

# ASTHO's 2023 Environmental Scan of Current and Emerging Public Health Priorities: Findings on Maternal, Child, and Family Health

ASTHO's annual Environmental Scan of Current and Emerging Public Health Priorities (the Scan) identifies state, territorial, and freely associated state health agencies' top current and emerging priorities across public health domains. The Scan documents the focus issues and strategies health agencies are using to address priorities.

This brief details the findings on state maternal, child, and family health, which was identified by the 2023 Scan as the top public health program priority area among state health agencies (SHAs). Details about the methodology used for the Scan and other key findings from 2023 can be found in the [executive summary](#).

## Maternal, Child, and Family Health in the Scan

Maternal, child, and family health was identified as the top public health program and service priority area among SHAs in the 2023 Scan. Contributing to maternal, child, and family health's ranking is the recent political landscape shift, namely the *Dobbs v. Jackson* Supreme Court decision. Additionally, there is increased interest in redirecting a post-COVID focus to maternal mental health and substance use mortality, adolescent physical and mental health, and issues related to Title V Maternal and Child Health block grant and Title X family planning service grants. Further, while not necessarily reflected in published SHA plans included in the Scan, state health officials point to recently soaring cases of congenital syphilis as contributing to the prioritization of maternal, child, and family health this year.

## Maternal, Child, and Family Health Focus Issues and Strategies

### Youth and Adolescent Physical and Mental Well-Being

To improve youth and adolescent physical and mental well-being, as well as prevent adverse childhood experiences, SHAs are:

- Implementing public education campaigns, school policies, and standards promoting healthy lifestyles, nutrition, physical activity, and mental health awareness for this population.
- Developing programs to empower youth and foster competence, belonging, and diverse youth inclusion in leadership opportunities.
- Implementing comprehensive physical activity and mental well-being programs—such as CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child approach—and evidence-based bullying prevention strategies.
- Expanding youth mental health support, crisis response, violence prevention, and tobacco use reduction programs, as well as referral systems to connect individuals and families to primary prevention programs.

- Evaluating child and youth well-being and identifying health and safety risk factors through enhanced data collection and monitoring efforts.

### Early Childhood Development and Health Promotion

To promote healthy early childhood development, SHAs are:

- Improving early detection and mitigation of developmental challenges in children ages 0-5 through expanded childhood screening.
- Strengthening education and outreach efforts to inform parents, healthcare professionals, and early care providers about the importance of preventive care for children (e.g., well-child visits, vaccinations, and immunizations).
- Implementing evidence-based home visiting programs and focusing preventive care and wellness promotion initiatives on social-emotional development, breastfeeding support, oral health strategies, and healthy eating habits.
- Supporting social, behavioral, and educational services for infants and toddlers living with disabilities.
- Collaborating across multiple sectors to offer supportive services (e.g., economic supports, quality childcare, and education services) and create positive environments that foster healthy child development and resilience.

### Prenatal and Perinatal Care

To improve the quality and access to prenatal and perinatal care, SHAs are:

- Enhancing comprehensive maternal care and support programs focusing on preconception, prenatal, postpartum, and maternal mental health.
- Providing education, awareness, and support services to families before, during, and after birth, with a special emphasis on mental health support and addressing chronic conditions during pregnancy.
- Increasing access to treatment and recovery services for pregnant people experiencing substance use disorders and prioritizing maternal vaccinations to reduce congenital disease transmission.
- Promoting equitable healthcare practices that address maternal health inequities, hiring diverse and culturally competent maternal health workforces, and working to strengthen systems, workforce capacity, and quality of care in birthing facilities and hospitals.
- Collaborating with relevant organizations and garnering community support in advocating for policy changes that make maternal and reproductive healthcare more accessible.

### Maternal and Infant Mortality

In addition to the strategies above, to prevent maternal and infant mortality (especially in historically underserved communities), SHAs are:

- Improving access to prenatal, postnatal, and preventive care, as well as increasing health insurance accessibility and expanding Medicaid coverage of maternal health services.

- Addressing language and transportation barriers to maternal health services and extending maternal healthcare to rural and underserved communities via telehealth while prioritizing the development of rural maternal health workforces.
- Implementing maternal preventive education and care initiatives to mitigate obesity, chronic diseases, and other risk factors that contribute to perinatal mortality.
- Expanding mental and behavioral health services for birthing people and promoting preventive measures for infant mortality, such as safe sleep education and breastfeeding support.
- Enhancing data systems, training, and partnerships with diverse representation to address inequities across maternal health services and outcomes, improving clinical management, and bolstering surveillance of maternal morbidities and mortalities to inform new interventions.
- Addressing the social determinants of health that impact birth outcomes to address maternal and infant mortality.
- Preserving and increasing access to reproductive health care and family planning services to mitigate worsening inequities in maternal and infant mortality.

A key part of ASTHO’s work is supporting state and territorial health agencies to improve the health and well-being of families, women of reproductive age, infants, children, and adolescents—including those with special healthcare needs. ASTHO increases public health capacity to develop and implement policies and programs in support of maternal and child health. Explore all of [ASTHO’s maternal, child, and family resources](#).

