

Policy At A Glance:

Emergency Medical Services for Children Reauthorization Act of 2024 (H.R. 6960)

Every year, nearly 30 million children visit the emergency department (ED), but many EDs are not adequately equipped to treat pediatric patients. This brief explains the need for improved pediatric readiness in the ED and how the Emergency Medical Services for Children Reauthorization Act of 2024 (H.R. 6960) provides necessary funding to improve emergency medical services for children.

Introduction

Each year, over 30 million children are brought to emergency departments by emergency medical services.^{1,2} However, most U.S. hospital emergency departments lack the staffing, training, and equipment to handle pediatric emergencies.³ Research highlights that achieving high pediatric readiness in emergency settings can significantly reduce child mortality and help address racial and ethnic disparities in care.⁴

On December 23, 2024, President Biden signed the Emergency Medical Services for Children Reauthorization Act of 2024 (H.R. 6960) into law.⁵ The Emergency Medical Services for Children Program aims to ensure that acutely ill and injured children receive high quality, coordinated care.⁴ Specifically, the program leverages economies of scale by providing programs and frameworks that enable states to adapt nationally developed improvement strategies to their unique local needs.⁶

This brief provides an overview of the need for improved pediatric readiness in the emergency department, the National EMS for Children Innovation and Improvement Center, and the Emergency Medical Services for Children Program as reauthorized by H.R. 6960.

Key Statistics

- 20%** Of all emergency department (ED) visits are made by children.⁷
- 14%** Of all pediatric ED visits are due to anxiety and panic disorders.⁸
- 13%** Of all pediatric ED visits are due to depression.⁸
- 11%** Of all pediatric ED visits are due to substance use.⁸
- 14%** Of all pediatric ED visits are due to conduct disorders, such as aggression and antisocial behaviors.⁸

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Pediatric Readiness in the Emergency Department

Children have unique physiological, emotional, and developmental traits that require specialized medical care, but most emergency departments across the nation are not adequately equipped to provide pediatric emergency care.^{3,9} Pediatric readiness refers to the preparedness of an emergency department (ED) or healthcare facility to deliver high-quality care to children. This includes having appropriately trained staff and pediatric specific equipment, procedures, and medications to accurately assess and treat illnesses and injuries in young patients.¹⁰

Increased pediatric readiness in EDs is linked to better survival outcomes for critically ill children, as well as for injured children admitted to trauma centers and those with injuries or medical conditions that require hospitalization, compared to low readiness EDs.¹¹ Studies show that EDs with high levels of pediatric readiness are linked to a 76% reduction in mortality rates for critically ill children and a 60% decrease in mortality rates for injured children.^{7,12,13} If all EDs across the nation achieved high pediatric readiness, it is estimated that approximately 2143 additional children's lives could be saved annually.¹¹

Therefore, the National Pediatric Readiness Project (NRPR) was established in 2012 to address and empower all EDs to provide effective emergency care for pediatric patients.¹⁴ The NRPR conducts assessments to evaluate an ED's ability to deliver high quality care for children by measuring its compliance with the most current national guidelines for pediatric emergency care.¹⁵ They also provide free open-access resources, such as ED checklists and toolkits, for all ED providers to help facilitate and deliver high quality emergency care to all pediatric patients.¹⁶

National EMS for Children Innovation and Improvement Center

Established in 2016 and funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the National EMS for Children Innovation and Improvement Center (EIIC) works to promote improvements in pediatric emergency care systems, ensuring the development of best practices, policies, and guidelines to improve pediatric care across emergency medical services (EMS) systems. The EIIC also provides resources and supports EMS personnel in ensuring the care they deliver is pediatric specific. The EIIC is part of the Emergency Medical Services for Children Program.¹⁷



Emergency Medical Services for Children Program

Pediatric patients account for nearly 13% of all Emergency Medical Services (EMS) transports and account for 27% of all emergency department (ED) visits in the United States.^{1,18} However, research shows that pediatric readiness varies widely among prehospital providers and hospitals, with many lacking adequate equipment, personnel, or expertise to care for critically ill or injured children.¹⁸

Research by the Health Resources and Services Administration indicate that almost 90% of children's ED visits take place in facilities that are not specifically equipped for pediatric care, and only 6% of EDs nationwide have all the recommended equipment and medications necessary to treat children effectively.¹⁹

Established in 1984, the Emergency Medical Services for Children (EMSC) Program is a U.S. federal health initiative administered by the Department of Health and Human Services.^{20,21} The program aims to reduce disability and death among children and youth from severe illness or injury by raising awareness among healthcare professionals, providers, and the public about the unique physiological and psychological needs of children in emergency medical care.²⁰

Furthermore, the EMSC Program provides 71 grants that reach nearly every state across the nation, supporting a wide variety of initiatives, including research, national assessments, educational resources, and workforce training.^{20,22} These efforts aim to empower

emergency clinicians to deliver optimal care to every child.²²

The program also aims to enhance access to child-appropriate equipment in ambulances and EDs, while supporting training initiatives to prevent injuries and educate emergency medical providers, including emergency medical technicians and paramedics.^{23,24} By providing tailored medical equipment and guidance on prescription drug dosages, the EMSC Program enables healthcare professionals to address the specific needs of adolescent patients and has contributed to a more than 40% reduction in pediatric injury-related death rates.²¹

Ensuring Funding for Pediatric Emergency Equipment and Resources

On December 23, 2024, the Emergency Medical Services for Children Reauthorization Act of 2024 (H.R. 6960) was signed into law, continuing funding for the EMSC Program. Specifically, H.R. 6960 authorizes \$24 million annually for the Program through fiscal year 2029.⁵ The continued funding to the EMSC Program will significantly enhance its ability to improve pediatric care nationwide. This funding will continue to empower the EMSC Program to provide high-quality, coordinated care to children across the U.S., with the goal of improving survival rates and better overall outcomes for pediatric patients in emergencies.²⁵

Conclusion

Emergencies that involve children can occur at anytime and anywhere, and children require specialized care during emergencies due to their unique physiological, emotional, and developmental characteristics.³ Unlike adults, their bodies respond differently to injury and illness, making it essential that medical professionals are equipped with the right knowledge, skill, and resources to provide the best care possible.²⁶ Continuing funding for the Emergency Medical Services for Children Program through 2029 ensures that children will continue to receive appropriate care during emergencies, improving their chances of recovery and survival.

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Did you know?

Pediatric emergency medicine physicians account for less than 5% of the overall emergency medicine workforce.²⁷



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