



The Pennsylvania Association for Infant Mental Health is in full support of Governor Tom Wolf's January 10, 2018 Disaster Declaration for the Heroin and Opioid Epidemic. The Pennsylvania Association for Infant Mental Health (PA-AIMH), founded in 2011, is an interdisciplinary, professional, non-profit organization established to build, promote, and support an infant and early childhood mental health workforce across the state.

While we agree that the declaration is needed, and no doubt will save lives, we know that we will have the greatest outcomes when we integrate "infant mental health principles" into the plans for responding to this epidemic. PA-AIMH views this declaration by state leaders as an opportunity to utilize a relationship-based approach to support struggling caregiver-child dyads impacted by substance use disorders, because **there is never just "a baby" ...there is always a "baby-in -relationship-to-a- caregiver"** and every baby relies on **their** caregiver for healthy growth and development.

[Good Infant Mental Health Matters and a child's early experiences impact their lifelong outcomes.](#)

We have a shared stake to make sure young children develop sturdy brain architecture, because this foundation supports a lifetime of learning and productive participation in society. When we collaboratively address the needs of a parent with a substance use disorder (SUD), the needs of the child, and the needs of the caregiver-child dyad, we more thoroughly respond to the epidemic at hand, and prevent multiple learning, behavioral, and health problems later in life, for our youngest citizens. When we address only the needs of the caregiver, we miss an opportunity to meet the needs of the children who are the most vulnerable and helpless victims of this epidemic. For example, a treatment approach that integrates principles of infant mental health might include:

- Home visitors who support grandparents who are grieving the loss of an adult child who has overdosed while taking on the care of very young grandchildren who have survived this trauma.
- An IECMH consultant who helps an infant teacher better understand what a baby who has experienced neonatal abstinence syndrome might need in the childcare setting.
- Helping a child welfare worker or family court judge determine a visitation schedule that is responsive to the infant's/young child's developmental stage and capacity.
- Child parent psychotherapy for dyads/families where the parent(s) are suffering from guilt and shame that is interfering with emerging attachment, perhaps putting them at higher risk for relapse; or a treatment focus on the prevention of intergenerational transmission of trauma.

The root cause of the SUD "is probably the most dangerous thing in the household—whether that's mom's history of abuse or neglect or sexual assault or whatever it is. That thing will continue to come back and haunt that caregiver and the child-caregiver relationship for a very long time unless its addressed."

*-Nadine Burke Harris, 2017
www.motherjones.org*

[Increased tracking and reporting of babies born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome \(NAS\) will help Pennsylvania get a better understanding of the number of babies and mothers impacted and how to better serve them.](#)

This strategy will allow for the exploration and implementation of multi-systemic approaches to assessing the needs of the caregiver-child dyad at diagnosis or during pregnancy, which is integral for data based decision making. Utilization of promotion, prevention, and intervention strategies using an infant mental health approach can improve the support that system partners provide to infants, young children, and caregivers impacted by substance use disorders (SUD). Options such as mother-child rehabilitation services that address the SUD while also supporting parent-child attachment is one such strategy. Additionally, coordination of community based supports, such as early intervention, home visiting, and family-strengthening programs may offer a comprehensive and extended path for supporting a caregiver-child dyad during and after the SUD initial treatment phase.

Ensuring that our workforce is Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Informed

PA-AIMH firmly believes that professionals, *from across all sectors*, who touch the lives of infants, young children, and families should have knowledge and skills in infant and early childhood mental health. IECMH workforce development strategies can prepare professionals to identify and address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), which increase when a caregiver has an SUD. Systems partners and professionals who participate in promotion, prevention, intervention, and leadership are key to building the capacity of our IECMH workforce, because everyone, every system, has a role in how IECMH looks within their sphere of influence. Workforce capacity building is recommended to include multi-systemic education about substance use disorders (SUD), including opiates, which is critical when it comes to assessing safety planning and supporting the caregiver-child dyad across settings. PA-AIMH is in the initial stages of bringing *Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-focused Practice Promoting Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health*® to PA, which uses uniform and nationally recognized competencies and standards to ensure that individuals engaged in multidisciplinary fields supporting young children and their families are trained in the current science of child development, infant and early childhood mental health principles and relationship-based practices. The *Competency Guidelines*® provide a professional development path for cross sector professionals supporting the health and wellness of very young children, including supporting family units where substance abuse or dependence is present.

PA-AIMH became the 27th member of the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health® in September 2016. The Alliance is a global organization that includes those states and countries whose infant and early childhood mental health associations have licensed the use of the Competency Guidelines® and/or Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health® under their associations' names. The Alliance seeks to build and sustain a reflective, skilled, culturally competent, and relationship-based workforce that supports infants, young children and their families so that all children begin their lives with warm, sensitive, stable and responsive caregiving relationships.

PA-AIMH acts as a professional home and resource for professionals, policy makers, state systems partners, parents and caregivers, and the community at large. PA-AIMH offers educational opportunities such as conferences, regional networking events and workshops, and provides web-based information designed to enhance professional skills and knowledge, and educate stakeholders about the importance of infant and early childhood mental health. More detailed information about our history, mission, strategic plan, leadership, and professional development opportunities can be found on our website: www.pa-aimh.org.

Since 2011, PA-AIMH has been an affiliate of the World Association of Infant Mental Health (WAIMH), an international, not-for-profit organization for scientific and educational professionals whose central aim is to promote the mental wellbeing and healthy development of infants throughout the world, taking into account cultural, regional, and environmental variations, and to generate and disseminate scientific knowledge.

We look forward to an invitation to share resources, skills and knowledge to develop and promote systems of care that will effectively address the needs of all members of our community affected by the opioid epidemic, and in so doing, prevent future problems while also creating a safer and healthier community for all residents of Pennsylvania. Please contact us at pa-aimh@pa-aimh.org.

Keeping Babies in Mind,

PA-AIMH Board Members: Stacey Carpenter, Psy.D./President; Brandy Fox, LCSW/Vice President; Christopher Dunkerley; MS/Treasurer, Erin Troup, LPC, NCC, CT/Secretary; Robert Gallen, Ph.D.; Michele Walsh, LSW; Connell O'Brien, M.Ed.; Maria Dobinick, MS; Una Majmudar, LCSW; Bonnie McNally-Brown, LPC; Dianne Jandrastis, Psy.D.; Mary Jo Mastriani, MA, ECMH-E®; and Susan Woodhouse, Ph.D.