



# NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN: DATA CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PROGRAM AND POLICY CHANGES

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## Executive Summary

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP) was released in February 2019 in response to Governor Roy Cooper's 2018 executive order. The ECAP established goals and targets in ten domains of child health and well-being to improve early childhood outcomes by 2025. When this plan was released, we could not have known that the COVID-19 pandemic would disrupt the lives of children and families across the state and nation.

### The ECAP needs a COVID-19 update for three reasons:

- 1) **Priorities in health and well-being have changed.** The pandemic will continue to have major public health implications. Children and families will experience ripple effects from school closures, the economic recession, time away from peers, and strain to the social safety net. A new plan is needed to reflect changes in how programs function and families are served. Leaders should determine whether previous priorities have shifted and what new priorities have emerged due to COVID-19.
- 2) **Poor, rural, and minority children and families are carrying the burden.** Vulnerable and marginalized communities are suffering the greatest due to economic downturn, lack of technology, and systemic oppression. COVID-19 has exposed the unequal opportunities and disparities in outcomes that the ECAP sought to address. We need to know "who" and "where" support is needed the most to not further widen gaps between families and maintain the focus on promoting equity.
- 3) **ECAP data sources and strategy may no longer be valid or reliable.** One of the strengths of the ECAP was the focus on evidence and data-driven outcomes to inform policy change and hold leaders accountable. The ECAP was intended to be a "living plan" that could adapt and evolve as needed, including reexamination of data sources. To accomplish the bold priorities and achievable goals identified in the ECAP, valid and reliable data is perhaps the most important resource for the plan's success.

This document seeks to begin the process of addressing the last point. We wanted to record changes to NC programs and policies that serve families in response to COVID-19, identify data limitations resulting from those changes, and make recommendations about how to improve and use the ECAP data moving forward. We asked: **Which ECAP indicators represent policies and programs most vulnerable to COVID-19? Which ECAP indicators are most concerning regarding data quality (validity and reliability)?**

We reviewed each ECAP Goal and Sub-Target in detail in the full report. In summary, we have identified the following six “**priority measures**” for immediate and ongoing tracking due to a) high vulnerability to COVID-19 and b) low concern about data quality. We suggest that all other remaining 50 sub-targets be reviewed by subject matter experts, prioritized, and assessed for data quality.

- 1) Families living at or below 200% Federal Poverty Level (Goal 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10)
- 2) Children years with health insurance (Goal 2)
- 3) Heads of household with health insurance (Goal 2)
- 4) Eligible families receiving state and federal supplemental food/nutrition assistance benefits from WIC (Goal 3)
- 5) Households facing high housing cost burden (Goal 4)
- 6) Children with two or more adverse childhood experiences (Goal 5)

