



# Chris 180

## IECMH GRANT PROGRAM

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**ABOUT THE SERIES:** SAMHSA funds three grant programs that promote the mental health and well-being of young children and their families: Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health), Indigenous Project LAUNCH, and the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) grant program. All three programs share a mission of ensuring the healthy development of young children through building comprehensive systems of care inclusive of evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment services and supports. Grantees recognize the importance of strong caregiving relationships and nurturing environments and invest in building early childhood workforce capacity and activities that strengthen parenting practices, families, and cultural identity. **This grantee profile is one in a series that highlights innovative approaches and accomplishments among grantees.**

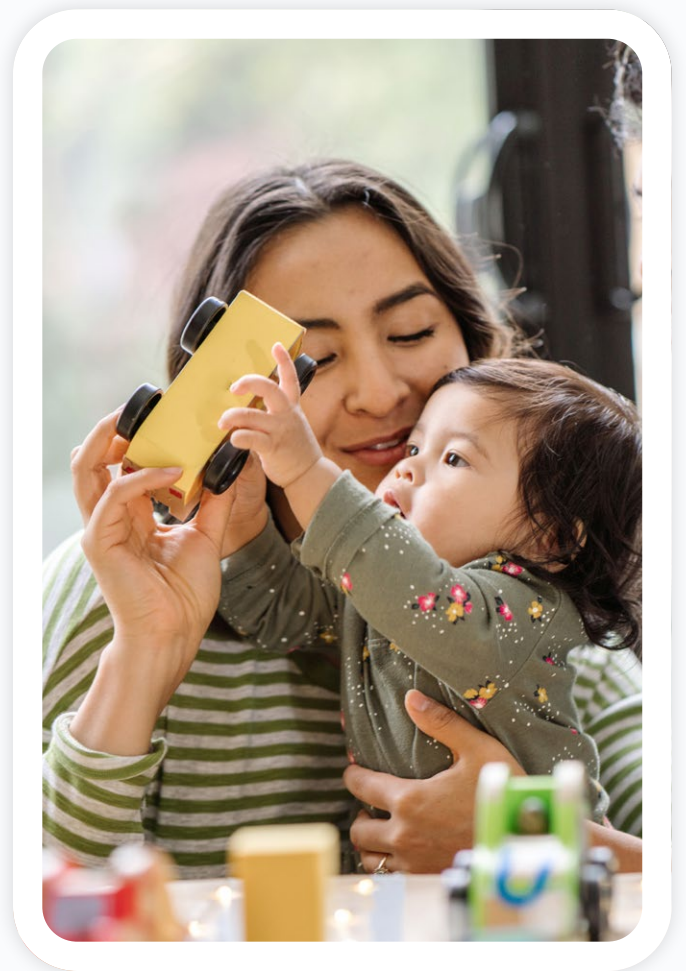
# About Chris 180

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**Chris 180** is a nonprofit, community-based behavioral health organization that serves children, adults, and families in Atlanta, Georgia, and the surrounding Fulton, DeKalb, and Gwinnett counties. Chris 180 was founded in 1981 and has worked with more than 200,000 individuals, providing services that help people build resilience and heal from trauma. Chris 180 was awarded a five-year Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) grant in the fall of 2018 which resulted in the creation of the New Generation Program. Although the grant has now ended, New Generation continues to grow. New Generation serves children from birth to age 12 who are at risk for or have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, with a particular focus on children exposed to violence, trauma, substance misuse, and/or child welfare involvement or showing signs of attachment disorder.

Over the course of the five-year grant, New Generation made great strides in building the expertise within Chris 180 to provide high quality, specialized IECMH care to young children and families, and not surprisingly, met or exceeded many grant goals. By the time the grant concluded in the fall of 2023, New Generation had provided training to roughly 975 mental health clinicians and allied professionals (e.g. early care and education providers, home visitors, physicians, and nurses) on evidence-based mental health interventions and approaches to address the impacts of trauma. New Generation also succeeded in offering mental health services and supports to approximately 275 children and 650 other family members, including, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Treatment (TF-CBT), narrative and expressive play therapies, Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP), Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP), Circle of Security (COS), infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC), and case management services.

Many factors have contributed to the success of New Generation. Notable among these is the passionate and collaborative leadership of Project Director, Kathy Bragg. Kathy's vision began with a focus on building capacity to serve young children and families within a single organization, but she quickly found herself building partnerships that spanned across the state and helped to raise awareness and build capacity to deliver IECMH services both locally and statewide. Two efforts that illustrate the power of Kathy's strategic and collaborative approach include her work to help grow the IECMH workforce at Chris 180 and in Georgia, and her work to build capacity and infrastructure to implement IECMHC.

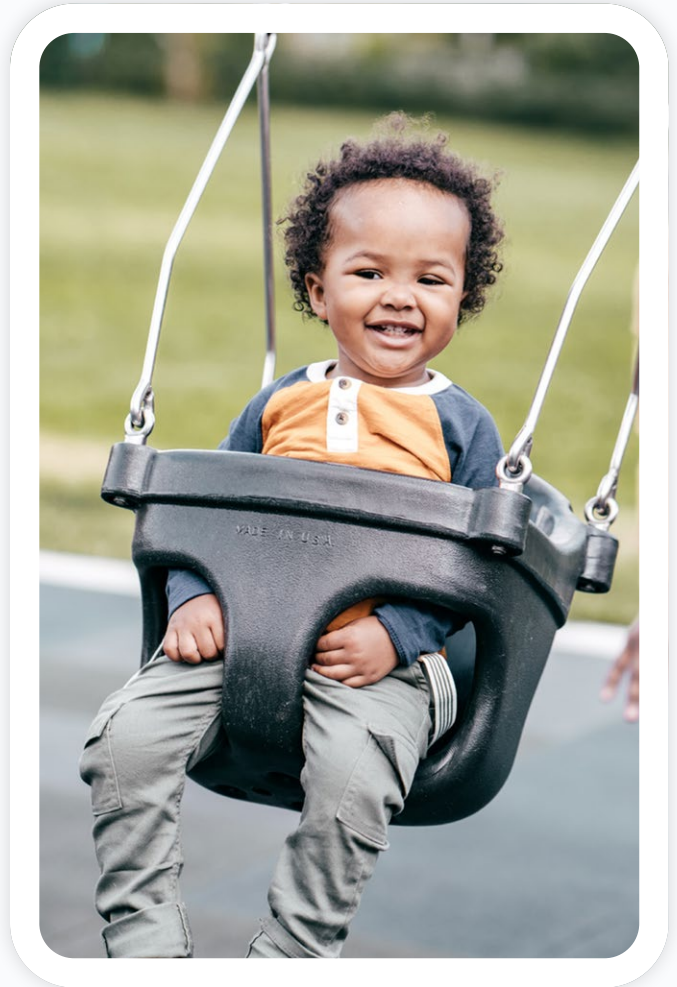


# Building an IECMH Workforce

When New Generation started in the fall of 2018, Chris 180 leadership was supportive and invested in growing services for young children and families, but this was also a very new area for the agency. As the New Generation Project Director, Kathy Bragg, notes, “Before the grant, there was awareness of IECMH and early trauma and its importance, but there wasn’t the capacity. Then when we got the grant there was motivation to grow and sustain this work.”

Kathy started working to build organizational capacity at Chris 180 with training in evidence-based interventions like CPP, along with a wraparound approach to serving children and families. But she quickly became aware that the pool of clinicians with IECMH expertise in Georgia was limited, and finding staff became significantly harder with the onset of the pandemic. Kathy explains how her strategy evolved. First, “We found clinicians who were interested in getting trained to work with young children. Then we started recruiting people in early learning centers who were looking to do something else, and we recruited them as behavioral aides. They’re not clinical or master’s trained, but they work very closely with the clinicians to mirror what is in the treatment plan and help deliver our wraparound services.”

As Kathy was building her New Generation IECMH team, she was also actively working to build partnerships with others in the early childhood mental health field. The partnerships created a sense of community and served as a catalyst for joint endeavors to address workforce challenges. As Kathy explains: “Through our partnerships we were able to get together a group of people and found our Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health ([GA-AIMH](#)). That’s one of the things I’m most proud about.” Key steps in the process included putting out a Request for Proposals to identify an organization that would be interested in housing the GA-AIMH. Georgia State University was identified, and generously provides in-kind administrative support to the GA-AIMH, which is



run on an entirely volunteer basis. An Advisory Board was formed, and the GA-AIMH took on the role of offering IECMH foundational training for clinicians and other child-serving agencies and their staff, eventually building the infrastructure to offer multi-level IECMH endorsement. At present, the GA-AIMH has approximately 200 members.

Critical to this effort was building relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, from state agencies to grassroots organizations. The GA-AIMH has partnered with the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, which resulted in funding to support training in TF-CBT. The Department of Public Health has also recognized the need to build the clinical workforce and is funding CPP training.



Kathy notes the importance of partnering with the state's Child Welfare agency as well: "We always got referrals from Child Welfare, but not as much as we could have. Since we established the AIMH, now they really understand. Now they know we are available to serve their children and families and give more support to the foster families."

An important facet of the New Generation and GA-AIMH story is the "snowball effect" or momentum that builds when these partnerships lead to new collaborations and initiatives. One example of this kind of snowballing was when the Georgia legislature took on the issue of IECMH. Kathy explains how the formation of a legislative study committee on infants and toddlers led to the opportunity to provide information about the importance of IECMH, and eventually a set of committee recommendations that included the creation of a new state position: IECMH Director. Other developments that have come from these collaborations include a statewide task force on IECMH consultation spearheaded by the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), and a task force made up of early childhood faculty from institutions of higher education that is looking

at ways to infuse concepts and materials related to early brain development and social-emotional learning into curricula for early educators. Other key partners include Voices for Georgia's Children, Georgia Family Connection, and Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) — important grassroots, community-based advocacy groups.

**“ I think there were small pockets of people who were working in this area, and others who knew nothing about it, and when we got the grant that was my role, to say: ‘Hey we got funding to be able to do this, how can you help? Are you interested? Let’s make it happen!’”**

— Kathy Bragg, New Generation Project Director



# Implementation of IECMHC

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Partnerships and a central focus on sustainability have not only fueled activities to build an IECMH workforce but are also critical drivers of advances in implementing IECMHC as part of New Generation and statewide. For example, a partnership between GEEARS, Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive (PAACT), and Aetna Insurance led to one important opportunity to support child care providers serving low-income children and families. Kathy Bragg explains: “Many of the early learning centers were decimated during COVID, and that has really impacted families being able to access early care and education services. So, through funding from AETNA, five child care centers got resources to refurbish and revamp their centers, and along with that, implement IECMHC.” New Generation was involved as the partner providing IECMHC services.

At the same time, New Generation has also struggled to hire mental health consultants, so Kathy has been collaborating with the statewide IECMH Director to establish an IECMHC task force. A small group of IECMH colleagues are working on a conceptual framework and strategies for a statewide IECMHC system. Their ideas include building on the current Pyramid Model already embedded in early care and education programs, and identifying core competencies and educational requirements for consultants that will result in a diverse and robust workforce.

With one eye toward statewide work, Kathy is also thinking about how New Generation can sustain its capacity to offer IECMHC to Atlanta area families. She notes that one very important development has been Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC) funding from SAMHSA. This funding for Chris 180 enables New Generation staff to serve “anyone from birth to age eight who comes through the door,” as well as bill insurance companies for treatment services being provided, which supports sustainability. Local philanthropic funds have also been made available to support additional staff and resources needed.

## LESSONS LEARNED

from the New Generation  
Project Director

### **Prioritize Sustainability**

“You want to have a sustainability plan. I know that is difficult to do starting in year one, but that’s really when it should start. Have those discussions with your program officer and your organization.”

### **Build and Nurture Partnerships**

“I think what I’m most proud of are the partnerships. I put that neck in neck with sustainability in importance. The importance of networking and finding your own community of professionals in other agencies where people are interested in the work. Make sure you have strong relationships and a variety of partners.”

### **Find Fellow Champions**

“I would encourage other grantees to get like-minded people together so they can say ‘we can do this.’ We were able to get CPP training free for clinicians, and COS training – even without the grant funds, but as a result of those relationships.”



# Conclusion

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A five-year grant from SAMHSA provided resources and the focus to create the New Generation program at Chris 180 and helped the organization to develop trainings and clinical capacity to offer IECMH services that had previously been beyond their scope. New Generation's Project Director, Kathy Bragg, believes that this focus was instrumental in helping the agency to secure CCBHC funding that, in turn, created even more resources and opportunity to serve traumatized children, families, and communities. But one of the most important outcomes of this grant is the role that it enabled Chris 180 and its dynamic Project Director to play in coalescing expertise and understanding of

the importance of IECMH across the state. Outcomes of partnerships among IECMH champions include the formation of an Association for Infant Mental Health, creation of a state-level position focused on IECMH, and work toward a statewide system of IECMHC. It appears that the legacy of this grant will extend far beyond five years.

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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