

Beginning Jan. 1, the federally funded BabyNet program, designed to provide services for infants and toddlers from birth to three years of age, will be organized under the auspices of the South Carolina First Steps to School Readiness.

Gov. Mark Sanford issued an executive order last week transferring control of the program from the Department of Health and Environmental Control.

BabyNet, designed to be an interagency program where various education and health agencies work together to meet the needs of youngsters, was established by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1986.

In a press release issued by the Governor's Office, Sanford said S.C. First Steps is the state's only program devoted solely to meeting the needs of infants and toddlers with developmental challenges.

"Given that the BabyNet program aligns far more closely with the core mission of First Steps, we this is an important step toward managing the program more effectively," Sanford said. "Matching BabyNet with state resources better able to handle its original purpose represents a better use of taxpayer dollars – and ultimately a more effective service to those moms and dads whose young children have real challenges."

Dr. Dan Wuori, First Steps Chief Program Officer, said state and local First Steps offices are excited about their new responsibility.

"This is a great and logical match for our mission," Wuori said. "We exist as an agency to meet the educational needs of youngsters before first grade. We feel like it's a smart and strategic move." Wuori said First Steps has always had a role in BabyNet, having worked closely with DHEC.

Since inception in 1999, First Steps has helped more than 400,000 young children prepare for school through programs that strengthen families, improve children's health and well-being, increase the quality of child care and early education opportunities, and help transition rising kindergarteners into school. Many of the programs have targeted 4-and-5-year olds.

Wuori said First Steps and DHEC are working closely together to ensure a smooth and seamless transition for BabyNet. "Our goal is that on Jan. 1, families receiving BabyNet services won't be able to notice there's been a change," Wuori said. In that regard, a 30-member transition advisory team has been established to review BabyNet from top to bottom. A link to a new BabyNet web page will soon be operational, he said. "These meetings are open to the public," Wuori said. "We'll be posting information on these meetings on our Web site."

Local health departments will maintain an active role in delivering BabyNet services, said Wuori, especially in the early going. "In the very short term, the local DHEC offices will maintain a role with an emerging role for our local First Steps offices," he said. Every county in the state has a First Step office, he said.

BabyNet is designed to enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities; reduce educational costs by minimizing the need for special education through early intervention; minimize the likelihood of institutionalization; and assist families in meeting their children's needs. -