Early Lessons Learned from Building Local Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems in Texas

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Introduction

The negative consequences of poverty for child and family well-being are well documented.[1,2,3] Poverty is associated with higher rates of perinatal complications, less home-based cognitive stimulation, poorer school-readiness skills, harsh and inconsistent parenting, as well as increased exposure to both acute and chronic stressors. Because children's development during the first five years establishes the foundational capabilities upon which subsequent development builds, disparities between children growing up in poverty and their non-poor peers are evident very early in childhood and persist into adulthood.[4,5]

Decades of research show that early childhood policies and programs can support early development and improve the life chances of young children growing up in poverty.[6] These services, however, are "highly fragmented, with complex and confusing points of entry that are particularly problematic for underserved segments of the population and those with special needs."[7] This suggests that integrating early childhood services into a comprehensive system can better meet the needs of children and families, particularly for those with complex problems.

Over the last decade, the need to integrate and coordinate early childhood services has received both federal and state attention. Since 2003, 49 states and the District of Columbia have participated in the Early

Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) program to build and integrate early childhood service systems. Even more recently, in 2010, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) provided states with $1.5 billion in funding over five years to support the development and implementation of evidence-based home visiting programs in their states. The legislation specifically mandated that home visiting programs be implemented within a comprehensive early childhood system with the purposes of improving coordination of services for at-risk communities and identifying and providing comprehensive services to improve outcomes for families who reside in at-risk communities.[8]

The recent MIECHV legislation requiring states to implement home visiting programs within an ECCS provides an opportunity to determine which factors enhance and limit the development of an ECCS. The purpose of this paper is to examine the early successes and lessons learned during the first year of ECCS implementation using data from the Texas Home Visiting Program (THVP), which was developed with MIECHV funding. The factors that promote and interfere with ECCS development in Texas are relevant to ECCS development more generally for several reasons. First, the size and diversity of the Texas population has made previous efforts at creating a statewide ECCS difficult (the

Raising Texas initiative begun in 2003, funded through the ECCS program, resulted in very little systems integration).[9] With the recent MIECHV funding, instead of trying to develop another statewide ECCS, Texas opted to require each of the seven THVP sites across the state to develop a local ECCS for their community. This provides the unique opportunity to examine the development of coalitions that vary in membership, mission, and size, across communities that vary in resources and services.

Second, according to the US Census Bureau, half of the US child population growth in 2010 occurred in Texas, which means supporting the early development of children in Texas has implications not only for the future of Texas, but for the US as well. Thus, although the findings in this paper are drawn from the evaluation of THVP, the findings can be applied to any effort to build supportive communities for children.

Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems or Coalitions

Community coalitions are community-wide groups of individuals or organizations that share a common sense of purpose and work together to affect change in the community.[10,11] Participation in the coalitions is voluntary with the pay-off being action taken toward the desired social change. Such coalitions bring together likeminded local stakeholders from

multiple sectors (public, nonprofit, academic, and business) of the community that work to improve early childhood development, or to assist parents with young children. Coalition members are accountable for working together to create an uninterrupted continuum of care for families in the community and may include programs or services that specialize in childhood education, health, family support, child welfare, domestic violence services, faith-based groups, home visiting programs, and other relevant programs.

Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems in Texas

In Texas, the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) provided MIECHV funding to each of the seven THVP communities with the purpose of developing local community coalitions focused on improving the lives of young children, which are referred to as early childhood comprehensive systems (ECCS). In THVP, each ECCS is organized by the primary contractor in each community or a hired subcontractor who is also responsible for marketing the ECCS within the community and recruiting other members. Membership includes each of the home visiting programs that are taking part in THVP as well as other local service providers and organizations that share a common goal of improving the lives of children and families in their community. Importantly, although

each ECCS is being developed as a part of a statewide home visiting program (THVP), all of the ECCS members, including the local home visiting programs should hold equal influence in the coalition.

Each of the seven THVP communities developed an ECCS from the ground up and many did so without any prior experience developing or leading a coalition. Each ECCS was provided considerable flexibility in the specific goals they chose to establish for their community, however, each ECCS was required to work to establish a "no wrong door" approach for families in their communities. Ideally, community members should be able to receive information about other relevant programs in the community regardless of the specific coalition member with which the individual interacts. By encouraging interagency referrals, the coalitions are ultimately working toward initiating community action.

Over the course of THVP implementation, HHSC developed several ECCS related milestones. Some milestones were completed early in the implementation, including hiring and designating a coordinator to oversee the ECCS, whereas others were achieved later, as the coalition developed.

The specific milestones included:

- Promote awareness of programs and services
- Promote referrals to programs as children transition through services or as other services are necessary
- Encourage regular communication between programs, including home visiting program models, both informally and through the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU)
- Begin to identify gaps and overlaps in services and strategies to address those gaps
- Use community data to develop a strategic plan on improving children's readiness for school
- Develop a sustainability plan for the ECCS, including how to sustain its stakeholder group

To support ECCS development across the THVP sites, Texas received additional funding to provide each community with technical assistance from the Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems (TECCS)[12] initiative and to implement the Early Development Instrument (EDI). The technical assistance from TECCS included guidance on how to recruit stakeholders for the coalitions; how to build effective coalition structures; how to build and maintain effective communication between coalition members; how to engage the community and neighborhoods in coalition initiatives; and how to identify, collect, and present data from the EDI.

The EDI consists of a checklist of 103 items, which kindergarten teachers complete on each of their students and provides communities with local-level information about childhood developmental outcomes. The

EDI is intended to help communities assess how well they are doing in supporting young children and their families and to assist in monitoring changes.[13] Communities can use EDI results to determine deficits in early childhood development by neighborhood, to better target services to expecting parents and families with young children, and to identify gaps and overlaps in services.

Current Study

The data for the present study are part of a larger, on-going evaluation of THVP, which is summarized below, but the analyses in this study were limited to data collected during the initial development of an ECCS in each of the seven THVP communities. Although each ECCS had the same overall purpose of improving services for young children and their families within each community, each ECCS was developed within a different community context, affording the unique opportunity to examine the factors that support and impede ECCS development in seven different communities.

Method

Data Sources

The overall goal of the implementation evaluation is to examine the factors that advance or limit the successful implementation of home visiting programs and local early childhood comprehensive systems in THVP. To collect data for the evaluation, the evaluation team, an independent team of university-based researchers, engaged in the following activities to assess qualitatively the early implementation of home visiting programs and the development of the local ECCS:

Reviewed THVP documentation and materials. The evaluation team reviewed internal and external documentation associated with THVP, including the formula and competitive grant proposals; the Request for Proposals (RFP) sent by HHSC to the seven Texas communities who were identified in a statewide needs assessment; and state contracts. These materials allowed the evaluation team to understand the requirements and expectations from HHSC, the technical assistance team, and the agencies that were involved with implementing ECCS across the state.

Conducted interviews and community visits. The evaluation team conducted semi-structured, open-ended quarterly interviews over the phone or in person with contractors and home visiting program

coordinators participating in THVP. Between August 2012 and July 2013, the evaluation team conducted interviews with all state and community contractors,[a] most home visiting program coordinators within each community, HHSC staff and state contractors, including biweekly interviews with a staff member from HHSC. In the summer and fall of 2013, the evaluation team conducted additional rounds of interviews with contractors and subcontractors from each community. During interviews, the team asked the interviewees to reflect broadly on how the ECCS and EDI implementation were progressing. The interviewer followed-up with structured questions to understand better the goals and objectives (both short term and long term) of the coalitions, who were the members of the coalitions and how they were recruited, what activities were being conducted with the ECCS, how forming the ECCS affected the provision of early childhood services within the community, and whether the technical assistance process helped the communities form their ECCS. The interview process was semi-structured to allow for variation in responses. The evaluation team expected variation because the seven communities vary greatly from each other in community resources and

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[a] In this paper, state contractors refer to partners such as, state home visiting model leads, and any other agency or group who are involved with THVP but who are not focused on any specific community. Community contractors refer to agencies that are implementing THVP within a specific community. Community contractors include the lead agency overseeing THVP in a community, the ECCS coordinators, and agencies implementing or expanding home visiting programs within THVP.

experiences implementing community coalitions, and thus, were expected to differ in their implementation experiences.

Observed technical assistance meetings, trainings, and coalition activities. The evaluation team observed numerous THVP meetings and training activities. During the first year of implementation, the evaluation team observed calls that included state contractors, staff from HHSC, and the technical assistance team. The evaluation team also observed three technical assistance conferences and monthly conference calls, which involved staff from HHSC, the technical assistance team, and the ECCS coordinators from each of the seven communities. Finally, the team has observed multiple ECCS meetings in several of the communities, which provides an opportunity to see the coalitions in action.

Data Analysis

The evaluation team took extensive notes to document all discussions during each interview, focus group, and observation activity (in-person and phone call observations). Multiple note takers were present at each interview and, when feasible, at trainings. A single note taker typically was present at trainings, monthly conference calls, and observations.

After each event (ie, review of documentation, materials, and reports; notes from observations and interviews), the researchers coded

the notes. The process of coding included reviewing notes from events, and identifying relevant themes that ultimately would be used to create overarching findings. The qualitative data were sorted into five broad domains related to the development of the ECCS, which included motivations, infrastructure, communication, data collection and use, and recruitment and marketing strategies. In addition, the researchers identified how the domains contributed to either successes or challenges in the development of the ECCS. To determine the overarching findings, the researchers identified consistent and reoccurring themes across sources (ie, interviews, observations, materials). This method of triangulation strengthened the justification for a particular finding by ensuring that the theme was shared across sources, communities, and contexts.

Lessons Learned

After only the first full year of implementation, it would be premature to determine definitively if one approach or strategy ultimately leads to success or failure when developing an ECCS. Factors that present barriers during the first year of implementation may not interfere with ultimate success. Likewise, indications of early success may not predict long-term sustainability. Evaluating how communities have progressed in

the first year toward developing sustainable and coordinated coalitions, however, does provide insight into the factors that have contributed to early successes or challenges, which can guide future ECCS implementation or expansion efforts.

Status of ECCS progress in Texas communities

Despite facing a variety of challenges, each of the seven communities taking part in THVP is committed to building an ECCS to integrate services for young children and their families. All communities have made significant progress toward building an ECCS while also launching home visiting programs and making significant progress toward fulfilling other grant requirements. By the end of the first year of implementation, most communities had formed a new coalition as their ECCS and six of the seven[b] communities had received technical assistance on ECCS development and implemented the EDI in at least some schools in their communities. Each community has begun the important work of referring families between organizations that participate in the ECCS, although the referrals mostly are among THVP home visiting programs and have not

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[b] One community did not take part in the competitive grant; thus, the community did not implement the EDI.

yet incorporated services beyond home visiting. Communities also have begun to develop strategic and sustainability plans for their ECCS.

Lesson #1: Prior Experience is Helpful but not Critical

Overall, communities in which the contracting agency or the ECCS coordinator had prior experience developing or leading a coalition were able to get off the ground more quickly early on. By the end of the first year, however, the communities that were more unfamiliar with coalition building had caught up and each ECCS was in a similar stage of development—actively recruiting additional stakeholders, developing goals and action plans, and beginning to develop a sustainability plan.

Initially, the organizations and coordinators participating in THVP who had prior experience building coalitions and convening stakeholders in their communities tended to be more successful in drawing the support of their community ECCS. Experienced coalition builders were able to pull from an already existing network among agencies within their communities and had the advantage of being a trusted presence in their communities.

The organizations and coordinators who had less experience building coalitions were able to utilize the technical assistance provided by both the state (HHSC) and TECCS to make up the ground they lost in the beginning. HHSC provided updates regarding available resources through

weekly emails in addition to regularly checking in with communities to offer support. HHSC staff members and other state contractors providing technical assistance provided frequent one-on-one support and facilitated collaboration among the communities during monthly conference calls.

The THVP communities were engaged in the TECCS process while developing their ECCS, which provided intensive technical assistance to communities on how to effectively engage stakeholders and use EDI data. Communities have reported that the technical assistance provided in reviewing their ECCS plans was especially valuable. Some of the communities restructured their ECCS based on TECCS feedback. Restructuring included adding subcommittees with specific foci, changing the format of meetings to a more participatory structure, reworking their mission and vision statements to more clearly articulate the goals of the community, or increasing representation from additional sectors (eg, business, faith-based, and healthcare sectors) in their coalitions.

Lesson #2: The Opportunity to Collect and Share Data is Essential

Participation in THVP presented communities with two unique opportunities to collect and share data: the federally required benchmark data and the EDI data, which both provide important information about the needs of families in their communities (eg, child and maternal health,

school readiness, and family violence). In some THVP communities, specifically, the EDI was difficult to implement or the community was too small to gather reliable data. These communities have relied on collecting their own data or other existing data tools.

Access to local-level data, whether from the EDI or from another source, provided an impetus for collaboration among stakeholders within each community. Importantly, many local stakeholders joined the ECCS because of the opportunity to have access to new data about their community. Some communities envisioned their ECCS primarily as a platform to collaboratively use this newly available local-level data to effectively target areas of need and enact change. Although the opportunity to collect and share data was a helpful incentive for building their coalitions, many communities have noted a delay between data collection and being able to use their data, which some have reported is associated with frustration among stakeholders.

Lesson #3: Roles and Responsibilities of Each ECCS Member Needs to Be Clear at the Onset

The THVP communities and state contractors had varied interpretations of what a successful ECCS should look like and what emphasis should be placed on the home visiting programs relative to the non-home visiting

organizations. It was not clear from the beginning whether the ECCS should prioritize the goals of the home visiting programs that were participating in THVP or whether all ECCS members had equal buy-in. Some communities, for example, reported that their ECCS placed a larger emphasis on the home visiting programs than non-home visiting members, whereas other communities reported that all members of the ECCS held equal influence.

Home visiting staff whose programs were housed within the primary contracting agency for THVP in their community were more likely to report that their programs were a central focus of the ECCS. In contrast, home visiting staff members who were employed by subcontracting agencies were more likely to see themselves as a collaborative member participating in an ECCS. Although state contractors who provided technical assistance advised the communities that the home visiting programs should be considered an equal partner with other members of the ECCS in the community, for some communities the recommendation was not fully embraced or implemented. The variation in member buy-in may influence the activities and goals of the ECCS, including whether the communities are able to accomplish the goal of creating a continuum of care among community organizations.

Lesson #4: Degree of Subcontracting Influenced ECCS Development

Each of the THVP communities differed greatly in their approach to infrastructure and staffing, which presented unique challenges and benefits as communities built their ECCS.

In some communities, the primary THVP contractor chose to implement all of the THVP elements including the ECCS within their agency, whereas in other communities, various elements of THVP were subcontracted to specialized agencies or consultants. The availability of other social service agencies, the primary contractors' experiences with subcontracting, as well as their experiences with direct services largely drove the decision of whether or not to subcontract.

In general, primary contractors who oversaw the ECCS and subcontracted the home visiting programs to other agencies tended to experience fewer challenges than contractors who oversaw both a home visiting program and the ECCS. Subcontracting most of the home visiting programs helped contracting agencies focus on building the ECCS, rather than having to share their time and energy launching an ECCS and individual home visiting programs. Subcontracting also requires that the primary contractor facilitate clear communication and collaboration among the community partners. Subcontracting agencies may focus too exclusively on their respective home visiting program if the primary

contractors do not establish mechanisms that encourage collaboration and put the ECCS at the center of the community's efforts.

For those agencies that chose not to subcontract, an additional challenge with overseeing both the ECCS and the home visiting program is the potential conflict of interest the dual role can create for the ECCS coordinator. ECCS coordinators who also have a role in running home visiting programs can potentially favor the home visiting program over other stakeholders within the ECCS. Subcontracting various elements of THVP to other agencies helps eliminate the potential for favoritism.

Lesson #5: Communities Need Tools for Sustaining ECCS Membership from the Beginning

Over the course of the first year, several communities noted dwindling ECCS membership. Some communities attributed decreasing ECCS membership in part to the extensive time lag between the establishment of the coalitions and the availability of local-level data. For communities where membership recruitment into the ECCS was driven largely by the promise of access to new local-level data, membership decreased when the data were not delivered in a reasonable timeframe. The lack of data made it difficult for some ECCS to develop goals and establish plans of action to address needed changes in the communities. Thus, the ECCS

members who are not part of THVP experienced decreased incentive to commit to the ECCS.

Some communities also attributed difficulties sustaining ECCS membership to the changes in the coalitions associated with delayed technical assistance. The technical assistance site visits occurred months after the coalitions began to convene. HHSC purposefully allowed a time lapse between the onset of coalition meetings and technical assistance to allow communities more time to establish their coalitions. However, some communities changed their priorities and requirements after receiving technical assistance, which gave the appearance that the ECCS requirements were in flux and disorganized. The appearance of indecisiveness caused some of the subcontractors and community stakeholders to lose interest in participating in the coalitions.

Several communities reported additional concerns about overburdening ECCS members, especially when forming subcommittees or advisory boards to oversee the different goals within the ECCS. Communities, for example, were asked to form subcommittees within the ECCS coalitions to oversee the collection of local-level data and the continuous quality improvement process. Communities also were asked to form advisory boards to oversee each of the home visiting programs participating in THVP in their communities. The need for multiple

committees and boards was particularly taxing on ECCS members in communities in which the same individuals often serve on multiple coalitions, boards, and committees. HHSC and TECCS worked with communities to alleviate concerns about ECCS sustainability and member fatigue. This assistance included helping some communities to reduce the number of subcommittees, combining multiple advisory boards into one, and helping to refocus the ECCS. Reducing member fatigue and promoting sustainability are keys to a successful ECCS. Providing stakeholders with clear benefits of membership in the ECCS along with reasonable demands and expectations are expected to help promote ECCS sustainability.

Conclusion and Next Steps

After the initial year of implementation, each of the THVP communities has made significant progress toward developing their ECCS within the context of various difficulties. Although early successes and challenges may not be indicative of long-term success, the progress each community has made thus far in building a local, comprehensive coalition is encouraging. The lessons learned along the way provide useful direction for other states and communities who are considering implementing local coalitions. Importantly, the lessons learned begin to create a roadmap for

how to (and how *not* to) build and sustain comprehensive early childhood systems in any community.

Even though home visiting programs have been operating across Texas for over 20 years, the MIECHV Program grant was the first opportunity to build a strong state system of home visiting encompassed within a comprehensive early childhood system. Communities required flexibility to build an ECCS that fit their unique contexts, but also required strong support and technical assistance to sustain their coalitions. Prior experience building coalitions facilitated early success, as did being able to focus time and energy on recruiting and maintaining stakeholder membership in the coalition.

In the years to come, the ECCS in each THVP community is expected to evolve to reflect the unique goals of the communities. Moving forward, the evaluation team will assess how communities will continue to engage stakeholders and maintain their commitment to the coalition, what steps will be taken to reduce member fatigue and attrition, and how the coalitions attract additional stakeholders to take part in a comprehensive effort to promote child health and well-being. Sustainability of a local coordinated system that is both fully integrated and comprehensive will be critical to reaching the ultimate goal of providing a seamless delivery of health and human services for young children and their families.

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