

Every Worcester Child Thrives!

Reimagining Phase - Worcester Together: Central Mass COVID-19 Fund

Together for Kids Coalition (fs Edward Street Child Services)

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Application Form

Project Title*

Every Worcester Child Thrives!

ROOT CAUSE

Pressing Issue & Systems Identification*

What is the pressing issue you are trying to address?

In doing so, what are the system(s) you are coming into contact with?

The pressing issue for Together for Kids Coalition (TFKC) is the disproportionate burden of toxic stress and inequitable access to resources for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) families of infants and young children in Worcester. These inequities impact the wellbeing of generations and the health of our community. TFKC believes the place to address them is at the very beginning of life.

Currently there is no coordinated early childhood ‘system’; instead, we have a disjointed set of siloed, undervalued and sorely underfunded services that leave many young families without critical support. This loosely connected ‘system’ includes diverse partners: obstetricians and pediatricians, early education and care providers, infant and child behavioral health and development specialists, protective care workers and families. It is a patchwork quilt marred by unequal access and widening gaps. COVID-19 exposed these gaps and deepened long standing disparities for BIPOC and poor families in our community.

Due to chronic underfunding at all levels, early childhood services and resources are targeted to small numbers of families that meet unique criteria (i.e. parents aged 18-24, or a child’s diagnosed developmental disability). The eligibility process can be demoralizing and exhausting; having to prove dysfunction in order to receive support. This increases stigma and creates barriers. A new approach, targeted universalism, offers a promising alternative. Targeted universalism sets universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals. Universal goals are established for everyone. The strategies developed to achieve those goals are targeted, based upon how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and space to obtain the universal goal. Targeted universalism is explicit about reducing inequities in its pursuit of universal goals (Haas Institute 2019). For TFKC, that universal goal is, every young child in Worcester thrives.

Systems Change*

What parts of these identified systems (relationships, power dynamics, structures, policies, resource flows etc...) are holding this issue in place?

What are the risks and consequences to your organization, collaborative group and community if these systems do not change? (What's at risk)

The lack of a clear organizing structure and leadership aligned to a universal goal – every Worcester child thrives - holds our issue in place. Lack of alignment across health, education and employment sectors makes life for families of young children harder. Families are left to navigate a confusing landscape to access what their children need. Added burdens of systemic racism, economic inequality and housing discrimination have left a legacy of toxic stress impacting generations. Families carrying this burden of toxic stress are required to find what they need in a fragmented system with complex eligibility requirements.

At the core is a chronic lack of investment in the programs and services that help infants and young children and families thrive. Instead, funding has been plagued by a shell game with diminishing resources

year after year. Tightening up eligibility has been one strategy to make those early childhood dollars go farther. The unintended consequence is stigma for those who need those targeted services and unequal access to screening and interventions, resulting in deepening health disparities.

What is the risk? It rests on who we want to be. A divided community where those with resources cobble together what they need and move farther away from those who lack resources? Or a community committed to investing in universal early childhood programs and services that result in a diverse generation of physically and mentally healthy, skilled and trained young people ready to take Worcester into the 21st century?

TFKC proposes a system ‘shift’ – from a failing patchwork quilt of targeted interventions, to a targeted universal approach. This shift will do three important things: catch developmental issues early where they can be treated best, reduce unequal access to critical resources that mitigate toxic stress and reduce long term impact for BIPOC families, and eliminate stigma related to receiving developmental screening and family support.

Evidence & Research*

What is shaping your knowledge and understanding of these systems?

What and whose stories, experiences and research is your approach grounded in?

TFKC engages experts from across the early childhood continuum to build our collective knowledge base and systems understanding. TFKC members include leaders in maternal/child health, infant/child behavioral health, early education and care, developmental interventions, family and community engagement programs and most importantly, families. Members share their local experience on what is helping and hindering families with young children. Their concerns are elevated to policy influencers at the city's Governance Council on Children, Youth and Families, and with policy advocates at regional and state levels.

We are informed by research from national centers, including the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University, Zero to Three and Early Learning Nation. We stay abreast of policy by partnering with Strategies for Children and Common Start. Jack Shonkoff from the Center for the Developing Child says, “The best science-informed thinking available, combined with on-the-ground expertise and the lived experiences of all families raising children under a wide range of difficult circumstances, is desperately needed to produce the breakthroughs required to address this global crisis.” This describes the work TFKC does.

TFKC approach is grounded in the work of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley, Targeted Universalism Policy and Practice, 2019. “Targeted universalism is a platform to operationalize programs that move all groups toward the universal policy goal as well as a way of communicating and publicly marketing such programs in an inclusive, bridging manner. It is an approach that supports the needs of particular groups, even the politically powerful or those in the majority, while reminding everyone that we are all part of the same social and civic fabric...Targeted universalism is a platform that jettisons an overly formalistic, one-size-fits-all policy formula in favor of an approach that is more outcome-oriented.”

COLLABORATION

Who are the confirmed partners in this project, and what is their level of engagement?*

Indicate engagement level for each

TFKC is the early childhood collaborative in Greater Worcester with over 60 community stakeholders from across the continuum of early childhood services. Eve Gilmore, Executive Director of Edward Street serves as chair and our representative on the city's Governance Council on Children, Youth and Families. Our partners in this project include: Coalition for a Greater Healthy Worcester, Worcester Healthy Baby Collaborative, early intervention providers, early education and care providers, family engagement programs and families. The Family Resource Center of YOU, Inc. became an essential partner as a communication hub and sharing their front line experience with young families early in the pandemic. TFKC has been an active participant in the Community Greenhouse hosted by the Boston Foundation and works closely with Strategies for Children and Mass Budget and Policy on policy and funding issues. All of these partners are fully engaged and actively collaborating on solutions.

Who are partners you would still like to get to the table?

What is your plan for engaging these potential partners?

TFKC continues to engage in partnership development on a number of fronts. We work with cultural broker organizations and individuals currently and seek to deepen and solidify these relationships. We need to build a case for the value of Every Worcester Child Thrives to community business leaders; including discussions of why employer support for early education and care is critical to their bottom line. We are excited about the foundation of a Central MA region Common Start organizing group that will focus on the needs of working families, from livable wages and safe affordable housing to affordable high quality early education and care. We will partner with them going forward. And, essential to any initiative focused on equity, we will ceaselessly work to include the voices, experience and expertise of those most impacted by toxic stress and systemic injustice in the solutions we support.

PROCESS

What ideas do you have about the process you will use to undertake this work?*

Together for Kids Coalition has an over 20 year history of championing early childhood in Worcester. In 2019, we developed a strategic plan, attached to this proposal, that outlines our theory of change, goals, objectives and actions. TFKC meets monthly as a full coalition, with an average attendance of thirty diverse stakeholders. We work in action groups under four pillars: health, including early childhood behavioral health, early education and care, family engagement and community and business investment. COVID 19 has impacted this work, but we are returning to full functioning. A small strategic planning group meets weekly to move coalition work forward. TFKC integrates our work with the Governance Council to coordinate strategies across developmental stages and throughout the community.

Our approach is grounded in a Targeted Universalism Framework. Its five steps are the backbone of our work. Each is further described in our 2019 Early Childhood Strategic Plan, (attached), a short summary along with key actions or partners is provided here:

1. Establish a universal goal based upon a broadly shared recognition of a societal problem and collective aspirations. (Every Worcester Child Thrives)
2. Assess general population performance relative to the universal goal. (Early Childhood Data Dashboard, Governance Council on Child Youth and Families)
3. Identify groups and places that are performing differently with respect to the goal. Groups should be disaggregated. (CHA, CHIP, Worcester Healthy Baby Collaborative, Education Equity Roundtable, MA Business Roundtable)
4. Assess and understand the structures that support or impede each group or community from achieving the universal goal. (Ongoing data gathering, analysis and lived experience in TFKC and working groups).

5. Develop and implement targeted strategies for each group to reach the universal goal. (TFKC brings together all partners working on early childhood solutions under one framework).

What would you like to do?*

At the heart of this proposal is a system ‘shift’ - from identifying families with problems and sending them to a mixed bag of interventions - to universal screenings that focus not on eligibility, but on access; ensuring every family receives the unique support they need. To this end, we will work closely with the Worcester Healthy Baby Collaborative and lead agency, Pernet Family Health Center on developing universal home visiting for every newborn in Worcester. We will continue to work a policy agenda that builds in universal processes throughout the first five years of life. One area of great potential is advocating for expansion of what is currently known as Early Intervention into a universal developmental screening process and extending it until children enter formal schooling. Developing an action agenda that explores innovative funding solutions such as providing billing to pediatricians for following a universal screening process are already under discussion at TFKC.

TFKC will use its broad community base and diverse membership to raise awareness in two areas. A campaign aimed at employers on the critical importance of quality affordable early education and care to their bottom line today, and their workforce, tomorrow. The second is a community wide awareness campaign aimed at a universal audience on the importance of the early years and the immense return on investment if we collectively commit to ensuring every young child in Worcester thrives.

Finally, the establishment of early childhood benchmarks, indicators and measures adopted at the community level through the Governance Council and published publicly will help keep us on track and hold us accountable to each other.

How will you monitor progress as you go? How will you know if your plan is starting to work?*

TFKC has established track record as a champion for young children and families. We work tirelessly to ensure that all our youngest residents—prenatal to eight—live in families and neighborhoods that help them thrive. We engage various sectors— health, early education and care and family support providers and families themselves —and activate them for collective impact. We represent early childhood at the Governance Council on Child, Youth and Families, a cross-sector partnership, co-chaired by Worcester’s City Manager and Mayor. We are in the process of establishing critical early childhood benchmarks and measures to identify who is served and who is not to ensure every child has what they need to thrive, as an essential step in the targeted universalism approach. Alongside these data markers, we integrate the voices of our members- maternal and child health experts, pediatricians and early education and care providers, infant and early childhood mental health specialists, family support programs including literacy, early intervention and trauma informed home visiting, and most importantly, parents. This combination allows us to monitor our progress and adjust our plan as needed.

What are the possible risks, and for whom?*

No large systemic change comes without risk and resistance from some not fully sold on why change is needed. The challenging ‘rob Peter to pay Paul’ nature of funding for early childhood services has left behind territorial issues that must be addressed as we move forward together. Any one organization or group would be challenged to fully collaborate with a partner that ‘took their funding’. This is one of the primary reasons for the approach we are taking - to focus on the universal goal and how we, working collectively, not competitively, ensure every Worcester child thrives.

We also know that the path of good intentions can lead to unintended consequences. A shift to universal screening, without sufficient investment, may actually end up with less families being served. We can’t simply

take the funding currently used for targeted interventions and convert them to universal without growing the overall investment.

A long term risk within the early childhood community is called the “cliff effect”. When we successfully move families off subsidized services, they often fall into a situation of reduced or no support. Just as they are getting on solid ground, we remove all the help that got them there. Early childhood support needs to sustain families from birth through entering the formal education system, specific to their needs and for as long as needed.

A common threat often emerges when communities or societies make big investments in systemic change. The process for accessing those resources is built for the largest, most powerful organizations, leaving smaller, more grassroots organizations behind. TFKC’s approach is clear; small grassroots organizations, especially those representing traditionally underserved populations are essential to our success. We know a diverse continuum of services, some large and institutional, and some very close to the lives of those we serve are needed to achieve our goal that every Worcester child thrives.

BENCHMARKS

What work have you already done since hearing about this grant opportunity?*

TFKC enters this work with both a long and a more immediate history. Since our inception, TFKC has focused on long term sustainable change grounded in policy and community investment. TFKC was the coalition that established early childhood mental health as an essential service and developed a funding mechanism to support it across the state. In this challenging year, TFKC was active and we believe instrumental in supporting early childhood services in the state and locally. Specifically, we were able to see early education and care adequately funded in the state budget. While we were able to hold the line and not lose any funding, a real success in this year of COVID 19, we are still a long way from having truly sufficient funding across the continuum of early childhood services.

One important new partner that has emerged since learning about this grant opportunity is Common Start. Common Start is an experienced policy advocacy organization focused on economic equity for working people. They are building a new agenda focused on the needs of working families and have begun developing regional organizations to forward this work. We are in on the ground floor with the Central MA group and have committed to working with them as they develop over the coming three to five years.

Since the inception of the 2019 Community Health Assessment (CHA) through the development of the 2021 Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), TFKC has been an active community partner. From ensuring the voices of our members were included in the CHA to identifying effective strategies for the CHIP, many TFKC members from across the continuum of early childhood have contributed their experience and expertise. This past week TFKC was represented in all of the CHIP priority setting meetings to be sure the issue facing families with young children were included in strategies to address racial and system inequities.

TFKC has worked closely with the Governance Council over the past year, clarifying and solidifying our role in holding up the early childhood years as critical to the wellbeing of our community. TFKC has developed a clear process for sharing data, family and provider voice and best practices with the Governance Council. Our process is being considered a model for others along the developmental scope of the Council.

What will be the first steps you will take to launch the project?*

Our first steps in launching Every Worcester Child Thrives is to reinvigorate our full membership and commit to the plan outlined in this proposal. We will share readings and resources about Targeted

Universalism, so every member is comfortable with the overarching framework of our project. We will sit with our partners, large and small to ensure we are all committed to our universal goal. We will align across other funded initiatives, including Pernet Family Health's universal home visiting program and Woo Labs community based supports for families, should they also be funded by Worcester Together.

We will set to work immediately to expand our table and engage new members aligned with this plan, most critically the business community. We will reach out to the Worcester Chamber of Commerce to engage them from the beginning in our employer focused awareness plan. We will partner with the MA Business Roundtable and align our efforts in regard to family friendly policy and early education and care. We will gather all the available data sources, new and archival that will help us assess the general population in regard to our universal goal; every Worcester Child Thrives.

Simultaneously we will hire the additional talent we will need to implement our plan. We will need skills in communication, marketing and promotion and research and data analysis specifically. Once TFKC is fully staffed, we will build out our day to day infrastructure to support ongoing implementation. A key aspect of this planning for infrastructure will be supporting our three key groups-the full TFKC Coalition, our small strategic planning group and our working groups in the areas of health, early education and care, family engagement and community and business as we move from virtual to in person work over the coming year as COVID allows.

What do you hope to have accomplished within the first 6 months?*

One area of great promise is the transformation of early screening services for infants and young children - from targeted screening to universal screening. Early intervention (EI) programs have traditionally tight eligibility requirements that target only a small population of families. This limitation, combined with lack of awareness, have left these programs underutilized. EI programs were a key lifeline for young families during COVID-19 when eligibility requirements were temporarily loosened. This temporary fix reveals an important area for systems change. Instead of identifying and screening 'high risk' children and families, we propose universal screening for all families. This shift is simple but so important. Universal screening is stigma free and ensures every child has access to services. Targeted screening, even with the best intentions, serves to reinforce disparities and unequal responses that marginalize some families.

In six months, working closely with Pernet Family Health and others we will have a workplan to support the initiation of universal home visiting and early childhood screening. In this plan we will articulate strategies to engage a committee of pediatricians to help us consider protocol and billing issues, as well as early intervention leaders who will help us understand and navigate the policy work needed to move forward. This initial workplan will be focused on understanding all the aspects of a shift from targeted to universal screening for young families. As we move forward, and clear strategies emerge to push policy, TFKC will support work across our membership to advocate for this system change.

In six months, we will also have an initial communications plan for both our community awareness activities. While TFKC will lead the effort, we will engage community leaders as advisors throughout the development of key messages and promotional strategies. Concurrent with the communication work will be the ongoing development of data (both quantitative and qualitative) to support effective messaging.

What do you hope to have accomplished after a year?*

At the end of the first year, implementation would be under way in these areas:

- Universal screening pilots from birth to five -identify the tools, training and providers
- Community business and employer focused communications regarding the value of early childhood are being shared with pilot audiences.
- Community campaign on the value of supporting the early years has a diverse and engaged group of sponsors and champions to move into full implementation.

- The development of a system and data dashboard that will support steps two and three in our targeted universalism framework and identify emerging unintended consequences related to funding and policy.
- how families are doing, who is thriving, who is being left behind
- where our system, programs and strategies are working, and where they fall short
- funding and investment in early childhood solutions
- policy and structural change that reverses disparities

And then what?*

We have picked work big enough to matter and small enough to accomplish in our initial stages. Over time we will work on the larger, thornier issues; pay/affordability in early education and care, reducing barriers to preventative health care for BIPOC, infusing trauma informed responses and restorative practices to reduce the impact of long term exposure to toxic stress.

Ultimately, we would like early childhood to be understood as an essential component of healthy individuals, families and communities in the same way the K-12 education system is, a system that is so impacted by these early years. With this deep understanding, financing would follow until we are fully funding early childhood programs and services so every child thrives.

FINANCIALS

How do you plan to utilize the grant funds?*

We request \$250,000 for two years to increase human resources in the areas of communications, research and policy development and data sharing. With a yearly budget of \$125,000, we will engage a skilled full time project coordinator with local experience and deep system understanding. We will engage short term communication expertise as needed by engaging limited consultant assistance. A small amount of funding will be utilized to support the data development work. These three areas will be solidified as we identify the core skills of our full time staff person and what additional support may be needed to implement the full project. TFKC is happy to provide a full finalized budget to Worcester Together if approved for funding.

Are there any state, federal or other resources that could be brought to bear on this project?

If so, indicate potential sources

TFKC continually advocates state and federal funding to support the early years. We will continue to leverage every resource for young children that comes into the city of Worcester under the universal goal of Every Worcester Child Thrives. Much of these funds go directly to programs, providers and families, and we believe that is as it should be. We will not compete with these programs for funding. TFKC has received support from the Greater Worcester Community Foundation to provide coalition coordination and facilitation. Last year we received \$23,000 and this year we received \$25,000. This supports a senior public health consultant for an average of 4 hours a week and a small amount of program support.

Private foundations do offer funding that could be brought to bear on this project. Just this week, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released a request for research proposals that explore policies and programming to help improve families' access to the social safety net system for \$200,000. These funds can be used to study the ways that access to early education and care, income supports, and nutrition supports interact and

potentially reinforce one another to promote families' well-being. We are already collaborating with Clark University on submission of a proposal.

Optional Attachment

If you feel there are particular select materials that would enhance your application, you may upload them here. *You do not have to take advantage of the optional attachment, and any uploaded documents should not be a substitute for your written narrative responses.*

TKFC Early Childhood Strategic Plan and Member List.pdf

IN CLOSING

Thank you for submitting your full application to the Reimagining Phase of the Worcester Together Fund. If we have any questions about your application, a program officer will be in touch with you. *You will know you have successfully submitted your application when you receive an auto reply that it was received right after hitting submit.*

File Attachment Summary

Applicant File Uploads

- TKFC Early Childhood Strategic Plan and Member List.pdf

Early Childhood Strategic Plan for Worcester



Building a community where every child thrives!

Early Childhood Strategic Planning Work Group



**Together For Kids
Coalition**

June 2019

The Together for Kids (TFK) Coalition is a collaboration of early childhood champions with a mission to promote the social-emotional well being and general health of young children and families throughout Central MA.

Our members include individuals and representatives of early childhood service-providing agencies, parents/guardians, health care providers, human service organizations, community leaders, representatives of religious and business institutions, school and university personnel, local and state government representatives and other interested members.

TFKCoalition is grateful for the financial support of **Worcester Division of Public Health, City of Worcester, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation, Edward Street Child Services** and the time, energy and thoughtfulness of a large group of community members in the creation of this plan.

It comes down to a simple idea-*when the youngest among us do well, we all do better.*



The value of a healthy start cannot be overestimated. Decades of research on human development indicate that solid investment in the earliest ages and stages of a child’s life is the most proactive, efficient and effective way to support a lifetime of well being. As any builder

Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course... Emotional well-being and social competence provide a strong foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar of brain architecture. The emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, the workplace, and in the larger community.

Key Concepts in Brain Architecture

The Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University

knows, the foundation determines the strength and durability of the structure. The same is true for early childhood development. Early experiences lay down the foundation for the brain architecture that will later determine a child’s learning, behavior and health.

How do we ensure that every child in our community has a strong

foundation for a lifetime of growth and development? The good news is we know the essential building blocks for a strong foundation, and many of those building blocks exist in our community. At the same time, we have serious gaps in resources and capacity when measured against our real needs.

Ensuring each child is supported with the right resources at the right time requires a comprehensive and responsive system of care. Within this comprehensive system, special attention must be paid to those children who have experienced trauma and toxic stress.

All infants and toddlers need access to high-quality, affordable early care and education, health and mental health, and family support services. Programs and services that address these areas are critical; however, they are only as strong as the infrastructure that supports them... To support the healthy development of all children, states and communities must provide comprehensive, coordinated, well-funded systems of high-quality, prenatal-to-age-8 services that foster success in school and life.

Early Childhood Systems - Zero to Three

The science is clear; early childhood trauma is at the core of many long term, seemingly intractable problems—economic and health disparities affecting people of color, exploding child abuse and neglect complaints and ever expanding health care costs, to name a few. Long term research on Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs and a growing understanding of the social determinants of health tell us that poverty and systemic inequities across many of our major institutions lead to poor outcomes for families and subsequently for communities.



Toxic stress impacts us all; not just the infants, children and families exposed to trauma, although they most certainly bear the brunt of the pain. Toxic stress costs us all; in health care, criminal justice, education and workforce costs almost too big to fathom. Large cracks in our common welfare are evidenced when employers, large and small, can't find qualified staff to hire. The problem even has national

security implications: military leaders have expressed serious concern about their ability to recruit and keep qualified service men and women. These challenges impact many layers of our common life, from community well being to national defense.

Early childhood environments are essential. We need to invest our efforts before the damage of toxic stress takes place. We need major investment in the early years as a primary strategy, not an after thought. Only then, and over time, will we start to save on costly interventions after the damage is done. It is only a question of when we pay and how much we pay; it is never a question of whether we pay. The longer we wait, the more preventable suffering for individuals, families and society goes unheeded, the more costly it becomes.

The building blocks of early childhood development:

- Mastery over self (physically, cognitively and emotionally)
- Developing trusting relationships
- Understanding and navigating the environment

Exposure to toxic stress impacts the laying of these blocks, undermining their stability.

It is far more challenging to develop self efficacy and confidence or build trust in an unstable, unpredictable environment.

At all levels, nationally, in the Commonwealth and in our community, we are facing a burgeoning child care crisis. Early education and care centers are increasingly growing dim and dark as providers leave the field. At the same time, more and more families need access to high quality affordable care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The early education and care workforce is shrinking due to converging pressures: the physical and emotional demands of the work itself, and a critical tension between the required levels of education and credentialing

and extremely low compensation. A stubborn lack of sufficient high quality, affordable care is now amplified by a shortage of qualified professionals to fill early education and care positions as they are created or become vacant. As a result, a system that has been inadequate for years is now losing critical capacity.

The early education and care crisis greatly impairs our ability to provide environments that ensure our children have a strong foundation for a healthy and productive life. Why? Because early education and care environments are the places that, in collaboration with the child's



family or caregivers, provide the essential elements for the foundation, brain architecture and relationships so central to healthy development.

We understand that this is a massive shift and that it will take sustained commitment and political will. At the same time; the early years must be the focus of our efforts if our goal is lasting sustainable change. If we do not invest in children and families from the very beginning; all our future investments are undermined.

It is with this sense of urgency and purpose that the strategic planning working group set about the creation of the following plan. We identified four principles guide our work:

1. Children's success is everyone's job.

Ensuring all young children thrive creates ripple effects throughout a community's economic well being. It has benefits today in parent and caregiver job success and productivity, and over time in supporting our future workforce development needs. Business leaders are beginning to understand as the CEO and Board Chair of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce noted in a recent editorial in the Worcester Telegram and Gazette¹. They see the links between readiness for kindergarten, academic achievement and career readiness. Ensuring every child enters school ready to learn strengthens the foundation of our future workforce. This workforce is key to the health and vibrancy of our collective future.



¹ <https://www.telegram.com/opinion/20180708/as-i-see-it-three-elements-to-boost-workforce-development-and-economy>

2. There is no time to wait.

According to the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University: *“In the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections form every second...the connections that form early provide either a strong or weak foundation for the connections that form later.”* There are concrete evidence based strategies we can employ right now and into the future to support the development of a strong foundation for all of our children.



3. Early childhood is critical to health equity.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s 2018 report of the same title describes the root causes for disparities; *“Poverty limits childrens’ and families’ options for healthy living conditions. Poverty can limit where children live, and can lead to exposure to unhealthy conditions in the home,*

such as lead or mold—and in the community, such as air pollution or lack of healthy food options.... Sustained poverty and racism can create chronic stress in children and parents. So-called toxic stress can derail healthy physical, cognitive, and social emotional development.” Interventions must address individual and family as well as systemic and structural barriers and challenges. If we reduce systemic barriers that create disparities from the start, we impact health over a lifetime.

4. The Return on Investment (ROI) is significant.

There is a substantial and growing body of research that shows that resources invested now will return tremendous economic benefits over a lifetime. As Nobel Laureate James J. Heckman puts it in the **Heckman Equation**: *High quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment—a rate substantially higher than the 7-10% return previously established for preschool programs serving 3-to-4-year-olds.”* These returns are realized through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors and employment.



By the Numbers

Here in Worcester, the challenge is significant and increasing. A close look at the available data reveals that many Worcester families carry an unequal burden of toxic stress:

- Our family poverty rate is 22%; almost 2X the state as a whole. Among children, 31%.²
- For families of color the family poverty rate is even higher; for African American families, 22.7%, for families of two or more races, 33.5%; for Latino families, 37.2%.³
- Over half of Worcester's renters pay more than 30% of their income for housing.⁴
- 80% of Worcester kindergarteners are classified as "high need."⁵
- 56% of Worcester kindergarteners begin school with no preschool experience. (vs. 30% statewide)
- Rate of NAS (opioid withdrawal in newborns) in Worcester, doubled since 2012.

Addressing Inequity-why we focus on disparities

Local data reveals that while Worcester is on an upswing, we are not bringing everyone along in our growth and prosperity. Gaps in academic, economic and health outcomes exist that impact African American and Latino families at much higher rates. These disparities must be addressed or they will continue to impact our progress as a community. Local data provides a current picture of who is in highest need in our community, and where our efforts must be focused for greatest impact.

High quality early education and care (EEC) has been demonstrated to make a difference for children exposed to toxic stress and their families. However, Worcester's total licensed EEC capacity for children under age five is 4,654. Worcester has a population of 7,185 children under five whose caretaker must work outside the home. This leaves over 2500 children under five in families that are on their own in arranging care for their infants and young children.

To compound the issue, trends in state support for EEC are moving in the wrong direction. In FY2018, state investment declined by \$381,000 from the prior year. For those who must pay out of pocket the prospects are daunting. Infant care in Worcester County costs \$16,500 annually (36% of median household income). For 4 year olds the situation is not much better, at \$12,300 (27% of median). Even among more affluent families, the cost is crippling. So, what do families do? In 2016, Worcester Community Connections Coalition of YOU Inc. released their findings from a parent survey seeking to identify their childcare needs. Of the 438 participants,

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey 5 year Estimates. Worcester. City.

³ Ibid

⁴ Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance 2017 Point in Time

⁵ MDESE School Districts Profile-2018

197 were parenting children aged 0-5; all respondents identified as low income with 61% earning under \$30K a year. A few quotes from the study bring the Worcester parent experience to life:



- “Right now my mom watches her. If she’s in the hospital, I have to find friends or miss work.”
- “I have to stay home with my children, and not work, it’s not financially worth it.”
- “I wish there was assistance for the people like me who are in the middle. Where I make too much money for some things but still struggle and live paycheck to paycheck.”

In spite of significant challenges, these families persevere to create a workable childcare plan for their children. This shows real resilience in the face of daunting systemic barriers and is important to recognize. However, we must not allow this resilience to allow us to be complacent. For many of these families, a variety of adults (grandparents, other relatives, friends), serve as primary caregivers for their children. Many are disconnected from the early education and care system and as a result may not know the community resources available to them; everything from toddler play groups to early intervention services. Lack of awareness can result in lack of access to the early education and care services that build protection against the negative impact of toxic stress.

Our Vision: Every parent, family and caregiver has what they need to ensure their child’s healthy development from prenatal through age eight.

Our Theory of CHANGE

IF every family has

- Access to work at liveable wage jobs that enable them to support a family
- Access to safe affordable homes, quality affordable food, effective transportation
- Access to affordable high quality early education and care and preschool
- Access to primary preventative care, healthy development knowledge, support as a parent



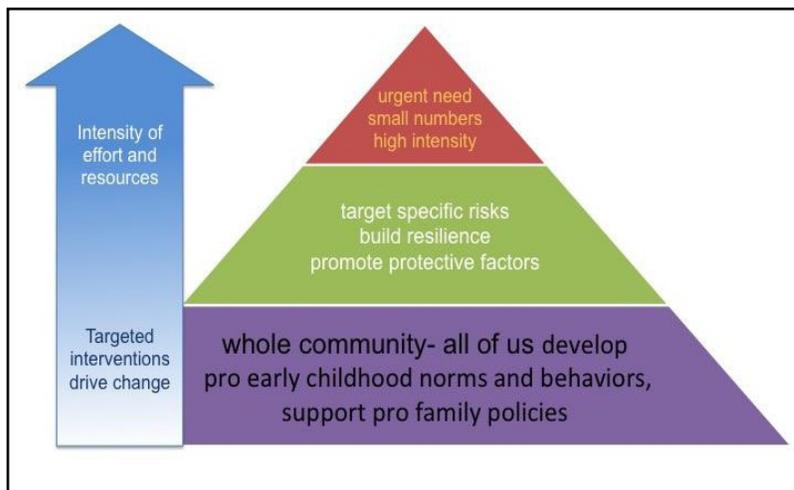
THEN Parents and caregivers of children prenatal to age eight are completely able and ready to provide the environment needed to raise healthy young people.

Worcester has many important building blocks in place that provide a strong foundation for this plan. Our first focus will be to fully assess our current assets against existing needs and disparities. We will work to align and network these assets to improve access, promote authentic family engagement and build champions for the work ahead.

Our plan will focus on these five areas in order to develop a sustainable comprehensive response to families with children prenatal through age eight:

- Accessible, affordable, non stigmatizing parenting education and family support and health (including behavioral health) services that make family life easier
- Access to high quality affordable early education and care for all Worcester children and families
- Family resilience and community connection for families experiencing toxic stress and trauma
- Advocacy opportunities (in partnership with others) for livable wage jobs, safe affordable housing, access to nutritious food and efficient transportation
- Coordination of services and supports, including the development and tracking of indicators and benchmarks to measure progress and inform future planning.

Our comprehensive plan spans a continuum from basic to complex. We recognize that all parents and caregivers need access to healthy child development information and support. A substantial issue for families across the economic spectrum is access to affordable high quality early education and care. Many families in Worcester face a variety of factors that put them at risk for greater exposure



to toxic stress and trauma. They struggle with trying to balance the cost of early education and care with low paying jobs and other essentials (housing, health care, food, transportation). Some Worcester families experience multigenerational poverty and the resulting toxic stress and trauma. This untreated trauma contributes to disparities in health, education and economic stability. In order to make real sustained impact we need investment that aligns and deepens across universal, risk-specific and high intensity interventions that are appropriately resourced and form a comprehensive, coordinated system.

All families with children (prenatal through age eight) need a community that:

- Recognizes the importance of the earliest years as the foundation of a healthy life and community and treasures young children as their most essential future investment

- Invests in organizations, programs and places that support young children and their families reach their full potential
- Implements a high quality, affordable early education and care mixed delivery system (prenatal to age eight) that meets the needs of our diverse families
- Provides a continuum of care and resources that support healthy bodies and healthy minds for all community members

Families facing specific risks need intentional focused support:

- A safety net that provides basic needs support without stigma and shame
- A real path forward to greater self sufficiency (education/training, access to affordable high quality early education and care, livable wage jobs)
- Free, high quality, culturally responsive and low threshold home and community based support for early childhood development (pop up playgroups, libraries, park activities, parent support networks)
- A community committed to understanding the factors that put some families at greater risk and a will to mitigate those factors

Families currently experiencing toxic stress and trauma have unique and complex needs that require access to a coordinated response by networked community supports:

- A proactive response by community navigators who assist families with what they need today, tomorrow and over time.
- Effective trauma informed resources and restorative practices that match the needs of those in our community most impacted by trauma
- A highly responsive and communicative network of providers to address each family's unique health, education and care needs
- A strong recovery community that supports healthy, post trauma, community engagement and leadership

Having identified the comprehensive set of solutions required to ensure that all Worcester children have what they need to thrive, the planning group then established five strategic goals, each with initial two year objectives. We have also articulated aspirational five year outcomes to provide a clear compass point on the horizon.



Our Proposed Plan

Goal One: Maximize the effectiveness of existing systems and supports through alignment and coordination, deep and respectful engagement of families and network building among providers, families and other concerned parties.

In two years we will:

- Understand and track the flow of resources for young children and families in and out of Worcester.
- Expand authentic opportunities for families to engage actively and meaningfully in their children's healthy development and education.
- Engage local stakeholders in discussion of best fit interventions; zero in on strategies to address gaps and expand options.
- Support evidence based trauma informed responses throughout the local system of care.
- Create a comprehensive community model that outlines strategies, results and resources to align programs and services across a continuum of solutions.

Goal Two: Engage the business community and government as partners in supporting early childhood wellbeing.

In two years we will:

- Support active and vocal champions and leaders from across the community; including the chamber of commerce, government, faith and education, as they express the value of ensuring every child in our community has a strong foundation.
- Articulate and promote the financial and social returns on investment in early childhood to all who have the opportunity to contribute.



Goal Three: Change community norms so that everyone understands the value of investment in early childhood.

In two years we will:

- Have an active popular movement in support of children's well-being that includes social media presence; traditional public relations & communications; what-you-can-do and how-you-can-help campaigns; tips for reaching out to parents and families.
- Participate in continued community based activities and events that deepen community member's understanding of the science of child development, ACEs, resilience and promising practices in the field.

Goal Four: Organize locally and partner with local, state and national champions to address the crisis in high quality affordable early education and care and infant and early childhood mental health services.

In two years we will:

- Raise awareness of the growing crisis in early education and care.
- Promote helpful policies and resist policy changes that negatively impact early childhood resources and services.
- Connect with and support early education and care and infant and early childhood mental health advocacy efforts at state and federal levels.

Goal Five: Develop a Worcester based robust data monitoring and evaluation system to ensure we stay data informed and accountable.

In two years we will:

- Develop, track and document indicators of child well-being, availability of resources, obstacles to progress, and persistent/emerging disparities.

As a result of this work and continued commitment to early childhood development, in five years we will achieve the following outcomes:

1. Worcester has a robust data system that tracks outcomes for families with young children (prenatal to age eight), resources in and out of the community and organization and program impact.
2. Through advocacy, Worcester will have substantially more federal, state and local government funding and other policy supports for the mixed delivery system and its workforce.
3. Substantial increase in access to quality of education and comprehensive services across the Prenatal to 3rd Grade continuum for young children and their families.
4. Measurable increase in the supply of quality behavioral health services for young children and their families.
5. Measurable reduction in health disparities affecting young children.

The Together for Kids Coalition strategic planning workgroup would like to thank everyone who has had input into the development of this plan.⁶ We are fortified by the passion and commitment of so many in our community who understand the importance of early childhood well being and are working in myriad ways to support young children and their families. We hope to broaden that circle so everyone understands their role in supporting early childhood development.

We have a lot of work to do, and **there is no time to wait!**

⁶ See the next page for a summary of the planning process and list of planning group members

Summary of TFK Coalition Early Childhood Strategic Planning Process

This document is the result of a year long process initiated by the Together For Kids Coalition (TFK) and the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) System of Care (SOC) initiative. The members of the TFK Coalition Strategic Planning Work Group are:

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Lynn Hennigan, Together for Kids Program, Community Healthlink
Dodi Swope, Facilitator
Lynne Flanagan Tsombakos, Coordinator

Recognizing our history is an important component of our forward movement. We would like to acknowledge that many in our community have long been concerned with early childhood matters. Worcester has an experienced and talented early education and care provider mixed delivery system, and higher education institutions that provide professional development for early childhood development, education and care, and committed individuals from across a broad spectrum of the community who understand the importance of early childhood development.

Over the past decade, multiple efforts have been made to capture Worcester’s sizeable assets and identify gaps and racial, socio-economic and ethnic disparities impacting families with young children in our community. Each of these efforts has been an important and helpful step forward in the development of a comprehensive plan to ensure Worcester’s families with young children succeed. In the past two years we have seen a groundswell of community interest in children’s well being and a desire to work together to improve our efforts here in our community. At the heart of all of these efforts were partners or collaborators from the Together for Kids Coalition.

Over the summer of 2018, Together for Kids Coalition, in close collaboration with the city’s Division of Public Health’s System of Care initiative initiated the development of a community wide strategic plan to ensure every young child has what they need to thrive. The planning group met faithfully almost every week for a year. We held two community sessions and one educational event to gather community input and review of our planning process and draft plan. We engaged a broad variety of community members; from parents and caregivers to community leadership; over 60 people provided input to our developing plan. We brought in

national expert Dr. Jayne Singer, Brazelton Touchpoints Center to talk with us about building protective factors for families of young children. We recognized key leaders in our community including Commissioner of Health and Human Services, Dr. Mattie Castiel, Kate Sharry from the Worcester Chamber of Commerce, Chris O'Keefe, Senior Program Officer at Greater Worcester Community Foundation and Tim Garvin of the United Way of Central MA. We engaged a group of Clark graduate students to assist the completion of our developing needs and assets assessment.

In the fall of 2018 and into early 2019 ,we brought all this extensive information together with research on evidence based strategies and community processes. The group then entered a quieter phase to craft this plan. With a solid draft in hand, we vetted our plan with a few key community members and heeded their recommendations. We are now disseminating our work broadly. We hope you will join our forward progress. We welcome your thoughts, ideas and energy. Please share this document with other interested parties.

You can reach us at: tfkcoalition@greaterworcester.org

Visit our Website: <http://www.greaterworcester.org/tfkcoalition>

Like and follow us on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/Worcester-Together-For-Kids-Coalition-1048498895333771/>

The Together for Kids Coalition is grateful for the financial support of Worcester Division of Public Health, City of Worcester, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation, Edward Street Child Services and the time, energy and thoughtfulness of a large group of community members in the creation of this plan.

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