ACEs are potentially traumatic incidents that harm a child’s social, cognitive, and emotional functioning and behavior. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) during childhood and adolescence increase a person’s risk for many health conditions later in life. In 2019, ASTHO conducted the ACEs Capacity Assessment Tool (ACECAT), an electronic survey for health agencies that measures the extent to which strategic agencies or states have capacity to prevent ACEs. The ACECAT included three main components: background on the S/THA respondent; infrastructure at the health agency to support ACEs prevention; and top prevention strategies health agencies are focused on.

HEALTH AGENCIES ARE WORKING WITH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERS TO PREVENT ACES

Health agencies reported having partnerships with public and public-private sectors to support ACEs prevention at some or full capacity: 76% have partnerships with public sector partners; 68% have public-private partnerships. 97% of health agencies report having public sector partnerships focused on early childhood care, mental health and substance use, and education.

HEALTH AGENCIES WITH STRONG ACES PARTNERSHIPS HAVE HIGHER CAPACITY IN OTHER AREAS

There are differences between health agencies that frequently utilize public partnerships (defined as some to high capacity) and those that rarely or never do (defined as low to no capacity). Health agencies with high capacity for public sector partnerships are significantly more likely to have high capacity to:

- Establish leadership presence across three or more sectors (e.g., maternal and child health, housing, and Medicaid programs).
- Ensure that agency leaders are represented at all levels of government (e.g., state, territorial, county, and city levels).
- Secure funding sources to prevent ACEs.
- Direct scope of funding to prevent specific ACEs.

HEALTH AGENCIES ARE COORDINATING ACROSS STRATEGIC PLANS

Strategic planning at health agencies is a dynamic process that responds to changes in science, priorities, funding levels, and external support from the public and leadership. Formal strategic planning promotes action and the achievement of public health goals. To better understand strategic planning activities, the survey included questions about the following:

- 93% of agencies practice coordination across multiple strategic plans.
- 47% of agencies include sustainability activities in strategic plans.
- 42% of agencies incorporate ACEs or child abuse and neglect into state health improvement plans.
- 93% of health agencies report having public sector partnerships focused on early childhood care, mental health and substance use, and education.
- 76% have partnerships with public sector partners; 68% have public-private partnerships.
- 97% of health agencies report having public sector partnerships focused on early childhood care, mental health and substance use, and education.

HEALTH AGENCIES FACE CHALLENGES PREVENTING ACES

Health agencies report the following gaps in their ACEs prevention work:

- 60% report a lack of evidence-based practices.
- 42% report insufficient funding.
- 26% report insufficient external resources.
- 29% report a lack of knowledge about ACEs.
- 19% report a lack of evidence-based practices.
- 14% report insufficient funding.

LOOKING FORWARD

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Health agencies need to invest in leadership development in order to ensure that leaders have the capacity to effectively address the issue of ACEs.
- Health agencies should continue to invest in research and data collection efforts in order to better understand the impact of ACEs and identify effective prevention strategies.
- Health agencies should continue to work with community partners, including advocacy groups and parenting organizations, to develop and implement effective prevention strategies.

In summary, health agencies play a critical role in preventing and mitigating the impact of ACEs. By utilizing partnerships, strategic planning, and evidence-based practices, health agencies can effectively address this critical public health issue.