

## AN OVERVIEW OF:

# Universal Newborn Screening & Support Systems



Building a coordinated system and new standard of care for how families with newborns are welcomed and supported in Illinois

**Regardless of ZIP code or family income, when welcoming a new baby, all parents and families could benefit from additional encouragement and support.**

We know it takes a village to raise a child, but in the early weeks and months of a child's life, it can often be difficult for parents to navigate and connect to the various health care, early education and other services and resources they may need and want.

The first three years of a child's life are the most rapid, critical and vulnerable period of development in the entire human lifespan, making those early weeks among the most important for building secure relationships with parents and caregivers and ensuring that families have what they need to support healthy development. At the same time, the early postpartum period represents a vitally sensitive window for screening for critical health risks and supporting the physical and mental health of birthing parents.



**Yet, despite the importance of supporting families with a new baby, unlike many high-income nations, the United States lacks a comprehensive, universal approach to screen all families for health risks of both the newborn and their parents and to provide connections to vital community resources.**

Without such approach, families may struggle to navigate or can fall through the cracks of complex and disjointed early care and learning, health and mental health and other support service networks. It also jeopardizes parents who face gaps or delays in receiving postpartum health care during the first few weeks after birth, contributing to the nation's maternal mortality and morbidity crisis, which disproportionately harms Black and Indigenous birthing people.

**Universal Newborn Screening & Support Systems (UNSS): offer and provide voluntary, short-term screening and referral services to every family with a newborn to help connect them to the supportive services and resources they may need and want, at no cost to the family**

### Common Connections Made By UNSS Referrals:

While UNSS is still an emerging concept, it is common in several other high-income nations, such as Denmark, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand. States like Oregon and New Jersey are also moving to expand access to universal newborn nurse home visits.

Lactation Support

Primary Maternal & Pediatric Health Care

Services for Children with or At-risk of Disabilities or Developmental Delays (e.g., Early Intervention)

Household Needs & Material Supports

Parenting Support Groups or Other Family Supports

Supports for Safe Sleep, Managing Crying or Infant Care

UNSS approaches may look different depending on local contexts, but typically, a nurse home visitor, community health worker or other trained professional will connect with families at the hospital shortly after birth and offer to visit families in their homes around three weeks following childbirth. During this visit, the UNSS home visitor will complete a brief maternal and infant health screening and talk with the family to identify interest in any additional supportive services, including medical care, household needs, early childhood education, emotional supports or other community resources.



1. Nurse, community health worker or other trained professional connects with family shortly after birth



2. Provider will visit families in their homes around three weeks following childbirth and once the family is settled



3. Families are connected to community resources and additional supports

---

UNSS is already on the ground in some communities in Illinois. Family Connects, a nurse-driven UNSS model that emerged out of Duke University, has been implemented as [Family Connects Illinois](#) in Peoria and Stephenson Counties. Efforts are also underway through public-private partnership to bring [Family Connects Chicago](#) to all birthing hospitals in the City of Chicago. Evidence from these and other UNSS models demonstrate robust family-level benefits, including improvements in maternal and infant mental health, reductions in emergency medical care in the first years of life and positive parenting behaviors.

Illinois is making significant progress on implementing UNSS, but bringing this support to all families in the state will require buy-in from health care providers, businesses, early childhood educators, public health systems, insurers, hospitals, local and state government, families and communities. Ultimately, state funding can be used more effectively when services are coordinated and accessible to families, and UNSS approaches are central to building a more efficient, coordinated prenatal-to-age 3 system of supports in Illinois.

To learn more, check out the [“Creating a Universal Newborn Support System \(UNSS\) in Illinois: An Assessment of Opportunity Based on Wisdom and Experience from the Field”](#) report and accompanying [policy brief](#) from the Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, which taps insights from a broad range of policy and program thought leaders on what it will take to build a statewide UNSS system in Illinois

*“It’s just getting that medical support and knowledge and information, but in a comfortable environment. It sounds weird to invite a stranger into your home, but it’s just so helpful and encouraging to be able to do it in a comfortable environment where it can be slow paced, where you don’t have to worry about leaving your home [...] It’s good to know that [universal newborn supports] are there for any mom, no matter where you’re at or what your needs are or what your family, financial or family support situation is. But for me, it was just the encouragement of having a nurse come in and say, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’”*

**SAMANTHA PRICE,  
MOM OF FOUR IN PEORIA COUNTY, ILLINOIS WHO  
PARTICIPATED IN FAMILY CONNECTS UNIVERSAL  
NEWBORN HOME VISITING AFTER ALL FOUR OF HER  
BIRTHS**

