



Healthy Family Child Care Environments in Montgomery County

Supporting Best Practices for Nutrition, Physical Activity and Breastfeeding

May 2018



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Overview

The Healthy Montgomery Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI) is a collaborative partnership comprised of Holy Cross Health, the Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI), Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Eat Well Be Active Partnership, and numerous other government and community partners. Over the next three to five years, TCI aims to reduce obesity and promote tobacco free living in the focus communities of Gaithersburg, Germantown, Takoma Park, and Long Branch. The initiative is funded by Trinity Health and Holy Cross Health.

A critical part of this work involves taking steps to ensure that young children have access to proper nutrition and developmentally appropriate physical activity in their child care settings. In order to identify strategies to improve nutrition and physical activity-related practices in Montgomery County child care homes, IPHI partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to conduct an assessment which includes a landscape analysis, key informant interviews, and focus groups among family child care providers, County leaders, policymakers and non-profit organizations supporting the local child care system. The assessment builds upon the aim of the 2015 strategic plan developed by the Child Care Workgroup of the Eat Well Be Active Partnership. The goal of the 2015 strategic plan was to leverage and provide resources that assist childcare centers to adhere to the Maryland Child Care Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Act, which requires licensed child care facilities in Maryland to limit sugary beverages, make certain provisions to support breastfeeding mothers, and limit screen time for children in their care. The strategic plan was developed as part of the County's Community Health Improvement Planning (CHIP) process through which obesity and chronic disease prevention emerged among priority areas of focus. Results of the assessment will be used to identify the appropriate policy, system and environmental changes needed to improve healthy eating and physical activity environments for young children in child care homes.

The Need

The child care component of TCI emphasizes the need to create and sustain change in the focus communities by supporting healthy habits and lifestyles for young children. The initiative recognizes that for young children, access to proper nutrition and exercise contributes to an essential foundation for the development of lifelong healthy habits. A growing body of research suggests that young children's nutrition, levels of physical activity, and overall health and wellbeing are integral to their development and learning and are predictive of their long-term health outcomes (Sorhaindo & Feinstein, 2006; Ogden et. al., 2015).

Impact Areas for Family Child Care (FCC) Homes:

- **Nutrition:** Family child care (FCC) providers must serve meals that comply with the 2017 Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) Nutrition Standards for Child Care, based on current United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommendations.
- **Physical Activity:** FCC providers must eliminate screen time from their daily programs and offer multiple daily opportunities for structured and unstructured physical play.
- **Breastfeeding Support:** FCC providers must offer adequate, private space in their child care homes for mothers to breastfeed, attend training on how to handle breastmilk properly, and provide resources and information to families on the benefits of breastfeeding.

Key findings from the Landscape Analysis:

- Montgomery County is a minority-majority district, with over half of the population representing a minority racial, ethnic, or linguistic group.
- Significant portions of the focus communities are designated as “low-income and low-access” by USDA standards (i.e., 33% or more of the population lives more than one half of a mile from the nearest full-service supermarket)
- There are approximately 272 licensed child care homes operating in the TCI focus communities, with the combined capacity to serve 2,066 children.
- Countywide, children entering Kindergarten from FCC homes tend to have poorer school readiness outcomes than those entering from center-based early care and education programs. This points to potential system-wide limitations on FCC providers access to supports for program quality and workforce development.

Research also indicates that children from low-income and minority groups are disproportionately affected by health risks associated with poor nutrition and exercise. This can be attributed to limited access to fresh, healthy foods and safe play spaces, the comparatively low prevalence of breastfeeding among low-income and minority groups, and a lack of comprehensive health education and outreach to low-income communities (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017). Within certain Montgomery County communities, a significant portion of the population falls below the median household income, are members of minority groups, and/or have limited English proficiency. Correlations between these community characteristics and health-related risk factors suggest that many young children in Montgomery County could be at increased risk of lifelong adverse health conditions associated with overweight and obesity. To address this and other related health disparities, a comprehensive approach to improving community health and wellness outcomes would involve interventions for both home and school/care settings and should prioritize Montgomery County’s youngest and most vulnerable children. Currently, for about 70% of Montgomery County children under the age of six, all parents in the household are active members of the workforce (US Census Bureau, 2015). Given the significant amount of time that many young children spend in settings outside of the home, it is essential to equip those who care for children with the information and resources to implement best practices for children’s health and wellness.

The Approach

Making progress in this area will require effective system-wide and community-specific supports for child care providers. To better understand the communities and early childhood systems in which their work takes place, IPHI worked closely with SRC, a local consulting organization with expertise in early childhood research and evaluation, professional development, and early childhood policy. SRC’s work involved analyzing the demographic and child care landscape, aligning local opportunities with current research and promising practices, and deriving practical recommendations for advancing support to providers in the three impact areas. SRC’s work also included discussion groups with child care providers and interviews with key stakeholders. This report is the culmination of all phases of SRC’s work, and contains the following sections: Executive Summary; Landscape Analysis; Literature Review and Environmental Scan; and Recommendations.

Landscape Analysis

The Landscape Analysis presents a portrait of the focus communities, including relevant demographic and economic characteristics, and the presence of FCC homes as an important part of the child care delivery system. Data were collected

Key Findings from the Literature Review and Environmental Scan:

- Current professional development offerings related to nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding amount to basic, introductory-level training that providers must repeat annually. Providers would benefit from more advanced training, especially in the area of communicating with families to co-create best practices for individual children around these socially and culturally complex topics.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal resource provided by the USDA and locally operated by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) which provides reimbursements to child care providers for nutritious meals served to children.
- Only about 28% of family child care (FCC) providers are participating in CACFP to receive per-child reimbursements for nutritious meals served to children. Reasons for non-participation include the administrative burden, the high cost of nutritious foods (which providers report is not adequately covered at current reimbursement levels), and the amount of time it takes to purchase and prepare food, especially for providers in areas with low access to full-service supermarkets.
- Lack of direct staffing in key agencies to support and regulate healthy environments in FCC homes contributes to low coordination around this topic, and is a barrier to system-wide progress in this area.
- The local child care associations act as a trusted source of information and support for FCC providers. Currently, about half of Montgomery County FCC providers are represented by associations.
- Many FCC providers lack access to adequate indoor and/or outdoor space to provide the recommended levels of physical activity, and could benefit from opportunities to share space, costs, and equipment.
- Informal and unlicensed providers care for a high number of young children in the focus communities, yet they operate beyond the reach of most supportive and regulatory bodies.

from open sources and examined to gain a deeper understanding of the local population demographics, local child care characteristics, and child outcomes, especially as they relate to FCC. The focal point for analysis was defined by the following zip codes—Gaithersburg: 20877, 20878, 20879, 20882, and 20886; Germantown: 20874 and 20876; and Takoma Park/Long Branch: 20912.

Literature Review and Environmental Scan

The Literature Review and Environmental Scan highlights current research and best practices in the three impact areas of nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding support in FCC homes. To do so, the comprehensive scan involved an analysis of insights gained from 10 local key informants who work in a variety of decision-making and implementation capacities related to health and wellness, and on behalf of FCC providers. This expert panel of interviewees included representatives from the Montgomery County Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, Montgomery County DHHS, University of Maryland Extension Program, local child care associations, The Montgomery County Council, and the Horizon Foundation. In addition, the scan involved qualitative analysis of three FCC provider focus groups, where providers operating in the TCI focus communities shared their perspectives, challenges, and strategies related to the three impact areas.

Priority Areas and Recommendations

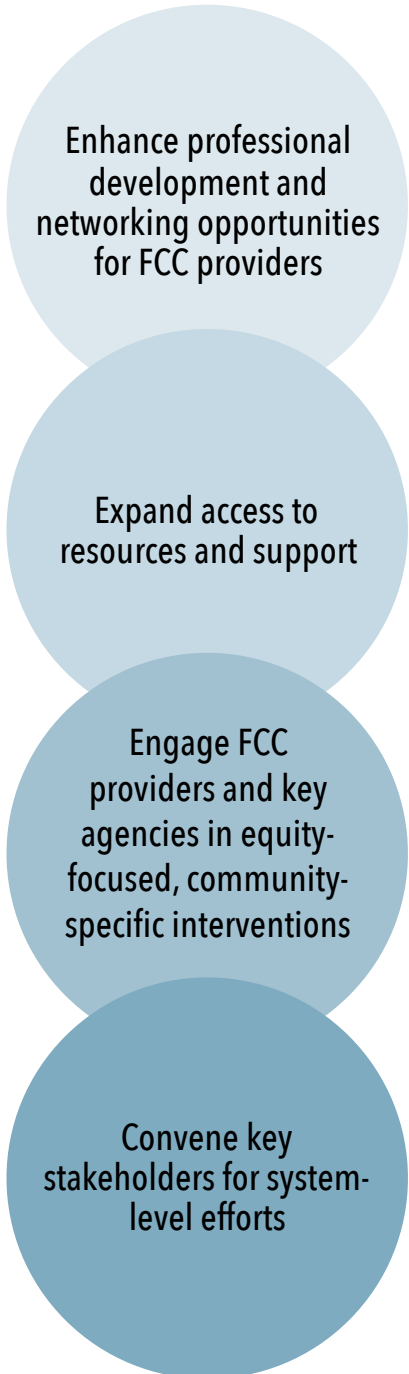
The findings in the Landscape Analysis and the Literature Review and Environmental Scan informed a set of recommendations, which highlight opportunities for immediate action, as well as considerations for ongoing strategic planning and engagement. The recommendations are organized by four priority areas for supporting home-based child care providers across the three impact areas. The priority areas indicate broad areas for system-wide improvement, and the recommendations describe strategies for stakeholders to consider that could support progress in these areas. These recommendations are identified as R.1-4 for each priority area. The priority areas include:

Enhancing professional development and networking opportunities for FCC providers: Providers expressed an interest in learning beyond basic introductory-level training in the three impact areas. Providers would benefit from comprehensive support for implementing best practices and partnering with families in these efforts. Providers also expressed the need for professional networks that offer ongoing peer support and opportunities to have a voice in policy shifts and decisions that affect their work.

Expanding access to resources and support: To address participation gaps in CACFP and other important resources, public and private agencies that work to support FCC providers can take the lead in facilitating a variety of opportunities for providers to create healthier environments in their child care homes.

Engaging FCC providers and key agencies in equity-focused, community-specific interventions: FCC providers are well-positioned to inform community-level efforts and to connect families to system-wide nutritional supports. As members and leaders in their communities, many providers could be identified as peer mentors and advocates for health and wellness practices among FCC homes and in the community at large.

Convening key stakeholders for system-level efforts: There are multiple stakeholders at the state and local levels that may have the capacity and reach to bring nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding support to the forefront of system-wide discourse on early childhood care and education. With additional coordination, such agencies could work to align priorities and resources and generate momentum for ongoing improvement in the impact areas.



Enhance professional development and networking opportunities for FCC providers

Expand access to resources and support

Engage FCC providers and key agencies in equity-focused, community-specific interventions

Convene key stakeholders for system-level efforts

Priority Area A. Enhance professional development and networking opportunities for FCC providers by:
R.1. Creating expanded professional development opportunities that allow providers to pursue deep learning and implementation support around nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding.
R.2. Collaborating with Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and approved trainers to expand the cultural competency components of professional development offerings to prepare providers to communicate with diverse families about creating healthy environments for young children.
R.3. Building expanded nutrition, physical activity, and breastfeeding learning opportunities into the emerging professional learning networks strategy out of Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).
R.4. Building capacity within child care associations to create opportunities for providers to inform upcoming initiatives and policy shifts.

Priority Area B. Expand access to resources and support by:
R.1. Implementing shared service options for providers that offer delivery of healthy, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)-compliant meals or fresh ingredients at an affordable rate, and support cost- and space- sharing arrangements to enable FCC providers to access physical activity spaces, equipment, and partnerships.
R.2. Promoting partnerships that build capacity at Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to increase outreach efforts to FCC providers who currently do not participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
R.3. Promoting public awareness among families and child care providers regarding the characteristics and importance of proper nutrition and developmentally appropriate physical activity for young children, and engaging trusted community-based non-government organizations and local businesses to deliver information and resources to support young children, regardless of where and by whom they are cared for regularly.

Priority Area C. Engage FCC providers and key agencies equity-focused, community-specific interventions by:
R.1. Targeting coaching/mentorship and shared service opportunities to FCC homes located in areas most at risk for low access to fresh, healthy foods and safe play spaces.
R.2. Preparing FCC providers to help families navigate systems of nutritional support in culturally sensitive ways, connecting families to supplemental nutrition programs such as SNAP and WIC as they are eligible.
R.3. Expanding current/creating additional coaching opportunities to include a non-regulatory peer-mentorship or community health worker approach to promoting best practices among FCC providers.

Priority Area D. Convene key stakeholders for system-level efforts, such as:
R.1. Exploring revenue streams to support additional personnel capacity within public agencies to lead and resource recommended strategies (i.e., expanded professional development and coaching opportunities, shared service options, etc.).
R.2. Building awareness within the Montgomery County Regional Service Centers and the Montgomery County Early Childhood Coordinating Council to raise issues of low access to healthy foods and safe play spaces in the focus communities.
R.3. Partnering with local pediatricians, obstetricians doulas and other healthcare entities to advance awareness among families about seeking and selecting healthy child care environments.