



CASE STUDY

Michigan Parent Leadership

This case study was written by the BUILD Initiative with input from Bryn Fortune, the former director of Family and Parent Leadership at the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, and by current Senior Parent Leaders Effie Alofoje-Carr, Monica Gaines, and Sarah Zyburt.

After more than 30 years of trying, Michigan now has a parent leadership program model that works when faithfully implemented. The model, a concept tested over the last eight years, can be replicated within any early childhood system or program. In Michigan's case, it is within the state's home visiting program that the voices of parents sharing their lived experience and expertise has been shown to produce positive results. Michigan has demonstrated that when its parent leadership model is used, program, child, and family outcomes improve and early childhood systems become more effective because parents have shared in decision making that, by definition, is more equitable, culturally sensitive, and responsive to their needs than previous efforts.



▶ BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE MODEL

The current model has been in place since 2013. The proof of concept has been in its ability to produce results at the local and state level. Earlier model iterations were not able to do this: some were not oriented to target neighborhoods that have been marginalized and, therefore, were not able to provide the lived experience and expertise of the group of parents who could provide a legitimate strategy to equity.

Currently all proof is qualitative, but funding has been secured to conduct a formal evaluation to study the difference between the parents who have participated in the Parent Leader Network and their peers who only received home visiting services. Julie Heany, Ph.D., MPHI will perform the evaluation.

- ▶ Approximately 65 parents have participated in the model.
- ▶ Parent participants are identified locally and offered the leadership development opportunity at the state level.
- ▶ The parent leaders represent collectively the voices of urban, suburban, and rural areas of Michigan. They are: 52% African American/Black, 39% White, and 3% each American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and Spanish, Latin, or Hispanic Origin.

A significant number of parents have dealt with issues such as intimate partner violence, maternal depression, substance abuse, and poverty and many of their children experience developmental challenges. Their collective expertise and input at the state level has been invaluable and addresses the disconnect that often exists between the problems that families experience, especially those in marginalized communities, and the “solutions” offered by the state. The deep connection between those closest to the problems that the programs seek to address and the planning and implementation of the program provides Michigan with a key strategy for the advancement toward equity.

The model is built from the local governance structure of the home visiting Local Leadership Group (LLG) that is tasked with building a locally coordinated home visiting system. These LLGs are connected to the local Great Start Collaboratives, but in most areas are a separate, but linked, working body. The local structure is required to have a minimum of two parent representatives actively engaged on these LLGs.

Each local group, active members on the LLG, worked with its home visiting models to identify parent leaders being served in its program. Once a parent is identified and has a place to “practice” her leadership skills, she is invited to join the state leadership development group—Michigan Home Visiting Initiative Parent Leader Network.

Michigan’s Parent Leadership Initiative is supported with funding from MIECHV (Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting), where family and parent leadership activities are allowable activities/expenses under infrastructure in the MIECHV grant. In addition, the work has benefited from some state general funds.

WHY THE MODEL WORKS

The model has been successful because:

1. Parents have been at the forefront of the state’s parent leadership movement, ensuring their voices are heard at decision-making tables and informing early childhood policies and programs.
2. The partnerships between parents and others at the table produce meaningful change.
3. It is sustainable.

According to Bryn Fortune, former director of family and parent leadership at the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, who shepherded the process

▶ ONE PARENT'S STORY

Sarah got involved in parent leadership through her early childhood home visitor, who invited her to attend the Michigan statewide home visiting conference, with her attendance, hotel, and travel expenses paid through funds provided by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services earmarked to support parents attending leadership and development opportunities. Sarah attended the conference and, in time and through involvement in the Michigan Statewide Home Visiting Parent Leader Network, got to know other Michigan parents. She specifically connected with two other women who had children the same age as her son and were also members of the Parent Leader Network. Sarah appreciated the peer support.

When Sarah's son was a toddler, she was volunteering at a community event when she met another mom from her community who shared that she was struggling with postpartum depression and asked Sarah if she knew of any local support resources. Sarah couldn't think of any in that moment, so she took down the parent's contact information and the next week spent several hours making phone calls to different early childhood resource providers she knew through her local parent work. When she came up empty-handed after calling over 10 agencies and programs, she asked the mom if she would consider trying home visiting which, though not exactly the support the mom was seeking, would be able to provide resources and assist mom and baby. The mom enrolled in home visiting, connected with her home visitor, and was able to form a secure attachment with her daughter. Furthermore, after talking with the mom about the idea, Sarah got back in touch with all the people she had called in her search for postpartum depression resources who hadn't known of any but agreed when she called the first time that they were needed and should be available in the community. Together with the other parent, Sarah created a weekly peer support group for which they were able to receive training to ensure high quality and that the two still co-facilitate. Sarah said, "It hadn't occurred to me that parent leaders, working together, could be such a critical part of a solution. We ended up creating a much-needed service. We even found a local therapist who specializes in perinatal mood disorders. So, when we have moms in our group who need more intensive support, we can connect them with this therapist."

over the years through its several iterations in partnership with many professionals and parents who guided the spirit of the work:

"Bringing the reality of families' lived experience together with research, science, and best practices is now a proven solution. Parent leadership [hinges on] bringing these entities into partnership. When we can bring both professional system readiness and parent readiness into partnership, that is absolutely what produces results. That's the sweet spot for meaningful change."

Regarding partner readiness, Monica, a Senior Parent Leader, noted that states new to parent leadership need to consider whether they are ready for parents to be partners, as opposed to just having them at the table. She said:

"It is important to ensure your staff is ready to work with people who they may feel are beneath them for whatever reason. Parents with and without a high level of education provide equally valuable input." And don't limit the kind of parents that come to the tables. You need to hear from the parents who didn't like a particular service because that dissenting opinion can be the one that changes services, and/or that leads to many more people accessing that service. Those are typically the parents who have more barriers to access. You can help eliminate some of those barriers.

Sustainability is also key; the model identifies potential leaders and supports their development from the ground up. The parents, in Michigan's case, are often identified by home visitors, who, for Senior Parent Leader Effie, displayed "amazing relatability and authenticity." Effie never felt that it was a "helper-helpee" relationship. On the contrary, her home visitor made her feel that not only were they on a journey together, but that Effie had skills she could teach her. As Effie said, there was a "total leveling of the playing field." It is the trusting relationships in which parent leaders feel comfortable to develop their skills. Eventually new parent leaders will replace them as their children grow and/or they move into other positions of leadership. Michigan's model is characterized by the continual growth and renewal, i.e., new parents and the leadership it generates. In fact, Bryn said that when she sees the same three or four family representatives at meetings and events, she knows the system is not working properly.

MICHIGAN'S SPECTRUM FOR PARENT LEADERSHIP IN HOME VISITING: SARAH'S JOURNEY

Parents engage in a continuum of experiences on their journey to leadership that impacts both them and early childhood systems and services. Following are Sarah's experiences as viewed through the spectrum:

1. Informing: Communications Regarding Services or Opportunities for Parents

At the first conference Sarah attended, she was approached by two co-facilitators of her local leadership group for her local county. Also, when attending those meetings, she was invited by other groups and programs serving parents to serve on their advisory boards.

2. Involving/Consulting: Survey, Focus Groups, or Interviews with Parents

When Sara and the other mom who co-facilitates the postpartum peer support group with her convened the other service providers to create a service for parents struggling with postpartum depression, they asked the different programs to survey the parents in their programs about whether this service was truly wanted/needed in their county. Similarly, they partnered with the Genesee County Health Department to host four parent focus groups, for which parents were reimbursed for their time. Focus groups allowed them to learn more specifically what supports parents wanted when perinatal mood disorders were present. Some of the parents who participated in those focus groups went on to become parent leaders or were interested in moving to the collaborating stage as they thought through their peer support group planning.

3. Collaborating: Changes in Approach or Services as a Result of Parent Voice

Once there were parents collaborating on decision-making, parent leaders provided home visiting programs the feedback that doing a single paper screening for postpartum depression was not an effective way to discover parents in programs who were struggling. Many parents are afraid to tell a professional. Parents helped home visitors develop more regular check-ins and ways to involve other family members, such as the mother of the young child's partner, or parents, or others in the household, to help understand if postpartum depression was a real concern and connect them with resources. Home

visiting programs changed the way they were providing services because of what they heard from parents.

4. Partnering: Planning, Decision-Making, Implementing, Assessing with Parent Partners/Leaders

This step is still in development. Parents have been asked to join the assessment teams for home visiting programs which is ongoing in Michigan at the local and state level. Michigan home visiting uses Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and [Plan Do Study Act](#) cycles. Parent leaders have been able to receive training and technical assistance/coaching as they have learned how to do this work.

5. Empowerment/Leadership: Parent Leaders as Change Agents

This occurs when parent leaders are consistently at the table, have a supportive community of peers, and move into roles such as recruiter of other parent leaders, co-facilitator or facilitator of meetings, or even when they get hired into positions in which they work with parents (this is when they become an internal partner -- but they can continue to champion parent leadership even in that new role). Sarah and her support group co-facilitator became Change Agents when they founded and sustained the peer support group. In 2017 they also kicked off their first annual [Climb out of Darkness](#). Sarah now represents their community on the statewide Postpartum Support International-Michigan group on behalf of Genesee County.

RELATED RESOURCES:

[Stepping Out and Speaking Up: The Evolution of Parent Leadership in Michigan](#)

Case Study Contributors



EFFIE ALOFOJE-CARR
Senior Parent Leader

Ms. Alofoje-Carr is a proud native of Detroit, MI who currently coordinates the Ingham Local Leadership, serving the Lansing, MI area in maternal, infant, and child health and education. She is an author, speaker, and women's event host, inspiring women to make over their lives to live out their dreams. She has worked as a legal advocate for survivors of domestic violence and as an outreach coordinator of after school programming for young girls. Effie holds a B.A. from Michigan State University. She and her husband are parents of a brilliant and active 7-year-old son.



MONICA GAINES
Senior Parent Leader

Ms. Gaines lives in Wayne County, MI with her husband Nathaniel and their son Nate. She began her journey into home visiting in 2013 when she joined the Healthy Families program in Wayne County. She became a parent leader in 2015 when she joined the advisory board and the Local Leadership Group. She went on to also join the State Local Leadership Parent Leader Team. In 2017, was hired as the Healthy Families Program senior program assistant and most recently has also taken on the role of parent coordinator with the Early Childhood Investment Corporation.



BRYN FORTUNE
Family and Parent Leadership Consultant

Ms. Fortune raised two daughters with special health needs and has served in multiple leadership roles in community, state, and national initiatives over her 30-year career.

As the Director for Family and Parent Leadership with the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, she led the development of Michigan's Home Visiting Initiative Parent Leader Network, as well as the Publication, "Stepping Up and Speaking Out: The Evolution of Parent Leadership in Michigan."

Ms. Fortune is a consultant for the Education Development Center; the Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau; the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Technical Assistance Resource Center; and Reach Out and Read's national efforts to incorporate the voice of families served in its work. She serves as a member of the national Home Visiting Network and is a Family Leadership Home Visiting Coach for the Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Networks and an advisor on early relational health at the Center for the Study of Social Policy.



SARAH ZYBURT
Senior Parent Leader

Ms. Zyburt, mother of a seven-year-old child, is from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and now lives in Flint. She serves on the Michigan Parent Leaders in State Government workgroup, and Postpartum Support International, Michigan. Formerly, she served as a parent leader on her Home Visiting Local Leadership Group, the Great Start Collaborative for Genesee County and the Statewide Parent Leaders group for home visiting in Michigan. Sarah enjoys volunteering as a co-facilitator for a local postpartum support group for new moms as well as with the Parent Coalition in Flint and Genesee County.