

Response to the Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids (LEAD-K) Task Force Report

Louisiana Department of Health

Office of Public Health

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Overview of the Resolution

Act 455 of 2018 established the Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids (LEAD K) task force to study and make recommendations relative to matters including, but not limited to, developing the framework for assessing children who are deaf or hard of hearing and selecting language developmental milestones from existing standardized norms. It further charges the task force to submit a report to the Louisiana Legislature on the following:

- Review and make recommendations relative to existing tools or assessments for educators to use to assess the language and literacy development of children who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Determine how often the tools or assessments reviewed should be used for children from birth to age five.
- Identify language milestones for children who are deaf or hard of hearing by consulting with professionals trained in the language development and education of such children.
- Identify procedures and methods for reporting language acquisition, assessment results, milestones, assessment tools used, and progress of such children to parents and teachers and other professionals involved in their early intervention and education.
- Make recommendations relative to ensuring that state law and state and local policies are adequately addressing the language developmental need of such children.

Act 455 (2018) further charges the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) to submit responses to these findings and recommendations.

The LEAD K task force report made the following recommendations to the Louisiana Legislature in their February 1, 2019 report.

Responsibility	Review and make recommendations relative to existing tools or assessments for educators to use to assess the language and literacy development of children who are deaf or hard of hearing.
Recommendation	Louisiana should use the SKI-HI Language Development Scale to assess the language milestones of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Louisiana should produce a resource document that outlines tools available to measure language skills, requirements for administration of each tool, and the ability to be administered in spoken English and/or American Sign Language.

Responsibility	Determine how often the tools or assessments reviewed should be used for children from birth to age five.
Recommendation	The task force recommends that assessments should be completed and reported every six months to ensure ongoing monitoring of language development.

Responsibility	Identify language milestones for children who are deaf or hard of hearing by consulting with professionals trained in the language development and education of such children.
Recommendation	The task force recommends the formation of a subcommittee to develop a Louisiana Milestones document that focuses on nationally accepted milestones while also featuring milestones for American Sign Language and English.

Responsibility	Identify procedures and methods for reporting language acquisition, assessment results, milestones, assessment tools used, and progress of such children to parents and teachers and other professionals involved in their early intervention and education.
Recommendation	<p>The task force recommends that the state’s data system to support the monitoring of language acquisition include the following information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person who made identification • Type, degree, and configuration of hearing loss • Mode of communication and language at home • Other diagnosis • Information dissemination to families • Child progress towards milestones, assessment results • Any technology used • Language of choice • Mode of communication <p>Additionally, the task force recommends that the designated data system allow authorized providers to input assessment results and other necessary information.</p> <p>Lastly, the task force recommends that the data system allow for state agencies to analyze data to identify systemic trends.</p>

Responsibility	Make recommendations relative to ensuring that state law and state and local policies are adequately addressing the language developmental needs of such children.
Recommendation	(From amended LEAD K Task Force Report, submitted by LDOE on February 28, 2019 following final convening on February 25, 2019). The task force recommends that the department of education and the department of health work with local school systems to establish regional early childhood education classrooms that offer full language access to children who are deaf and/or hard of hearing.

Findings

The mission of the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) is to protect and promote health and to ensure access to medical, preventive and rehabilitative services for all citizens of the State of Louisiana. As such, LDH is dedicated to supporting the healthy development of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Some of the primary supports and services for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families include the following programs:

Early Hearing Detection and Intervention

The LDH Office of Public Health (OPH) is responsible for the state’s newborn screening mandate for the [early identification and follow-up](#) of infants who may be deaf or hard of hearing. Through the tracking of newborn hearing screening results conducted at birth, the Louisiana Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EDHI) program is able to support timely diagnosis for children who are identified as deaf or hard of hearing and conduct timely referrals to early intervention services for those children.

Newborn hearing screening results of children born in Louisiana are maintained in a database that is called the Louisiana Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Information System, LAEHDI-IS. Through the use of LAEHDI-IS, the EHDHI program is able to track hearing screening results, date and degree of diagnosis as deaf or hard of hearing, date of referrals to early intervention programs and whether or not a family accepts early intervention services.

The EHDHI program also currently contracts with the Louisiana Hands & Voices, Guide by Your Side (GBYS) program. Hands & Voices is a non-profit, parent-driven organization dedicated to supporting families of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. They are charged with offering non-biased education and support around communication modes.

This program is grounded in the principle that families can make the best choices for their child if they have access to good information and support. They also offer the support through Deaf or hard of hearing guides to share insight on life experiences and on developing a personal identity as a Deaf adult.

EarlySteps

[EarlySteps](#) is Louisiana's [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) Part C](#) early intervention program which provides services to families with infants and toddlers aged birth to three years (36 months) who have a medical condition likely to result in a developmental delay, or who have developmental delays. Children with delays in cognitive, motor, vision, hearing, communication, social-emotional or adaptive development may be eligible for services.

EarlySteps services are designed to improve the family's capacity to enhance their child's development. These services are provided in the child's natural environment, such as the child's home, childcare center or any other community setting typical for children aged birth to 3 years (36 months). These services include but are not limited to physical, occupational, and/or speech therapy; sign language interpreters; audiology services; and special instruction.

Children who are deaf or hard of hearing qualify for EarlySteps services based on a medical diagnosis of hearing loss. Supports are based on individualized needs identified through an evaluation process and an assessment of the family's priorities. Children enrolled in EarlySteps are served until the child's third birthday. During their enrollment, families are supported to make choices about their child's needs after age 3. Included in the transition plan for after age 3 is the eligibility determination process for IDEA part B services provided through local school systems.

Louisiana Medicaid

[Medicaid](#) provides medical benefits to low-income individuals and families. Although the federal government establishes the general rules for Medicaid, specific requirements are established by each state. As of 2017, over half of children in Louisiana are covered through Louisiana Medicaid, most through the [Healthy Louisiana](#) managed care plans.

Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) is the child health component of Medicaid under section 1905(r) of the Social Security Act. The EPSDT benefit provides comprehensive and preventive health care services for children under age 21 who are enrolled in Medicaid.

Under EPSDT, states are required to provide comprehensive services including all coverable, appropriate and medically necessary services needed to correct and ameliorate health conditions, even if such services are not included in the Medicaid state plan. EPSDT is key to ensuring that children and adolescents receive appropriate preventive, dental, mental health, specialty, and developmental services, including but not limited to physical, occupational, and/or speech therapy and audiology services.

Children enrolled in Medicaid should receive both vision and hearing screenings as a part of certain well-child check-ups.

Title V Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Block Grant Developmental Screening Initiative

The LDH OPH Bureau of Family Health administers the state's Title V MCH Block Grant which supports services, programs, and policy initiatives to promote the health of women, children, and teens, as well as children and youth with special health care needs and their families.

One area of focus is to strengthen developmental screening and supports for children. The Title V [Developmental Screening Initiative](#) seeks to improve early detection of developmental delays and disabilities in children from birth to 5 years of age by promoting the use of evidence-based, validated screening tools with all children in pediatric primary care and related services. The [Louisiana Developmental Screening Guidelines](#) (LDSG), promoted through this initiative, provide recommendations for screening periodicity and instruments that align with the *Bright Futures* guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Developmental Screening Initiative partners with a variety of other agencies and organizations to strengthen Louisiana's early childhood system.

Women, Infants and Children Program

Louisiana WIC (Women, Infants, & Children) is a public health program that provides nutrition counseling, breastfeeding support, food benefits and referrals to other social services to pregnant women, new moms, and young children under the age of 5.

The WIC program has frequently served as a connection to families of children who need additional hearing screening or diagnostic testing following hospital discharge. Completing screening and/or diagnostic testing is crucial to identifying children who may be deaf or hard of hearing children and linking them in a timely manner to early intervention with EarlySteps and other programs.

Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program

Parenting and pregnancy support is offered through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program which includes Nurse-Family Partnerships and Parents and Teachers programs. These supports empower families in developing communication with their children and promoting a greater understanding of overall child development, enhancing the opportunities for children to thrive and grow and enter the school system ready to learn.

As described in the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) response, the following programs exist under LDOE and are dedicated to supporting early childhood needs:

- [Early Childhood](#) Community Networks have a lead agency that serves as the point of contact for local care providers and as the liaison with the state education department.
- [Ready Start](#) Community Networks pilot new strategies to increase access to and improve the quality of early childhood care and education.
- [Louisiana Special School District](#) (SSD) SSD strives to be a model of excellence in serving students with low incidence disabilities and needs. In a recently outlined a strategic plan, SSD is working to improve the services in its schools and programs and provide greater supports to students with low incidence needs across the state.

Conclusion

As noted in Act 455, LDH is committed to collaborating with the LDOE to improve services for children who are deaf or hard of hearing so that all of Louisiana's children have the opportunity to begin kindergarten with the language skills necessary to acquire the knowledge and academic competencies that will allow them to be successful in school and life.

LDH will examine the existing programs and systems previously mentioned through the lens of the LEAD K task force recommendations which include the following areas: developmental assessment and progress monitoring, child specific data collection and data management, and enhancing regional resources to support children and families.

In addition, LDH proposes to:

- Reexamine protocols for hospital training specific to newborn hearing screenings, including the delivery of screening results sensitive to the culture of the family, with resources available to the family and providing a clear map of next steps following hospital discharge.
- Develop a physician toolkit with guidelines for coordinated care specific to children after hospital discharge and across delivery systems.
- Explore resources for training opportunities for the staff in EarlySteps and supporting programs with respect to the SKI HI curriculum. Such training would provide the ability for those serving deaf and hard of hearing children to assess and monitor the language acquisition and progress toward developmental milestones. LDH will explore opportunities to improve transition of children from LDH to LDOE service settings.

- Continue to strengthen the collaboration with the Parent Pupil Education Program under SSD.
- Develop a plan to increase the capacity of early care and education providers to assess and respond to the developmental and health needs of infants and toddlers, including linking families to supportive services in their communities.

Through analysis of current programs and collaboration with the LDOE, LDH will consider the recommendations put forth by the task force and move forward with addressing unmet needs to enhance the quality and capacity of service systems provided for children who are deaf and hard of hearing.

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