

March 2025

# SEEDING A RESILIENT EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

Promising Minds Initiative Retrospective Evaluation Report  
Hawai'i Community Foundation



# Executive Summary

**What does it take to nurture healthy development for Hawai'i's youngest children? For the Hawai'i Community Foundation and its nonprofit and state government partners in the Promising Minds Initiative, the answer started with a focus on wellness and resilience in the early childhood system.**

Promising Minds recognized that transforming early childhood systems required more than just funding programs—it required shifting mindsets. The Foundation began by fostering the belief that trauma-informed practices could be implemented in real-world settings, in ways that early childhood providers could see, touch, and integrate into their daily work. By demonstrating tangible examples of trauma-informed approaches in action, the initiative built confidence among providers and partners. From there, Promising Minds partners strategically built momentum and demand for broader systems and policy change, including Hawai'i's first integrated behavioral health plan for infants and children.

Over six years, Promising Minds catalyzed a movement to strengthen the providers and systems that support children and families, ultimately influencing state policy and institutional practices. Key accomplishments of the initiative include:

- **Championed wellness and resilience in early childhood settings:** Promising Minds strengthened the capacity of early childhood providers—teachers, home visitors, pediatricians, and social service professionals—who serve as the first line of support for families experiencing adversity. Through peer learning communities, the Resilient Early Childhood Systems Self-Assessment (RECSSA), and a focus on data and storytelling, the initiative helped providers deepen their understanding of trauma-informed care and embed these approaches in their organizations. As a result, more early childhood programs across Hawai'i are integrating social-emotional learning, mental health supports, and culturally grounded healing practices into their work with children and families.
- **Created new pathways for mental health professionals to support infants and young children:** To address the critical shortage of infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) professionals, Promising Minds partnered with the Association for Infant Mental Health Hawai'i (AIMH HI) to launch the Promising Minds Fellows Program. This program provided training, reflective supervision, and consultation experience for mental health professionals, creating new pathways into IECMH careers. By reducing barriers to entry—such as traditional licensing requirements—the program helped grow a diverse, community-based workforce equipped to support Hawai'i's youngest children and their families.
- **Built alignment to shape policy and systems change:** Promising Minds played a key role in advancing IECMH policies at the state level, helping to normalize discussions around early childhood mental health. The initiative brought together partners across philanthropy, state government, and nonprofits to develop Hawai'i's first Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan, a foundational policy document guiding system-wide improvements. Promising Minds also helped lay the groundwork for the creation of the Office of Wellness and Resilience, which now leads efforts to embed trauma-informed practices across Hawai'i.
- **Enhanced data use and capacity:** The initiative recognized that stronger data systems were essential for sustaining change. With Data Culture, Capacity, and Storytelling grants, Promising Minds helped early childhood programs transition to digital data systems and collect and use data for learning and reflection. Additionally, through clinical partnerships, the initiative improved developmental screenings, creating a better picture of mental health needs. Throughout the initiative, the Hawai'i Community Foundation also partnered with an external evaluator to surface relevant, local data to identify system issues and opportunities and support policy discussions and strategic decision-making. These efforts strengthened Hawai'i's ability to track early childhood mental health needs and inform future policy decisions.

Beyond funding, the Hawai'i Community Foundation played a critical role as a convener, capacity builder, funder, champion, and storyteller. The Foundation brought together cross-sector partners to align efforts, most notably through the development of the Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan. It strengthened provider and organizational capacity by supporting training, peer learning, and tools like the RECSEA self-assessment that supported organizational work. As a seed funder, the Hawai'i Community Foundation supported innovative pilot projects beyond federal grants, enabling flexible, community-driven solutions. The Foundation also championed infant and early childhood mental health by elevating its visibility and engaging additional funders. Finally, the Hawai'i Community Foundation took on a critical role as a storyteller, sharing insights and successes through newsletters and ongoing communications to sustain momentum for trauma-informed care beyond the initiative's conclusion. These roles enabled the Foundation to shape the broader landscape of early childhood mental health in Hawai'i.

Through strategic investments, collaborative partnerships, and systems leadership, Promising Minds helped transform Hawai'i's approach to early childhood mental health. Its impact endures in stronger networks, sustained policies, and a growing community dedicated to ensuring that every child in Hawai'i has the foundation for lifelong well-being.

### Key Recommendations for Advancing Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health in Hawai'i

As Promising Minds concludes, its lessons offer a roadmap for sustaining and expanding trauma-informed early childhood systems. Below are opportunities to continue building on this momentum:

- **Strengthen early childhood data systems.** Develop an integrated system to support data collection, referrals, and outcome tracking, enabling better coordination and data-driven decision-making.
- **Expand pathways into the IECMH workforce.** Create alternative training opportunities, like the Promising Minds Fellows Program, to increase the number and diversity of IECMH providers, especially in rural areas.
- **Formalize and fund IECMH services.** Establish structured networks for IECMH consultation and ensure sustainable payment through public funds, such as Med-QUEST.
- **Ensure dedicated leadership for IECMH efforts.** Establish a central coordinating body or umbrella organization to oversee and sustain early intervention and trauma-informed care initiatives.
- **Continue policy education and advocacy.** Build on Promising Minds' progress by increasing awareness among policymakers and securing long-term commitments to IECMH funding and policies.
- **Address the root causes of trauma.** Advocate for systemic changes, including reducing poverty, addressing systemic racism, and ensuring that early childhood professionals earn a living wage.

By advancing these priorities, Hawai'i can build on Promising Minds' progress and ensure that every young child has the support needed to thrive.



# Introduction

During the first few years of life, children's brains grow faster than at any other time, making new pathways with every interaction, smile, and experience. Through nurturing relationships and exploration, children develop skills like empathy, creativity, and problem-solving that lay the foundation for a lifetime of learning and resilience. Caregivers and environments play an important role in this growth, helping children to form social bonds, learn to handle big emotions, and adapt to new situations. When significant stressors threaten family and caregiving environments, strong relationships between adults and children can support recovery and resilience.

Recognizing the importance of healthy development, in 2018 the Hawai'i Community Foundation launched Promising Minds, a six-year initiative to strengthen early childhood systems and spread trauma-informed practices. In particular, the initiative aimed to support the more than one in four children under age six across Hawai'i who had faced an adverse childhood experience (ACE),<sup>1</sup> a proportion that is even higher amongst Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities.<sup>2</sup> At the time, Hawai'i had significant gaps in supports for infants and young children, including a fragmented early childhood system, limited access to mental health resources, and long wait times for families to receive referrals to services.<sup>3</sup> These issues required a multifaceted approach to improve coordination, increase state support, and make system-wide improvements to adopt trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices to promote healthy development in young children.

## Seeding Systems-Wide Change

For the Hawai'i Community Foundation, it was important to start at the heart of the work: with the providers who care for children and families in their communities. *"We needed to foster the belief that trauma-informed work in early childhood settings in Hawai'i was possible in a way that people could see and touch and know what it meant within a program or organization,"* said Justina Acevedo-Cross, Senior Director of Community Strategy at the Hawai'i Community Foundation and Promising Minds lead. The Foundation convened childcare providers, social service workers, home visitors, and other professionals in early childhood settings to deepen their understanding of trauma-informed approaches, child development, and how to build resilience in children who have experienced trauma.

From there, the Foundation hoped to catalyze change by strategically building momentum for trauma-informed practices to ripple out across Hawai'i, leading to systems and policy change: *"It was about building up a tipping point strategy. By getting enough of the programs to believe in trauma-informed early childhood work, that then starts to create the demand for systems change,"* said Acevedo-Cross. As providers learned new trauma-informed approaches, the Foundation offered supports like the [Resilient Early Childhood Systems Self-Assessments \(RECSSA\) tool](#) for embedding practices into their organization and training to build their data capacity. They also partnered with the Association for Infant Mental Health Hawai'i (AIMH HI) to strengthen the infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) workforce. These efforts not only helped to institutionalize trauma-informed practices but also brought partners together to write Hawai'i's first Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan and supported important policy changes, like the creation of the Office of Wellness and Resilience.

Throughout this effort, Engage R+D has served as the evaluation and learning partner to the Hawai'i Community Foundation, working to document, measure, and reflect on this work. This report looks back on the journey of Promising Minds to share important lessons for strengthening well-being and resilience in early childhood settings, fostering partnerships, and supporting policy and systems change to create a lasting impact on young children and families.

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<sup>1</sup> National Survey of Children's Health. Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health. 2022. <https://www.nschdata.org/browse/survey/results?q=10211&r=13>

<sup>2</sup> Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Hawai'i Health Data Warehouse. 2020. [https://hhdw.org/report/query/result/brfss/ACECount/ACECountCrude11\\_.html](https://hhdw.org/report/query/result/brfss/ACECount/ACECountCrude11_.html)

<sup>3</sup> Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan. State of Hawai'i Executive Office of Early Learning. 2022. [https://earlylearning.Hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/IECBH\\_Plan\\_2.0\\_071322-final.pdf](https://earlylearning.Hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/IECBH_Plan_2.0_071322-final.pdf)

## Measuring the Movement

This evaluation included a mix of *formative* and *summative* methods—which focus on tracking what works, what to improve, and documenting success—embedded within a *developmental* approach—which offers more flexible and adaptable practices to support real-time learning. It also draws on principles from the Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment-Hawai'i (CREA-HI), [Evaluation with Aloha](#). Our culturally responsive evaluation aims to reflect the values and experiences of the Promising Minds communities. With this approach, we acknowledge the importance of high-quality, locally-relevant data that informs targeted interventions and guides policies in Hawai'i, while also recognizing that infant and early childhood mental health is a developing field in Hawai'i. For many partners working to build their capacity to deliver services, it is not yet possible to measure this work at the level of child and family outcomes. In the evaluation, we aimed to capture what partners are learning and doing as they advance this work, as well as to help inform the work as it builds, grows, and scales. To this end, the evaluation unfolded in the three phases detailed below:

### Exhibit 1. Promising Minds Evaluation, 2019-2023

2019: Getting to Know Promising Minds	2020-21: Informing Program Development	2022-23: Documenting Systems and Policy Changes
<p>The start of the evaluation focused on developing relationships with key leaders and understanding the context and culture of early learning and trauma in Hawai'i, including cultural and historical trauma. This period was essential in fostering an equitable approach to evaluation and helped lay the groundwork for future work. Activities included drafting a theory of change, conducting surveys and site visits with practitioners, and making an initial assessment of data capacity.</p> <p><a href="#">Year 1 Evaluation Report</a></p>	<p>The next phase of the evaluation used a developmental approach to support the progress and adaptation of the initiative. This included understanding changes in programs and systems through the evaluation of the early childhood Community of Practice, the development and use of the RECSEA key leader interviews, and a participatory Photovoice project with children and families. Engage R+D also partnered with AIMH HI to evaluate the Promising Minds Fellows Program.</p> <p><a href="#">Year 3 Evaluation Report</a></p>	<p>The final phase of the evaluation focused on measuring progress toward systems and policy goals. This included continuing to monitor the development and growth of a trauma-informed early childhood system, building capacity and infrastructure to gather developmentally appropriate data, and telling the stories of early learning practitioners through interviews and participatory approaches. These methods helped to measure systems development, examine providers' data capacity, and show the early impact on policy and systems.</p> <p><a href="#">Year 5 Evaluation Report</a></p>
2024-25: Retrospective Evaluation		
<p>This report takes a retrospective look at the data collected throughout these evaluations to tell the story of Promising Minds. Past data was supplemented with additional key leader interviews and partner focus groups reflecting on their experience in the initiative. Evaluation questions and methods are explained in more detail below.</p>		

In this report, we take a retrospective look at the data collected throughout these evaluations to answer the following questions:

### Exhibit 2. Retrospective Evaluation Questions

<p><b>Early Childhood Settings</b> How have early childhood and health systems in Hawai'i become more equipped to embed trauma-informed mental health practices?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What new trauma-informed mental health practices, if any, are those working in early childhood using?</li> <li>• How has access to IECMH professionals changed since the start of Promising Minds?</li> <li>• In what ways are early childhood organizations growing their capacity to collect and use data to assess and support IECMH?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Workforce</b> To what extent did IECMH providers grow their capacity to serve young children and families in Hawai'i?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has the supply of mental health professionals with expertise in working with children ages 0-5 and their families changed since the start of Promising Minds?</li> <li>• What new skills and capabilities, if any, have IECMH providers gained to support trauma-informed care since the start of Promising Minds?</li> </ul>

### Policy and Systems

What is needed to advance policies and systems?

- What policies and advocacy efforts have been adopted since the start of Promising Minds that support trauma-informed mental health practices?
- What did we learn about measuring child and family outcomes?

### Promising Minds

What was the journey of Promising Minds?

- What were the journey and key events of Promising Minds over the past six years?
- What new trauma-informed practices and mental health capacities are participants planning to carry forward? How have policies and systems changed to support continued work?
- What lessons from this initiative might apply to other initiatives and other funders related to sustaining and exiting a long-term initiative such as this one?

To answer these questions, the report draws on the following new and existing evaluation data:

- Fall 2024 key leader interviews with 13 systems and policy leaders in Hawai'i, including 3 Hawai'i Community Foundation staff, to gain a broad perspective on how this work unfolded over time and key changes and supports that may help sustain trauma-informed IECMH going forward. See appendix for participants.
- Fall 2024 focus group with six Promising Minds grantees working in the early childhood field or workforce development to capture how the work has evolved and any plans for sustaining these practices and capacities.
- A review of 18 Hawai'i Community Foundation closing conversations with grantee partners from Fall 2024.
- A review of past evaluation data (see notes throughout this report and the original evaluations for additional detail):
  - 2019 and 2020 surveys of 54 Promising Minds early childhood Communities of Practice participants
  - 2022 and 2023 surveys of 52 participants from the Promising Minds Fellows Program
  - 2022 interviews with seven consultation participants from the Promising Minds Fellows Program
  - 2023 interviews with staff from two Promising Minds clinical partnership grants
  - 2023 key leader interviews with 12 systems and policy leaders
  - 2022 and 2023 RECSEA from 12 Promising Minds partners
  - 2023 data capacity assessment of 14 Promising Minds partners
  - 2021 Photovoice participatory evaluation with four parents/families
  - 2023 Journey Mapping activity with Promising Minds partners

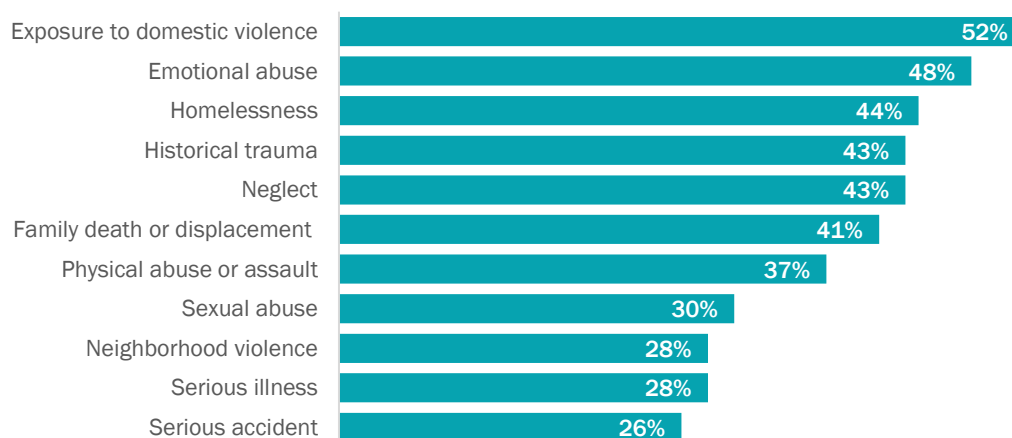
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# Laying the Groundwork in Early Childhood Settings

Childcare providers, social service workers, pediatricians, and other professionals in early childhood settings often serve as the first line of support for families affected by trauma by offering a nurturing environment, reinforcing social emotional skills, and making connections to community resources and mental health services. In recognition of this crucial role, Promising Minds aimed to equip professionals with the knowledge, skills, connections, and resources to adopt a trauma-informed approach. This work started by bringing early childhood professionals together in peer learning communities focused on trauma-informed practices and grew to include support for spreading these practices throughout their organizations and building their capacity for data collection and assessment. These activities were informed by data on the types of trauma Promising Minds partners observed in children in their practice, as shown in the chart below.

**Exhibit 3. Promising Minds partners reporting trauma among children served (n=53)**



*Source: Promising Minds Community of Practice survey results across six cohorts*

This section shares evaluation findings describing how the providers listed above gained a deeper understanding of trauma's impact on children and built their confidence in supporting wellness and resilience, including a focus on providers' own well-being and healing. It also shares findings from the Data Capacity and Storytelling Grant and the Resilient Early Childhood Systems Self-Assessment (RECSSA), which supported partners in embedding trauma-informed practices in their organizations. These efforts served to build a trauma-informed early childhood system for providers.

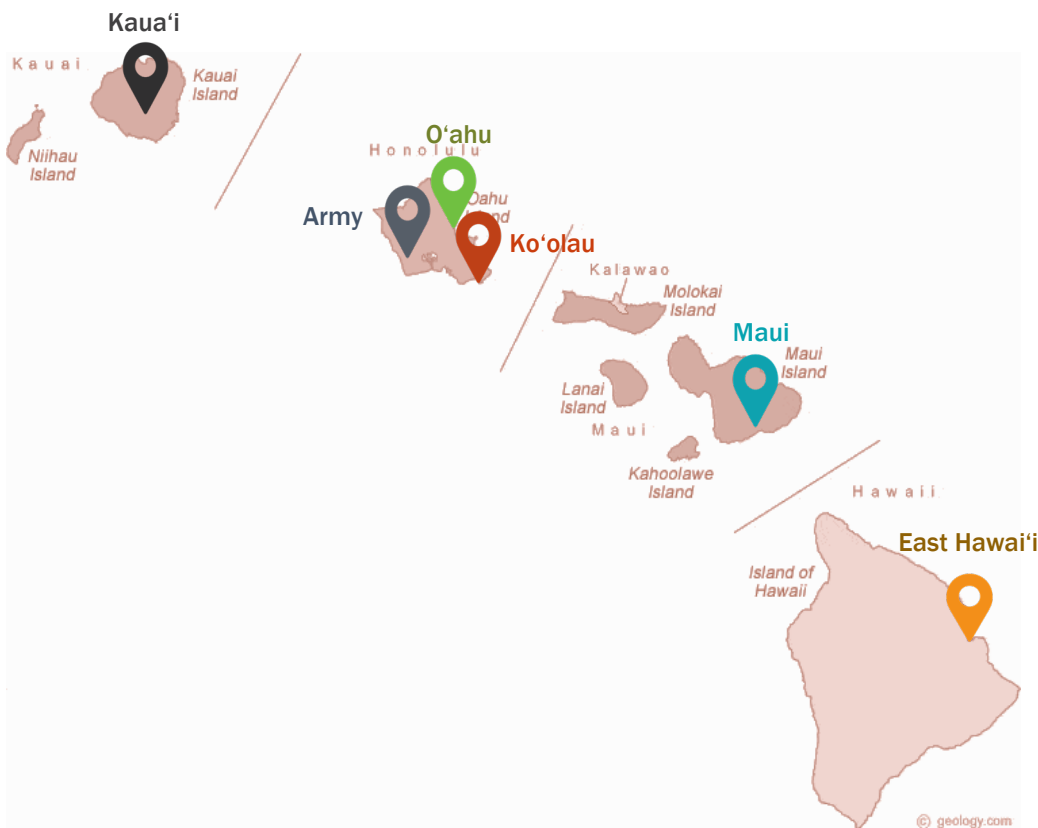
## Planting Seeds for Trauma-Informed Practices in Early Childhood Settings

To support trauma responsiveness in early childhood settings, Promising Minds hosted seven place-based Communities of Practice facilitated by West Ed with local support from Parents and Children Together (PACT) in 2019 and 2020 (see Exhibit 4 below). Through a series of four training and learning sessions over the course of a year, program teams from participating agencies came together to deepen their understanding of trauma-informed approaches, support healthy child development, and build resilience in children who have experienced trauma. These Communities of Practice included providers from across settings where children learn and grow—from our survey data across cohorts, 33% of participants were home visitors, 22% were center-based teachers, 17% provided home-based childcare, and 13% worked in the homes of families, along with others serving in specialized roles or management.

### Evaluation Approach:

Engage R+D conducted surveys of Communities of Practice participants from cohorts 1-5 and 7 (cohort 6 was a pilot using a different facilitation approach). The survey helped gather insights on Promising Minds participants' understanding of trauma-informed care, their self-efficacy to use trauma-informed approaches, practice of self-care, and their perceptions and satisfaction with the training. Overall, the surveys had a 62% response rate, with responses from 54 participants.

Exhibit 4. Promising Minds Communities of Practice Cohorts

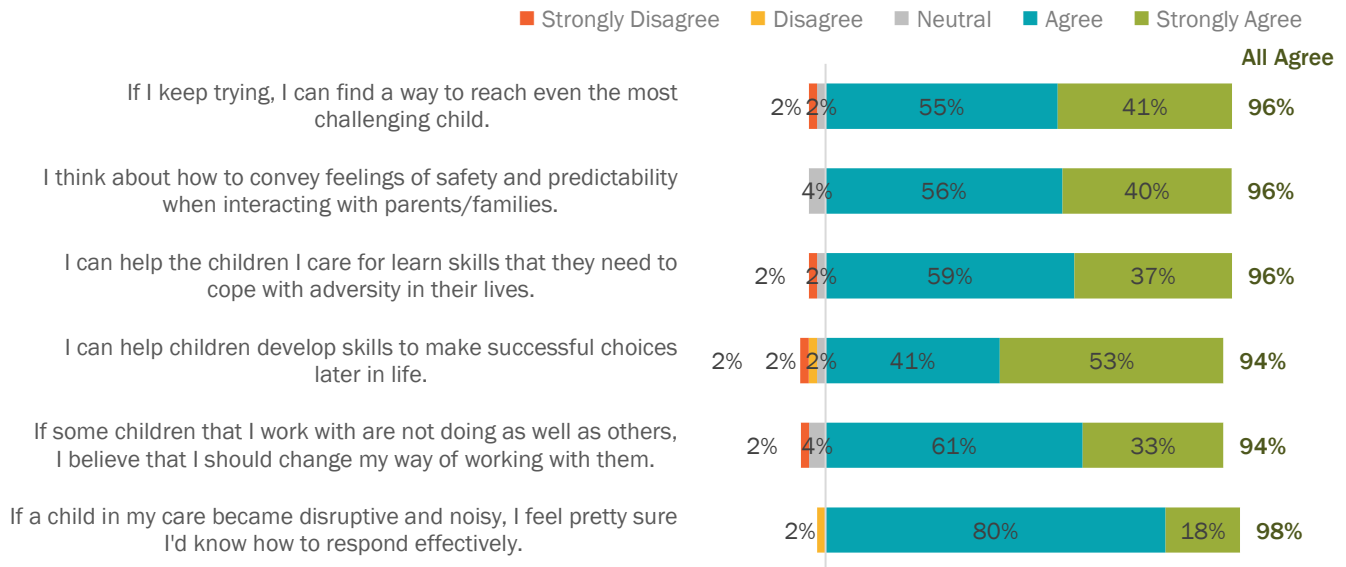




## Participants developed a stronger understanding of how trauma impacts children and confidence in implementing a trauma-informed approach.

Survey data from the Communities of Practice participants highlighted providers' growing confidence in helping children cope with adversity, make positive life choices, and confront challenges. Participants also reported feeling equipped to interact with families and respond effectively to behavioral challenges (see Exhibit 5 below).

**Exhibit 5. Select Learning Outcomes from Community of Practice Participants (n=53)**



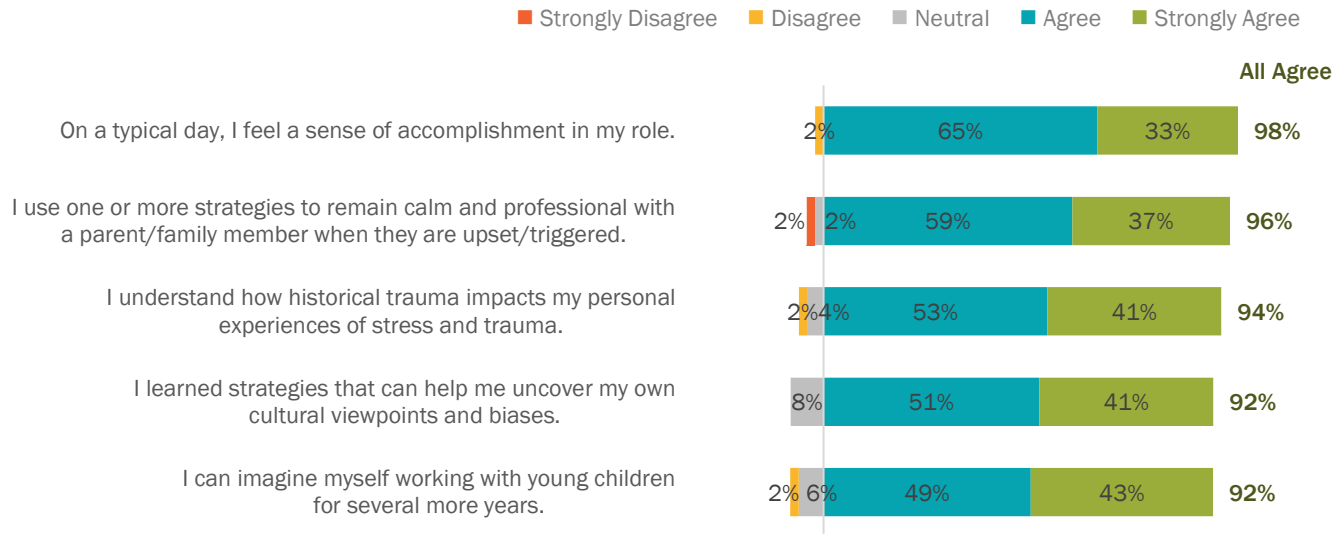
Source: Survey of Communities of Practice participants, Cohorts 1-5, 7

When asked about the most valuable part of the program, one participant praised the “research and evidence-based strategies that work for those who experience any form of trauma and the numerous ways to support children and families.” Another appreciated reflecting on the power of their role in working with families: “The most meaningful thing that I learned is that we are the hope and the help for many of our families and our keiki. We can help our families simply by being aloha and creating a safe and welcoming environment where they know they are cared for, loved and respected.” Insights into trauma’s diverse impacts, including historical and cultural trauma, also resonated deeply with the group, particularly for Native Hawaiian participants: “As a Native Hawaiian, we continue to process the truth of our trauma due to colonization.” Another shared that they were surprised by “how many [of our] staff members are not trained on trauma-informed practice,” underscoring the importance of expanding resources and training in their communities.

## A key aspect of the trauma-informed training was attending to providers' needs and healing.

The Communities of Practice also placed a strong emphasis on self-care, recognizing that providers' well-being affects their ability to help others. This is particularly important for providers who have experienced personal, cultural, or historical trauma, and in recognition that the Communities of Practice were happening at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. One person reflected, “I always put everyone else before myself... I learned that my safe mind and thoughts are just as important as the children I look after.” The sessions offered tools like journaling and mindfulness techniques to manage stress and reactions, especially when dealing with challenging behaviors in children. One participant reflected, “If I can be that consistent anchor, it’s what they need.” Exhibit 6 highlights some of the self-care outcomes for providers, including feeling an accomplishment in their work, understanding their own trauma and biases, and using strategies to remain calm and professional.

**Exhibit 6. Self-Care Outcomes from Community of Practice Participants (n=53)**



Source: Survey of Communities of Practice participants, Cohorts 1-5, 7

**Participants are approaching the work through a Hawaiian cultural lens.**

One piece of trauma-informed practice that particularly resonated with participants was the two-generational approach to mental health. This approach recognizes the importance of working with parents, grandparents, and other caregivers alongside children to promote well-being. In Hawai'i, this is often thought about through "ohana nui," translated as *large family*, an approach that recognizes the strength of Hawai'i's multigenerational families. One partner described how this approach to mental health *"fits really nicely with a lot of the work that we were doing because we were promoting the caregiver depression screens, whether it be for mamas or dads or grandparents who are raising their kids... If we can uplift the parent, they will be able to parent their kids better and support their kids on all the development that they need."* Promising Minds partners spoke about how they were working to support a variety of family members alongside young children, from fathers to teenage siblings.

**Kahewai Trauma-Informed Care Summits**

To further support providers after the conclusion of the Communities of Practice, the Hawai'i Community Foundation, together with the Hawai'i Department of Health and the Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools, partnered with Ke Ala Ho'aka & Associates and ACEs Connection Hawai'i to offer professional development and connection for providers. Developed by trauma-informed strategist Danny Goya, this work started with one-hour lunch calls called the Well Bento, followed by a virtual Kahewai Summit and then in-person Kahewai Live events. Goya explained that, like the four fingers of the Kahewai waterfall, the summit brings together the four streams or types of providers in one place, including family childcare homes, group childcare, infant and toddler childcare, and family child interaction learning programs. *"It's really meant to get those four streams together. And then the storm of COVID brought us together to form one powerful entity to push forward mauili ola or the pursuit of wellness."* From 2021 to 2024, the group hosted four annual virtual summits intermixed with live events, fostering wellness and resilience through trauma-informed practices for all types of early childhood providers serving children from birth to age five.

Source: 2024 Key Leader Interviews

## Cultivating Strong Practices in Organizations

As providers learned new trauma-informed approaches, it was important to support them in embedding these practices in their organizations to help build stronger systems that sustain the work. This included support for activities like seeking buy-in from management, re-imagining agency policies and ways of working to become more trauma-informed, implementing practices like reflective supervision,<sup>4</sup> and creating a system for screening and referrals. As one practitioner put it, *“Just because I attended a trauma-informed care training doesn’t make me ‘trauma-informed’ ...It is something that you have to sustain and commit to doing and turning into a practice.”*

### Evaluation Approach:

The RECSSA tool helps providers identify key indicators to guide organizations and communities toward deeper changes needed to be trauma-informed. Partner organizations were encouraged to complete the RECSSA tool and review the data together as a team. In total, 12 organizations and agencies in Hawai‘i completed the RECSSA in 2022 and 2023.

To support this work, the Hawai‘i Community Foundation began exploring what a cohesive, trauma-informed, and resilient early learning system might look like. Engage R+D interviewed 14 leaders in early education, public health, and social services to help identify elements of a strong system using a Hawaiian cultural lens. Leaders, especially those working with Native Hawaiian communities, advised that the tool must attend to cultural and historical trauma. One of the community leaders consulted was Danny Goya, who advocates for a “two-lens approach” that merges science and culture. The evaluation team used these insights to create the Resilient Early Childhood Systems Self-Assessment (RECSSA), a tool that early childhood organizations across Hawai‘i can use to assess the ways in which their organization is supporting resilience among families, caregivers, service providers, and community leaders and plan for how to strengthen their approach.

The RECSSA identifies indicators of a resilient early childhood system across four domains:

- **Leadership:** The extent to which leaders at different levels within and around the organization are committed to and demonstrate support for trauma-informed care and practices. Leadership is critical to building and improving the sociopolitical environment to sustain change. (Sample item from the Leadership domain: *An equity lens is applied to all programs and policies to address bias and the impact of historical trauma and systemic oppression on multiple generations of families.*)
- **Quality Improvement:** The extent to which the organization has a clear, focused strategy and plan for improving the quality of its early childhood programs with trauma-informed care and practices. This is supported by a culture of continual improvement and structures (e.g., data and dedicated time) for learning and data-informed practices. (Sample item from the Quality Improvement domain: *It is a norm for all high-quality early childhood programs – birth to age 5 – to support the trauma-informed process with cultural responsiveness and aloha.*)
- **Infrastructure:** The extent to which the organization has the resources and infrastructure (e.g., funding, staffing, facilities, and policies) to implement and scale effective trauma-informed care models. Resources and infrastructure should be adequate and aligned, coordinated across institutions, and receive attention from leaders at different levels. (Sample item from the Infrastructure domain: *Trauma-informed organizations have made trauma-responsive practices the organizational norm and have become so accepted and embedded that it no longer depends on a few leaders.*)
- **Partnerships and Alignment:** The extent to which there are strong and effective linkages to similar and connected entities in early childhood, public health, mental health, informal care networks, and social services. (Sample item from the Partnerships and Alignment domain: *Funders and policy-makers actively, appropriately*

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<sup>4</sup> Reflective supervision often includes dedicated time with a supervisor or mentor to step back and examine thoughts and feelings about experiences with children and families and identify the interventions that best meet their goals. Read more at Zero to Three: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/three-building-blocks-of-reflective-supervision/>

*and meaningfully partner with community organizations to advocate for and meet the needs of early care practitioners, keiki and their ohana.)*

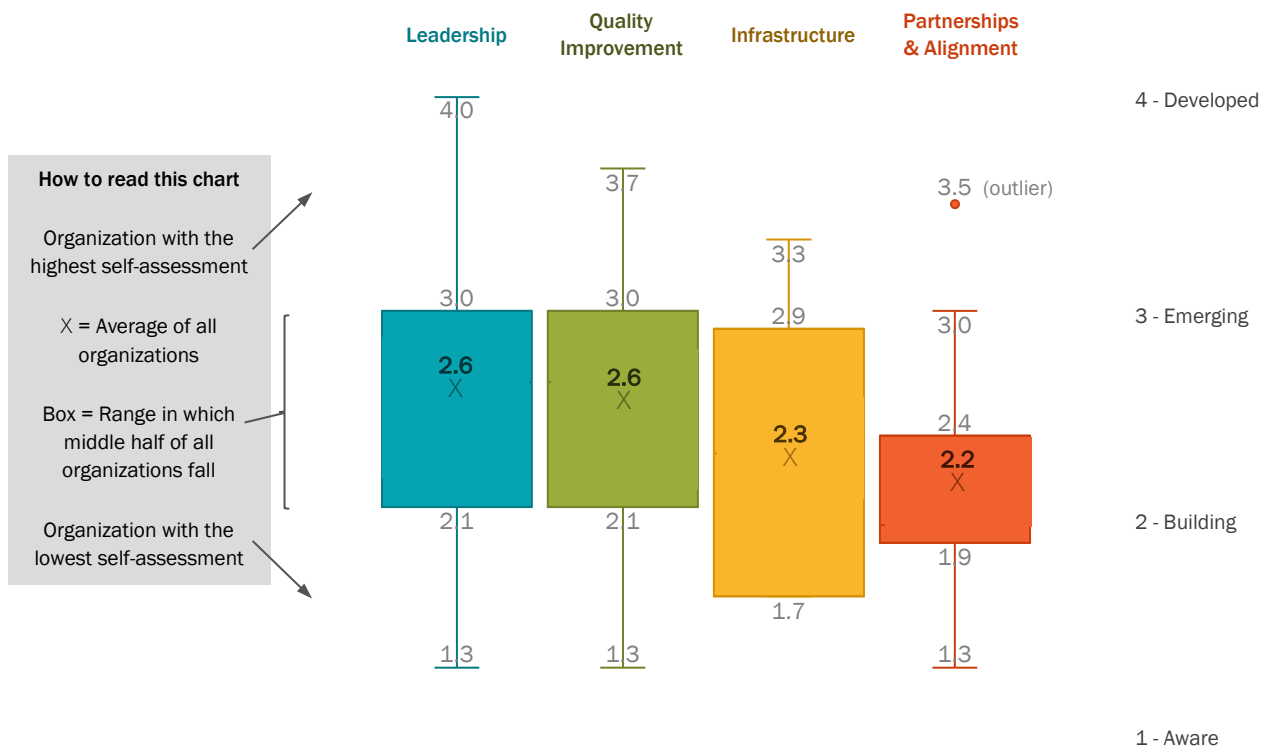
Each domain is composed of three sub-items, which are scored on a four-point scale: Aware (1), Building (2), Emerging (3), and Developed (4).<sup>5</sup>

In 2022 and 2023, a total of 12 organizations completed the RECSSA at least once and shared their data with the evaluation team (one organization completed it in 2022 only, five organizations completed it in both 2022 and 2023, and six organizations completed it in 2023 only). These Promising Minds partners include 11 organizations that participated in the early Communities of Practice and AIMH HI. The analysis below includes data from the first time that organizations took the RECSSA; given the small sample size and relatively short timeframe, we did not expect to see major differences in average domain scores for those organizations that completed the assessment at both timepoints.

### Partner organizations' average scores were between “Building” and “Emerging” across the four RECSSA domain areas.

Average domain scores for the 12 partner organizations taking the RECSSA for the first time range between “Building” (score of 2 out of 4) and “Emerging” (score of 3 out of 4), indicating solid standing and opportunities for continued growth and strengthening. The graph below (Exhibit 7) shows some variation in the distribution of scores within each domain, with the X representing the mean scores. Overall, the domains with the highest average scores were Leadership (2.6) and Quality Improvement (2.6), followed by Infrastructure (2.3) and Partnerships & Alignment (2.2). We share qualitative data from the key leader interviews and the provider focus group below to provide additional context and examples of the quantitative domain scores.

Exhibit 7. Range of First Year RECSSA Domain Scores [2021-2022 (n=6) and 2022-2023 (n=6)]



<sup>5</sup> See the RECSSA overview for more information: [https://www.hawaiicommunityfoundation.org/file/2024/RECSSA-Charts\\_October-2023\\_.pdf](https://www.hawaiicommunityfoundation.org/file/2024/RECSSA-Charts_October-2023_.pdf)

## Leadership: Leaders' understanding and support of trauma-informed practices varied among partner agencies.

This domain captures the ways in which leadership understands and supports wellness and resilience, including ways in which leadership understands trauma, applies an equity lens, and provides staff with opportunities to try new and innovative approaches. Out of the four domains, leadership had both the highest average score (2.6) and the largest range of scores (1.3 to 4.0).

One provider described how the REC SSA itself supported conversations with leadership and encouraged further buy-in, saying: “[We used the REC SSA to have a] bigger conversation with our administration. They were so open to taking a look at how we are doing these trauma-informed practices—it was a really big deal.” Some providers, however, faced challenges when trying to gain support from upper management to make their organizations more trauma-informed. Some practitioners, who had direct and regular contact with clients, felt they had a different vantage point than supervisors or executives, who they felt were further removed from those experiencing trauma. This, they said, led to a greater focus on results than attending to healing and practices such as reflective supervision: “We were advocating for increased reflective supervision, which we knew was a really important part [of trauma-informed care]. ...At one point the response [from leadership] was, ‘Can’t they just go to a counselor through the insurance?’ So, we had to... [explain] the importance of the practices and the activities that we wanted to engage in.” Another provider expressed a desire for trauma-informed training aimed specifically at organizational leadership to support a culture of reflection, saying, “There is a need for training on infant and early childhood mental health or trauma-informed [practices] aimed at the C-suite, non-direct service people.”

## Quality Improvement: Partners are working diligently to integrate trauma-informed approaches throughout their organizations and identify areas for improvement.

This domain addresses establishing effective and high-performing programs and services through incorporating trauma-informed care and practices. Partners assessed the ways in which a trauma-informed approach is integrated in their organization's programs and services, such as increased awareness among staff about self-care, the extent to which staff receive trauma-informed training as part of new hire orientation, and staff understanding of how to support families healing from trauma. This domain also had a higher average score (2.6) and a wide range (1.3 to 3.7).

Some participants reported that the process of completing the REC SSA together helped teams identify both strengths and challenges, prioritize areas for improvement, and articulate the specific changes needed to support overall quality improvement within their organizations. One provider said, “[REC SSA] helped us to determine a baseline on where we were at as far as our trauma-informed practices. ... [The tool] really helped us to hone in on those aspects that needed to flourish a little bit more.” Some of the improvements they made to their early childhood programs included: letting families know how to contact mental health consultants directly; updating policies and procedures to be more trauma-informed; and developing tangible supports to improve staff wellness initiatives. Almost all the providers who participated in the focus group said that their staff and the families they serve are dealing with various mental health challenges and traumatic events. “Promising Minds and the REC SSA tool [encouraged us to] stop, pause and see how we can support our families, our staff and the children at a greater capacity,” said one provider.

## Infrastructure: Organizations aim to weave trauma-informed practices consistently throughout all programs rather than treat them as isolated initiatives.

The infrastructure domain assesses how organizations support wellness and resilience, from deeply embedded practices to strong data collection and access to mental health consultants. Organizational scores in this domain were between “awareness” and “building,” with an average score of 2.3 and a range from 1.7 to 3.3. These indicate that partner organizations have room to grow with respect to their ability to implement and scale trauma-informed care models.



In their efforts to strengthen organizational infrastructure, partners are gaining clarity and being explicit about their purpose and goals. One provider shared, *“One thing that we [learned through using the RECSSA] was that we really didn’t have any agency policies around trauma-informed practices. ...We looked at our organization’s mission...and dug in to see, who are we serving and what are our goals? What are the challenges for families?”* Making trauma-responsive practices the organizational norm takes time and begins with individual shifts. One provider shared how proud they are to see shifts in attitude and behavior among their staff, stating, *“People who have been so opposed to reflective practice [are now] willing to attend things like AIMH HI reflective trainings or step outside their comfort zones. That’s a really big deal to me.”* This emphasis on becoming more trauma-informed has led one organization to develop a greater willingness to look beyond immediate behaviors and take time to understand underlying causes. Another provider noted that seemingly small improvements in staff capacity can have positive ripple effects, explaining, *“[We are] going to retain families in the program if they see that their staff want to stay as well, and their staff are happy.”*

**Partnerships and Alignment: Hawai‘i’s decentralized early childhood system is difficult to navigate; however, Promising Minds helped to bridge gaps and facilitate connections.**

This domain addresses creating strong and effective linkages across system components, including public health, mental health, informal care networks, and other social services. It had the lowest average domain score (2.2; range 1.3 to 3.5).

While organizations are effectively integrating trauma-informed approaches, partners reported that it has been challenging to develop the necessary partnerships to secure resources to sustain progress. Many key leader interview participants expressed frustration with the early childhood system in Hawai‘i, describing it as decentralized, siloed, and difficult to navigate. One person said, *“[it is challenging] to understand the different pots of money that are out there like SNAP, TANF, or childcare or HUD or FEMA. It is just so confusing for even our staff who have access to some of those resources to understand it better to even help our clients with.”*

Despite these barriers, Promising Minds has helped strengthen linkages across the early childhood ecosystem. As one provider noted, *“Promising Minds took so many programs out of their silos and connected them and was able to emphasize that we’re all moving in the same direction, even though we might have different destinations. ...If I’m a Head Start, my destination is kindergarten readiness, for example. Whereas if I’m a home visitor...my destination might be attachment and parental education.”*

### Embedding Trauma-informed Practices at One Agency

Family Support Hawai'i (FSH) used the RECSSA tool to reflect on their systems, policies, and practices and inform actions needed to embed trauma-informed practices across their organization. Stacy Brown, Early Head Start Director at FSH said, *"It was really helpful for us to utilize a tool that identified strengths as well as challenges across our agency...As an organization, [we asked,] 'What are some of those things that we want to improve together?'"* Below are some of the ways that RECSSA helped to support trauma-informed practices at FSH:

- **Making trauma-responsive practices the organizational norm.** When completing the RECSSA together, Brown and her colleagues realized that *"Our agency on the whole, didn't really have any policies and procedures around trauma-informed practices. So, we looked at [updating our policies] and that's still in progress."*
- **Providing reflective supervision to more staff across the agency.** All FSH supervisors now complete reflective supervision training, and the staff feel more supported overall. Brown shared, *"We had quite a few of our [early intervention services program] staff receive their infant mental health endorsements, so that has been great!"*
- **Ensuring that staff have access to needed support, including wellness and self-care.** FSH participated in an intensive trauma-informed care training through UCLA with a goal of improving staff wellbeing: *"We wanted to look at staff wellness as an important component [of our service delivery model]...How do we support our staff...to be healthy and well so that they can then care for families who then...care for their children?"*

Source: 2022 and 2023 RECSSA; 2024 Provider Focus Group

Following the enthusiastic reception of the RECSSA tool by partner organizations, the Hawai'i Community Foundation created an online RECSSA toolkit to support its continued use.

## Measuring Growth for Children and Families

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Data represents another crucial element in building the early childhood system. On an individual level, screenings like Ages and Stages Questionnaires® (ASQ®), which assesses developmental milestones, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which documents exposure to different types of trauma, can help providers identify and provide timely support for developmental delays or mental health challenges. When this data is shared across communities, it also can help systems leaders allocate resources and craft policies to support this work. Over time, this information can be used to understand the effectiveness of interventions and trauma-informed supports. As one systems leader explained, *“If we don’t know how our youngest keiki are doing developmentally, it’s hard to then determine which population needs the supports and what types of interventions and programs we should be providing.”*

### Evaluation Approach:

In 2019, Engage R+D collected information from 14 Promising Minds grantees to better understand their data capacity and use. Grantees in the 2022 Data Culture, Capacity, and Story Grant Program also completed a data planning assessment that details their data landscape, needs, and hopes for an early childhood data system. Evaluation data from these grants is supplemented in this section with reflections from partners and key leaders as part of the 2024 retrospective evaluation.

In 2019, Engage R+D conducted an initial assessment of the data capacity of the early childhood programs working with Promising Minds. The assessment revealed that there was great interest and enthusiasm for using data to understand the impact of the work, inform practices, and engage families. It also uncovered opportunities to enhance data quality through training and professional development and to strengthen the data system infrastructure to meaningfully support early childhood and mental health professionals. This led the Hawai’i Community Foundation to create the Data Culture, Capacity, and Story Grant Program in 2022, which provided resources to help programs interpret and use their data for program improvement, build an organization-wide culture around data, and tell the story of their work. In particular, the grant focused on helping organizations work with the data they already had to develop meaningful insights and strengthen their systems. Below we share a summary of this work.

### Promising Minds partners are building their capacity to collect and use data.

Through the Data Culture, Capacity, and Story grant, partners received technical assistance on data goals, building out their data systems, and if they wanted it training on implementing the ASQ and using tools like social media for storytelling. One priority for many partners was to transition from paper to online data collection, which can make the data more accessible and available for real-time reporting. A partner explained how the grant cohort worked together to achieve this: *“One of the big needs for our organization was to transition from paper ASQs to ASQ Online. Knowing that others in the cohort with us had either done it or wanted to do it as well, we were able to partner to get initial ASQ Online training with other cohort members.”* Data Capacity grant projects supported the increased efficiency of data tracking and monitoring using existing data management systems, development and administration of internal data collection tools, and the creation of a data dashboard to enhance sensemaking and storytelling.

### Clinical Partnerships for Screening Across Early Childhood Settings

Pediatricians can serve as another touchpoint for supporting children and families by conducting developmental screenings during well child visits. In 2023, Promising Minds funded the Hawai'i Island Community Health Center as part of their Better Data strategy to develop a standard ASQ screening process to identify and assist families who may need additional support, testing, or referrals. *"We're creating this additional layer of a safety net for looking at developmental concerns,"* noted Cecilia Sakata, the project lead. This is helping to create an integrated system across all early childhood settings and provide supports where they are most needed: *"Two years ago, there was nothing I could do for [our rural] patients. If you got a positive screen for a child without resources, you could maybe get them seen in six months. Now we can get them in with our behavioral health team right away and get a list of recommendations to share with the school and referrals to get them in Head Start programs,"* she explained.

Source: 2023 Clinical Partners Interviews

### The evaluation surfaced relevant, local data to surface systems issues and opportunities and to support policy discussions.

In addition to programmatic data collection efforts, several grantee partners noted the importance of having an external evaluation partner in Engage R+D and others. For some, it was especially important to collect data specific to the local context, with one partner saying, *"It's helpful to have locally collected data and to talk to people who actually live here [rather than] extrapolating from a different context and different culture."* To ensure that the evaluation team had time to build relationships, understand the local context, and support the work as it evolved, the Hawai'i Community Foundation partnered with Engage R+D throughout the six-year initiative rather than bringing them on towards the end. The evaluation was designed to be a mix between traditional models of evaluation focused on understanding what works, identifying areas for improvement, and capturing both strengths and challenges (formative and outcome evaluation) and newer models focused on using evaluation to support learning, taking a flexible and adaptable approach (developmental evaluation).

Partners noted that the evaluation was especially helpful for sharing about the work to policy makers and systems leaders. *"The external evaluator has been very key... I know that I use them a lot in presentations. The work gets referenced a lot,"* said a partner. Another noted how data collected for Promising Minds was used effectively for policy discussions, saying, *"[Engage R+D] did a beautiful job on presenting the data that they collected... and how they included the providers in those discussions."* In this way, external evaluation partners supplemented the data collected by individual agencies and helped to answer larger questions across systems to inform critical decision making.

### Families shared how they are introducing keiki to new activities and experiences and creating "little moments" to build parent-child relationships.

In addition to evaluations of Promising Minds activities like the Community of Practice and workforce development detailed in this report, the external evaluation team sought to add to programmatic data efforts by engaging with a small group of families from Imua Family Services to tell their stories. Engage R+D used a method called Photovoice that encouraged participating families from Imua Family Services to act as recorders in their own communities by taking photos that highlight the ways in which they and their children are thriving. Parents and families shared pictures of their children exploring the rain, playing with a grandparent, visiting the beach, and trying new foods for the first time. Parents shared that they enjoyed spending time with their children and sharing these experiences with them. One parent explained, *"Even if we are busy working parents, we can still spend quality time with [our child] and do things with [them] that [they] enjoy."* These experiences showcase the ways in which families support healthy development.

#### Evaluation Approach:

In 2021, Engage R+D conducted an evaluation with four parents/family members served by Promising Minds participants in Maui County. The evaluation used a participatory research method called Photovoice, which seeks to empower people to share their experiences through digital storytelling.



Family members also explained what messages these pictures can send to people who care for their children and other children in Hawai'i. They noted that these pictures described the importance of creating "little moments" to share with their children, such as reading books together, cuddling on the couch, and playing with their children. They explained that these moments helped introduce their children to new experiences, allowed their children to learn and grow, and helped parents and family members build connections and trusting relationships that can *"make a huge impact in their lives and development."* One parent also shared that their child benefited from the care provided by an organization who participated in Promising Minds. This

parent shared, *"[My child] has greatly benefited from being a part of [the developmental services]. We are very grateful to this organization for all the help they continue to provide to [my child] and many other families in the county."*

### Statewide support could further strengthen data for referrals, planning, and decision making.

Despite this work, many Promising Minds partners noted that data use and capacity in this area is still very limited across Hawai'i. *"Hawai'i does not have an early childhood data system at all or at least a coordinated one,"* noted one partner. *"We have data sets like EPSDT [Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment] and we have programmatic data from the Department of Health, EOEL [Executive Office on Early Learning], and DOE [Department of Education]. But you can't confidently answer the question in Hawai'i, 'How are our youngest keiki doing developmentally?'"* One benefit of such a system would be to coordinate resources and referrals between agencies: *"How cool would it be if there were a platform where organizations can enroll and do warm handoffs?"* asked a partner.

*"Then it can collect data so Med-QUEST can track and get reports on how well different health plans are doing."* Such a system could also enable partners to better track and measure the outcomes of their work: *"All the details of those referrals, like why they were made, who made them, and how long it took [could then be tracked to show] outcomes,"* explained a partner.

#### Evaluation Approach:

Engage R+D interviewed key leaders and decision-makers in 2023 (n=12) and 2024 (n=13) to understand how the state has supported trauma-informed practices and plans to sustain that work going forward. In 2024, the evaluation team also conducted a focus group with six Promising Minds participants working in early childhood settings or workforce development to reflect on their work and share future plans.

Partners further underscored the need for data to inform policy decisions. One partner described questions that came up when applying for state funding: *"Legislators would ask us, 'How many kids five and under need mental health services?' ...We came up with a number based on some national estimates... It's not really a good number because we're not basing it on actual screening data. I think we need screening data."* In this way, access to accurate local data could better inform policy and funding decisions that shape programs. For example, the Data Capacity Assessment conducted by Engage R+D noted a need to standardize the ASQ® assessments to be conducted twice a year and collect data on measures such as teacher or classroom quality and kindergarten readiness. Partners also indicated a desire for centrally collected student data, such as suspensions and expulsions, and information on mental health providers with different certifications and trainings. *"It is really the priority for us to find a way to use our data in a really meaningful way that helps others work collaboratively to solve these issues,"* shared a partner.



# Nurturing a Supportive Network of IECMH Professionals

Supporting wellness and resilience in young children and families requires a whole-community approach. Providers in early childhood settings rely on a network of supports, from ongoing training and coaching in trauma-informed practices to the ability to refer families to additional services. Mental health professionals trained in supporting infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) play a crucial role by providing services to children and families and consultation to early childcare providers to explore strategies for managing challenges, improving child-caregiver relationships, and supporting trauma-informed practices. These services can help caregivers and the families they serve understand and address developmental milestones, behavioral challenges, or emotional distress early, preventing long-term mental health issues.

Through Promising Minds, the Hawai'i Community Foundation partnered with the Association for Infant Mental Health Hawai'i (AIMH HI) to increase the availability of trained IECMH professionals who can support providers in early childhood settings. As an agency that works to improve access to culturally competent IECMH services through education, advocacy, and collaboration, AIMH HI was uniquely positioned to offer training and support. Together with the Foundation, they created the Promising Minds Fellows Program, which brings mental health professionals interested in supporting IECMH together for monthly learning modules, regular reflective supervision sessions, and opportunities to practice their skills by providing consultations to early childcare providers. To date, the program has trained approximately 80 professionals through several tracks, including:

#### Evaluation Approach:

Engage R+D partnered with AIMH HI on an evaluation of the Fellows Program. This included a survey of 52 fellows from cohorts 1-3 and 10 consultation fellows, along with interviews of seven consultation fellows. This is supplemented with information on the IECMH workforce from interviews with key leaders, including AIMH HI staff, as part of the 2024 retrospective evaluation.

- **Promising Minds Fellows:** The core fellows program offers training and support for mental health professionals seeking to specialize in IECMH. AIMH HI has supported four cohorts of fellows from 2020 through 2024.
- **Promising Minds Consultation-Intensive Fellows:** For those who participated as Promising Minds Fellows, AIMH HI offers a follow-up fellowship to train mental health professionals in providing consultation services to childcare providers. While this consultation training was originally part of the original Fellows program, as AIMH HI learned more about what expertise was needed in the field, the consultation-intensive became a separate, more in-depth experience with two cohorts from 2022 to 2024.
- **Child-Parent Psychotherapy Learning Community:** Starting in late 2022, AIMH HI hosted an 18-month learning community designed specifically to support licensed clinicians in building their capacity to work in IECMH, with a second cohort in late 2024.

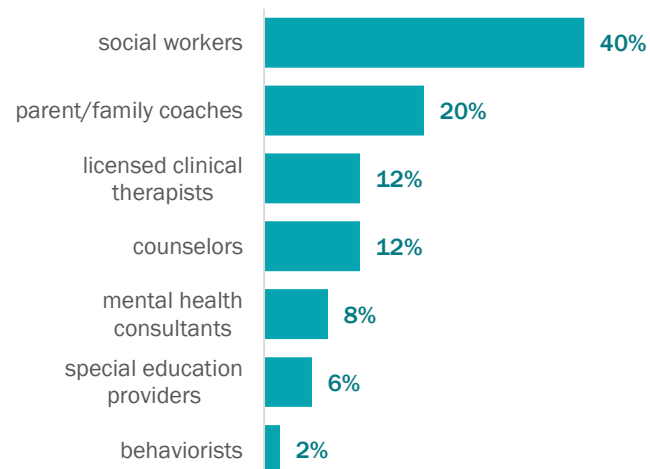
This section shares findings from the evaluation of the Promising Minds Fellows Program, including ways that it has opened new career pathways, built mental health providers' capacity to serve infants and young children, and begun to weave a network of mental health providers throughout Hawai'i. It also shares considerations from key leaders for how this work could be further integrated into the early childhood system.

## The Promising Minds Fellows Program opened new pathways to expanding the IECMH workforce.

A key aspect of the Fellows Program is that it trains a wide range of professionals who support mental health needs in their communities. This includes mental health professionals who may not have previously worked with young children. *“My focus... is usually the teenager or preteen,”* shared one fellow. *“By learning more about babies, it taught me more about prevention and to support the baby before he/she becomes a preteen or teenager.”* In this way, the Fellows Program provides professionals with increased exposure to and support for working with young children and families.

The Fellows Program also works with professionals regardless of their licensure or level of advanced education. In a survey of the first three cohorts of fellows in the foundational program, participants included social workers, coaches, counselors, mental health consultants, and other professionals in addition to licensed clinical therapists (see Exhibit 8). These professionals worked in a variety of settings, including programs/agencies (46%) and the homes of families (21%). By working with a wide range of professionals, the Fellows Program created new pathways into the field of IECMH without the systemic and cultural barriers associated with formal licensing, holding promise for increasing the size and diversity of the IECMH workforce. Upon completion of the program, fellows are eligible to receive an official Endorsement from AIMH HI, an internationally recognized credential demonstrating their specialization in IECMH.<sup>6</sup>

**Exhibit 8. Professional Roles of Promising Minds Fellows (n=52)**



Source: Survey of Promising Minds Fellows, Cohorts 1-3

## The Fellows Program built mental health providers' capacity to provide culturally responsive IECMH care.

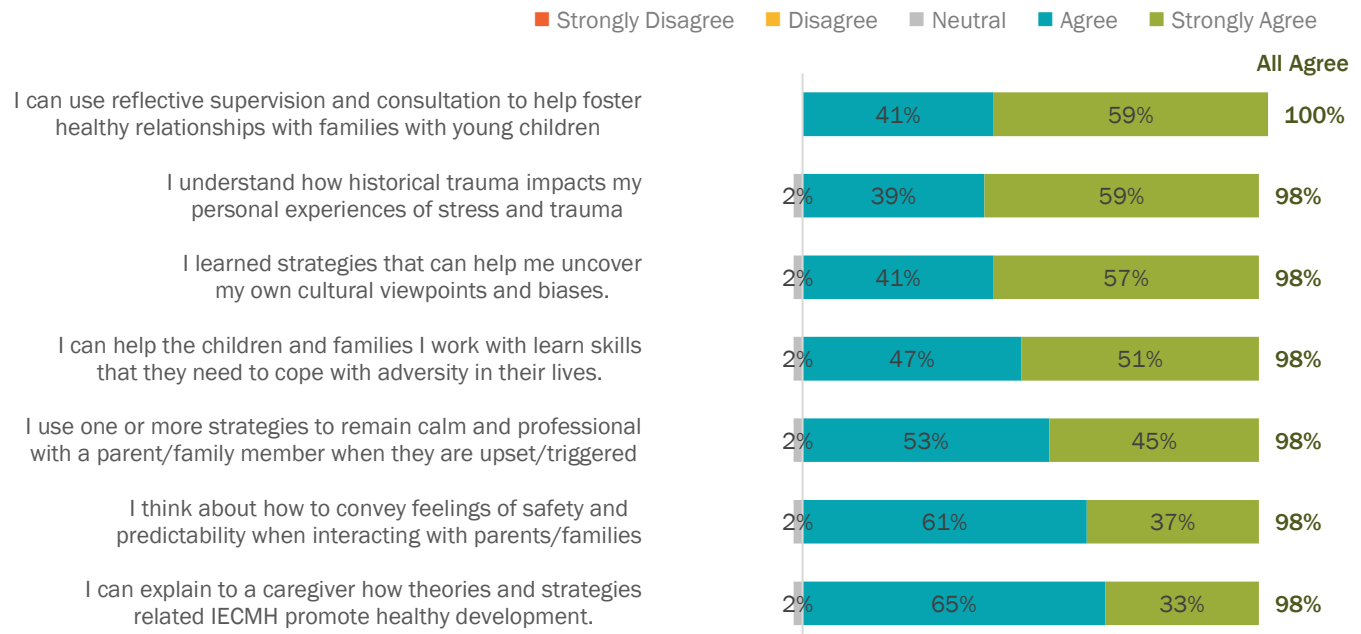
In a survey of the first three cohorts of fellows in the foundational program, participants reported that they learned about theories related to IECMH, strategies for reflective supervision and consultation, the impacts of historical trauma and support uncovering their own biases, and how to create a safe and calm professional environment (see Exhibit 9).

The opportunities to come together with peers and to participate in reflective supervision—where fellows engage with mentors to step back and examine thoughts and feelings about experiences with children and families and identify the interventions that best met their goals—were particularly impactful parts of the program and were the highest-rated resources by participants. As one participant stated, *“Reflective supervision was the missing piece for me... I need that group support and connection to be the best practitioner I can be.”* Another shared, *“The sense of community between us all was powerful... I felt like I was not alone in this field.”* Others noted how reflective supervision helped them feel more present and self-aware in their work, saying, *“It helped me make more meaningful connections to my families... I am more ‘present’ for my teams and for myself because of it.”* Participants also appreciated learning skills like creating a *“brave space for staff to process and reflect.”* As a result of the program, nearly all (98%) reported that they felt they could support the children and families they work with to learn the skills to cope with adversity in their lives.

<sup>6</sup> AIMH HI Annual Report. 2023.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63ed4991a48af1775bdbc7ce/t/66341fc32ee64a7fc66bc597/1714692053575/2023+AIMH+HI+Annual+Report+%282%29.pdf>

## Exhibit 9. Select Learning Outcomes for Promising Minds Fellows (n=49)



Source: Survey of Promising Minds Fellows, Cohorts 1-3

### Fellows are becoming part of a network of support.

Beyond the training itself, program participants and staff described how the connections they made are helping them to weave a professional network across Hawai'i. Fellows reported connecting with others across various fields and regions, fostering a diverse support network. One participant shared appreciation for the “peer support across the island” and the “deepening relationship with CPP [child-parent psychotherapy] peers.” Other fellows said they left the program with what one described as “lifetime colleagues.” These connections provide ongoing support, networking opportunities, and a shared commitment to IECMH that fellows can carry into their work beyond the program.

On a systems level, AIMH HI is leveraging these connections to create linkages in IECMH across Hawai'i. For example, AIMH HI staff are drawing on the relationships built through the Fellows Program to connect programs in need: “We get text messages all the time saying, ‘I’m having a client with this issue. Do you have any resources?’ ...The more that we’re learning about who’s in the community, the more we can connect them to people who haven’t been connected before,” shared one AIMH HI staff member. In another example, a staff member shared how a consultation fellow reached back out to get supports for their program: “We can serve as that bridge for them, and that all started from the relationship that began in the Fellows Program.” In this way, the Fellows Program has become a hub for IECMH in Hawai'i, making connections across geographic and sector boundaries to support resource-sharing, referrals, and collaboration.

**“A fellow in our first cohort of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants worked with a school, and now that school is reaching out to AIMH HI to do other work.”**

Going forward, some Promising Minds partners expressed a need to build this network more formally and incorporate more voices across the Hawaiian islands who are doing this work. “My next question is, how can we make this more systematized? Right now it is very relational,” said a member of the AIMH HI staff.

## There is a need to further integrate IECMH providers into the early childhood system.

To ensure that young children and families can access these services, key systems leaders noted it is vital that IECMH providers be integrated into the early childhood system. Currently, while fellows are developing new skills for working with younger populations, these skills are often underutilized due to systemic gaps, such as a lack of career ladders, compensation structures, and referral pathways. One leader explained, *“For providers who do get additional training, there’s no way of compensating them for those additional skill sets. Those are systems pieces that are hard. Now we have a lot of trained consultants at varying levels, but no way of plugging them into anything.”* Another leader noted how changes to the reimbursement structure for Med-QUEST and other state programs could support this work: *“Eventually, it will need to become a covered service under Medicaid...Getting reimbursement for this stuff is a huge policy piece.”* Reimbursements for IECMH services would provide agencies with an avenue for expanding early childhood care.

Key leaders also noted that the sustainability of the IECMH workforce is further challenged by high turnover and insufficient wages in the sector, which undermine retention efforts and lead to skill degradation. As one leader put it, *“You’re constantly churning through people, and what that means is you have to always have the trainings available.”* Another emphasized, *“These trained people with skills are going to go by the wayside if they don’t have a position or a system that supports the utilization of those skills.”* Lower pay in this sector compounds these issues, with one provider stating bluntly, *“It doesn’t matter how reflective we are when we can’t pay people a living wage.”* Some noted that this issue was particularly acute on the prevention side of the workforce—which can include teachers, support workers, and case workers—and less severe for those providing mental health treatment. These challenges further underscore the importance of funding IECMH, including competitive wages and reimbursement for mental health services through Med-QUEST and other state programs. In the meantime, one key leader emphasized the importance of creating a supportive work environment and fostering connections within the field, which can further support workers. By creating a more supportive infrastructure, Hawai’i can better retain and utilize its IECMH workforce to make services for wellness and recovery more available to young children and families.

# Growing a Resilient System

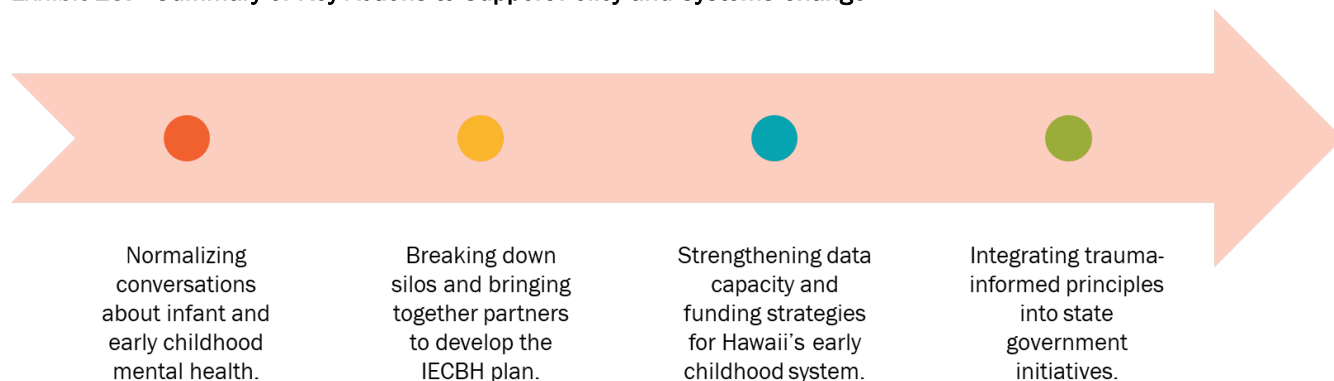
Promising Minds has coincided with major traumatic events impacting Hawai'i (and beyond), including the Kīlauea lava flow (2018), the start of COVID-19 (2020), and the wildfires in Maui (2023). As one key leader reflected, *"The trauma exists...But pathways to healing and resilience need some strategies that can be informed by both care and culture. And if we do that—and you have done that with Promising Minds—there's a lot of hope there."*

The work of Promising Minds has supported changes in the IECMH system in Hawai'i and established a strong foundation to support wellness and resilience. The initiative also bolstered administrative and policy efforts. Promising Minds partners are eager to build on the momentum generated through this initiative by continuing to expand access to mental health services for infants and young children, improve coordination between health professionals and agencies that serve young children, strengthen data sharing across institutions, integrate behavioral health screenings in early care settings, and expand the workforce. Promising Minds is now at an inflection point as the program prepares to sunset after six years. In this section, we share reflections from key leaders on what it takes to support a resilient early childhood system so the seeds that the Hawai'i Community Foundation planted can flourish. Exhibit 10 summarizes the key actions outlined in this section.

## Evaluation Approach:

Engage R+D interviewed key leaders and decision-makers in 2023 (n=12) and 2024 (n=13) to understand how the state has supported trauma-informed practices and plans to sustain that work going forward. In 2024, the evaluation team also conducted a focus group with six Promising Minds participants working in early childhood settings and workforce development to reflect on their work and future plans. See appendix for a list of participants.

Exhibit 10. Summary of Key Actions to Support Policy and Systems Change





## Policy and Systems Change

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Promising Minds helped to advance policies and systems related to early childhood well-being in Hawai'i by normalizing conversations about mental health and trauma, facilitating professional connections across silos, and supporting stronger systems, including data capacity and financing. Key accomplishments and opportunities for continued growth are described in this section.

### Promising Minds helped normalize conversations around infant and early childhood mental health.

As providers in early childhood settings learned more about trauma-informed approaches, they described how they became equipped with language to discuss trauma and the importance of working with young children to ensure future success. *"The understanding of what infant and early childhood mental health services are, is really becoming normed and accepted as a critical part of any early childhood system. That's really significant,"* noted one partner. The early childhood professionals we spoke with attributed expanded awareness of IECMH in part to Promising Minds, with one leader saying, *"Promising Minds is uplifting the conversation around what it means to have an impact on early childhood development in the realm of trauma and traumatic exposure."*

Promising Minds also helped to generate interest in trauma and resilience across state agencies and embed mental health into systems. Some key leaders noted that this shift in awareness coincided with national efforts to destigmatize mental illness, including messages from the Surgeon General about mental health and resilience: *"Now we have both [Promising Minds and a national conversation] happening at the same time and people are starting to buy in. It's transformative in terms of how we're going to do things."* Key leaders shared how this increased awareness about trauma and resilience has led to a focus on funding relevant programs, research and data collection, educating the public about mental health, supporting initiatives focused on trauma-informed care, and providing training and technical assistance for organizations that work with young keiki and their families. Trauma, resiliency, and early intervention has moved from being cutting edge to being a normal part of the conversation among Hawai'i's providers, leaders, and legislators. Promising Minds seeded a shift in the way people talk about early childhood and infant mental health. As one key leader shared, *"I think trauma-informed care is now on the forefront of everyone's mind."*

**"I do think there's absolutely been a change of how we think of infant early childhood mental health."**

### Promising Minds created space for relationship building and working across silos, leading to alignment around the Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan.

As described in this report, the decentralized nature of the early childhood system in Hawai'i is a major challenge, making it difficult to align efforts, make referrals, and track data across the system. Partners recognized the value of Promising Minds in fostering and strengthening relationships among key agencies and organizations, leading to greater alignment across the system. *"The peer learning from other organizations and building those relationships where we can understand what others are doing so, we can make referrals to them, and they can make referrals to us... I think that was what was valuable,"* said one partner. Another early childhood professional reflected on building connections across agencies, stating, *"I enjoyed being able to have an opportunity to network with different agencies who are doing the same work."* Throughout the initiative, the Hawai'i Community Foundation created intentional space to connect through activities like the early childhood communities of practice and Promising Minds partner gatherings, and by funding efforts like the Kahawai Summit.

**"Promising Minds really took so many programs out of their silos and connected them."**

This robust network and improved alignment has contributed to high-profile accomplishments for the early childhood sector in Hawai'i. Notably, Promising Minds brought together IECMH partners in philanthropy, state government, and the non-profit sector to develop the Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan (IECBH), which is now a core resource and driver for additional improvements to the state strategy for serving young children. Through this collaborative effort, the plan states that it is the *"first comprehensive, cross-sector five-year plan that outlines shared goals, policy and financial strategies to improve access to behavioral health services for infants, toddlers, preschoolers and families in Hawai'i."* Specifically, the plan focuses on strengthening systems and policies, workforce development, and community education to expand access to early childhood behavioral health services. To date, there has been significant progress in the areas of workforce development, IECMH consultation, and financial sustainability. [Learn more about IECBH Plan.](#)

### Promising Minds seeded improvements in data capacity, financing, and new initiatives in Hawai'i's early childhood system.

Since the start of the initiative, Promising Minds has recognized the importance of documenting progress through data and evaluation. In 2022, the Data Culture, Capacity, and Storytelling grant program was designed for *"programs to feel more ownership over their own data,"* noted Promising Minds lead Acevedo-Cross. Prior to this, the Foundation noticed that providers were collecting data for compliance purposes. When asked what they wanted to use their own data for, Acevedo-Cross said, *"A lot wanted to be using it more for program improvement, but also storytelling and understanding what their program was doing."* Other projects focused on data systems, including the Policy Analysis data scan project conducted by Jen Cox, a UC Berkeley graduate student in public policy, which analyzed the screening referral intervention system in Hawai'i, and the Hawai'i Island Community Health Center, which has demonstrated new ways for gathering and using data in a clinical setting. *"A lot of people are pointing at and amazed by the data that Hawai'i Island Community Health Center has been collecting in their closed loop system to really look at their developmental screening data and then say, 'here's what's happening with our 0 to 3 population and here's how we're using this data to do something different,'"* said Acevedo-Cross. In addition, Med-QUEST has been a partner thinking alongside the Foundation about better use of Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment data.

These efforts were the precursor to planned projects focused on addressing some of Hawai'i's data challenges. One such effort is the Perigee Fund supporting the ECCS-HIPP IECMH Consultation Sub-Group, which will be led by AIMH HI to develop a data and evaluation system for infant and early childhood mental health consultants. This two-year project will help to identify gaps and improve data tracking and systems. Specifically, one leader said that improvements are needed in Hawai'i's *"ability to structurally and systematically share information from department to department, then be able to track that data over time, to be able to show outcomes and impacts of programming."*

In addition to strengthening data capacity, another issue that key leaders are addressing is how to fund this work. In July 2021, the Department of Human Services (DHS), including representatives from the Med-QUEST Division, created a Sustainable Financing Work Group to strategize and identify recommendations on how to maximize existing resources for early childhood mental health care. They have worked on identifying potential funding streams to support mental health services and explored strategies such as securing a Medicaid waiver of services for Native Hawaiian health practices. Key leaders emphasized the need to braid federal, state, and philanthropic funding.

Providers noted that they have faced some difficulties securing funding for prevention focused work. *"Promising Minds and a lot of the IECMH consultation work is really on the prevention side, working with providers. It's not doing direct service with our keiki. Legislators like the direct services stuff, it's sexy,"* noted one key leader. Nevertheless, many leaders shared that Promising Minds funding was unique in that it allowed for community-based initiatives from the ground up.

Lastly, Promising Minds has helped to weave IECMH and trauma-informed principles into different initiatives over the past six years, including:

- **DOH Home Visiting Program:** To support underserved families with newborns, the Department of Health (DOH) has long offered a home visiting program. As a Promising Minds partner, they expanded the program to integrate an infant and early childhood mental health component to services.
- **DOH Trauma-Informed Care Task Force:** Comprised of state and private agencies, this task force *“proposes recommendations for Hawai‘i’s child-serving agencies and organizations to become collectively more trauma-informed to better serve Hawai‘i’s children and families and improve the health of our communities.”*
- **Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR), Office of the Governor:** Established in 2022, the OWR’s mission is to *“strengthen our state systems and services, using healing-centered care principles as strategies to make Hawai‘i a trauma-informed state.”* Staff from OWR were on the ground in Maui to support the wildfire response and oversee mental health coordination across the island and all of Hawai‘i.
- **Hawai‘i as a Trauma-Informed State:** In February 2024, Hawai‘i Governor Green signed an [executive order](#) to make Hawai‘i a trauma-informed state to *“help alleviate some of the impacts of trauma, and build resilience in our families, communities, and state workforce.”* This designation is significant in that it allows for more State and Federal funding to go towards trauma informed initiatives in Hawai‘i. As one key leader shared, *“there needs to be the State designation for federal and philanthropic buy-in.”*

## The Role of the Funder

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This evaluation report so far describes how Promising Minds partners built their capacity for trauma-informed work and are building a more cohesive system that supports infant and early childhood mental health. In this section, we call special attention to the role and strategy of the Hawai'i Community Foundation in supporting this work.

### Promising Minds took a strategic yet responsive approach to catalyzing systems change.

At the center of the Foundation's approach was an intentional strategy to build momentum around wellness and resilience in early childhood settings that, over time, could lead to policy and systems change across Hawai'i. *"It wasn't a strategy just to provide professional development,"* explained Promising Minds lead Acevedo-Cross. *"It was a strategy to start with that because we needed to foster the belief that trauma-informed work in early childhood settings in Hawai'i was possible."* Looking back on Promising Minds, some systems leaders underscored the important role that foundations can play in elevating new approaches: *"The solutions aren't there without these efforts from the private sphere,"* noted one leader. *"It's just very challenging to move the state and taxpayer funds to look at prevention efforts... [Community foundations] are well positioned to partner and braid funding and get support."* As described in this evaluation, the strategy recognized critical moments to promote wellness and resilience practices in early childhood settings, align partners through projects like the IECBH plan, and find strategic opportunities to elevate this work with governmental partners as they developed policies and programs.

As a result, Foundation staff reflected on how they are seeing change across multiple spheres. *"Promising Minds was able to make an impact on so many different levels and through a diversity of partners. ...There are new ways in which folks in Hawai'i are working together as a result of interacting through this initiative,"* said Malia Maier, program officer with Promising Minds. Throughout the evaluation, partners noted the changes they were seeing, from pediatric screenings to changes in early childhood settings to the creation of a statewide Office of Wellness and Resilience. *"The Promising Minds Initiative is probably the most impactful thing that has happened for the 0 to 5 field,"* one partner enthused.

Throughout the initiative, the Foundation also demonstrated a willingness to pivot and remain flexible as they learned and grew deeper in the work. For example, they had initially planned to develop a train-the-trainer model to support early childhood providers following the communities of practice. *"We had to change course on what that looked like because... the operational structure wasn't there for doing that kind of contracted training,"* said Acevedo-Cross. *"So, we really shifted gears and I'm thankful that the Promising Minds Fellows Program was ready to come online with AIMH HI."* The initiative also intersected with monumental crises like the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020 and the 2023 Maui wildfires. In response, the Foundation followed the lead of community members, providing supports as needed. *"When the pandemic hit,"* said Acevedo-Cross, *"we put the programs in the driver seat to tell us what would be helpful."* This allowed for community-based led initiatives such as providing family kit meals on Moloka'i to strengthen family resiliency by eating together at the dinner table and offering perinatal classes online following the Maui fires.

### The Foundation's trust-based approach empowered grantee partners to innovate and address emerging needs.

Key to the Foundation's approach was fostering strong relationships with partners characterized by responsiveness, transparency, and flexibility. Promising Minds partners said that this helped them to feel supported and empowered to implement their visions. As one partner explained, *"This was the first time I've experienced this trust. [The Foundation said,] 'You know what you're doing, go and do what you need to do and let me support that.'"* This supportive relationship was crucial to enabling partners to address community needs effectively and innovate in their approaches. During the Maui fires, for example, a partner shared that *"the autonomy and trust from Hawai'i Community Foundation allowed us to [provide supports] and integrate them into our normal operations."*

Partners also shared appreciation for the reduced reporting burdens and the autonomy to focus on their work without excessive administrative oversight. *“We did produce specific reports,” said one partner, “But there was this idea that I don’t need to count the beans... [The Foundation said,] ‘I see your work, I hear about your work. I’m in meetings with you where we talk about the work.’ There was the ability to do my job and not have to worry about administrative, fiscal, and contractual oversight.”* This deep partnership created a strong working relationship between the Foundation and its partners.

## The Foundation played multiple roles throughout this effort, from convening and aligning partners to storytelling and championing the work.

As the Foundation built awareness for infant and early childhood mental health and the need for coherent systems to support it, they found themselves playing a variety of roles. Some roles, like convener and capacity-builder, were baked in from the start. In other instances, the Foundation found itself playing unexpected roles, such as telling the story of this work. Their roles included:

- **Convener:** The Foundation played a very intentional role in bringing people together to align their work. In early childhood settings, partners described how the Foundation offered meeting spaces and promoted community support through their platforms, facilitating networking and professional development. *“Promising Minds created those spaces and those times to... have people paddle together and see how they can connect,”* said one partner. Most notably, the Foundation partnered with public institutions and nonprofits to create a shared agenda through the IECBH plan. *“There was a lot of work that had gone into convening stakeholders [to discuss] what were in the components [of the IECBH plan] and what we really wanted to agree on as objectives,”* said Acevedo-Cross. In the words of one partner, this created an *“organizing principle around what it means to launch more directed efforts around early childhood.”* Another partner noted that, as a result of this work, *“Hawai’i has received quite a bit of national recognition for how we’ve built this system collaboratively with philanthropy and with state partners and with private folks.”* [Read more about the Hawai’i Community Foundation’s role in convening partners around the IECBH plan on page 21, as well as how partners in early childhood settings are becoming more connected on page 18.](#)
- **Capacity Builder:** Central to the Foundation’s work was building the capacity of its partners, from hosting communities of practice with early childhood organizations to supporting workforce development. They were intentional about how to embed support for trauma-informed work within organizations, including developing the RECSSA organizational self-assessment tool and funding projects like the data capacity and storytelling grant program. *“It was important to build up the capacity of the partners that we’re bringing into this work to carry on that legacy once the funding sunsets,”* said Promising Minds program officer Maier. [Read more about how the Foundation built organizational capacity for those in the early childhood system starting on page 4, and workforce capacity starting on page 16.](#)
- **Seed Funder:** Partners also highlighted the importance of private funding from the Hawai’i Community Foundation in supporting new ideas and seeding work beyond federal grant dollars. *“Funding from the federal government... comes with strings and such. This opportunity with the Hawai’i Community Foundation allowed our systems to address the need past those deliverables,”* said one partner. Another described the willingness of the Foundation to test new ideas: *“While there are different initiatives out there on this topic, if we want to pilot something, we can turn to partners like the Hawai’i Community Foundation.”* Examples of partner projects include support for planning and networking, a deeper focus on early prevention efforts, the ability to respond to crises like the Maui fires, continued work on systems and data, and the ability to explore out-of-the-box approaches like family meals as a way to promote children’s mental health. [Other examples include clinical partnerships to support early childhood screening detailed on page 14 and the Kahawai Trauma-Informed Care Summits detailed on page 7.](#)
- **IECMH Champion:** Beyond direct support, many of the Promising Minds partners highlighted the crucial role that the Foundation played as a champion for IECMH in Hawai’i. *“Having the Hawai’i Community Foundation champion [IECMH] is a big deal. It adds a tremendous amount of credibility to the work,”* said one partner.



Another described how the Foundation's investments in this area helped to elevate the conversations around mental health for young children and families, saying, *"Hawai'i Community Foundation recognized this better way of viewing families and young children and elevating it so that we're all talking about it now."* The Hawai'i Community Foundation also played an important role in bringing other funders into this work, including the Stupski Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *"They're so well positioned to partner and braid funding and get support to have the state come in and have the private come in and make it happen,"* noted one key leader. [Read more about how Promising Minds is changing the conversation around IECMH on page 21.](#)

- **Storyteller:** While the Foundation initially planned to work with other partners to help tell the story of the work, they also began to leverage the power of their own visibility. *"What I realized is people do see foundations, no matter what, often operating in that space around telling the story or sharing out information,"* said Acevedo-Cross. The Foundation began to share clear and frequent updates to highlight the impact of their investments through the Promising Minds newsletter, *Promising News*. Not only was this important for keeping partners updated, but also as a reminder about the big picture. *"You have to keep telling the story with some frequency... it's so helpful to have these monthly Promising Minds stories that go out or messaging that are really clear,"* said Acevedo-Cross. The Foundation plans to continue occasional news updates beyond the end of the initiative to keep partners connected as well as create a website to house the work.

While the Foundation played multiple roles in promoting IECMH, a few partners are interested in seeing them take on more of an activist role. One partner felt that the Foundation could do more to challenge existing systems of power that perpetuate trauma. They highlighted the need for more proactive measures, such as advocating for paid family leave, taxing the wealthy to fund early childhood education, and supporting anti-poverty and anti-racist initiatives: *"My org works on taxing the rich. I don't think Hawai'i Community Foundation is interested in taking a position on taxing the rich in order to provide childcare."*

## Partners question who will lead IECMH work in Hawai'i going forward.

Key leaders raised concerns about who will continue to promote IECMH following the sunset of Promising Minds in 2024. While significant state-level partners like the Office of Wellness and Resilience, the Executive Office of Early Learning, and other entities exist, each has its own unique mission. For instance, while the establishment of the Office of Wellness and Resilience represented a significant step forward for Hawai'i, it does not have a focus on children ages 0-5 as Promising Minds did. Some leaders have suggested creating an umbrella organization to centralize and streamline early intervention services and trauma-informed care, addressing the challenges of a decentralized system. *"Most states have one [early childhood] system,"* noted a key leader, *"but we have five at a minimum. That's tough. It's tough for coordination, it's tough for collaboration, it's tough even to make sure that the funding that everybody is getting isn't duplicating but is actually aligning."* Another leader said, *"We need a clear direction and a dedicated entity to ensure the sustainability of these efforts."* Key collaborators highlighted Justina Acevedo-Cross's role as the champion of this initiative and wondered who might take its leadership in her wake.

# Harvesting Insights for the Future

This report describes how Promising Minds promoted wellness and resilience for Hawai'i's youngest children with a strategy that engaged those working in early childhood and built momentum toward state policy and systems change. Starting in 2019, Promising Minds convened childcare providers, social workers, and home visitors to deepen their understanding of trauma-informed approaches. The initiative then supported these providers with tools like the RECSSA to assess their organizational capacity and partnered with AIMH HI to strengthen the mental health workforce. As awareness and understanding of how to support IECMH grew, the initiative brought partners together to write Hawai'i's first Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan. This deepening knowledge and alignment created opportunities at the state level to strengthen data, financing, screening, and other supports for IECMH. While the work is far from over, Promising Minds catalyzed a movement to better integrate child and family mental health into early childhood systems throughout Hawai'i.

There is much to learn from this effort, both for those continuing the work in Hawai'i as well as early childhood mental health advocates looking to advance this work in their own contexts. Below we share themes that rose to the top from the last six years:

- **Attend to healing.** Many providers come from the same communities they serve and have also experienced personal, cultural, or historical trauma. Promising Minds recognized that, to foster resilience in children, it was important to first support wellness and recovery for providers and families. This meant emphasizing self-care in the communities of practice, supporting basic needs for families in addition to mental health care, and offering flexible funding that allowed organizations to adapt to crises as they arose.
- **Strengthen relationships.** At the core of Hawai'i's fragmented early childhood system was a need to foster relationships and connection. By encouraging collaboration among professionals, organizations, and community members, Promising Minds worked to build a more integrated and responsive system to better serve the needs of young children and their families. These connections helped providers learn from one another, created linkages for referrals, and led to better alignment around goals and advocacy opportunities.  
  
“Just take a moment and use Coconut Wireless. Just go see who out there has this grand idea that can be elevated to help more people.”
- **Ensure cultural relevance.** While there are a number of efforts across the country to support infant and early childhood mental health, it was crucial to partners that their efforts reflect the unique context of Hawai'i. Promising Minds prioritized community-based partnerships, contracted with local groups where possible to provide training and resources, convened the Kahawai Summit on different islands, collected local data to support the work, provided professional development on colonization and historical trauma, and adapted tools like the RECSSA for use in Hawai'i.
- **Make the work tangible.** Systems change can feel vague and abstract. By engaging directly with those working in early childhood to address trauma, Promising Minds helped leaders envision what a system that supports mental health and resilience could look like. This included working with early care and mental health providers, as well as new partners such as pediatricians. The RECSSA tool also helped develop a vision and pathway for a resilient early childhood system in consultation with local leaders. These tangible first steps supported calls for systems and policy change that reflected real community needs and priorities in a variety of spheres.
- **Embed changes within organizations and systems.** To sustain new ways of working, it is important to institutionalize changes rather than rely on individual champions. To ensure that trauma-informed practices became a lasting part of organizations, Promising Minds supported its partners to integrate this work into their missions, policies, and practices through tools like the RECSSA and grants for data capacity and storytelling.
- **Carry the momentum toward system-wide changes.** As partners developed a common understanding of

wellness and resilience, Promising Minds supported efforts to align this work at the state level. It worked with key leaders to consider what policy changes might be needed going forward—including trained mental health providers and consultants, funding, and the capacity to collect and use data—and outlined them in the Infant and Early Childhood Behavioral Health Plan. The designation of Hawai'i as a trauma-informed state, the IECBH plan, and the creation of the Office of Wellness and Resiliency all helped institutionalize this work to move forward.

- **Be strategic.** The Hawai'i Community Foundation took a deliberate approach to building this work from providers working with children and families up to state policy. They served in multiple roles, including as convener, capacity builder, seed funder, IECMH champion, and storyteller. At the same time, they maintained a willingness to adapt and pivot as needed to support partners and respond in real time to community needs. These practices align with the principles of trust-based philanthropy, which fosters mutual accountability between funders and communities.

As Promising Minds sunsets, key leaders are thinking about how to continue the work through the following policy priorities.

- **Create an integrated early childhood data system to support data collection, referrals, and measuring outcomes.** Currently, Hawai'i lacks a coordinated early childhood data system, which makes it difficult to understand how young children are doing developmentally and to coordinate resources and referrals between agencies. An integrated data system would enable the state to track outcomes and impacts of programming, and to use data to inform policy and funding decisions.
- **Offer alternative career pathways for individuals to gain IECMH skills.** A lack of trained IECMH providers is a significant issue in Hawai'i, especially in rural areas and different islands. The Promising Minds Fellows Program is one example of how to create pathways for professionals to gain IECMH skills without the systemic and cultural barriers associated with formal licensing, holding promise for increasing the size and diversity of the IECMH workforce.
- **Build comprehensive systems for organizing and reimbursing IECMH services.** Currently, IECMH services and consultations operate via informal networks, creating potential gaps in services. More formal networks, accompanied by funding such as Med-QUEST reimbursement, would support providers in making their services more widely available and ensuring fair compensation.
- **Ensure leadership for ongoing IECMH efforts.** A dedicated entity and clear strategic direction are needed to ensure the sustainability of these efforts. Current gaps in the system remain, making coordination and collaboration difficult. Some leaders have suggested creating an umbrella organization to centralize and streamline early intervention services and trauma-informed care.
- **Continue to educate policy leaders.** Promising Minds has helped to normalize conversations around IECMH, and this work needs to continue. By increasing awareness of the importance of IECMH, the state can make informed decisions about funding and policies.
- **Advocate for policies that address the root causes of trauma.** Some key leaders emphasized the importance of prevention, including working on issues such as poverty and systemic racism, to combat generational trauma. One place to start would be to ensure that the early childhood workforce earns a living wage.

Promising Minds helped seed lasting change, laying the groundwork for ongoing transformation in Hawai'i's early childhood and health systems. This momentum will propel forward efforts to expand access to early childhood behavioral health services, strengthen workforce capacity, and embed behavioral health tools within care settings. By equipping providers with training and consultation, advancing infant and early childhood mental health, and fostering equitable, family-centered systems of care, these initiatives work to ensure long-term, cross-sector collaboration. Many of these efforts, supported by federal funding, uphold Promising Minds' core vision—creating sustainable solutions that will shape Hawai'i's future for generations. What began as a six-year initiative has ignited a movement that will endure, continuously evolving to meet the needs of young children and families.

# Appendix: Data Sources

This report draws on the following data sources in addition to a review of past evaluation data:

## 2023 and 2024 Key Leader Interviews

Association for Infant Mental Health in Hawai'i (AIMH-HI): Erin Henderson (2023 & 2024), JoAnn Farnsworth (2023)  
Commit to Keiki: Rona Suzuki (2023)  
Department of Health: Ka'iulani Galon (2024) and Matt Shim (2023)  
Department of Human Services: Sharon Thomas (2023 & 2024)  
Early Childhood Action Strategy: Christina Simmons (2024) and Kerrie Urosevich (2023)  
Hawai'i Community Action Network (HCAN): Keopu Reelitz and Deborah Zysman (2023)  
Hawai'i Community Foundation: Justina Acevedo-Cross, Malia Maier, and Lee-Won Fulbright (2024)  
Institute For Native Pacific Education and Culture: Sanoë Marfil and Saydee Pojas (2024)  
KAHA Associates: Danny Goya (2023 & 2024)  
Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women & Children: Michelle Pangilinan (2023)  
Office of Wellness and Resilience: Tia Hartsock (2023 & 2024)  
Papa Ola Lōkahi: Alohi Bikle (2024)  
Parents and Children Act Together (PACT): Ryan Kusimoto (2023)  
State Executive Office of Early Learning: Yuuko Arikawa-Cross (2024)

## 2024 Promising Minds Early Childhood Partner Focus Group

Association for Infant Mental Health in Hawai'i (AIMH-HI): Erika Warner  
Family Support Services of West Hawai'i: Stacy Brown  
Honolulu Community Action Program (HCAP): Adoniss Spencer  
Keiki O Ka 'Aina: Me'ja Kaniho  
Rainbow Schools: Jayne Arasaki  
YWCA Hawai'i Island: Michelle Flemming

## Promising Minds Interim Evaluation Reports

[Year 1 Evaluation Report](#)

[Year 3 Evaluation Report](#)

[Year 5 Evaluation Report](#)



# The Promising Minds Journey

At the Promising Minds Gatherings in 2022 and 2023, partners came together to map out how their efforts contributed to a whole system of care for young children and families. Through an interactive exercise, they added the work of their organizations and others across the state to building a trauma-informed ecosystem in Hawai'i from 2019 through 2024. Like water that starts as rainfall and trickles down to nourish the land and ocean below, the journey to infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) flows through a network of early care providers, workers trained in IECMH, and strong state and policy systems that nourish the community. The journey map below illustrates these efforts over time, including important context, the early childhood system, efforts to strengthen the IECMH workforce, policy and systems changes, and community-wide engagements.

