



Hub Community Spotlight: Growing Up New Mexico

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Growing Up New Mexico

The NCIT Newsletter offers *Spotlights*, a regular monthly feature that provides an ongoing opportunity to share the work happening at the state or community level, and foster connections among grantees. This document highlights the work of New Mexico, a state grantee.

BUILD: What are the big prenatal-to-three goals in your community?

Kate: We have six overarching goals for our prenatal-to-three agenda. Two of them are really system-wide goals. One is to have an aligned system that increases the impact in prenatal-to-three services. And the other is to build and maintain a system that remediates racial, economic, linguistic, and other inequities. Those two big goals really run through everything we're doing.

Then we have four more grounded subject-area goals, which run through the spectrum of the prenatal- to-three age range, starting with increasing access by women and families to programs that support safe and healthy births and ongoing, healthy maternal and child development. The next subject area is increasing the number of families served in home visiting programs. Then we have increasing access to high-quality affordable infant/toddler care for low-income families.

Certainly not last or least is increasing the qualifications and capacity of the early childhood workforce serving infants and toddlers. That is in some ways also a systemic goal because as we dig in to all our work, we find that for every problem, part of the answer is in the infant/toddler workforce and making sure that we have the professionals who can do the work and really be the foundation for everything else to occur in improving our infant/toddler ecosystem in the state of New Mexico.

I would say where we are practically is we have launched a state task force looking particularly at expanding Medicaid reimbursement for home visiting, and that has a lot of political will and traction behind it. We are incredibly optimistic about our opportunity to expand home visiting through Medicaid billing and leveraging those federal dollars in our state.

New Mexico has a reasonably high poverty rate and lots of families are eligible for home visiting to be reimbursed through Medicaid. So, there's a big opportunity there. We are also starting to see some good momentum on expanding Medicaid coverage for 12 months postpartum in our goal area of maternal and child health, and that is pretty exciting to see.

We are experiencing an incredible disruption in the child care system, as many places are, I'm sure. In that area, we've started to really focus on building the system back through very grassroots efforts in local communities around home-based providers. That is also something that is gaining a lot of traction and (political) will, and just feels like the right idea at the right time.

Rebecca: I'd add our incentive pilot within our workforce strategy and crosswalked curriculum. As Kate alluded to, the workforce really does connect across all of the subject areas and thematic parts of the prenatal-to-three initiative. And in New Mexico, I can't speak to how unique this particular struggle is, but we have a recruitment challenge and need to build and incentivize more and more folks to join the early childhood workforce.

One of the partnerships that has evolved has allowed us to offer incentive funding to try and lighten the burden that a lot of professionals face when they're trying to obtain credentials or degrees and certificates in order to skill up. So this incentive program is, in essence, going to provide financial support to professionals completing coursework, and we've had a great response to that initiative. Through this effort we hope to learn where the critical barriers are for people trying to enter the early childhood workforce.

Kate: The big thing there is in part that they have the biggest subscription to the infant/toddler coursework I think that CNM has seen in quite a long time. There may be a number of factors at play, but everybody feels and thinks that the incentive is in fact making a difference in recruiting folks into these courses.

BUILD: What are your primary challenges in achieving your prenatal-to-three goals?

Kate: One challenge that I think existed before and continues into the COVID world, and it's really the reason we're appreciating this work and a prenatal-to-three initiative in New Mexico, is that there's not enough focus on the prenatal-to-three space in early childhood. We have seen a lot of focus on pre-K and that's incredibly important. But as we look to something like supporting workers, there are even some disincentives for being in the infant/toddler space. Now we feel we've really been able to understand some of those issues and hopefully we can work to change them. But just bringing a unique focus to the infant/toddler space is a real challenge and an opportunity to do things differently and make a better, more complete, aligned system of early childhood.

I would say COVID has brought its own set of challenges just in that in doing all of this work, our state government, which is a crucial partner, has been incredibly stretched. With the health system, contact tracing, and getting vaccines out, with protective equipment for childcare, changing ratios and group sizes, there have just been so many details for the team at the state to manage that its capacity has been eaten up. We have an exceptional team that has worked incredibly hard and managed to keep the momentum going for building a stronger system and making this big structural change despite all the extra things that it has had to do for COVID.

Rebecca: Seeing some of the challenges play out I think has highlighted where our strengths are. Having the launch of the new Early Childhood Education and Care Department in July of 2020 has provided this real opportunity that has been building for over a decade. In terms of now moving forward, in spite of the stress and difficulty that the pandemic has caused, there is more consensus on strategic priorities and so much momentum that the new department, all of the advocates, partner organizations, and providers have really been able to activate and mobilize.

Kate: Another big challenge, largely due to the pandemic, is budgetary. We have a state that is committed to early childhood investments, and we are not actually seeing budget cuts in early childhood. We are so grateful to our state leadership for that, but the budget universe is still incredibly challenging. There's no denying that as costs have increased for childcare, across the board, that that is something that we will need to wrestle with in the months ahead.

Rebecca: This certainly isn't unique just to New Mexico, but we are a very rural state. Perhaps highlighted during the pandemic, there are significant challenges for delivery, infrastructure building, and capacity

development in a state that has lots of small-sized communities that are spread across a very large geography. I think the way our work is structured probably looks very different compared to a really urban state.

BUILD: Who makes up your coalition, including at the leadership level public, private partners, parents, etc.?

Rebecca: Our stakeholders are very broad, probably not unlike a lot of other prenatal-to-three initiatives across the country. But I do think we've benefited from having such a big spectrum that includes some parent advocacy organizations as well as our key state leadership. We have a steering committee of over 80 people who continue to stay actively involved. The committee helps to drive, inform, and "gut check" all the work in the prenatal-to-three initiative.

The membership includes advocacy organizations, home visiting providers, child care programs and center directors, home-based care providers, and folks that work with home-based providers. We have members from the Department of Health and the Early Childhood Education and Care department. Medicaid is another really critical partner within the Human Services Department. I think the breadth of our stakeholder team has been really instrumental in carrying it all forward.

Kate: In 2021, I think we'll focus more on engaging parents and parent voices in the work, particularly as we look towards recovery from the pandemic, and hopefully the recession as well. This will be important to really understanding families' needs, desires, and perspectives on childcare, health, and home visiting support because it all may look different than it did before COVID. We recognize that this is all evolving and that with kids at home, we've all experienced things differently and understood better what we need from our community in order really to raise young children successfully.

Rebecca: I think it's worth mentioning too that the groundwork that was laid during the Needs Assessment through the Preschool Development Birth-to-Five Grant required a statewide effort that was really about bringing everyone together for collective input into the state's Strategic Plan. At that time, our organization was able to do that in person through many conversations and touch points with families and folks in all parts of the state. It raised up what are those key needs are, what people's visions for success are, and what that looks like.

Kate: We have a strong pre-COVID picture from the Needs Assessment from families, and we'll build a strong recovery picture.

Rebecca: Also, I don't think we mentioned this explicitly, Growing Up New Mexico was the organization contracted to undertake the Needs Assessment and strategic plan for the state under the Preschool Development Grant. It was a big multi-year effort.

BUILD: How are you supporting families of infants and toddlers and pregnant women who face significant barriers to supports and services?

Kate: I think the main point is we're trying to identify barriers and figure out ways that they can be overcome. One significant one is language. We have a lot of Spanish speakers in New Mexico. So, we are working with everything we do to provide translated materials and interpretation at events. We have set really a standard and, again, are very fortunate that our partners at the state have picked up that baton and are working very hard to create access for the many Spanish speakers in different communities. A lot of this was identified in the Needs Assessment. Language was a big barrier – probably the biggest - in terms of the forms and information. But then there are also the barriers of transportation for many populations in rural communities.

Actually that's been something that home visits and telehealth have actually probably improved during COVID. Nevertheless, for those who have barriers to access, transportation is part of the problem.

So is it language? Is it transportation? Is it financial? Again, huge kudos to our partners in the Early Childhood department at the state who are administering this. They've been waiving child care copays for childcare in New Mexico during the pandemic, and we've lowered regulatory barriers to home-based caregivers who are providing family, friends, and neighbor care so that they can access the childcare subsidy. We have had contracts that are much more forgiving in terms of attendance for families that are guaranteed to providers so that providers can have a more dependable stream of revenue. And we are continuing to listen in communities to ask what and what the (specific) barriers are.

We're looking to understand, identify, and find ways to solve the access issues - language, geographical, and financial – step by step and we are continuing to go to our folks in communities. The home visiting community is great for that; the providers are so in touch with families and ask what the needs and barriers are. We also have a couple of incredible mutual aid networks that have blazed some trails. One of them is based in the Navajo nation. They've raised an incredible number of resources and directed them to families, whether it's medical supplies or food or anything else. As long as we can understand the barriers, we've been finding that there are almost always resources or communities that can help in overcoming them.

Rebecca: I think some of the things that Kate described are driven by an approach that's really centered in listening deeply to families and community partners that are facing the implications of all of the policy decisions that are made at a local or statewide level. This is not an insignificant detail; I think it requires somewhat of a cultural shift to have policy leaders and decision makers really understand the voices of families and providers and really listen.

One of the things I think we've been able to do, and part of our work in the PN-3 initiative, is about brokering those conversations in a way that can yield a good outcome and an outcome that's really been driven by the direct input of providers and families who are living those experiences.

Kate: To that end, we have launched a larger equity work group that will begin work to define a set of guidelines to help us look at all the work, under a prenatal-to-three agenda, through an equity lens. How do we address racism? How do we increase access? It's really important to keep doing that at all the levels we can. And again, this will be in partnership with our colleagues at the state who are going to do a parallel equity council for the Early Childhood Education and Care department. And there's a lot of good momentum to keep learning, keep thinking, keep diving more deeply into how we can increase equity across our early childhood systems in New Mexico.

Is there anything else that you feel your counterparts in other states and communities should know about what's happening in New Mexico?

Kate: One piece that is a bit surprising me is just how important it is to continue to engage leaders and invite folks in to listen and be a part of this. The momentum from our communications and lifting up these issues is really extraordinary and powerful. As part of that, bringing in the national perspective. Our Pritzker contacts have come to a couple events and said things about how this all ties together nationally, and that just, for lack of a better way of putting it, lit up the Zoom room.

You can see that people are excited to be engaged in a national conversation about this, to be part of something that is larger than just our state and that is knit together in many ways. So, the talking about it constantly, the reflecting on what's happened, giving people rich information about the prenatal-to- three

agenda, and the larger work tying in nationally have just been really powerful. It's something that I'm not sure we thought about in detail upfront, but it's been really striking as we've begun the work.

Rebecca: I think some of that has been highlighted as a result of the pandemic; morale is really important. People want to feel part of the success in our state. When we talk about early childhood and child well-being, there are so many indicators where we can see how deeply New Mexico struggles. And yet, there is so much to celebrate, so much innovative and exciting work happening.

I think Pritzker has given us a platform to say those things, even though they've also been true prior to this grant. There have been so many wonderful things that communities have been building over years and it's part of their story of resilience. It's their strength that has carried them through, allowing for more opportunities to highlight how powerful and critical this work is.

We talk about how the funding of this work has given us an opportunity to be the weavers trying to knit together efforts that maybe needed a little boost or alignment to really inform the bigger systems. This is, in part, because our systems are actually being rebuilt through this new department. Our new Early Childhood Education and Care Department is pulling in programs that existed elsewhere, from the departments of health, children youth and families, and human services.

It's really like trying to stand up to a whole new, big piece of infrastructure. The role that we're able to fill right now has this beautiful timing, where we're able to help connect the bits and pieces that have otherwise, at times, been working at cross purposes or disconnected. We've thought about how this is actually what the Pritzker work has meant about being in a position to connect everything. And that's really where I think some of the great leverage is.

Kate: We speak of ourselves as connective tissue in many of these areas and that's really right on and valuable. You can see the importance of that connectivity among things that have been somewhat disconnected.