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## Help Me Grow Alabama: Connecting parents to services that help their children

Elaine Brackin  
ebrackin@dothanprogress.com 3 hrs ago



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Will Francis, shown manning a Wiregrass 2-1-1 booth, is the go-to person for Help Me Grow Alabama in the Wiregrass region.

Navigating the maze of social services available for children with developmental risks can be a daunting task for parents. But, it does not need to be. A guide through that maze is now just a telephone call away for parents of children from birth to eight years old. It's called Help Me Grow Alabama, and this one-stop referral center can be accessed by dialing 2-1-1 and asking for Help Me Grow. Locally, that request will put concerned parents in touch with Will Francis, regional care coordinator for the seven-county area covered by Wiregrass 2-1-1 (Barbour, Coffee, Covington, Dale, Geneva, Henry and Houston counties).

Although Francis, 27, just started with Help Me Grow Alabama in December, he is no stranger to helping people connect with social service agencies. He spent two years as a volunteer with Enroll Alabama through the Navigator organization that helps people enroll in the Affordable Care Act.

"I did in-person assistance through the Medical Aids Outreach, which received the Navigator grant," Francis said. "I would meet people at the library. I had a two-year run with them. While there, I started volunteering here (Wiregrass 2-1-1 office). I didn't want it (Enroll Alabama) to be the end of the line for my clients. I wanted to be on the other side of it while I was with Enroll Alabama."

That desire to assist others eventually led to the full-time position as regional care coordinator for Help Me Grow Alabama. It has been another learning experience for Francis, but one that he gladly embraces.

"I don't have children," said Francis, a graduate of Northview High School and Huntingdon College. "My biggest challenge has been to find out the major milestones for children, to see if children are on track or not."

Francis, whose parents have been involved in social services work for many years, credits those involved with HIPPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters), the Family Guidance Center and Early Head Start for assisting him in getting Help Me Grow operating on a solid informational foundation.

"They are great resources and great people," he said of the three agencies. "They are willing to help me."

Help Me Grow is a national program created to assist parents in identifying developmental issues their children may be encountering. The program in Alabama is coordinated by the Alabama Partnership for Children. The goal of Help Me Grow is to ensure that every child gets the help he or she needs to reach consistent developmental milestones. This is done through developmental screenings and early intervention, if needed. The screening measures five areas of development: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving and personal-social skills.

Twenty percent of all children from birth to age eight are at risk for developmental delays. Undetected through screenings, only 30 percent of these children are being identified and connected to services, according to information provided by Help Me Grow Alabama. Developmental screening enables 70 to 80 percent of children at risk for developmental delays to be identified. Once these issues are identified, parents are given information about local agencies that can assist them.

"High quality early intervention services can change a child's developmental trajectory and improve outcomes for children, families and communities; and intervention is likely to be more effective and less costly when it is provided early in life." (Source: Help Me Grow Alabama newsletter, quoting the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University)

Locally, Francis says Help Me Grow is already having an impact.

"It's dramatic how much we've been able to do," Francis said of the new referral service. "We look specifically for early childhood needs and child development. When someone calls 2-1-1, we now ask if they have a child eight years of age and under. If they do, we tell them about Help Me Grow. That will give me the opportunity to talk with them."

That conversation, he notes, includes asking specific questions about their child's development.

"When they give me a need, we follow up until that need is filled," Francis said. "We run an assessment list to help them apply for services, like WIC, that they may be eligible for. We walk them through the process.

"Through Help Me Alabama, we can also communicate with physicians. We can refer a child for help through our screening programs."

Early educational intervention is a key ingredient in Help Me Grow.

"I ask the parents to talk to their child's teachers," Francis said. "If they have concerns at home, the more the teacher knows about those concerns will help the child. This program helps them (parents) know who to ask and what to ask. For example, a lot of children have ADHD, but their parents haven't gone to the school about it. My question for the parents is this: Are their children in an IEP (Individual Education Plan)? I reassure them that the school is there to help them."

Help Me Grow Alabama is funded by the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education through the Preschool Development Grant and the Alabama Department of Mental Health through a Project LAUNCH Grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association.

Free screenings to be held March 14

Free developmental screenings will be held at the Main Library (445 N. Oates St.) of the Dothan Houston County Library System on Tuesday, March 14, from 10 a.m.-noon. Help Me Grow Alabama will provide free, in-person Ages and Stages Developmental Screenings for children five years old and under. The screenings measure how children play, learn, speak, behave and move. Parents will also answer questions about their child which will identify their strengths and areas where they may need more support. If concerns are raised, parents will be given information on appropriate services in the area.

Will Francis can be reached directly by calling 334-836-1963 or via email at [willfrancis211@gmail.com](mailto:willfrancis211@gmail.com) or by calling 2-1-1 and asking for Help Me Grow.

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