Written Testimony to Legislative Budget Board re HHSC

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Honorable Chair and Members of the Legislative Budget Board:

My name is Barbara Grant Boneta, and I serve as Director of the Austin/Travis County Success By 6 Coalition (SX6) at United Way for Greater Austin. On behalf of the SX6 coalition, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of increased investment in Early Childhood Intervention services.

SX6 brings together over 140 early child organizations, including families, early childhood educators, health care providers, school districts, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and other community partners around a shared goal: that every child in Austin/Travis County enters kindergarten happy, healthy, and prepared to succeed.

For families with young children experiencing developmental delays or disabilities, Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a critical part of making that goal possible. ECI serves children from birth to 36 months with developmental delays, disabilities, or certain medical diagnoses and provides individualized, family-centered services designed to support children's development.

Across our community, partners are working to strengthen developmental screening and identify concerns earlier. Yet identification is only the first step. When ECI providers do not have sufficient capacity to serve children and families, we risk creating a system that identifies a need without being able to respond.

That concern is especially urgent as demand for ECI services continues to grow. HHSC previously reported that the average number of children receiving comprehensive ECI services each month increased from 30,516 in FY 2021 to 35,317 in FY 2024. Providers are also operating in a challenging funding environment. Recent analysis found that inflation-adjusted state ECI funding per child declined by approximately 38 percent between 2010 and 2024, while providers face increasing caseloads, workforce shortages, and declining Medicaid coverage among children enrolled in ECI.

This advocate participated in programming that equips Texans most impacted by state budget decisions with the knowledge, skills, and support to advocate for policies that strengthen our communities.

The window for intervention is extraordinarily short. These services reach infants and toddlers during a period of rapid development, when timely support can strengthen children's development and help families understand and meet their child's needs. Delays in accessing services can mean losing valuable months during the brief period when a child is eligible for ECI.

Our coalition sees ECI not as a stand-alone program, but as an essential piece of Texas' early childhood infrastructure. Pediatricians, child care educators, families, school districts, and community organizations all play a role in recognizing developmental concerns. ECI provides the bridge between recognizing those concerns and ensuring families receive meaningful support.

We respectfully urge the Legislative Budget Board and the 90th Texas Legislature to fully fund HHSC's Exceptional Item #8, “Ensuring Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Sustainability,” and ensure that the additional ECI funding requested by HHSC is appropriated to Strategy D.1.3, ECI Services, for $13.8 million in the FY 2028–29 budget. HHSC has specifically identified ECI sustainability as an exceptional funding need in its FY 2028–29 Legislative Appropriations Request—a modest request that pays huge dividends..

This investment should ensure ECI providers have the resources necessary to respond to growing caseloads, recruit and retain qualified professionals, maintain timely access to evaluations and services, and continue serving eligible infants and toddlers across Texas. These priorities align with documented challenges facing ECI providers, including growing enrollment, rising costs, workforce recruitment and retention challenges, and reduced Medicaid revenue.

Texas has identified the need. That is the first step toward action. Now we must respond to the documented needs. An investment in ECI is an investment in children, families, schools, and the future of Texas. We appreciate your consideration and your commitment to ensuring that Texas' youngest children have the opportunity to thrive.

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