



August 15, 2023

Senator Steve Glazer
Senator Nancy Skinner
Senator Aisha Wahab
Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan
Assemblymember Mia Bonta
Assemblymember Alex Lee
Assemblymember Liz Ortega
Assemblymember Buffy Wicks

RE: SB 326 (Eggman): The Behavioral Health Services Act – Oppose Unless Amended

Dear Members of the Alameda County Delegation to the California State Legislature:

On behalf of First 5 Alameda County, I am writing to express our opposition – unless amended – to SB 326 (Eggman): MHSA Modernization which puts critical behavioral health services for children at risk by eliminating the earmarked expenditures to fund prevention and early intervention (PEI) services and supports for California’s youngest children.

Children’s mental health is in crisis and requires bold actions that prioritize the health and well-being of children ages 0-5, now is not the time to re-route hard fought investments away from child-serving programs. **We urge an amendment that restores, protects, and maintains existing levels of PEI set aside with a portion of funds focused on critical behavioral health services for children ages 0-5.**

Early identification and intervention is key when it comes to infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). We know that [young children experience and respond to mental health challenges](#) differently than older children, adolescents and adults. Successful prevention and treatment of mental health concerns among young children requires a different approach than when serving older populations. Ensuring that families with young children have access to early identification and interventions supports [cost-effective systems](#) and promotes better health, educational, and life outcomes.

First 5 is guided by a “whole community, whole family, whole child” policy and programming approach that seeks to ensure that all children in Alameda County are ready for kindergarten by creating the conditions that position all for success. Our most recent [Kindergarten Readiness Report](#) (KRA) found that **33% of parents believe their child is fully ready for kindergarten compared to 44% in 2019**. Our study also finds that among children with special needs, 28 percent were unable to access the professional help they needed during the pandemic. In addition, the percent of parents/caregivers reporting high stress levels increased 13 points during COVID-19. Past research in Alameda County found lower levels of parenting stress were linked to higher readiness.



In 2021-22, Alameda County used nearly \$640,000 of its MHSAs PEI funding to support early childhood mental health outreach and consultation as well as school-based mental health consultation in preschools. These critical programs provide direct case management support, referrals, and linkages to families with children birth to 18 months in the County's home visiting program and provide services to teachers and directors in low-income preschool programs. PEI investments in IECMH programs support a wide variety of critical services that help mitigate later mental health challenges. However, the proposed re-routing of funds does not guarantee that these programs and services will be protected by counties, the current Medi-Cal infrastructure and one-time investment in the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative.

That is why we recommend that the MHSAs Modernization proposal be modified to include a 50% set-aside in each category of MHSAs funding to support the social-emotional health of children and youth and that 20% of that set-aside be specifically directed to support California's youngest children ages 0-5.

The bill language as written will dramatically reduce the dollars available at the county level to support infant and early childhood mental health services. This proposal is landing while First 5 county commissions – which have historically funded prevention and early intervention mental health programming –are experiencing steep revenue declines and are unable to sustain direct investments in programs like those listed above with Proposition 10 dollars.

First 5 Alameda County is committed to advocating for and achieving health equity and ensuring that all children in Alameda County are born healthy and that community and family conditions exist that support their health, well-being, and growth. **For the above reasons we urge that SB 326 be amended to include a 50% set-aside to support the social-emotional health of children and that 20% of that be set-aside specifically to support California's youngest children.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kristin Spanos".

Kristin Spanos
Chief Executive Officer
First 5 Alameda County

CC: Office of Governor Newsom

Assembly Member Jim Wood, Chair of the Assembly Health Committee

Assembly Member Marie Waldron, Vice Chair of the Assembly Health Committee

Members of the Assembly Health Committee