



**Testimony for the FY2026 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services
Submitted by: Elizabeth Isakson, MD, Executive Director, Docs for Tots
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Help Me Grow New York program and the critical importance of primary prevention services for New York State's children and families.

Docs for Tots works to ensure children's healthy development and future success. We bring together children's doctors and communities to transform practices, optimize childcare, empower families and strengthen systems. Docs for Tots has a two-pronged role in regard to Help Me Grow organizing Help Me Grow Long Island and serving as the convener for the five existing Help Me Grow sites across the state while supporting new Help Me Grow NY communities. **Help Me Grow NY currently operates in 17 counties throughout the state: Long Island; Monroe County/Finger Lakes; Onondaga County; throughout Western New York and Oswego County. In 2024, we provided guidance and support to 8 additional counties in NY that are in various stages of exploring and preparing to incorporate Help Me Grow in their communities.**

- We urge the legislature to increase Help Me Grow New York's funding to \$2,000,000. This increase will continue to build this critical infrastructure for young children and families across more communities in New York.
- Additionally, we urge the legislature to combine the appropriations in FY2026 into a total of \$2,000,000 rather than 2 appropriations, as was done in FY2024 and FY 2025.

Help Me Grow is a nationally recognized, evidence-based model that improves outcomes and reduces disparities in early developmental health and family well-being. The model works across sectors (human services, health care, childcare,) to promote

child development, make developmental and social emotional screening universally available, and provide ongoing support for families to effectively navigate systems to access services.

The Help Me Grow model provides a road map of what community support of young families choosing to raise their children in New York State could look like. **In 2024 alone the five HMG systems reached approximately 12,000 families, 13,000 children and worked with over 600 community-based partners to provide support and services to these families.**

The foundation of thriving families and the opportunity for primary prevention is during pregnancy and early childhood. The science is clear. Ninety percent of brain development occurs in the first five years of life. This means that a strong first five years can determine a strong forever. New York's investment in the early years can be enhanced through evidence-based programs that are effective and efficient, making a huge difference for today's littlest New Yorkers, tomorrow's productive citizens. Help Me Grow does just this.

Families with young children today are still struggling to access childcare, early intervention services, preschool special education, timely SNAP benefits and a myriad of other issues. Help Me Grow's community expertise in available services for children under five allow navigation, connection, and continuous improvement where families need the support – their community.

An investment in Help Me Grow:

- **Provides support for families:** Help Me Grow recognizes the crucial role of families in a child's development. We provide support and resources to families, empowering them to understand and nurture their child's development. This can include guidance on parenting, educational resources, and connections to community services and programs.
- **Assists with the navigation of services:** Help Me Grow acts as a centralized hub that connects various services and resources available in the community. This

navigation eases the process for families seeking assistance, making it better for them to access the support of their child's basic and developmental needs.

- **Fosters community collaboration:** Help Me Grow fosters collaboration among healthcare providers, educators, community organizations, and families. This collaboration enhances the overall support system for children, ensuring that various stakeholders and sectors work together to promote healthy development.
- **Further helps to build on existing resources:** Help Me Grow builds upon current state efforts such as NYS Council on Children and Families' 'Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Project' and the recommendations of the Child Care Availability Task Force.
- **Is cost-effective:** Investing in early childhood development, including evidenced-based models like Help Me Grow, is often more cost-effective in the long run. Addressing issues early can reduce the need for more intensive and expensive interventions later in life.

An investment in Help Me Grow will greatly assist children from birth to age five across New York State. HMG is a proven prevention model that brings communities together to foster strong families and ensure that all children get the start they deserve.

Thank you for considering our testimony.

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