



COMMUNITY STORY

Creating a Centralized Access Point on Long Island, New York



By Julie Pratt, THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT



Help Me Grow is an evidence-based system framework aimed at helping communities identify vulnerable children, link families to community-based services, and empower families to support their children's healthy development. The framework includes four components: a centralized access point (CAP); family and community outreach; child health care provider outreach; and data collection and analysis.

Melissa Passarelli first learned of Help Me Grow in 2015 while working for Docs for Tots, a New York based nonprofit organization. Led by pediatricians, Docs for Tots promotes practices, policies, and investments that will enable young children to thrive.

Passarelli was involved in integrating developmental screening into Long Island pediatric practices that served children with Medicaid coverage and referring those families to needed services.

"We were finding families to refer," said Passarelli, "but if you tried to look at what happened after a family was referred to services, that's where the problem was. That's what I was looking into when I came across Help Me Grow."

With technical assistance from the Help Me Grow National Center, Docs for Tots spearheaded a community-wide process to explore and plan for [Help Me Grow Long Island \(HMG-LI\)](#). The system was launched in January 2018, with Passarelli as the Director of Programs for Docs for Tots and Coordinator of HMG-LI. About a year later, HMG-LI was put to the test when the nation's first COVID-19 diagnosis was made in New York City.

Creating a Centralized Access Point

Laying the groundwork was critical in establishing HMG-LI. "We started by having lots of individual stakeholder conversations," said Passarelli. "We spent about



a year doing that before starting our planning year.” This included sharing information about the Help Me Grow approach and assuring people that it wasn’t a new “program,” but a system framework that helps existing programs work together.

The stakeholders began a year-long planning process in 2017, with funding from the state’s Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant. A Help Me Grow Leadership Team representing more than 30 organizations was created based on nominations from the community.

All four of the Model Convening Project partners have affiliates or sites in Nassau County, one of the two counties comprising Long Island. Family Connects, HealthySteps, and Nurse-Family Partnership were all involved in the planning phase of Help Me Grow. Representatives from Family Connects and HealthySteps are current Leadership Team members.

The Leadership Team created four work groups and made the CAP their top priority. The CAP work group, which included several organizations with call center experience, met monthly and reported on their progress and recommendations at quarterly meetings of the Leadership Team.

“We wanted to make the CAP an ‘our’ thing, not a Docs for Tots thing,” said Passarelli. “We intentionally structured the CAP so that ownership was shared by a few different agencies. Docs for Tots was the organizing entity. We employed the staff for the CAP, but they were physically housed at the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency. And we used the phone system from 211 Long Island, which was sponsored by United Way of Long Island.”



Being creative and adaptive has been key to successful implementation. For example, Help Me Grow continues to be an option on the 211 call center menu, but the work group eventually opted for a web-based phone system with an app accessible by phone or computer, which they deemed essential for communicating with families. And after COVID-19 came to New York, the CAP workers moved their offices from the CCR&R to their homes.

Responding to COVID-19

“Once New York shut down in March 2020 to slow the spread, more families than ever needed help,” said Passarelli. “Most families served by Help Me Grow Long Island identify as being Hispanic or Black and live in communities most affected by both COVID-19 and the economic fallout from the pandemic.”

The volume of contacts with the CAP nearly quadrupled during the early months of the pandemic. The nature of the families’ concerns also shifted dramatically. “Prior to the shutdown, the main reasons that families connected to us were related to developmental concerns, and about 30% were for basic needs,” said Passarelli. “When COVID-19 hit, those concerns immediately switched, with 95% of the families contacting us about basic needs. Their top concern was diapers, followed by formula and food.”

In partnership with the Allied Foundation’s Long Island Diaper Bank and funding from Help Me Grow National via the JPB Foundation, a quarter-million diapers have been distributed, along with HMG-LI bags and materials. Other organizations across Long Island have also been instrumental in distributing needed items to families.

One of the partners previously worked for the Long Island Diaper Bank. She had just started her own non-profit organization, where she made emergency drop-offs of baby items to families, most of whom were struggling financially and couldn’t afford a car. “When COVID-19 hit, she was the only thing that would work for those families,” said Passarelli. “But she was a one-woman show and couldn’t handle coordinating all the intakes. So, it was mutually beneficial for us to have families contact HMG-LI, and then we coordinated with her to get diapers to the families.”

As the pandemic persisted, Passarelli saw the need for more support for parents trying to cope with the many stressors their families were experiencing. To help address the need, Docs for Tots became a national Bright by Text partner on behalf of HMG-LI. Bright by Text is an evidence-based text messaging platform that encourages healthy development and resilience through positive parenting tips and fun games, as well as providing local information and resources. HMG-LI has been able to text information about free developmental screenings, food distribution events, and other topics to more than 1,000 local subscribers.

Hopes for the Future

More than 2,000 developmental and social-emotional screenings were completed in 2020 through the CAP and local screening partners. Passarelli cited the partnership with Family Connects as one that works particularly well:

Family Connects nurses provide home visits to parents of newborns to provide information and link them to community resources. During their six-month window with families, the nurses refer to HMG-LI for resources as needed. At six months, Family Connects does the developmental screening using HMG-LI's online system. Family Connects asks parents for their consent to refer them to HMG-LI for ongoing assistance if needed. If parents agree, all they have to do is call Help Me Grow, and their information is already in the system.

In addition to creating a seamless transition for families, the database can also assist with community-level planning, development, and evaluation. "I would love it if all of the programs on Long Island that use the ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire) got connected to our database," said Passarelli. "We really do want to build out a regional database."

Passarelli is eager to build upon the mobilization of partners that occurred in response to the pandemic:

I hope more stakeholders will see the value of partnering with Help Me Grow. We want people to understand that we're not replacing anything. We're just trying to make it easier for partners to do their jobs and for families to connect to services. We do in-services with partners, and maybe a few months later they'll make a referral. They'll see that the process was good because, not only was the family's need met, but they knew what happened because we followed up with them.

To Learn More

["Building a Strong Centralized Access Point"](#) is a webinar that includes a presentation by Melissa Passarelli, beginning at 18:20 minutes on the video.

[Using Help Me Grow to Support Families Through COVID-19](#) is a report by the Help Me Grow National Center that describes the various ways affiliates have employed seven key elements of the Help Me Grow model to support families impacted by COVID-19.

ABOUT THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT

Four national early childhood models—Family Connects, HealthySteps, Help Me Grow, and Nurse-Family Partnership—are exploring ways to have a greater impact on young children and their families in communities where their programs overlap. The project is a multi-year initiative, with leadership and facilitation from [ZERO TO THREE](#) and funding from the [Pritzker Children's Initiative](#). While the four models were the starting point for the project, their local experiences reveal a broad range of community partners who play important roles in early childhood collaboration. For links to additional stories and briefs from the Model Convening Project, see the [Hand in Hand Directory](#).

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