

First 5 program to expand mental health, developmental screenings of young children

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | July 07, 2017



Athziry, 2 1/2, develops her fine motor coordination and sensory skills during "messy play" at the Northern California Children's Therapy Center in Woodland. The center is a key partner in First 5 Yolo's "Help Me Grow" program, which screens children for developmental issues and connects families to services. Courtesy photo

A contract approved last month by the Board of Supervisors will provide universal mental health screening to Yolo County parents and their children ages 0-5.

The contract between the county's Health and Human Services Agency and First 5 Yolo provides \$225,000 annually over the next three years for First 5's "Help Me Grow" program, which has been providing developmental screening and access to services to young children for the past two years.

The funds will be appropriated under the county's Mental Health Services Act three-year expenditure plan and will be matched dollar for dollar by First 5 Yolo, which receives funding from California's tobacco tax revenue.

First 5 Yolo was one of two local agencies — the other being Victor Community Support Services — that responded to the county's request for proposals for an early childhood

mental health access and linkage program. The RFP was issued in April and First 5 Yolo was awarded the bid last month.

This is the first time that services specifically for children ages 0-5 were included in the county's Mental Health Services Act three-year plan, according to First 5 Yolo Executive Director Gina Daleiden.

Statewide, fewer than one in three young children receive timely developmental screenings, Daleiden said, and 70 percent of delays are not identified until kindergarten.

Earlier screening and identification of mental health and developmental issues, as well as early intervention, pays off later with lower health and educational costs, Daleiden noted.

Spending in the earlier years, she said, "gives you more bang for your buck."

Just in the past year — on a smaller budget — the Help Me Grow program screened 703 Yolo County children and referred 36 percent of them for additional assessments or services, Daleiden said.

The top referrals were for acute developmental concerns (communication skills, cognitive development and social development) as well as for fine motor skills services and communication/speech and language services.

First 5 Yolo contracts with the Northern California Children's Therapy Center in Woodland to coordinate the Help Me Grow program.

The center has been providing developmental screenings and early intervention services for more than 20 years with a staff of 23 multi-disciplinary pediatric specialists, including in infant development, speech therapy, behavioral therapy, social work, occupational therapy, physical therapy and child development.

The center provides services to all children in the community regardless of their family's ability to pay.

First 5 Yolo's new contract with the county will fund two additional full-time-equivalent positions at the center. Those new positions also will enhance services to foster children in Yolo County, who will now receive screening for mental health and developmental concerns after they've been placed with a resource family.

“We are grateful for our partnership with First 5 Yolo to expand the Help Me Grow program in order to increase access and linkage for our young children who can benefit from mental health services,” said Jennie Pettet, director of the county’s child, youth and family branch, which oversees child welfare services.

Under the contract with the county, Help Me Grow will provide universal mental health screening to parents and their children ages 0-5 in order to identify young children who are either at risk of or beginning to develop mental health problems that are likely to impact their healthy development.

The program then will connect those children and their families to services aimed at preventing or intervening in mental health problems.

Multiple agencies will partner with First 5 Yolo in the effort.

For example, Empower Yolo and the Family Violence Coordination Pilot Program will screen children in families affected by domestic violence. Empower Yolo completes about 200 intakes monthly and between 20 percent and 30 percent of those families have children ages 0-5 who would be targeted for screenings.

Other participating agencies include the Yolo County Children’s Alliance and RISE.

Help Me Grow also will expand medical provider outreach with pediatricians and their staffs to ensure that all children 0-5 and their families receive information and referrals to Help Me Grow as part of all well-child visits.

Meanwhile, any parent with concerns about their children’s mental health and development can contact Help Me Grow directly for assistance. The program maintains a call center staffed by child development professionals who help link clients to services and can respond to questions about healthy child development and more.

Learn more by calling 844-410-GROW or visiting <https://helpmegrowyolo.org>.

Learn more about First 5 Yolo at <https://www.first5yolo.org>.

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