



Early Childhood Self-Assessment for Family Shelters in North Carolina

Technical Assistance Project

FINAL REPORT

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Report prepared for Child Care
Services Association

by



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Introduction

In December 2020, Child Care Services Association (CCSA) contracted with Partners for Impact to develop and implement the *Early Childhood Self-Assessment for Shelters in North Carolina Technical Assistance Project*. This report describes the work of Partners for Impact in this three-year project to improve services for very young children experiencing homelessness in emergency shelters across North Carolina. More information and reports from the first and second years of the project can be found on Partner for Impact's [website](#). Additional reports and resources on early childhood homelessness can be found on the [CCSA website](#).

North Carolina Technical Assistance Project

The purpose of this project is:

1. To ensure that the parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers experiencing homelessness receive early childhood services to promote their children's wellness and readiness to succeed in school and are connected to needed resources for their young children.
2. To help shelter staff members create shelter environments that are safe and facilitate the physical, socio-emotional, and intellectual development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers as they experience homelessness.

CCSA contracted Partners for Impact to provide training and technical assistance to emergency shelter programs serving families with children ages 0-5. Participating agencies included family shelters and domestic violence facilities. Partners for Impact consultants provided assistance to shelter agencies in completing the validated and revised [Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters](#) (ECSAT), developing an Action Plan for implementing improvements, and connecting with early care and education (ECE) programs in their communities. The project budget provided small "mini-grants" for each shelter to implement changes based on their assessments and action plans.

Partners for Impact

Partners for Impact, LLC is a North Carolina-based consulting firm that reimagines and engages the systems and organizations that make people vulnerable to create more equitable opportunities and solve community problems. This company partners with community collaboratives, agencies, and leaders to gain maximum impact through system-level thinking, targeted planning, data utilization, innovative programming, intentional communications, skilled facilitation, and continuous learning. Their consulting team has strong and diverse program design, implementation, and evaluation skills, and uses an equity lens in all of the work they do.

Partners for Impact senior consultants have over 60 years of combined experience working directly with a wide variety of nonprofit human services agencies, including serving families and youth in health and in crisis (health/mental health/developmental well-being, homelessness, domestic violence, aging out of foster care, etc.). The team has extensive experience working with organizational and community change initiatives within and comprising various types of organizations (government, philanthropy, nonprofit, faith communities, and community coalitions). They use a wide variety of tools to gather data and implement processes for the purposes of organizational and community change.

Partners for Impact consultants have worked with CCSA to design and implement the Early Childhood Self-Assessment North Carolina Pilot Project. Partners for Impact has managed the project; recruited shelters; created data collection tools, agreements, project management tools, and communication materials; gathered data; provided technical assistance and support for shelter staff; met regularly with the CCSA team, the PDG grantees, and the [Yay Babies!](#) statewide task force. Since the start of this project, Partners for Impact consultants have presented along with the CCSA team at the 2021 [North Carolina Annual Smart Start conference](#), the [2021 PDG Birth to 5 Annual Convening](#), the 2022 Annual [North Carolina Head Start](#) conference, the [2022 North Carolina Bringing it Home conference](#) and 2023 North Carolina Bringing it Home conference for homeless service providers, and the October 19, 2023 PDG Birth to 5 NC Partner Meeting. As part of a [Schoolhouse Connections](#) webinar series, Partners for Impact also highlighted the work of this project in conjunction with the [People's Emergency Center](#) whose team initiated the use of the ESCAT tool with Philadelphia shelters in 2016 through the Bell Project.

Child Care Services Association

Child Care Services Association believes in a future where all children have equitable access to affordable, high quality early care and education to lay the foundation for successful life outcomes. This organization leads efforts to strengthen accessible and affordable quality early care and education by providing supports for families, communities and the workforce. Specifically, CCSA provides free child care referral services; financial assistance to low-income working families; technical assistance and training to child care businesses; and meal services

for children enrolled in participating child care programs. CCSA also provides local, statewide, and national early childhood systems research, and educational scholarships and salary supplements to child care professionals. CCSA is one of the three lead agencies of the NC Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Council. As such, CCSA provides management and oversight of five Regional Lead Agencies to ensure the delivery of high quality CCR&R services, and access to special statewide initiatives, including the Birth-to-Three Quality Initiative. CCSA also works with partners on early childhood homelessness and food insecurity at the local, state, and national level.

Technical Assistance Project Implementation

Brief Review of Phase 1

In the first stage of this project in 2021, Partners for Impact, in cooperation with CCSA, developed a timeline and three-year plan to implement the technical assistance project. This included developing the criteria for participating shelters, identifying shelters across the state through conversations with the [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Emergency Solutions Grant Office](#), and creating recruitment materials. In a non-competitive process, four shelters were recruited, completed the pre-assessment survey, and began working through the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters. This cohort included three family shelters and a domestic violence shelter. More detailed information about the recruitment process and the shelters participating in this cohort can be found in Partners for Impact's [Phase 1 report](#).

The ongoing COVID pandemic brought some significant challenges in the first phase of the project. In 2021, shelters were coping with COVID outbreaks in their facilities, changing relationships with volunteers and community partners, and staff shortages. Most had difficulty devoting staff time to this project and took many months to complete the steps to developing an Action Plan. All four shelters completed the project by the end of 2022 and those who submitted requests received mini-grants of \$500 to begin to implement improvements. At least one staff member from each shelter completed a post-assessment survey.

More information and learnings from the first cohort's work completing the ECSAT and developing Action Plans can be found in Partners for Impact's [Phase 2 report](#).

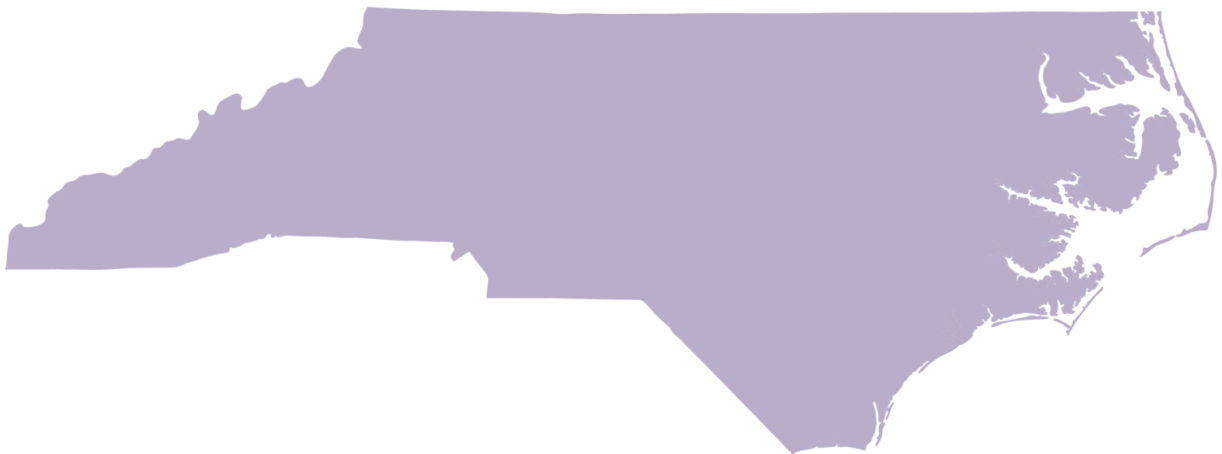
Brief Review of Phase 2

Using lessons learned from Phase 1, Partners for Impact recruited two additional shelters to participate in the project in 2022. By this time, the impact of COVID on shelters had shifted from a near-daily crisis to learning a new way of providing shelter in a still-changing landscape. Staffing shortages, increased demand for services, and an altered array of community partners presented ongoing challenges but agencies had more time and focus to devote to longer-term planning again. The second cohort comprised two agencies; one in the western part of the state had one domestic violence shelter while the other agency in the central region of NC operated two domestic violence shelters. Partners for Impact's [Phase 2 report](#) provides additional information about the improved recruitment process and the second cohort of shelters.

Phase 3

In early 2023, three more shelters joined the project. Recruiting shelters for this phase presented many fewer challenges than the previous years. With the worst of the pandemic over, agencies had more interest in planning for the longer term. Information about the project had spread across the state as Child Care Services Association and Partners for Impact shared findings on their websites and in statewide housing and early child education conferences.

The shelters in the third cohort included: one family shelter in a large, urban center; a domestic violence shelter in a rural county near a large city; and a small shelter for women and children in a very rural part of western North Carolina. With the lessons learned from Phases 1 and 2, Partners for Impact was able to move these shelters through the entire process very quickly in 2023.



Community of Practice

One intention of this project was to create a Community of Practice among the participating shelters to share information and mutual support. In the project's first year, Partners for Impact hosted Community of Practice meetings bimonthly and staff from all four participating shelters attended regularly. These virtual gatherings provided space for sharing successes and challenges, training on specific topics, and time to build relationships. Participants indicated their appreciation for this opportunity to connect with others working in the field of emergency shelter, especially in 2021-22 when the pandemic brought additional stress to already high-pressure environments.

The second and third cohorts of this project were unable to participate fully in the Community of Practice meetings in 2023. Resources, staffing, and the nature of emergency services prevented shelter representatives from attending meetings, despite Partners for Impact's best efforts at scheduling with input from all shelters. This missed opportunity for connection is unfortunate and indicative of the larger challenges that shelters are facing in meeting higher demands for services with fewer staff. Those staff members who attended Community of Practice meetings were able to support each other and recognize that they are not alone in their struggles. In the post-assessment survey, one staff member wrote, *"We learned to connect with other shelters who do the same work to learn their best practices and resources and gained knowledge."*

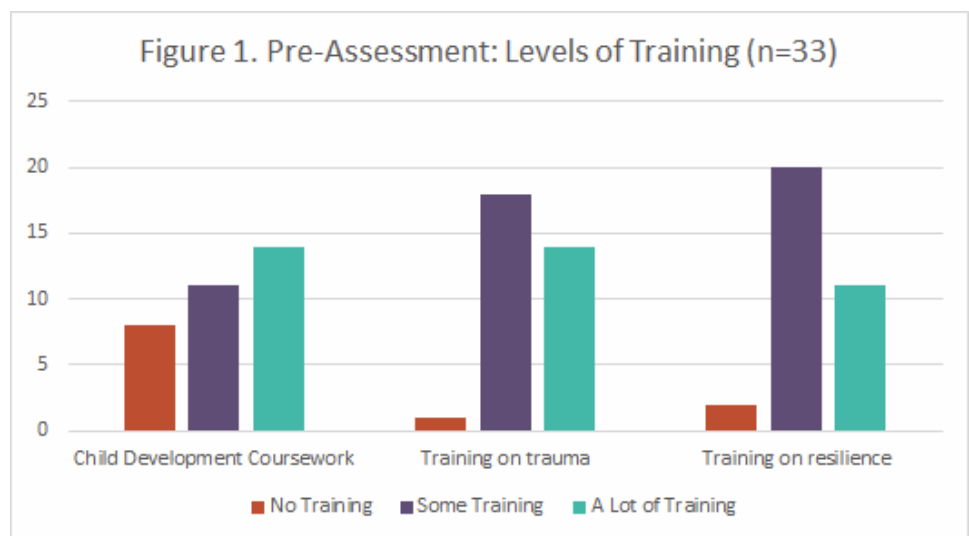


Pre- and Post-Assessment Surveys

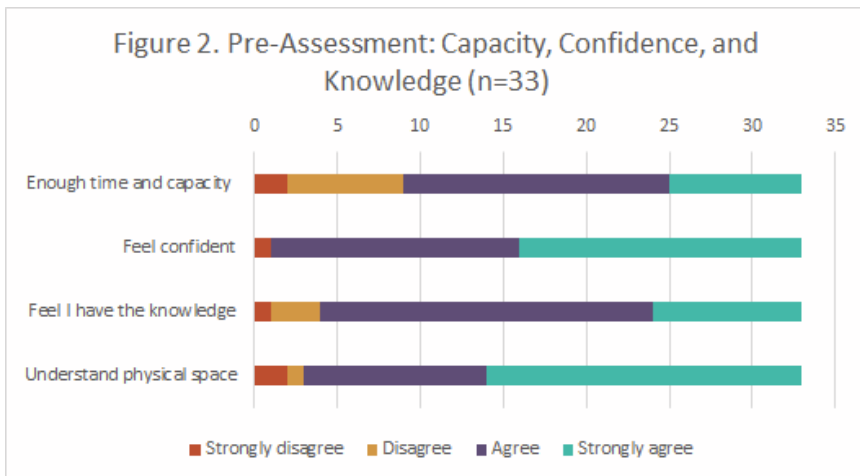
Responses to the Pre-Assessment Survey

In order to measure their level of training around child development and trauma, and other aspects of their work with children, Partners for Impact administered a pre-assessment survey to shelter staff. At least one staff member from each of the nine shelters in this project completed the instrument. The first cohort of four shelters had 26 responses; 15 staff members from the five shelters in the second and third cohorts completed the survey. Of the 41 total respondents, eight indicated that working with children is not part of their job and were removed from the analysis. The following analysis includes the remaining 33 responses.

As shown in Figure 1, a **majority of respondents have had some or a lot of training on trauma (97.0%) and resilience (93.9%);** a higher percentage of respondents (24.2%) indicated they had no training in child development than in trauma (3.0%) and resilience (6.1%).



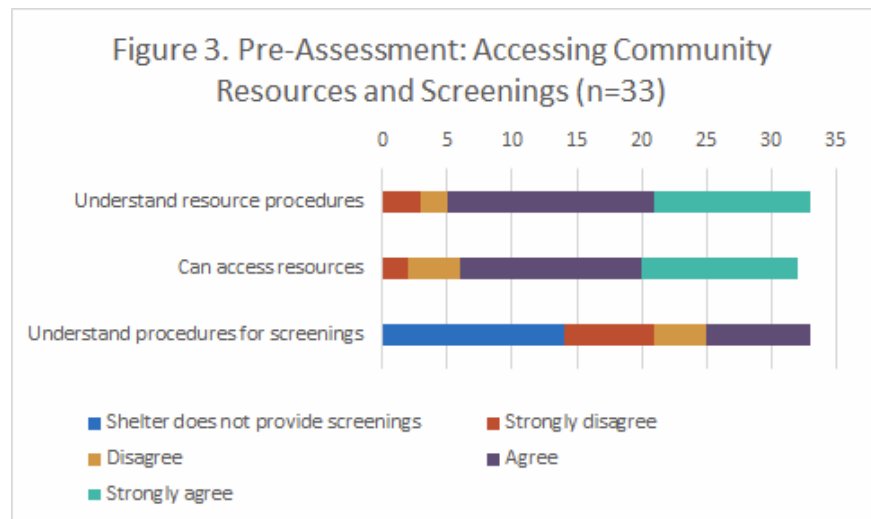
These findings correspond to the prevalence of professional development programs on trauma and resilience that are available to service providers, particularly those working with clients experiencing domestic violence and/or homelessness. These trainings are often general and not specific to working with children, though the basic concepts apply to all ages. Staff who have not and are not working with children regularly are unlikely to access education programs on child development.



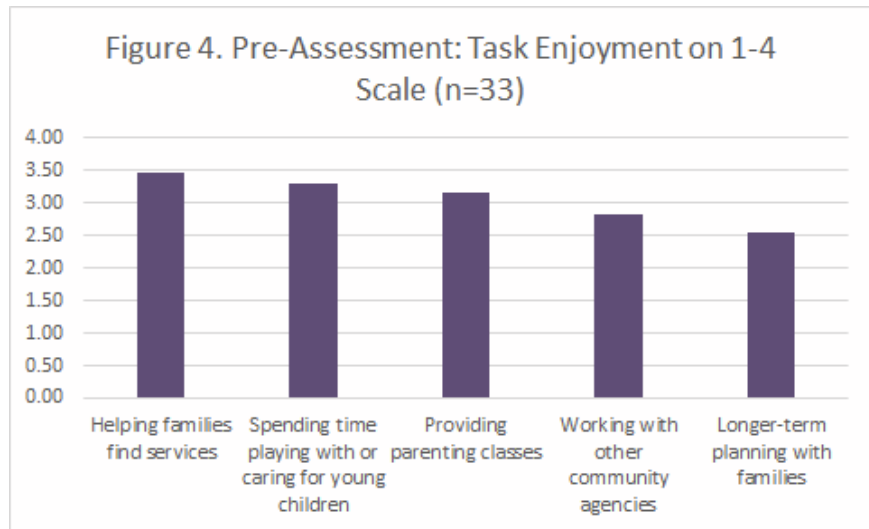
A majority of respondents (48.5%) agreed that they have enough time and capacity to adequately support the well-being and development of children ages 0-5 in their shelters (Figure 2). All but one respondent (97.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they are confident when engaging

with children, while 87.9% feel they have the knowledge needed to support the well-being and development of children ages 0-5. All but three (90.9%) agree or strongly agree that they understand how physical space can support children's development and well-being.

Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they know how to access community resources (84.8%) and understand their shelter's procedures about connecting families with outside resources for their children (78.8%). As shown in Figure 3, only 24.2% of respondents agreed that they understand their shelter's procedures for screening children for developmental delays, and no one strongly agreed; 33.3% disagree or strongly disagree that they understand, while 42.4% say their shelter does not provide developmental screenings. These answers were not consistent within shelters, i.e. answers from staff at the same shelter varied from "agree" to "we do not provide developmental screenings." This could indicate that staff are unclear about the meaning of developmental screenings" or are unaware of their shelter's procedures.



The pre-assessment survey asked staff to rank how much they enjoy certain tasks on a scale of 1-4 (Figure 4). “Helping families find services” received the highest score, followed by “Spending time playing with or caring for young children.” “Long-term planning with families” received the



lowest score. Given the difficulty finding affordable housing, accessible child care, and long-term employment in most communities, long-term planning presents significant challenges for shelter staff.

Respondents were asked several open-ended questions including, “What is the expectation of the shelter about working with young children?” Many respondents wrote about safety and the need to provide a safe space for children and adults. Others spoke about connecting parents to resources for their children. Several comments referred to supporting children who have experienced trauma, including those witnessing domestic violence. Others spoke about age-appropriate activities, providing toys, and making sure children attend school. Helping parents secure housing was also mentioned by several respondents.

When asked about the greatest enjoyment of working with children and families in the shelter, many responses included watching children grow, gain confidence, become more resilient, and smile when they’ve accomplished something. A shelter staff member described their greatest enjoyment of working with children thusly: *“Their innocence of pure laughter, game playing, sitting with them if they need it, encouraging them with high fives on good behaviors, how their day was in school, or watching a family movie with them. Just allowing them to BE in a safe place where they know we love and care for them in all aspects of their lives.”* Others wrote about seeing families build a new life when they feel safe and supported. Some respondents indicated they enjoy helping families move into new homes. One respondent answered, *“The greatest enjoyment of working with families is supporting them in overcoming barriers and seeing families be able to stay together because of programming. To support them in finally finding joy in their lives after being turned away or denied so many times before.”* Another said,

“Seeing parents using the information and resources that we give to achieve and accomplish the goals they have for their family. Planning activities that give children the opportunity to have

fun while at the shelter as well as seeing the children develop skills they have learned during activities to help them cope.”

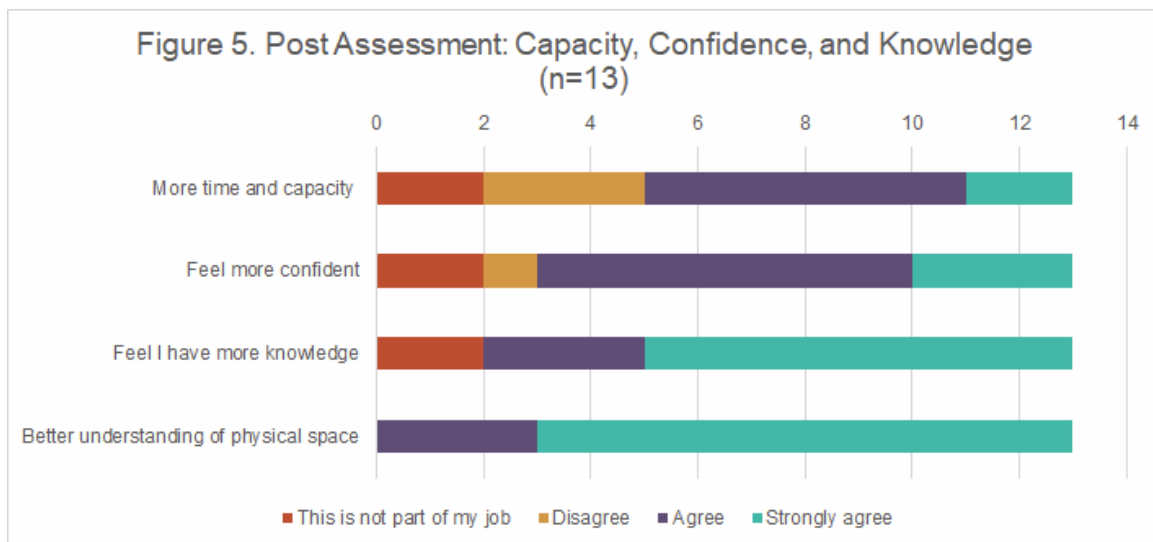
Respondents described many of the challenges of working with children and families in the shelter, with the majority mentioning a lack of resources. That included not enough time to spend with children, child care, housing, and mental health care. Respondents spoke about the difficulty of helping parents take care of their children when the parents themselves are dealing with their own trauma, mental illness, struggles with addictions, and pressure to find employment, child care, and housing. Staff were challenged by family dynamics and the ability of parents to engage with them. One respondent wrote, *“The greatest challenge in working with families is stigma due to homelessness.”* Another said, *“Our shelter is 3 stories and this makes it difficult because we do not have a play area with a door so moms could walk off to complete laundry, cook, or other small tasks. This causes the mom to be overwhelmed at times.”*

Staff described the barriers to getting families into licensed child care in this community as the lack of available spaces, transportation, and financial resources/employment. They also included the requirements of voucher programs and lack of child care afterschool and in the summer for school-aged children.

Overall, the responses to the pre-assessment survey suggest that the majority of staff at all of the participating shelters felt confident and equipped to work with young children. Many more respondents indicated that they had a lack of time and capacity to support children than those who said they lacked knowledge. While very few agencies had dedicated staff for children’s services, these pre-assessment results show that most respondents felt comfortable working with very young children within the limits of the resources available to them.

Responses to the Post-Assessment Survey

After each shelter completed the ECSAT, developed an Action Plan, and began implementing improvements, Partners for Impact requested their staff complete a post-assessment survey to evaluate the impact of their participation in the project. At least one staff member from every shelter completed the survey, for a total of 14 responses - six from Phase 1 and eight from Phases 2 and 3 combined. One survey was incomplete and excluded; 13 total responses were included in this analysis. The decrease in responses from the pre-assessment is related to staff turnover, change in staff duties, and general attrition in project participation.



The post-assessment survey asked respondents to consider how they felt compared to prior to their participation in this project and completion of the ECSAT. Compared to before completing the assessment, 61.5% indicated they agree or strongly agree that they have more time and capacity to adequately support the well-being and development of children ages 0-5 in the shelter (Figure 5), while 76.9% agree or strongly agree that they feel more confident engaging with young children. Compared to prior to the project, 23% agree and 61.5% strongly agree that they feel they have more knowledge to support child well-being and the remaining 15% said it was not part of their job. All participants indicated that they have a better understanding of how physical space can support child well-being and development, with 23.1% agreeing and 76.9% strongly agreeing. To an open-ended question, one respondent answered, “*We have gained more knowledge about how our physical environments help support parents and promote positive interactions with children and staff.*”

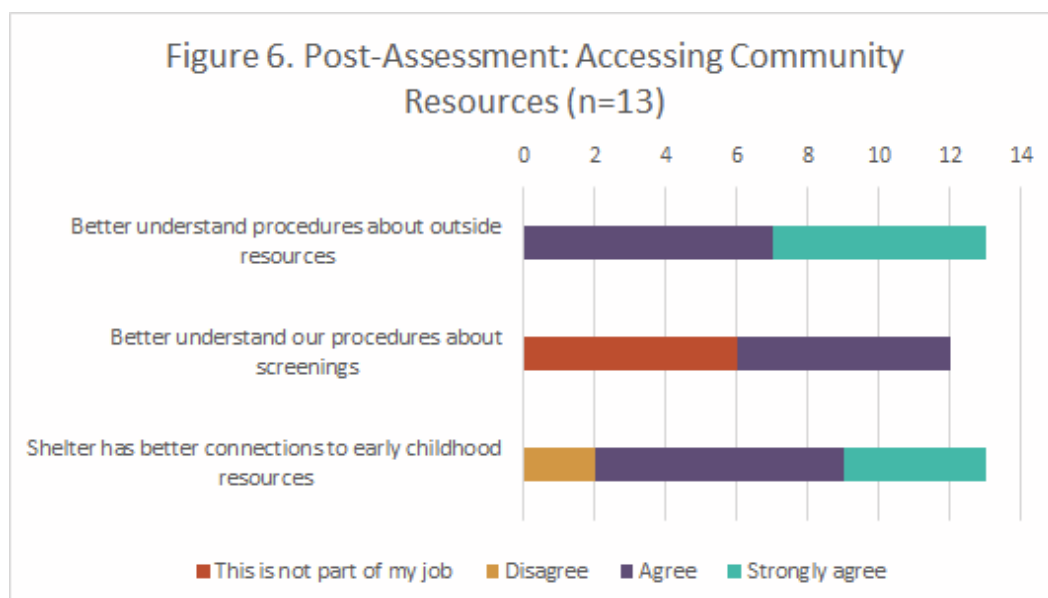


Figure 6 shows that 53.8% agree and 46.2% strongly agree that they have a better understanding of shelter procedures to connect families with outside resources to support children. Compared to before participating in the project, 85% agree or strongly agree that their shelter has better connections to early childhood resources in their community; 15% disagree. This is consistent with open-ended responses in which some participants wrote that the scarcity of resources for young children in their community continues to be a challenge. Half of the 12 respondents (with one person not answering) agreed that they have a better understanding of their shelter's procedures for screening children for developmental delays. The other half of respondents indicated that their shelter does not provide screenings. As in the pre-assessment survey, the answers about the developmental screenings were inconsistent within individual shelters.

The first open-ended question asked respondents how their shelter's connections with early childhood resources have changed as a result of participating in this project. Most respondents reported new and/or stronger relationships with early childhood resources in their communities. One respondent wrote, *"We now have connected with resources on McKinney Vento website and have been connecting with more local resources that specifically help children instead of just parents."* Other answers reflected similar improvements in connections. Another respondent described a larger shift around serving children writing, *"We collectively have changed in our approach, positive parenting techniques, more collaborations with outside agencies and more attendance of community resources events for our families."*

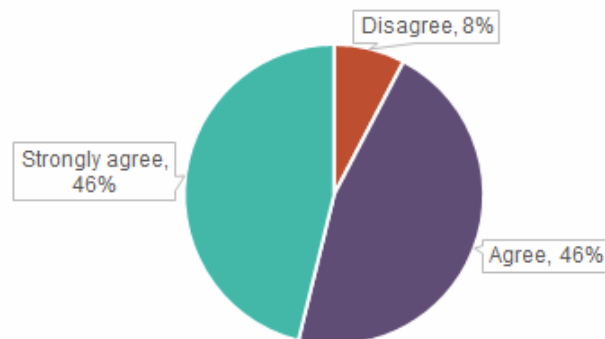
The survey asked whether expectations of the shelter about working with young children changed after participating in this pilot project. Respondents mentioned increased awareness of what is needed to work with children, and that they are shifting their focus to include more attention to the children, not just their parents. At one agency, *"All shelter staff are now aware of the framework we are creating in our approach to children and are growing to serve them with equity. We also have new staff on our committee for child empowerment."* One respondent mentioned a lack of staffing as the barrier to providing more comprehensive services to children. Another indicated that their shelter serves very few young children for any significant length of time.

The survey asked individuals to name some of the most important things learned by completing the self-assessment. Several respondents recognized gaps in shelter safety, including needing anti-slip mats in tubs, baby gates, and designated play areas for younger children. One mentioned recognizing that not all staff were aware of the shelter's existing protocols for serving children. Others learned about engaging children at a developmentally-appropriate level, finding online resources to support the staff in understanding what is needed, and creating space that supports child development and well-being. *"The shelter must be conducive*

to our families needs, behaviors, assessments, social and emotional spaces/environment are needed as it relates to education of schooling, social involvement with others, parents and staff. Policy and procedures came about as we collectively met around this project,” wrote one respondent.

Of the 13 respondents to the survey, 92% agreed or strongly agreed that completing the self-assessment was very helpful in improving services for young children in their shelter; one person disagreed (Figure 7). To the question, “What would you want staff at other shelters to know if they begin participating in this pilot project?” responses included:

Figure 7. Post Assessment: Completing the self-assessment was very helpful (n=13)



- *“That it takes effort and time but really helps you evaluate gaps of shelter and staff. There's always room for improvement.”*
- *“The assessment is very important in finding your organization's weakness and brings awareness of what is important in the development of children.”*
- *“The opportunity to learn more is invaluable and to understand further how to support children in a trauma informed way. Using this tool is not only beneficial but I believe it's necessary for all children to be given a voice and safety while in shelter.”*

As a whole, the post-assessment results indicate that participation in the project led to increased confidence and knowledge to support very young children among shelter staff. Fewer staff indicating increased time and capacity is consistent with the chronic understaffing at service agencies, an ongoing issue beyond the scope of the self-assessment and this project.

Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool and Agency Action Plans

Partners for Impact worked with the shelters in various ways to support them through the self-assessment process. All nine agencies completed the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool (ECSAT) through an online form created by Partners for Impact for this project. Some shelters had multiple staff members complete the ECSAT separately. Partners for Impact color-coded the results in spreadsheet so that shelter staff could more easily see where their answers agreed, where they diverged, and areas that needed attention. Other shelters were better able to complete the ECSAT during meetings with the Partners for Impact consultants. Most agencies were able to have at least two people complete the self-assessment.

Each agency used the results of the ECSAT to create an Action Plan, including identifying short-, medium-, and long-term goals for improvement in each of the areas of the self-assessment. The template provided by Partners for Impact also included space for agencies to specify activities to contribute to each goal, resources needed, persons responsible, and a timeline.

Many agencies made some changes immediately after completing the self-assessment. Most of these were physical changes but they also included reconnecting with community partners and finding new resources for young children. One shelter moved toward asking clients more directly about what they needed and how best the staff could support them. Others created time for additional staff training and began looking for new funding for child-specific services.

In the Action Plans, **long-term** goals varied by agency. Examples include:

- “To first ensure all residents and shelter staff have safe space and know shelter emergency response plan for residents upon arrival, for staff to evaluate on a regular basis.”
- *To create a welcoming and comfortable environment within the shelter that promotes a sense of security and belonging for residents.*
- To create a welcoming and trauma-informed intake process

- *Shelter is a safe and secure environment for all infants and children with trained staff and clear policies and procedures in place at all times.*
- Ongoing safety audits and inspections will be conducted with consistency to assess and ensure compliance with health and safety policies and practices.
- *Having constant support for pregnant women and mothers of 0-1 year old babies to prevent mortality*

Short- and medium-term goals and activities included:

- Daily safety checks, purchasing and preparing a safe wholistic space for children
- *All policies and procedures about child and family safety are documented and accessible to all staff and residents at all times.*
- Establish Breastfeeding-Friendly Sites: Develop and promote designated breastfeeding-friendly sites to provide a supportive environment for nursing mothers, with sensitivity to diverse issues. Ensure staff members are attuned to the potential influence of factors such as poverty, sexual abuse, body image, family history, or adolescent culture on an individual's decision to breastfeed.
- *To provide better options for women breastfeeding. Offer more information and safe space for feeding*
- Cultivate a collaborative learning ecosystem by integrating eLearning platforms, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, and coaching programs. This multifaceted approach fosters an organizational culture that thrives on continuous improvement across all levels and departments.
- *Engage in ongoing evaluation and improvement of the intake process. Feedback mechanisms, both from staff and service users, are instrumental in refining our procedures and enhancing the overall experience*
- Tailor the approach to accommodate varying family sizes and compositions to create a supportive and adaptable environment.
- *Maintaining long term schedule for volunteers to facilitate childcare in shelter*
- Providing consistent education and support for moms around care and nutrition
- *Shelter staff respect residents' ideas and voices. Create a simple survey to find out what went well and what areas could be improved. Boost the response rate by asking for*

feedback while the participants are still in the shelter

- Have a designated area for children to play with separate sections by age group
- *Have all materials families need in one intake packet and process*
- Have referral and follow-up system in place for all children needing assessments at shelter
- *Identify and connect with community agencies that can provide appropriate screenings and services*
- Provide internal and external support and behavioral screenings
- *Staff from shelter and local agencies serving young children have regularly scheduled meetings*
- Multidisciplinary task force with community agencies established

The Action Plans are intended to be working documents that agencies can update as needed. Shelter staff can use the results of the process to inform strategic planning and prioritize efforts to improve their services for young children. Partners for Impact also encouraged agencies to repeat the ECSAT annually to evaluate progress and update their Action Plans.

Experiences of Shelters Completing the ECSAT

Working with nine agencies during this three year project allowed Partners for Impact consultants to assist shelters in a variety of ways. Each shelter came with their own goals for the project and approaches to using the self-assessment tool. Most staff knew that they wanted to make some changes to their spaces and services, though they may not have had specific plans or a clear vision of what was needed. Several shared that their funders had made observations about their programs or their spaces, particularly as the agencies adapted their ways of operating in response to the COVID pandemic.

Changes to Physical Spaces

All of the shelters made changes to their physical spaces as a result of the self-assessment. Most shelters identified some basic safety needs that they could implement quickly, e.g. outlet covers, bath mats, child sunscreen, informational posters about safe diapering, etc. In addition, shelters wanted to think more creatively about developing more nurturing environments for children in their facilities. Staff have heard from clients that they would like spaces where children can be supervised but parents do not have to hover to ensure safety. Clients also want a quiet space for respite while someone else watches their children. Supporting the well-being of children includes helping parents to take care of themselves.

Very few agencies have significant funding for renovations or rebuilding spaces, unless they are moving or renovating with a capital campaign. Knocking down a wall or other structural changes are usually outside of the budget, making staff work with their space in its current configuration. Sometimes plans for improvements are made but when the money is secured, other priorities arise. Agencies with multiple facilities often have competing priorities for their limited resources and staff time.

Partners for Impact supported agencies in identifying low-cost approaches to improving their spaces for children. This included suggestions such as decluttering playrooms, discarding broken toys, painting walls, changing lighting, and adding seating for adults. These low-barrier ideas encouraged staff to think creatively about the resources they already had or could easily acquire through donations or an existing fund. Creating the Action Plan also allowed them to

think in the longer term about desired improvements and identify necessary steps and timelines for acquiring new resources for larger projects.

Needed improvements to physical space are often easier to recognize and implement than evaluating policy or programming changes. Improving physical space also yields tangible changes as result of an effort. Often thinking about creating better space for very young children leads staff toward evaluating the other types of support and programming they provide for this age group. For some, this is when their mindset starts to shift from serving adults *with* children to serving adults *and* children.

Other Areas of Improvement

For agencies that were able to have multiple individuals complete the ECSAT, the exercise proved helpful in making sure all staff were operating with a similar approach. Where results showed different answers to items, staff were encouraged to explore the reasons. Sometimes the disparities were because the item was outside of a staff member's regular duties, or because training of new staff was inconsistent. In some cases, actual practices differed from written policies. Identifying these areas through the self-assessment provided opportunities to discuss different perspectives and develop solutions, such as additional training or updating policies.

Participating in the project also prompted agencies to reflect on their connections with community partners. Many participants indicated that they had partnerships with other organizations prior to the pandemic and recognized the need to rebuild those relationships. Partners for Impact's discussions with staff focused on forging relationships that were strong, trusting, and sustainable.

In addition to those listed in the self-assessment tool, participating agencies identified additional types of training for staff and for volunteers to better understand and interact with young children. One shelter planned to train staff and volunteers about identifying the drivers of behavior when a child is lashing out and developing appropriate responses. Another agency would like more training for their staff on supporting children - and adults - who are neurodivergent by creating spaces that better support their well-being. Discussions of other training for staff included culturally-responsive support for parents and caregivers of very young children, modeling healthy relationships, and de-escalating conflict.

Helping Agencies Get the Most Out of this Project

While they were interested in making improvements, many participants did not know exactly what to expect from the ECSAT and the project. Partners for Impact provided explanatory materials, but few staff had experience with self-assessments and could not relate it to previous processes. Having been through many compliance reviews for funding, staff in many agencies expected the project to inform them where their assessment answers were right or wrong. In some agencies where upper management had agreed to participate, frontline staff imagined that management would be using the results of the assessment for their performance review. Once they began the ECSAT, staff were able to understand that the objective was solely to evaluate themselves and that they would not be judged externally. This clarity provided more room for honest review of and reflection on practices and policies.

With additional support, agencies began to use their self-assessment results and Action Plan as a blueprint for how they want their shelters to be in the future, even as they made changes immediately or in the short-term. Partners for Impact also encouraged agencies to put best practices in place, create proper documentation, and develop training so that as staff changes, the practices continue. Staff were prompted to consider why their agencies did things in certain ways – was it because that was best practice, a reaction to an incident or past condition, or because it has always been done that way? After identifying short- and long-term goals as part of their Action Plans, participants were encouraged to take time to consider their current practices and how well they contributed to their stated goals. Building a framework with clear policies and procedures ensures that new staff have a clear understanding not just how things are done but also why. The Action Plan, with short- and long-term outcomes identified, can be used as a training resource for new staff, board members, and volunteers. This improves the sustainability of changes, especially in environments with high staff turnover.

Agencies also considered using the self-assessment tool to improve their aftercare services. This includes ongoing connections to services and resources as well as training to strengthen parenting knowledge and skills. Shelters looked at what they were providing for clients while they were in shelter that will help them stay in housing and support their children after they leave.

Partners for Impact encouraged agencies to return to the self-assessment annually as a tool for continuous quality improvement. It provides a framework for evaluating changes that have been made and developing future plans. The Action Plans can be consulted and updated more often and used as a roadmap for strategic direction.

Other Opportunities for and Challenges to Change

The process of completing the self-assessment tool and building an Action Plan helped agencies identify many areas for improvement. Taking time to assess and reflect allowed shelter staff to explore other opportunities for increasing the support they provide to young children and their families. The process also highlighted challenges that agencies face daily in serving people experiencing homelessness.

While Section A of the ECSAT provides extensive information about health and safety, shelter staff discussed some of the less tangible elements of providing a safe environment. A sense of safety goes beyond just a physical setting to include the people sharing that space. Individuals experiencing homelessness and leaving domestic violence situations often have heightened awareness of the trustworthiness of others, especially those in contact with their children. Shelter staff recognize that strengthening relationships among residents can increase the sense of safety within the shelter. Staff from one shelter spoke about their efforts to help residents see each other as a valuable resource that can provide support and friendship. At this shelter, several families shared the duties of parenting, with two mothers taking care of the children while the other mothers worked. The cooperation of these families created an environment that felt safer, while also providing solutions to other challenges such as affordable child care.

Connecting to Partner Agencies

Across the state, all participating shelters faced challenges connecting families to community resources for their children. Again and again staff spoke about the barriers to getting young children into child care. These included a lack of available spaces in general or specifically for young children in child care centers; child care that was not on a bus route and not accessible to families without their own transportation; child care available only during first shift and not second or third when some parents are working; and providers who will not accept vouchers. For most shelter agencies, the reasons for not placing children in high-quality child care were unrelated to staff knowledge or connections with partners, and were entirely dependent on the availability of care in the community.

Shelter staff also expressed concerns about referring clients to partner agencies in their communities. Similar to child care, other service agencies are stretched thin trying to meet increased demand with limited resources. Shelter staff are reluctant to refer clients to other agencies that are unlikely to provide adequate services and sometimes are too overwhelmed even to return a client's calls. Again, most shelter staff do not need more knowledge about what clients need - they need more partners with sufficient capacity to meet the needs of their clients.

Staff at shelters also recognize that many of their clients have likely interacted with other service providers prior to coming into the shelter. Families may already have multiple case managers and a list of required activities. Clients with open child protective services (CPS) cases are required to act on referrals, and often must take parenting classes. Staff at shelters hesitate to add to a parent's burden with more recommendations for additional services. Shelter staff also expressed that they and their clients have concerns about trusting some of their community partners. Clients fear that other community agencies will report them to CPS for issues related to experiencing homelessness. One shelter staff spoke of a client who said that it almost feels like they're being punished for being homeless. This fear further reduces the number of options for services in an already limited pool.

Shelter staff are finding creative ways to provide families with the services they need without adding to their burdens or risking additional harm. One agency, for example, is exploring offering parenting classes during regular meetings of all the residents. This provides the information but does not single out any one resident for needing the service. Other shelters are considering training staff to provide additional services such as developmental screenings. This is not a viable option for shelters with the most severe staffing shortages, but for some larger agencies it is a possibility.

Housing First

For all of the agencies participating in this project, providing a safe environment for their clients is their highest priority. Most found the elements of the ECSAT focusing on safety to be very useful, prompting them to look more closely at areas and issues that they may not have considered recently or at all. Participating in this project encouraged them to look through the lens of children who have experienced trauma and need resources. Most found value in the additional technical assistance provided by Partners for Impact and CCSA that went beyond basic safety to creating developmentally-appropriate and trauma-informed spaces for children.

For clients, too, having a safe space where they and their children can stay is first and foremost. Beyond basic safety, however, clients are most focused on getting into stable housing. In emergency shelters designed for families to stay for 90 days, staff are hearing from clients that they just want to focus on getting out of shelter and into their own housing. Parents often have limited time and mental capacity to think beyond this urgency to consider play spaces, sensory toys, or developmental assessments. Shelter staff seek to respect their clients' agency and reduce additional burdens when the families' priorities are getting into housing.

This focus on getting families into housing also relates to the staffing at most homelessness agencies. Only one shelter participating in this project had a dedicated child specialist. The other agencies do not have anyone with the job of providing services specifically for children. As a consequence, case managers focus on addressing the most immediate needs. Generally, this means working with the adults to find housing, employment, transportation, etc., leaving staff members with little time to devote to the younger members of the family. As a result of the self-assessment, some shelters are reconsidering their staffing to create positions with the explicit role of providing services and support for children.



Impact of Covid-19

Partners for Impact began implementing this Technical Assistance Project in January 2021, less than one year after the state of North Carolina issued mandatory stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID pandemic. Homeless services, like the child care sector, had already been operating with insufficient resources to meet high demand. Changing their service models in response to a global pandemic presented very significant challenges. These agencies could not do their work remotely and were instead forced to find creative solutions to new problems associated with people sharing space. This was a very difficult time for shelters to think beyond the immediate crises they faced daily; devoting time to longer-term planning or improvements was a luxury few could afford.

This level of crisis created difficult ground to begin working with shelters on self-assessments and asking them to focus on young children in a different way. Four shelters were able to complete the process but it took many months and significant technical assistance from Partners for Impact. The second cohort, recruited in 2022, faced fewer challenges; the third cohort in 2023 was able to complete the entire process much more quickly and with less hands-on assistance.

By 2023, the third year of the project, shelters had regained some stability and were more able to think about planning beyond the next moment or hour. All of the shelters are still working with fewer resources than they need to meet demand. Some have decreased bed capacity because of safety concerns about the number of clients sharing the space. Others have had high staff turnover and difficulty filling positions. In one urban center, participating shelters are facing much greater demand for their services since another large provider of emergency shelter closed its doors in 2022.

While the agencies are still working under difficult circumstances, they are no longer in the full crisis mode of coping with COVID outbreaks, moving clients from their facility to hotels and back again, and other ongoing challenges and daily unknowns of the pandemic. For some shelters, the complete upending of their status quo has also presented an opportunity to rethink their “new normal.” Using the self-assessment tool was a good step toward creating a new way of supporting their adult clients by making sure the needs of the children are being met.

Recommendations

During the three years of this project, Partners for Impact has been working with CCSA to identify better ways to support young children experiencing homelessness. While the self-assessment tool helps shelters improve their services, additional work is required at other agencies, including child care providers, and at the systemic level. This technical assistance project has identified barriers and facilitators to completing the ECSAT; it has also brought more light to the larger systems beyond individual agencies that also need to shift to better support young children. This section offers several recommendations for future efforts.

Widely Disseminate the Toolkit for Addressing Young Child Homelessness

Using the learnings from this project, Partners for Impact has created a Toolkit to assist shelters, continuums of care (COCs), and other groups interested in implementing the ECSAT and improving services for very young children experiencing homelessness. Working with crisis service agencies presents specific challenges because of the constant, high-priority demands on the time and resources of staff. Any tools aimed for their use are only meaningful if agency staff have time to use them. Therefore, all components of the toolkit are designed to be easy to use in discreet, manageable pieces. They are intended to help small, understaffed agencies identify what is most important to do when they cannot do everything. The Toolkit includes concrete examples of small improvements that can be made with a minimal budget of time and money, with additional information about longer-term and larger-budget projects for inspiration. A short video component created by CCSA and Partners for Impact provides information and examples about creating child-friendly environments in shelters. The appendices include an extensive list of additional resources, websites, and sample forms to provide additional support during the self-assessment and action planning process. The Toolkit provides guidance for Executive Directors and Development Directors on using the action plans for strategic planning, as fundraising tools, and in grant proposals. It also includes suggested strategies for connecting with early childhood providers and other community partners.

The Toolkit is designed to facilitate improvements in agencies that are often struggling to stay funded, staffed, and compliant with the demands of funders and oversight agencies. The Toolkit also provides a lot of opportunities to explore more levels of change than are included

in the self-assessment tool. Hopefully shelters will use the additional resources listed to dig deeper into a lot of topics touched on by the ECSAT. For example, the ECSAT includes items on training on trauma-informed care and family-friendly spaces. Shelters can use the additional resources listed in the Toolkit to learn about creating trauma-informed spaces that support the well-being and development of young children. Agencies able to go further can bring those principles of trauma-informed design to their environments for adult clients, and even to the work spaces for their employees. The ECSAT, the Toolkit, and this project aim to inform shelter staff about what is needed for young children ages 0-5; they have the potential to create better spaces for children and adults of all ages.

Provide Resources for Shelters to Complete the Self-Assessment

With financial support from North Carolina's PDG grant, this project was able to assist nine shelters in completing the ECSAT and learning more about supporting young children experiencing homelessness. Additional funding can help spread this tool more widely across the state. Future projects should include additional resources not just for implementing improvements at the end of Action Planning, but also for staff to spend time going through the process. In agencies with significant staffing shortages, most employees are already bearing responsibilities beyond their job descriptions. Asking for more work from them should come with resources to shift other duties off of their schedules, allowing them to focus more closely on the self-assessment and subsequent planning.

Support a Statewide Community of Practice

While the community of practice among participating shelters did not develop fully during the three-year duration of this project, the model has potential to support progress at all levels of systems change. During the project's first year, the community of practice provided a space for shelter staff to learn from each other, provide mutual support, ask questions, share challenges, and celebrate successes. Participants made time to attend the meetings and have expressed their appreciation for this opportunity to converse with others who work in similar settings. This was particularly valuable in 2021 as shelters were continually faced with finding new solutions to unprecedented problems.

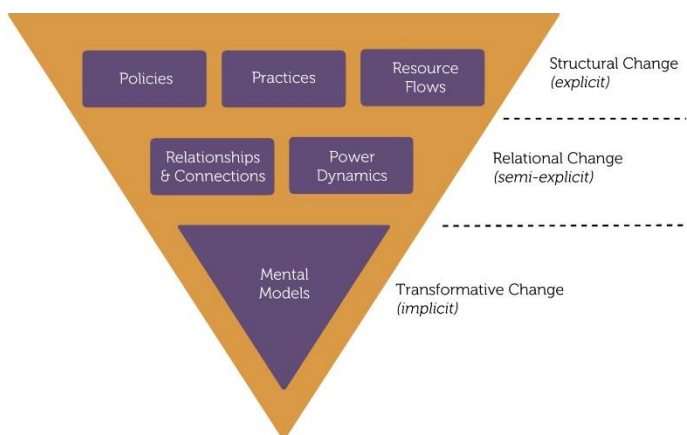
Opportunities for shelter staff to meet other professionals in their field varies as a result of multiple factors. Domestic violence (DV) shelters have been connected through the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCCADV) for more than 30 years. The Coalition

holds a biennial statewide conference and trainings throughout the year where staff from shelters across the state can meet and get to know each other. NCCADV also provides technical assistance and other support to create a network of DV shelters across the state. Homeless and family shelters in North Carolina do not have access to the same kind of statewide network. Some shelters may be connected to others through their COC or other regional efforts. Smaller and more rural shelters may be working in isolation with few other providers in their COC or region. While the [North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness](#) (NCCEH) works with shelters across the state, they have had limited success in creating networking opportunities. The [North Carolina Housing Coalition](#)'s Bringing it Home conference has only restarted as an annual conference for homeless service providers since 2017. None of these have an emphasis on strengthening supports for young children who are homeless with their families. Building and supporting a community of practice of shelters and homeless service providers that includes an area of focus on young children would allow agencies in all counties to connect to others in the field, learn from each other and share information, and provide mutual support for staff doing very challenging work.

Shift Mental Models

While the Toolkit walks through completing the ECSAT, it is intended as the beginning of a longer and more involved process that will lead to changes in larger systems. Effecting profound, sustainable systems change requires work on structures, relationships, and mental models, illustrated in FSG's model of the Six Conditions of Systems Change¹ (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Six Conditions of Systems Change



The very concrete elements covered by the ECSAT can offer a gateway to more significant changes in an agency's approach to serving young children. The self-assessment tool addresses the top-most level of Structural Change, guiding shelter staff through examining their practices and policies. Developing the Action Plans with recommended budget adjustments or planning is the work of changing resource flows. Because the policies, practices, and resource flows are

¹ Kania, J., Kramer, M., Senge, P. (2018) *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG.
https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

the most explicit elements of any program, they are the easiest to examine. They are also essential to any forward movement towards real change.

As shelters reach out to other agencies - both within the homeless and housing sector and in other sectors - they begin to create Relational Change. They can meet more needs by connecting clients to partner agencies and collaboratively address larger systemic issues. At this level, agencies also interrogate how power is operating and who wields control. In the public sector, funding agencies have significant standing to dictate priorities, approaches, and timelines. Other players, such as local elected officials and policy-makers, may also drive decision-making that affects how well shelter agencies can serve their clients. Any movement toward a new way of operating must identify and address the power dynamics that are holding dysfunctional systems in place. This is not easy but strong relationships within and across sectors can shift power toward those working most closely with young children and their families, facilitating substantive and sustainable change.

The deepest level of the Systems Change model refers to mental models. FSG defines mental models as “Deeply held beliefs and assumptions that influence one’s actions.” In order to create a system that centers young children experiencing homelessness and fully meets their needs, many mental models need substantial reworking. This includes developing new approaches to ensure young children and their families can maintain safe and affordable housing. Shifting the narrative of homelessness as a problem of single men to a crisis that affects families with young children is one step. Mental models that undergird criminalizing poverty and punishing people experiencing homelessness must also change for viable solutions to young child homelessness to become reality.

Work Concurrently for Systems Change

For more significant, sustainable change, shifts need to happen at the systems level alongside improvements within the shelters. This includes creating buy-in from and accountability to the community. Shelters cannot serve families experiencing homelessness or address the drivers of homelessness alone. Partners at all levels in their communities must be part of these efforts. The well-being of young children in shelters needs to be a priority for all agencies addressing homelessness, not just a few tasked with serving families. It requires a shift in the narrative so that providing more comprehensive services for children is not seen as at odds with quickly moving families into permanent housing.

Individuals at funding agencies and oversight entities need to shift their mindsets as well to recognize the needs of young children experiencing homelessness as separate and distinct from

those of their caregivers. This includes examining funding, reporting, and standards of care to shift attention toward young child homelessness. What federal and state funding for shelters is currently available and what can it be used for? What funding is available to shelters to hire staff dedicated to serving young children? What services are shelters required to track and report to funding agencies? Do funding agencies monitor shelters against standards of care that include best practices for serving young children and their families? Are there opportunities to adjust funding streams, reporting requirements, and standards to center young children?

Changes at the level of individual shelters is important but often only touch symptoms of larger systemic problems. Each shelter as an organization will impact the few children who reside there to the degree that they are able to access funding to provide the staff and resources necessary to do so. To achieve broader outcomes, intentional effort is required to identify, name, and address the challenges existing in policies, across funders, and among community-level attitudes. To achieve different outcomes, the system needs to work with new models, ones that center the most vulnerable in policy, programming, and funding.

Conclusion

In three years, this Early Childhood Self-Assessment Technical Assistance Project has assisted emergency shelters in improving their services for very young children experiencing homelessness. It identified facilitators and barriers to supporting children within shelters and across communities. Agencies have begun to shift their mindsets to consider the needs of young children separately from those of the adults caring for them. While substantial change takes time, smaller changes that each shelter can make add up to more supportive and nurturing environments for children.

Partners for Impact and Child Care Services Association will continue to disseminate the lessons from this project across the state and in national venues, when possible. Shifting systems and agencies to prioritize the needs of young children will be a long-term endeavor. Encouraging shelters to complete the Early Childhood Self-Assessment and connect with early childhood resources in their communities are important first steps to sustainable change.

About Partners for Impact, LLC



Partners for Impact, LLC is a North Carolina based consulting firm with over 60 years of combined experience working with a wide variety of nonprofit human services agencies. We believe that **existing systems do not provide all people with the same opportunities.**

Reimagining and engaging the systems and organizations that make people vulnerable can create more equitable opportunities, solve social problems, and strengthen the health and well-being of the whole. **Successful systems change can't be done alone**, so we partner with community collaboratives, agencies, and leaders to gain maximum impact.

Partners for Impact is a values-based company. This means we lead with our values in mind and seek projects that fit that value base. Our core values are **applying frameworks**, such as the collective impact framework, the social-ecological model, and more; being **data driven**; using an **equity lens**; being grounded in **human services systems**; engaging at the **systems level**; and being **nimble and accountable**.

Project Consultants

Alma Davis

Alma is a longtime Community Advocate for people and families experiencing bouts of homelessness. For over 25 years, she has been on the forefront in galvanizing community partnerships, fundraising, and evaluations. Her career has been built on policy reform for Domestic and Sexual Violence— specifically, working in shelters across the state identifying, advocating, and developing trauma informed services, while victims are moving forward from the aftermath of violence and homelessness. Her span of work includes development, improvement, and implementation of programs that serve families and children that have been forced into homelessness. She is committed to empowering families in distress by coordinating tangible resources in the community.

Beth Bordeaux, MSW

Beth cares about organizations-- their systems, metrics, budgets, and processes-- because she cares about people. She knows that to provide the support community members need to live and thrive, human service systems must be strong from the inside out. Beth is an executive leader with over 30 years of nonprofit and local government experience. She has worked in programs supporting individuals and families with many types of needs, including mental health, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, housing, childcare and childcare quality, early intervention, maternity care, domestic violence, faith support, education, and basic needs such as food and shelter.

Stan Holt, Ph.D.

With over 30 years in nonprofit development, executive leadership and grantmaking, Stan is an accomplished nonprofit professional who believes in the power of the collective. When Stan works with a group, he builds a space where each individual's authentic voice contributes to the emerging group voice within the group process. Stan brings a set of skills that transcends issues. He works with arts, environmental, health and human services, and educational organizations, drawing out the common elements for building community change.

Charlene Reiss, Ph.D.

Charlene has worked with Partners for Impact since 2018. As a consultant, she has 30 years of experience working with nonprofits, government agencies, academic institutions, and community collaboratives. Charlene's skill set includes creative problem-solving, evaluation, program planning, strategy development, systems change, and project management. As part of her own personal and professional journey, Charlene strives to use her white-woman privilege to surface issues of equity in white-dominated spaces and disrupt the systems that hold inequities in place.

Fiona W. Dunn

Fiona serves as the design consultant for Partners for Impact and lends a digital native's technological expertise when needed. She graduated from the Savannah College of Art and Design with a BFA in Sequential Art and a minor in Scientific Illustration. Fiona has a

longstanding interest in social systems and community-based problem solving, and she enjoys being able to bring her artistic skills to the team and their projects.