



Hub State Spotlight: Guilford County, NC

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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 Guilford County coalition.

Guilford County Prenatal-to-Three Goals

The mission of Ready for School, Ready for Life, (Ready Ready), is to build a connected, innovative system of care for Guilford County's youngest children and their families. The organization believes that every child deserves a great start in life and that every child should start from the same place, with equal opportunity. Family voice, equity, and early literacy are all woven into Ready Ready's work.

Guilford County Prenatal-to-3 Strategies:

- Design, test, and implement navigation services to assess PN-3 families for strengths and needs at five touch points – prenatal, birth, age 1, age 2, age 3 -- and guide them to effective services to support healthy child development and provide ongoing support.
- Expand and integrate evidence-based programs that serve pregnant persons, infants, and toddlers. Improve the quality of PN-3 (and PN-5) programs that will provide and/or receive referrals by practicing continuous quality improvement.
- Launch an integrated data system to enable data sharing among health/social service providers (with informed family consent) to connect families with services more efficiently.
- Build public will for PN-3 priorities.

Ready Ready Priorities

1. Build a navigation system to connect families with effective services.
2. Expand and integrate proven programs to meet community need.
3. Build a culture of continuous quality improvement.
4. Build technology to support data-informed decisions.
5. Conduct rigorous evaluation and build sustainability for system-building work.
6. Build public will for early childhood priorities.

Partners

Ready Ready collaborates with a mix of public and private partners. It has a public will-building team of board members (local government, public health department, and statewide advocacy organization representatives), community partners, and staff that meet monthly to design a strategy for leveraging its partners at both a local and state level and to work on replicating Ready Ready across the state.

With its strong commitment to having families involved in its work, family voice is present at all levels of the organization. This includes staff roles at all levels, from parent liaison to board member. Using the Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) model, Ready Ready not only further develops parents' leadership skills but strengthens parents' ability to be effective partners. The organization equips parent leaders with the skills to perform outreach and solicit feedback on what does and doesn't work in the community. One long-term big-picture goal is to not only embed family voice in Ready Ready's governance structure, but to equip families to be engaged in other organizations in the community. Further, by serving on committees and boards of other organizations, a larger infusion of family voice throughout the Guilford community is created.

Equity

With support from The Pritzker Children's Initiative, Ready Ready is implementing a three-year equity action plan. Families are not only in paid positions at the organization, but they have played a role, along with community partners, in the process of building a navigation system of care, Routes to Ready. Ready Ready is expanding proven programs to enable more families with young children and expectant parents, many of whom have low incomes, to be reached with services they want and need. These programs include Community Navigation, Family Connects Guilford, HealthySteps, and Nurse-Family Partnership.

Ready Ready, in collaboration with UNC-Chapel Hill, has identified common barriers, particularly for Black and Latiné families, to accessing prenatal care, including the lack of access to adequate health care, transportation and child care. The organization is working with community partners and families to develop strategies to address barriers identified in the findings. Ready Ready is also working in the community with partners to identify and meet the needs of expectant people who may not be coming in for obstetrician (OB) care.

The organization also is working to establish prenatal navigators in OB practices to ensure that every new OB patient is offered navigation to support them on their journey, prenatally through the early years. Prenatal navigators find referral services available through Ready Ready's Agency Finder, part of its Integrated Data System. Ready Ready's Network team supports this work by maintaining the data and using the technology to identify gaps, barriers, and other needs in the community.

As a member of the Think Babies NC leadership team, Ready Ready has advocated for higher wages for early child care educators and is excited to see a wage supplement program back in Guilford County. Ready Ready believes that co-advocating in this way helps to tell the story about why the early years matter, for all infants, toddlers, and families.

Overcoming Challenges to Achieving Goals

COVID has had a significant impact in Guilford County. Many partners, whether medical homes, early care and education centers, or others, have been struggling with staffing. When their capacity is diminished, their ability to move work forward is impacted. The pandemic also increased health and safety priorities for families and shifted expansion work of Guilford's proven programs from in-person to virtual. Virtual meetings and appointments, in general, eventually created a feeling of online fatigue, yet another challenge. All these transitions took time and pushed back some timelines but, on the bright side, they also presented an opportunity to learn how to do some things differently.

Another challenge is ensuring the capacity to meet families' language and cultural needs. For example, when delivering support through medical homes, there are families that don't speak English as a primary language, some that don't speak English at all, and others whose literacy skills in their own language are more limited. To best support these families, we not only must have bilingual staff available, but we also have to ensure cultural competency. A lack of staff capacity and the skills to serve families from different backgrounds creates barriers. To overcome this, Ready Ready relies on the ability of its Network team to identify gaps in the system. This identification can range from making sure there is an availability of items such as diapers, to ensuring a capacity to serve families that don't speak English.

Other challenges naturally develop as work and outreach is expanded. Ready Ready is now starting to serve more families as it performs field testing in more pediatric practices to ensure the system is identifying and serving families that typically can't get access to services.