

# Every Worcester Child Thrives!

---

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

## *Together for Kids Coalition (fs Edward Street Child Services)*

---

50 Portland Street  
Worcester, MA 01608

dswope@clarku.edu  
O: 508-792-0220

## *Dodi Swope*

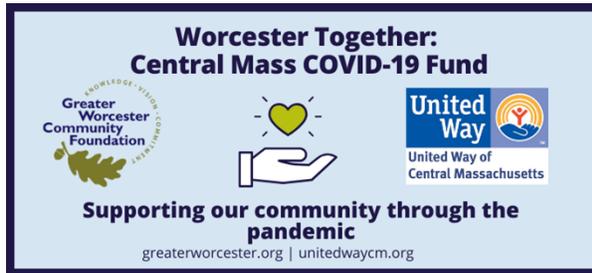
---

50 Portland Street  
Worcester, MA 01608

dswope@clarku.edu  
O: (508) 792-0220

## LOI Form

---



### Project Title\*

Every Worcester Child Thrives!

## Letter of Intent Questions

---

Address in narrative form your thoughts on the points below.

*A complete understanding of the system, and a full and complete strategy, are not required for this Letter of Intent - we expect that gaining that understanding will be part of the reimagining process.*

### ROOT CAUSE(S): Describe the system that exists.\*

- What is the pressing issue you are addressing? What is the issue at the heart of your proposal?
- What do you observing happening and how did we get here?
- Where is it staying stuck? Why have previous change efforts (if any) failed?
- What systems-level beliefs, behaviors, resources and policies contribute to the issue?
- What does research and evidence show you about this issue?

The Together for Kids Coalition seeks to address the early childhood “system”, which in fact isn’t a system at all, but a set of siloed, undervalued and sorely underfunded services. From early education and care to infant and child mental health services, maternal and child health supports to access to PreK, we have a disjointed, uneven patchwork of resources for families with young children. The cracks exposed by COVID-19 are not new, but the pandemic widened, deepened and exposed these gaps to all. Most importantly, the pandemic exacerbated long standing disparities for Black, Latinx and poor families in our community.

COVID-19 has struck the heart of our early childhood services, early education and care. Centers closed across the city as they were re-tooled to serve the needs of essential workers. Small home-based providers soon followed, with the sad outcome that many never re-opened. A number of those were led by Black and Latina women and served a diverse group of young children. Despite these headwinds, early care providers are not only continuing to provide for families with children under the age of five, but also providing essential out-of-school time learning supports to WPS students. A system that is barely surviving has stepped up to help all children and youth in the city.

As ‘stay at home’ became the order of the day, we saw parents who were essential workers scrambling for options for care. Parents and caregivers were released to “work from home”, juggling care and schooling of their young children with their professional roles. Early education and care services were on verge of collapse well before COVID-19. For decades they have not kept pace with the growth of women in the

workforce (now 70%) or the real needs of today's economy. Why? We don't invest nearly enough in the early years of child development because we still think families (mostly women) will somehow manage, in spite of everything else they need to do to survive. We are now at the breaking point.

The odds are stacked against families with young children. And yet, parents struggle every day to heroically and creatively to protect the healthy development of their children. TFK Coalition has witnessed the incredible grit and resilience of our families with young children- the full time social worker, a single mom with twin toddlers, trying to "work from home", the parent trying to keep their preschooler engaged in virtual learning as they answer pressing work emails or calls. While many families noted a heartrending benefit, "it was great to have so much time together", there is also great cost. As the pandemic grinds on, these costs escalate. One of the deepest costs is an epidemic of parental stress. Parental stress has an evidenced negative impact on early development. It will take years to see the full impact this crisis has on our youngest children.

Neighborhood health data shows that one's zip code impacts health and development over a lifetime. (<https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/interactives/whereyouliveaffectshowlongyoulive.html>) Using this tool to compare two addresses, one on Worcester's west side and one on Grafton Hill, reveal an eight-year difference in life expectancy. These disparities impact Worcester's Black and Brown families significantly more. COVID-19 has exacerbated chronic stress and exposed systemic racism. Because of the combination of fragile systems, systemic racism, economic inequality and COVID-19, we're on track to lose a generation of Worcester children, disproportionately Black and Brown.

One well documented local example is the virtual learning experience for Worcester's children at home during the pandemic. Worcester's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and English Language Learners carry an undue burden when it comes to transitioning to a virtual learning experience. The resulting disparities deepen already existing divisions in academic achievement between white and BIPOC students. The issues underlying these disparities are multifaceted and will not be resolved with one solution, such as universal internet access. They require radical system wide change from the very beginning of a child's development.

Where are we stuck? Early childhood services are underfunded and disconnected and therefore unresponsive to a huge fraction of our children and families. A long history of taking funding from one initiative (i.e. universal home visiting) to "provide new innovative programs" (i.e. center based care for pre and postnatal moms) perpetuates the shell game of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The real answer is, we need both. Moving from universal strategies to targeted services in an effort to save money has resulted in increasing stigma and deepening disparities, even when done with good intentions. Until we fund the early years to the full extent needed, we remain tinkering at the edges.

Previous change efforts haven't failed so much as fallen short. Historically fragmented, they haven't been able to capture attention and galvanize action. Over the course of TFKC's work, important gains have been made. We have developed a regular forum for advocates, providers and families who come together and express what they need and what would substantively make their lives better. We have garnered community leadership attention through our seat at the Governance Council for Child, Youth and Family Wellbeing. The pandemic offers us new energy and ideas - a possibility of moving forward dramatically, or the threat of slowing or even reversing the progress made pre-COVID.

Now is the time to double down on the insights and strategies that support TFKC's work. Our recovery and reimagining for a new more equitable, inclusive and diverse normal must address the question: Does this action, policy, or investment, support and sustain a community where every infant and young child thrives?

What if our investment shifted to life's early years, with a razor focus on eliminating disparities related to health, education, employment and housing for families with young children? Imagine the allostatic load alleviated in a single generation; the money saved; the lives improved. Imagine what we could do with our collective resources and capacity to build a future where ALL our children thrive. Our new Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen acknowledged, "Ensuring that all of our kids have 'strong foundations' will help build

a similarly strong foundation for the U.S. economy.” Building these strong foundations must start at the very beginning.

What if:

- Every family had access to prenatal and postnatal supports, every working parent had a safe, affordable, engaging early education and care resource for their children while they worked?
- Every family lived in an affordable, safe home with access to green space, in neighborhoods with places to shop and socialize, safe streets, easily accessed transportation to living wage jobs?
- Every family with unique needs, such as developmental delays, physical disabilities, mental illness, trauma, and substance use disorders, received non-stigmatizing right sized interventions for as long as they were needed?

TFKC has given serious thought to how to achieve this foundational system change. Our plan, outlined in the 2019 Early Childhood Strategic Plan for Worcester, is already in motion. With your support, we could gain critical momentum and catalyze this moment for sustainable system change.

## **READINESS FOR CHANGE: Describe why you think this system can/should be changed NOW.\***

- Why will this be meaningful?
- How do you foresee the community being able to influence the problem?
- What ideas do you have about addressing the issue?
- What is the potential for long-term change vs. a quick fix?
- What community support for this might already exist?

Early childhood wellbeing is intrinsically linked to lifetime health, economic stability and healthy thriving communities. Supporting all families from the very beginning is the cornerstone of an effective system. A serious question awaits us-Will we build back the old crumbling model, or will we build a system for the 21st century?

The insights and strategies that have guided TFKC have never been more important. Now is the time for us to act together to create new systems, where:

- Every sector in the community understands the importance of early childhood development and supports full investment in the services that support it
- Employers, professional development educators and early education and care providers work together to ensure families have access to a diverse mixed delivery early education and care system that meets their real and current needs
- All families are supported from prenatal through age eight through a comprehensive, integrated system that makes family life easier
- As a community we hold ourselves accountable by regularly measuring our progress with key indicators and measures

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—business, health, early education and care and more—and activate them for collective impact. We represent early childhood at the Governance Council on Child, Youth and Family Wellbeing, a cross-sector partnership, co-chaired by Worcester’s city manager and mayor. We advocate for early childhood solutions in the continuum of integrated solutions for this citywide alignment effort. We establish critical early childhood benchmarks and measures to address persistent disparities and ensure our youngest are thriving. We bring forth 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.

We need both quick fixes to address family stress right now, and we need long term change to build a more equitable, inclusive and diverse community by starting at birth. The COVID crisis has brought out a new willingness to reexamine our practices. We have built relationships with new partners; grassroots, BIPOC led organizations and programs previously unknown or unrecognized by those in power. We need to enable and accelerate this expansion of problem solvers and systems change agents. This is at the heart of TFKC's ongoing work

We are ever hopeful, we see our community coming together, we feel new energy, ideas and grassroots leadership are emerging all across the city. We are grateful for the role that Worcester Together has played and continues to play in system change efforts.

### **COLLABORATION: Who needs to be involved?\***

- Who are you currently working with?
- Who else would you like to be working with? (Who are the ideal players at the table if not there already?)
- How will people most affected by the issue be engaged in the process and what power will they have?

Together for Kids Coalition is the only early childhood collaborative in Greater Worcester. We engage over 60 community stakeholders and champions. In partnership with Worcester's Division of Public Health, we created an early childhood strategic plan to move the entire community forward. The plan is the road map for all the work the coalition does.

Eve Gilmore, Executive Director of Edward Street Child Services chairs the coalition and represents early childhood on the Governance Council. Laurie Ross, Professor at Clark University, is longtime member of both TFKC and the Governance Council and is the research partner for the council. Clark University provides a part time health researcher from the Collaborative for Youth and Community Justice. TFKC has an experienced consultant who provides coordination support to the collaborative. A small subcommittee of representatives from early education and care, family engagement and support, public health, early childhood mental health and philanthropy keep things moving in weekly meetings. Monthly TFKC meetings place provider and parent voices and experience at the center of our work. We raise these voices up to local civic leaders, statewide advocacy groups and elected officials to ensure that those most impacted by challenges and barriers have power to create a better system. We are always seeking to deepen these relationships, especially with those who can influence funding streams and policy. We are connected to the statewide advocacy group Strategies for Children and the newly emerging Common Start agenda. Common Start recently engaged a regional organizer for Central MA, and we are thrilled that it is our very own Liz Sheehan Castro.

We seek to engage business leaders to work together on the impact of early education and care on their workforce. We would love to partner with UMMHC on an employee initiative that ensures their lowest paid workers have access to high quality affordable early education and care for their young children. Last fall we began exploring a partnership with Hanover Insurance on a family support program "The Basics" for families of young children in Worcester. Connecting the work of Together for Kids to business and community development is essential to making real and meaningful change.

Finally, we see every community member as having a stake in this profound work. A fundamental shift in community norms around investment and commitment to our youngest residents is our long term goal.

### **COMMUNITY BENEFIT: How will life be different if your systems change effort works?\***

- What is the ideal outcome - your guiding star you set your sights on?

Our guiding star shines bright- Every Worcester child thrives!

The implementation of our strategic plan is moving forward on multiple fronts; this funding would support implementation of our work in three key areas, moving system change forward significantly:

- Supporting families in a diverse and flexible system that makes life easier.
- Elevating family and provider voice and experience to tables where decisions are made to ensure policy and funding support solutions that work.
  - Creating and utilizing a data dashboard that allows us to track:
    - o how families are doing, who is thriving, who is being left behind
    - o where our system, programs and strategies are working, and where they fall short
    - o funding and investment in early childhood solutions
    - o policy and structural change that reverses disparities

At a recent TFKC meeting, participants were asked what they would change if they had a “magic wand”. The responses we received were profound and provided clear direction for the system change we propose here. Many will be included in a full proposal should we be invited to submit. 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, what if we provided universal screening to 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.

We fully support and champion the important contributions of our member organizations as change agents. We give our full throated support for Pernet Family Health Center’s Reimagining proposal for universal home visiting. This is one of the most powerful early childhood supports we can provide right from birth. Universal home visiting is a proven model with impact on health equity. Nordic countries have achieved global recognition for exceeding universal quality of life standards for their people with this model. We applaud the remarkable work of the YWCA, a key partner in our work on multiple levels. As our member programs develop equity focused interventions, we will continue to support, elevate and align them. TFKC is the strategic partner, connector and promoter of all efforts, large and small, that line up with our guiding star; Every Worcester child thrives!

## **MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN: What would it cost to make happen the systems change you are proposing?\***

- This is not about a detailed budget, but a sense of the kinds of costs you could potentially incur.

We understand that system change on the level we are proposing requires a major investment. It will require a team of talented people who are relentlessly focused. It will demand diverse skill sets from communication and marketing to research and data analysis. We have the foundation but are currently a very small team pushing a large stone up a hill. With \$250K over two years, we believe we can deliver measurable progress toward meaningful and sustainable system change.

## File Attachment Summary

---

### *Applicant File Uploads*

*No files were uploaded*