

One Approach to Screening for Adverse Childhood Experiences in Delaware

Background

The Delaware Division of Public Health's (DPH) Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) program houses the state's [Help Me Grow](#) system, which includes its developmental screening initiative. During the 2013-2016 grant period, the ECCS program used federal funds to focus on [brain development](#), specifically, mitigating the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress on families with young children up to three years old. One goal of this grant was to use the ACEs questionnaire, a trauma-informed screening tool, to screen for individuals with elevated ACEs.

Steps Taken

- DPH partnered with four federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) to implement the ACEs questionnaire. FQHCs were chosen as the setting because they serve a high-risk population, therefore making them more likely to screen patients with higher ACEs scores.
- The goal was to assess moms with children ages zero to three by training providers in both ACEs and early brain development. The ACEs screening was performed at the FQHC during well-child visits. If the mom scored three ACEs or above on the questionnaire, she would be referred to the [Strengthening Families Program](#). This service was a partnership with a nonprofit in Delaware called [Children and Families First](#). The identified family would be enrolled in the Strengthening Families' eight-week program. The program provides high-risk family evidence-based training on a child's social skills, including parenting and family lifestyle skills.

Barriers

- At La Red Health Center, a FQHC with a high number of Hispanic families, DPH had to change their strategy of referring families to the Children and Families First facility. Families at La Red Health Center were reluctant to seek follow-up services at another location because they felt more comfortable and secure at their own FQHC. To overcome this barrier, Children and Families First hired a facilitator of the same cultural background, as well as dedicated support staff, to hold sessions at La Red Health Center.
- While DPH originally believed that ACEs and their impact would be self-explanatory and persuasive to both families and other providers, the private and intimate nature of screening questions proved to be a barrier. Based on this experience, DPH felt that an ACEs screening tool that is more strength- or asset-based would have been less threatening to families and more effective at eliciting responses. Delaware's work points to the importance of considering how to ensure that screening is culturally sensitive and trauma-informed.
- Key stakeholder buy-in for the ECCS program and education about ACEs in general was important to the success of this project. The project required considerable training of early childcare and education providers. While some child care center directors expressed interest in ACEs screening, they showed reluctance when they realized the intrusive nature of the ACEs questionnaire. Many did not think they could share that kind of information with enrolled families. This could be attributed to a lack of scientific understanding or insufficient knowledge regarding the implications ACEs pose to individuals and the community. To overcome this initial discomfort, DPH partnered with the Delaware Division of Prevention and Behavioral Health to visit these centers and show directors and staff informational videos on ACEs. As a result, the

centers' directors agreed to partner with DPH to provide parents with ACEs information each month at their monthly parent engagement events.

Next Steps

One of the objectives for the ECCS grant was to determine other ACEs work being done in Delaware. During this time, state and community-based agencies came together to form the Trauma-Informed Interest Group, which is now formally known as [Trauma Matters Delaware](#) (TMD). The ECCS program partnered with this group and used federal funds to support the first trauma-informed seminar. This statewide virtual community works to make Delaware trauma-informed across all systems and services. TMD raises awareness and provides resources to help individuals and organizations incorporate principles and practices of trauma-informed care into their programs and services. Its current membership includes the Delaware Department of Public Health, Delaware school districts, the Division of Corrections, the family court, as well as academic institutions, community social service providers, and other advocates. Since its origination, TMD has hosted several community listening sessions, bringing stakeholders and partners together to discuss ACEs, the work being done, and what individuals would like to see happen. What began as a conversation among a few state agency leaders about ACEs and trauma paved the way for a community vision of a trauma-informed state.

TMD also includes topically-focused subcommittees, including a data committee. The committee is comprised of individuals from different healthcare systems and state agency service systems interested in collecting and using data about ACEs and resilience screening. TMD is working to develop an electronic survey with a short set of questions to gather information on ACEs work being done in the state. The goal is to give information back to the community by mapping ACEs efforts throughout Delaware. Through this initiative, community members will be able to see what information is available on ACEs and resilience data across the state.

In Delaware, the governor's support has been key to advancing ACEs work by raising awareness around the issue and directing interagency coordination. On Oct. 17, 2018, Delaware Gov. John Carney [signed](#) Executive Order #24, which made Delaware a trauma-informed state. The order directs the Family Services Cabinet Council to address ACEs and build individual and community resilience. Their work will include developing tools to train state employees and community partners on ACEs and resilience. The council will also concentrate on strategies to improve services offered for children and families who have experienced ACEs. By becoming a trauma informed state, Delaware hopes to improve the overall health and well-being of all Delawareans.

For More Information:

Leslie Brower, PhD
Project Director
Delaware Division of Substance Abuse and
Mental Health
leslie.brower@state.de.us

Aileen Fink, PhD
Director, Behavioral Health Services
Delaware Department of Correction
aileen.fink@state.de.us

Paulina Gyan, MS, MPH
ECCS Impact/Help Me Grow Manager
Delaware Division of Public Health
paulina.gyan@state.de.us

Harpur Schwartz
Maternal and Child Health Analyst
Association of State and Territorial Health
Officials
hschwartz@astho.org