



Healthy Families
North Dakota[™]
Lutheran Social Services

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PUBLIC COMMENT
ND CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH TASK FORCE
November 16, 2018

Thank you, to each of you, for your time and service on the ND Children's Behavioral Health Task Force. As you are aware, children in North Dakota are experiencing many challenges related to behavior health, either their own behavioral health needs or behavioral health needs of their family members. It is for this reason I wanted to share information about a program called Healthy Families. My name is Missi Baranko and I am the Team Lead for Healthy Families, which is a program of Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota.

Healthy Families is a voluntary, primary prevention and early intervention home visitation program operating in Grand Forks and Nelson counties since 2000 and in Burleigh and Morton Counties since 2008. It is designed to support families, as they become parents, rooted in the belief that early and nurturing relationships are the foundation for life-long, healthy-development. Interactions between Family Support Specialists (AKA home visitors) and families are designed to promote positive parent-child relationships and healthy attachments through strength-based, family-centered, culturally-sensitive and reflective practices. Healthy Families is specifically designed to support parents who may have histories of childhood trauma, intimate partner violence, poor mental health, and/or substance abuse issues. In-home visitation begins prenatally or right after birth and is offered until the child turns three years of age. It is always free and voluntary, with all income levels served. We rely on well-trained staff, intentional curriculum, and evidence-based strategies to strengthen families and help them achieve their goals.

Referrals come primarily from birthing units, health care providers such as women's clinics, county social services, treatment programs and other community supports for new families such as WIC. Families

may also self-refer. We are currently engaged with over 80 families who are either receiving home visiting services or in the process of being scheduled for their initial assessments.

Healthy Families is an accredited program through Healthy Families America and is one of only 14 evidence based, federally recognized, home visitation programs. Lutheran Social Services of ND Healthy Families has successfully maintained its accreditation status throughout its 18 years as a provider of these services.

Substantial research, Such as the ACE Study, shows that early adversity is associated with diminished health across a person's lifetime and generations. The Study also establishes the link between adversities in childhood and subsequent negative health and well-being outcomes. Although we do not utilize the ACE screening tool specifically with each family, we do use the Healthy Families America Parent Survey to determine program eligibility, with a minimum score of 25 out of 100 identifying a family as being at increased risk for adverse childhood outcomes. A score of over 40 requires significantly more support be provided to the family. Recent data tells us that over 67% of our enrolled families scored over 40, which indicates increased risk for adverse childhood experiences and the need for additional support.

Even though we know that individuals with ACEs have an increased risk of adversities, science also tells us that supportive nurturing experiences help build resilience and protective factors. The relationship, trust and experiences through home visiting and community connections help develop confidence, independence and better decision-making, which lead to better lifetime health and quality of life.

Using a two generational approach (of providing support, resources and information for both the child and the parents), we implement Healthy Families Service Plans with all new families. This assures each family's risk factors and stressors (such as addictions, mental health needs, shelter, transportation, etc.) as well as parent-child interaction/attachment concerns are addressed. Through this process, specific strategies are created and tracked during weekly home visits with the family as well as during reflective supervision between each home visitor and supervisor to assure families and staff are receiving the support needed to address prevention and resilience related to ACEs.

Healthy Families has the added benefit of bringing joy to clients through in-home visits and parent-child interactions. Our strength-based solution focused curriculum, known as Growing Great Kids™: Prenatal – 36 Months, engages parents, cultivates secure attachments, and bolsters child development. All of this happens while building parenting, family strengthening & other essential life skills with parents who themselves have experienced childhood adversity and other traumatic events.

As stated earlier, families enroll prenatally or right after birth and services are offered until the child turns three years of age. Typically services begin with weekly home visits for at least 6 months after the baby is born. At this time, if the family has met specific criteria such as using healthy coping behaviors, establishing at least one positive support system, providing a safe home environment and having no open CPS investigations they move to Level 2. At Level 2 they receive home visits every other week. This process of achieving specific criteria and moving through levels continues through Level 4 as the child gets closer to turning three. Level changes are seen as a time to celebrate and families receive certificates of completion, celebrating their success.

Healthy Families has strong collaborative partnerships within the community. Families are connected to multiple resources based on individual and family needs. They are supported in accessing medical providers, WIC, public health services, treatment programs, housing, financial assistance programs, Job Service, education and training, public transportation, quality child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, and early intervention services.

Research tells us that the first three years of life are a period of incredible growth in all areas of a child's development. The trauma of abuse and neglect that occurs during this key developmental phase has lasting implications for a child's lifelong development. Children from birth to age three continue to be the age group most likely to be victims of maltreatment. This fact alone makes primary prevention efforts like Healthy Families critically important.

In consideration of the Children's Behavioral Task Force, we see our families crossing many of the Task Force focus areas from suicide prevention to bullying and most importantly providing support and services to families with Substance Exposed Newborns. As stated earlier, our staff are well trained and equipped to provide the specialized support needed to serve this population. As an evidence-based

program, we know the Healthy Families model works and appreciate the opportunity to share about our program with you today.

I have also attached two short handouts from Healthy Families America that provide additional research and information on the Healthy Families Advantage and impacts home visiting has on parents and families.

I am happy to take any questions you may have.

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Many families enrolled in HFA have experienced unresolved early childhood trauma including Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, which we know thanks to HFA's initial psycho-social history; an integral part of the trauma informed approach. Early childhood trauma shapes a world view that is very different from those lucky enough to be born into nurturing families and relationships.

When infants are born, they are 100% dependent upon their parents to meet their needs. When needs are met consistently, it ultimately leads to the development of self-regulation and impulse control. But when an infant is hungry, cries, and no one comes to help, that infant learns early in life that he must manage his own needs and that he cannot count on others. If an infant's first relationship with his caregiver is unpredictable, scary or hurtful, he may come to believe that people in general are unpredictable, scary or hurtful.

Future relationships are based upon the first relationship that a child experiences; the relationship with a parent. As children grow into adults, these lessons can combine to make it more difficult to trust other adults, including home visitors.

Researchers estimate that between 60-80% of the HFA population have experienced unresolved early childhood trauma. **HFA staff implement a different approach** – one that starts with attunement and connection rather than task.

A parent cannot access critical thinking skills when feeling fear, anger or sadness. It is only when these emotions are regulated that the parent can hear and understand information that is shared.

This is why **the HFA approach puts relationships first** - we believe the best support person is one you trust. HFA staff go the extra mile to build this trusting relationship with parents so we can better support them in building a nurturing and trusting relationship with their child, often one they did not experience themselves. The parents and children HFA serves benefit most from reflective staff who build on parental competencies rather than lecturing. This builds strengths not just now but also for future generations.

That's powerful. **That's the Healthy Families Advantage.**



IMPACTS ON PARENTS & FAMILIES

Healthy Families America is an effective and proven early childhood home visiting model with positive impacts in eight areas essential for children. Currently nearly 100,000 families are served by over 550 Healthy Families America sites in 37 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands and Canada. *Learn more about home visiting at homvee.acl.hhs.gov*

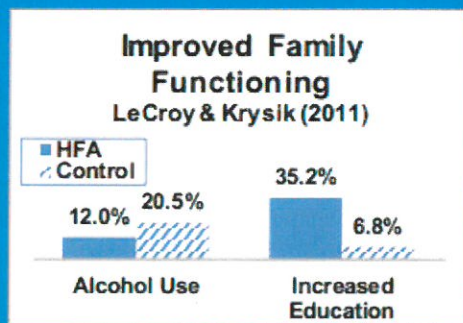
A parent's personal resources—including knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward parenting—impact their relationship with their baby. Healthy Families America helps parents develop their personal resources to improve family functioning, strengthen the parent-child relationship, promote child well-being, and prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

FAMILY FUNCTIONING AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY:

HFA parents make significant gains in their education¹ and make better use of community resources².

Delaying subsequent pregnancies at least two years impacts the health of both moms and babies, as well as helping young families achieve greater financial security. HFA studies show improvements in moms waiting to have another child³.

Substance abuse is another indicator of family functioning, as well as a risk factor for child maltreatment. Mothers in HFA reported less alcohol use compared to control families⁴.



POSITIVE PARENTING ATTITUDES

HFA helps parents develop more positive beliefs about their role as parents. Compared to control families, HFA parents:

- * showed stronger parenting efficacy⁵,
- * had reduced parenting stress levels⁶, and,
- * had more positive perspectives on their parenting roles and responsibilities⁷.

PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION

It takes time for parents to become acquainted with their new baby. Responsiveness and communication are the building blocks of attachment, which in turn promotes child well-being and protects against child maltreatment. HFA shows significant impacts on parent-child interaction in numerous studies⁹. In particular, a rigorous study showed significant improvements at two years on overall scores and specific areas of sensitivity, child clarity, and child responsiveness, while scores for control families declined¹⁰.

SUPPORT FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

HFA increases parents' understanding of children's developmental milestones and needs¹¹; and helps parents create a more responsive and developmentally stimulating home environment¹².

THE BOTTOM LINE: HFA benefits parents in many ways by helping them be the best parents they can be, and reach personal goals (such as furthering their education and gaining employment). These outcomes have been shown in rigorous studies in multiple states.

References: [available at](#)

healthyfamiliesamerica.org/impact-briefs/

More information: Please visit healthyfamiliesamerica.org to read more about HFA's positive impacts for children and communities.