

## When It Comes to Special-needs Kids, There's No Place Like "Home" Pilot Program Takes a New Approach to Pediatric Care



(NAPS)—Nearly 400,000 kids in Illinois live with asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and other conditions. For these kids with special needs, there is no one-size-fits-all medical treatment and support plan. After all, that's why these kids are special, and why their care must be special, as well.

Pediatricians and parents are usually on the frontline addressing the needs of children with chronic physical, developmental, behavioral or emotional conditions. Yet they're often there alone. Fortunately, the medical community is increasingly recognizing that the needs of these children are best met when diverse healthcare professionals, caregivers, and family members with wide-ranging perspectives work together to provide care, organization, and hope.

To encourage this sort of 360-degree care, the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (ICAAP) is supporting an innovative new program called the Illinois Medical Home Project (IMHP). The word "home" refers not to a bricks-and-mortar building, but a homelike medical practice approach to treatment.

The child's pediatrician acts as the home's "general contractor," communicating directly with patients and parents to create a "blueprint" for the child. The pediatrician also coordinates all of the child's care, making sure the "sub-contractors"—specialists, schools, community service providers, and

others—follow the plan. Dr. Charles Onufer, Director of the Division of Specialized Care for Children in Springfield, Ill., explains, "The goal is to build better lives for children."

The medical home project is as much an attitude as it is a way of approaching a complicated set of intertwined health care needs. "It's a way of building a foundation upon which care can be planned and provided. There's nothing routine about it; it's customized for each child and family," says Dr. Sara Parvinian of the Children's Health Center in Gurnee, Ill.

The IMHP is working with six pediatric practices that have formed teams made up of physicians, nurses, office staff, and parent partners. Combined, these medical-home practices serve approximately 15,000 Illinois children, of which an estimated 2,250 have special needs.

ICAAP and the IMHP provide a framework to help these teams deliver care, seek out new resources, and break down barriers, all while building a closer relationship with caregivers, other healthcare professionals, patients, and parents.

"IMHP has helped me do a better job of listening to families and responding to their special needs," said Dr. Mark Rosenberg, Children's Healthcare Associates in Chicago, Ill. "I can now anticipate these needs in other patients and make special accommodations more accessible to them."

The IMHP promotes seven distinct yet complementary elements.

A true medical home is:

- **accessible**, with health providers who are available when and where parents and children need them;

- **continuous**, with pediatricians who provide ongoing support, ideally from birth through early adulthood;

- **comprehensive**, offering high-quality care, which includes education, mental health and community referrals, as well as help with government and public assistance resources;

- **coordinated**, sharing information on care, progress, and resources freely so that everyone is "on the same page";

- **family centered**, with health professionals who encourage caregivers to be partners in healthcare decisions;

- **compassionate**, showing patients respect and empathy at all times; and

- **culturally competent**, recognizing differences in language, heritage, and values to provide the best treatment possible.

"IMHP has given me a voice in my child's care," says Mona Bernhardt, a Lake County parent of an IMHP special-needs child. "Now when I meet with my child's doctor, I have a better sense of not only where we are in my child's treatment, but where we're going for her long-term care."

*To learn more about the Illinois Medical Home Project or the medical home concept, visit: [www.illinoisaaap.org](http://www.illinoisaaap.org) and click on the "medical home" link to a brighter future for kids.*