



## Hub Community Spotlight: The Children's Trust of Alachua County, FL

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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 the Children's Trust of Alachua County, a community grantee.

### Alachua County's Prenatal-to-Three Goals

One of our goals is to increase participation rates for families with children prenatal to three in our maternal child health home visiting programs, this includes our local WIC program, Healthy Start Program, Healthy Families Program, as well as the Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV). We also have the NewboRN program, which is a program that offers every pregnant mom in Alachua County a visit from a Registered Nurse within 7 days of delivery. Many of our programs allow women to enroll from the very beginning of pregnancy and remain in the program throughout the pregnancy and until their child is three years old. Our second goal is to improve the quality and availability of early care and education services by increasing the percentage of accredited providers. We have a very active Early Learning Coalition that is committed to quality improvements in early child care.

### Challenges to Achieving Our Goals

There is a stigma associated with home visiting program for families. And that stigma crosses lines. In the healthcare field we see it in some doctors who feel that a home visiting program is for low-income families, families of color, or families that are at risk for substance abuse. Though we have specific programs that are designed to help families that might be at risk for substance abuse, most of our home visiting programs are for every pregnant woman and every child between the ages of birth and three.

Many of our families are also concerned with the stigma of a home visiting program. We have seen it locally with our NewboRN program as well as our Healthy Start program. To address these challenges, our maternal and child health experts have created marketing strategies that highlight the benefits of participating home visiting programs. Take the NewboRN program for example. Moms receive a home visit from a registered nurse to make sure mom and baby are doing well. If mom is breastfeeding, the nurse makes sure the baby is latching and getting enough breast milk. If mom is bottle feeding, the nurse makes sure that mom understands how to mix formula and that the baby is getting enough and gaining the appropriate amount of weight. For moms who have had C-sections, the nurse makes sure she is healing well, and examines the incision. The nurse also assesses whether there are any issues with baby blues or postpartum depression. The benefits of participating in a program such as this have been great, especially for new moms, so the last thing we want our families to be concerned about is whether it looks bad that they are getting a home visit.

It has been an ongoing challenge to make sure families understand that regardless of their socioeconomic or marital status, race, or education, many of these programs were designed to help pregnant women, and

just families in general. We really have to make sure we have a great marketing strategy in place, and that our messaging is used not only internally, but across many different sectors. For example, families need to know that there are peer-to-peer support programs available. Or, when programs are suggested in an obstetrician or pediatrician's office, we must ensure that the messaging is the same and that families understand what resources are available to them.

Another challenge has been the pandemic, which has caused our numbers to decrease drastically. Families just don't want someone in their home, especially with a newborn baby, to decrease the risk of anyone contracting COVID. In addition, our hospitals restricted the nurses that are hired through our program from going into the hospital to introduce this opportunity to families, understandably so. To address the decreasing numbers of home visits during the pandemic, we increased our virtual meeting options for our nurses and moms to meet. We also began to identify new moms through our infant screening. The hospital has continued to allow us to send home care packages with those moms. The care packages include information about how to access the program, explain the purpose of the program, and include some newborn gift items for mom and baby when they go home.

## Our Stakeholders

Our Pritzker-funded initiative is called the On the Way Initiative. Our partners include our local Healthy Start Coalition, the Early Learning Coalition, and the Florida Department of Health in Alachua County, which manages our WIC program. We also created On the Way committee. This committee consists of additional stakeholders in our area including health care providers and experts in different fields. These committee members hold leadership positions in agencies that can create policy and make immediate changes within our prenatal-to-three system of care.

## Parent Engagement

We are looking to Pritzker for support on a model we can use to encourage more parent engagement. We want to recruit families so that family ideas and suggestions can be implemented. What we have thus far includes information from surveys and pre- and post-tests that our partners are currently collecting from their families that are participating in their programs.

## Supporting Families who Face Significant Barriers to Supports and Services

Our families experience many different barriers - transportation, financial, access to many services, barriers caused by the pandemic - because they do not have the necessary equipment, data, or Wi-Fi to receive services. The Alachua County community has done a great job identifying what those barriers are, and then meeting those families where they are. If families want to participate in services, but do not have the data or equipment to support receiving the services virtually, the program will find a way to purchase tablets for those families to participate, or they will identify low-cost or free Wi-Fi services for those families to tap into, so they can continue to receive services. Our community is also working together on the housing and eviction crisis that is now occurring throughout the country.

We realize that barriers exist, and we are continuing to strengthen our systems and our connections to make sure that what we are learning from families is shared with our maternal child health and housing providers and helps to improve our support system. We are strengthening those connections, creating policy, and changing our system of care to address the barriers. In addition, we are keeping in mind the additional barriers caused by the pandemic and trying to make our services easily assessable during such a difficult time for our families.

## We are Building and Learning

We are new at this. Not only is our Pritzker fellow new, but some of the core staff is new, and the Children's Trust is only about a year and a half old. We are learning as we are also building our infrastructure, but Alachua County already has many of the pieces of the puzzle. We are in the beginning stages of implementing our strategies and assessing what changes are needed. The Children's Trust of Alachua County is bringing everyone to the table to assess what is going well, what the gaps are, and how we can create solutions for those gaps.