



Hub State Spotlight: Allegheny County, PA

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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 New Jersey coalition.

Allegheny County Prenatal-to-Three Goals

Our primary goal is that we want all families of infants and toddlers in Allegheny County to receive a comprehensive set of supports that ensure healthy child development - that they get off to a strong start and thrive.

Challenges to Achieving Our Goals

Life has been turned upside down for the past 18 months with COVID-19. In Allegheny County, we've always put a high priority on collaboration and relationships. Relationship building is the foundation on which families and caregivers build trust and children learn. Relationships are also the way programs help families build community trust in their services. Adjusting to a world in which we have been isolated has presented a new set of challenges for everyone, but especially marginalized young children and their families, and the programs that need to reach them.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that child care is essential for working families and businesses. Particularly early in the pandemic, child care providers requested waivers to stay open for "essential workers" providing other critical services. Not only does access to high-quality child care help families get back to work, but child care also provides concrete goods and social-emotional supports.

Now, eighteen months into the pandemic, while most child care has returned in Allegheny County, we are far from full enrollment. We aren't seeing the number of infants and toddlers in child care that we were seeing before the pandemic, which was always a narrow slice of the overall number of young children that we served to begin with.

While we haven't been able to connect with families in traditional ways, we have learned to be flexible, creative, and find new opportunities for connection in virtual and hybrid spaces. As we enter into the new school year, we're figuring it out as we go along. We're hopeful about returning to a "new normal" and looking forward to reconnecting to our communities face-to-face.

Another challenge our partners experienced was kicking off a new program during the pandemic. The program, Hello Baby, welcomes every new baby in the county, and ensures that every family knows about the range of supports that are available to them as they become a new family. Many things change in a family when a new baby joins, and every new parent can use a little extra help. This program meets those

needs by matching them to anything, whether it be a family support center, online information, or an enhanced or deeper level set of supports through Healthy Start, our partner.

The primary way that we were making points of contact with new families is through our birthing hospitals. As we all know, hospital systems are also overwhelmed due to the pandemic, so outreach to families with new babies was a bigger challenge than we expected. Nevertheless, the program launched and is working hard to ensure that families have what they need to support their new babies. It's happening--referrals are being made and families are getting connected--but it has been a challenge.

Supporting Families of Infants and Toddlers and Pregnant Women Who Face Significant Barriers to Supports and Services

In part, the intention of *Hello Baby* is to make sure that every family has access to a set of wraparound services and supports that enables a family or a mom or dad of an infant or toddler to access whatever they need. This means showing up on their doorstep and delivering goods when that's the need, or supporting them with transportation, which means ensuring family centers have vans, so they can transport families to doctor appointments and other appointments. *Hello Baby* also helps connect caregivers to Home Visiting services that support their child's healthy development.

Every family is so different. There's no one size fits all. It's about going back to the very beginning, building the relationship with the family, and then developing and helping to support the plan that the family identifies for itself and the resources and services that are needed.

Our Stakeholders

One of the strengths of Allegheny County is that we are very collaborative. The folks that are involved with this effort are Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Healthy Start, the Council of Three River American Indian Center, which leads our Early Head Start Child Care Partnership effort here in the county, the Early Learning Resource Center Region 5, our Family Support Network, Allegheny County Department of Health and ourselves, Trying Together. Home visiting in Allegheny County is coordinated by both Allegheny County Department of Human Services and Allegheny County Department of Health.

Engaging Parents

One of the things in Allegheny County that's different here in our county is that our Department of Human Services really values the role of family and family supports and invests heavily in them. Allegheny County Department of Human Services (AC DHS) uses some additional dollars to ensure that the county is well covered with family centers. In Allegheny County we have 27 centers so that all areas of the county are covered.

There is a parent council for each of the family centers, which are meant to be a one-stop shop for families with young children who need access to anything from concrete goods to home visiting experiences, to parent development classes or experiences, to opportunities for moms to talk to other moms, and dads to talk to other dads.

There are ongoing quarterly meetings where parents provide feedback about what works, what doesn't, and how we can reach our families. Further, many centers are led in part by parent leaders from the community who themselves utilized the center when they raised their own children and then went on to increase their involvement in the center and take on leadership roles. Family centers really are at the center of family and caregiver engagement here in Allegheny County.

Addressing Inequities

One area of work we are focused on is racial equity, being inclusive, and looking at your own biases and White privilege.

AC DHS released a resource guide of Black and Indigenous consultants and trainers, and other services in our community that are available to support organizations who want to do their own race equity work. DHS, for many years, has done (and continues to do) the internal work it needs to do to ensure that bias doesn't influence the way it provides services or child welfare decision-making.

At Trying Together, we have been investing heavily in our personal and collective anti-racism growth. Dr. Beverly Tatum talks about racism as being "the smog in the air." We are all affected by racism. It's everywhere. In some places it's thick and some places it's not. Regardless, we each ingest that smog and have to take an active approach to mitigating it. It's not something that gets done in a single session once a month. It's not something that gets completed in a weekly book reading. It's about ongoing work. It is (and has to be) embedded throughout our organization and it has to be addressed at the personal, collective, and policy level.

Much of the work that we're doing at the state level from an advocacy perspective is about addressing policies that have created inequities in the system from subsidy base rates to workforce compensation to suspension and expulsions.

We've also been doing a lot of outreach to relative providers. These are folks that are related to the child that they're caring for; they're often the ones caring for infants and toddlers during non-traditional hours like second and third shifts and weekends. Especially early in the pandemic, they were picking up a lot of the slack: when child care was forced to close, related providers--grandma, aunt, uncle, sister--were the ones caring for the kids. And yet, from a systems perspective, they're the ones that are often overlooked in terms of the quality supports.

At our Early Learning Resource Center in Allegheny County, we've been working on how to support relative providers in a way that meets their needs and removes barriers. It's a work in progress that has required a lot of flexibility, but we're very committed to supporting this group. Sometimes the ideas fail and sometimes they succeed, but it's all in an effort to make sure that our relative providers have what they need, including concrete goods such as diapers or access to the food bank. We were able to get some additional dollars from a philanthropic partner and give small grants. We knew that they probably had increased utility and food costs because they were caring for children for more hours than they typically would have been.

We've been trying to just figure out what a set of family development supports would look like. Figuring out what families and their caregivers need, what information they want more of, and how we provide it in a way that is accessible, relevant, and meaningful to them is essential. This has meant everything from virtual calls, Facebook groups, and dropping off bags at their home full of children's supplies. It takes a range of supports and the effort to figure out how to elevate their needs.

Connecting with the State Grantee

Much of the work at the state level is about policy. We have to take all that information and ask how it will affect us at the local level. Also, we have to examine what we are doing at the local level to see what might be shared as an example of a challenge or a snag that we could address at up the state level. It's a back and forth of information sharing and strategic thinking about what's happening at both levels.

Advice for Other States and Communities

The challenge the pandemic has forced us to try things that perhaps we wouldn't have tried before. There are some things we've learned that we'll keep after we get back to "normal." And that's a positive.

Having state experience, but also really understanding the county and having relationships with city government folks is helpful. It really gives the state team some specific examples of what can be done on a local level. We've seen in the state work, not just regarding the early childhood education piece, but also WIC and some of the broad health issues, that it's really helpful to have that community perspective.

Local Leadership and Public Revenue

We know that the range of needs that children, families, and communities have at this point exceeds what the state and federal government had historically been investing in. A few years ago, we took up a county ballot initiative to try to create an additional public revenue stream on behalf of children. It narrowly lost by about 6,000 votes—51 percent to 48 percent. But the positive that came out of it was that the county executive understood that voters really wanted government to focus on and support the children of our county.

As a result, the county executive empaneled a group of folks who drafted a plan to create a new Department of Children's Initiatives at the county level; he promised he would look for and identify long-term sustainable public revenue to support kids. The desire from the community is there; that was exemplified by the number of votes that the voter referendum got.

To date, the department was established, a director was hired, and some funding was earmarked for "Year Zero." Now it's about how we make sure that all parts of county government work on behalf of kids and that there aren't gaps in investments.

The City of Pittsburgh has also held a commitment to children. Several years ago, we successfully advocated for the creation of an Office of Early Childhood and an early childhood manager position. City Council then allocated \$2 million in the city budget to support child care programs in moving up in quality. Those dollars are being administered over the next two years. This is an example of municipal leadership, the council, and the mayor working together to bring a goal to fruition.

We have all been doing our work, but not necessarily making sure that all the parts work together comprehensively and seamlessly. That really was part of the work of the Pritzker grant. One of the goals coming out of our collective work from this grant is a comprehensive prenatal-to-three county plan in which all the parts are coming together, swimming upstream together. That's part of the big goal.