

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVIEWS & LISTENING SESSION

Summary Report | January 2019

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INTRODUCTION

The Dean & Margaret Lesher Foundation is a family foundation with a mission to enhance the quality of life in Contra Costa County through a focus on supporting education, the arts, and children and families. Within the existing focus areas, the Board has identified four strategic impact goals in order to deepen the Foundation's impact over the next five to ten years. One of the four impact goals is that more children are thriving through improved learning opportunities and strengthened families, over time resulting in increased educational and economic mobility. The Board has identified developing a ten-year initiative in early childhood as its primary approach for achieving this impact goal.

In order to inform its early childhood community investment approach, the Foundation wanted to understand the needs of Contra Costa families as it relates to helping their very young children thrive and have the foundation they need to be prepared for kindergarten and for future academic and life success. To achieve this, the Foundation partnered with Contra Costa County's robust network of local service organizations and agencies doing daily work with families.

In late 2018, VIVA Strategy + Communications facilitated two touch points with these community partners. First, phone interviews were conducted with the leaders of six of the county's organizations that do extensive work related to early childhood. Following that, a listening session was conducted among front-line staff of a number of local organizations serving families and children.

INTERVIEWS

Overview of Interviews

Six interviews took place between October 31 and November 9, 2018. Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Questions focused on the early childhood landscape in the county, families' needs, and the organizations' focuses and strategies. Interviewees were invited to respond based on their organization's work in this area, what they've observed more broadly in Contra Costa County, and their own experiences as leaders in this field. Their responses have been summarized and synthesized.

Please refer to the Appendix for a list of interviewees.

Common Themes

The following themes are based on recommendations for and examples of supporting children and families that surfaced across responses during the interviews.

- ▶ **Supports to parents must be individualized, responsive, and sensitive.** They should build parents' skills, increase their confidence, and strengthen their connections to their peers and communities. Services should meet parents where they are and fit into families' lives--instead of vice versa.
 - ▷ Respondents noted that programs like home visiting can be especially powerful and effective, but also described integrated strategies like building individualized coaching into group classes or workshops. Additionally, the need for trauma-informed care, culturally-sensitive services, and services in languages other than English were mentioned.
- ▶ **Families need comprehensive supports.** Organizations should ensure that families' basic needs are met first. They also must understand--and help families understand--the many intersecting components of early childhood, and help families navigate the different systems of support.
 - ▷ Several respondents noted the significant impacts they are able to have on families who receive intensive, wrap-around supports. Others noted a "no wrong door" philosophy and mentioned their roles in ensuring families get connected to other necessary services to combat poverty and its effects.
- ▶ **Community support is essential to family well-being, but is frequently lacking.** Efforts to build community reduce families' isolation while increasing their parenting knowledge and skills. Supportive and trusted communities for families can be created in multiple ways.
 - ▷ Respondents emphasized the importance of community, and of creating trusted places that families can go for support. Respondents provided a number of examples of this approach in action, including offering place-based services dedicated to family support, fostering stronger communities within the existing places families go, building the capacity of other organizations to provide families with supportive communities, and building parents' own skills as community leaders.

- ▶ **Everyone who works with children and families needs to be well-trained and supported.** Training in early childhood development should be provided to those who need it, in addition to capacity building in how to address cultural, linguistic, and other barriers facing families in the county. Wellness supports and wages must be increased for those who do the often difficult work of supporting families in need.
 - ▶ Respondents noted that agency staff, service providers, and early learning providers face many challenges. Low wages and high turnover negatively impact the early education field, in particular, but other staff and providers who work with families were also mentioned. Some also expressed that there is a lack of knowledge in some fields as to the importance of the first five years, the need for appropriate supports, and how challenges facing parents can negatively impact their young children.
- ▶ **Early childhood represents a significant opportunity to have an impact in Contra Costa County.** There is a strong foundation of organizations working to support children and families on which to build. As county demographics and needs shift, they should be addressed collaboratively to identify the best ways to expand capacity and fill gaps. Non-traditional partners can be convened to help grow countywide support for early childhood.
 - ▶ Respondents expressed appreciation that the Leshner Family Foundation is launching an early childhood strategy, and that they are beginning the work by reaching out to county organizations. Several expressed the desire to continue to develop collaborative relationships with the Foundation and saw the Foundation's new focus as an opportunity to bring attention to early childhood across the county.

Summary of Responses

1. Current Landscape

Respondents were asked to describe the current landscape for young children and families in Contra Costa County, including what was unique about the county specifically.

General Early Childhood Landscape

- ▶ Birth to five is the most critical time period to support children and families and is where interventions and supports can have the greatest impact. However, the challenges facing very young children can often be “hidden” and difficult to observe. Young children can't speak for themselves, and challenges they may face, such as early trauma, developmental delays, or a lack of quality early education, often go unrecognized.
- ▶ Investment in this age has long been insufficient. At the same time, seeds have been planted over many years. There has been greater recognition of this importance and a movement to better support and invest in young children, both locally and nationally, in recent years.
- ▶ Supporting children birth to five means supporting parents and other caregivers. It means taking a “whole child, whole family” approach because health, mental health, social-emotional development, literacy skills, and family stability are all connected and all impact school readiness and third grade success.

Landscape Specific to Contra Costa County

- ▶ Demographic shifts have increased the need in the county. As the cost of living and housing shortages across the Bay Area region rise, young families and lower income families are migrating from the cities and more central urban areas out to Contra Costa County.
 - ▶ Many families are in crisis. Financial challenges, drug abuse, mental health issues, and more prevent many families from providing stable environments for their young children.
 - ▶ Many other families face challenges that mean they struggle to help their young children thrive—such as long working hours, lack of child care, high housing costs, home languages other than English, insufficient parenting knowledge and skills, and a lack of support networks in their communities.
- ▶ These demographic shifts have impacted the local capacity to serve families' needs. Many areas of the county, particularly in the central and east regions, have not “caught up” to the current need levels. Some interviewees noted that the county has fewer non-profits to support families and fewer early childhood education programs than other nearby counties. However, others noted that there is broad support for early childhood at leadership levels in the county and that there are local funders who are investing in families.
- ▶ The county's geographic diversity means that both need and capacity vary a lot. The needs and solutions of the urban areas may not work in the suburban or rural areas.
- ▶ Collaboration is a strength. Several interviewees described participating in early childhood-focused collaborative groups, and many commended local agencies for their community leadership around early childhood.

2. Families' Needs in Contra Costa County

Respondents were asked to identify the most pressing unmet need of families in the county. While responses differed, several needs were reiterated by multiple respondents.

- ▶ **Poverty.** Poverty is the big underlying barrier to children's ability to thrive. When families are living in poverty, they struggle to meet their children's physical, mental, and social-emotional needs--all of which are critical to school readiness.
- ▶ **Child care.** There aren't enough high quality, affordable child care slots to meet the demand.
- ▶ **Family support/education.** Parents and caregivers need to understand the importance of the first five years and to have the skills, capacity, and support network to help them care for their children.
- ▶ **Access to specialized supports.** Mental health services, early intervention to address developmental delays, and oral health services all need to be more accessible to families.

3. Services Provided by Local Organizations

Although the organizations represented in interviews have different focuses, and the specifics of their programs and services vary, there were significant commonalities in how respondents described their work.

- ▶ Services provided to families include safety net services to ensure basic housing, food, and child care needs are met; support services including counseling, coaching, therapy, and case management; and education services including workshops, classes, playgroups, and trainings.

- ▶ Several interviewees mentioned tension between providing light-touch services that reach large numbers of families, and wrap-around services that only a few families can access. Most have services that fall into each category, but discussed the challenge in determining where to focus limited budgets.
- ▶ Nearly all of the interviewees also described efforts to build the capacity of other organizations to better support families on the issues addressed by these organizations. By equipping others with needed knowledge and skills, the organizations are able to extend their impact beyond their own organizational capacity. (A hypothetical example of this is that an organization might offer skill-building classes for families, but also teach early learning providers how to recognize need and support those skills among the families in their program.)

4. Most Effective Strategies (Already Implemented)

Respondents were asked to identify strategies of their organizations that have been successful in supporting families.

- ▶ Wrap-around services that provide comprehensive support to a family, including ensuring that basic needs are met before addressing other challenges.
- ▶ Support that fits into families' lives--either by providing services at the family's home, or by providing individualized coaching and supports.
- ▶ Building communities for families so that they have networks of support. This includes providing place-based services so that families have a trusted "place" to turn to and fostering supportive communities/relationships in other places families go.
- ▶ Increasing parents' skills so that they can better support their young children and are better equipped to handle challenges that arise.
- ▶ Capacity building and training for the people who work with children and families (eg., health-care and other providers, educators, and staff at social service agencies).
- ▶ Ensuring that services are strength-based and positive, and that they recognize parents and caregivers wanting the best for their children.

5. Desired Strategies (Not Yet Implemented)

Respondents were also asked to describe strategies that they would like to implement but are not currently. The following strategies were mentioned.

- ▶ End the eligibility "cliff effect" that keeps families in the system rather than enabling them to gradually move off of supports.
- ▶ Build service providers' capacity, with a focus on increasing their understanding of early childhood and on helping them to provide family-centric services that are supportive, unbiased, and reduce barriers to receiving support.
- ▶ Build families' capacity to be advocates and leaders within their communities.
- ▶ Expand early intervention efforts.
- ▶ Invest in transportation solutions for families to increase preschool attendance.
- ▶ Expand access to oral health services.
- ▶ Measure impact in terms of the positive effect on families (as opposed to numbers served), and ensure that impact is measured in ways that respect and build trust with families.

6. Advice for New Early Childhood Investments

Respondents were asked to share their advice for the Leshar Foundation as it begins to invest in early childhood in Contra Costa County.

- ▶ Collaborate with local organizations and work together as partners to identify and implement the right strategies.
- ▶ Recognize the complexity of early childhood and how the many systems that touch early childhood are interconnected, but be targeted with strategies. Focus and scale investments to have maximum impact.
- ▶ Look into gaps (eg., no transportation to preschool, lack of funding for family, friend, and neighbor quality improvement) and barriers (eg., restrictions on using funding for facilities improvements or Denti-Cal being too burdensome for dental offices) as opportunities for impact.
- ▶ Act as a convener of traditional and non-traditional partners to bring attention to and catalyze investment in early childhood. Leverage role as a community leader. Be strategic in telling the story so that the issue is relevant to all potential partners.
- ▶ Identify what works and share the evidence and best practices so that the landscape continues to improve and early childhood remains in the spotlight.

LISTENING SESSION

Overview of Listening Session

The listening session was held on December 4, 2018, at a Contra Costa County-based non-profit. Participants represented agencies and organizations that serve families and children; all of the participants work directly with families. In some cases, the services that are provided are court-mandated; in other cases the programs and services are voluntary for families. The types of services represented included classes, home visiting, therapy, referrals, and care coordination.

The organizations represented in the listening session work across the county; most participants noted that they personally primarily worked in one area, eg., West, Central, or East County.

The questions focused on the early childhood landscape in the county, families' needs, and the services provided to families. Participants were invited to respond based on their own experiences working in the field and based on what they've observed and heard during their interactions with families. Their responses have been summarized and synthesized.

Please refer to the Appendix for a list of listening session participants.

Common Themes

The following themes are based on the discussions heard throughout the listening session.

- ▶ **Supporting families' basic needs is essential.** This is the first step to enabling parents to focus on caregiving and to help give children the stable, nurturing environments they need to thrive.

- ▶ Stable and affordable housing, living wages, health care, and high quality childcare (on the days and times needed) were all mentioned as significant challenges facing families, with services in these areas noted as having the greatest impact.
- ▶ **Awareness, navigation, and the ability to be on a waitlist are major barriers to families of young children receiving critical support services.** Participants consistently shared that often services may exist, but families or service providers themselves are unaware of what exists, become frustrated with the navigation required to receive services, or must wait long periods of time to receive the supports they need.
- ▶ **Supporting children means supporting parents.** Participants noted that the parents of young children frequently face their own challenges, including mental health issues, unaddressed trauma, and lack of education, which need to be addressed to best support the child. At the same time, they noted parents' hopes for their children and desire to support their success, and the positive impact observed with interventions and supports.
 - ▶ Increasing understanding of both child development and the effects of trauma, reducing stigmas around accessing services, and increasing supports to help parents navigate the different systems and providers were discussed as ways to better help parents as they help their children.
- ▶ **Systemic issues pose challenges for service providers.** Issues that feel out of participants' control--including local, state, and federal policies; lack of funding; and siloed provision of services--impact their organizations' abilities to fully and effectively meet families' needs.
 - ▶ Participants noted a few achievements and opportunities in these areas, however. First, local efforts to build parents' capacity as advocates have been very successful. Second, improving connections between organizations and implementing effective warm hand-offs between service providers are achievable at the organizational level. Connections made at events such as this listening session can help build relationships between organizations.

Summary of Responses

1. Top challenges facing families that impact their young children 0-5: Service providers' perspectives

Top challenges noted:

- ▶ Meeting basic needs
 - ▶ Jobs are low paying and the cost of living is high.
 - ▶ Housing especially was noted by all as a significant challenge facing families: families frequently live in very small quarters, move frequently, and/or face homelessness.
 - ▶ Families face an "eligibility cliff," meaning that if their wages increase too much, they lose needed benefits, without earning enough to move them into financial stability.
- ▶ Parent knowledge and education
 - ▶ Parents aren't sufficiently knowledgeable about child development and therefore may not know how to support their child's school readiness or recognize if there are concerns.
 - ▶ Parents are not aware of all of the resources that are available.
- ▶ Accessible high quality childcare

- ▶ Affordable childcare isn't accessible and, for many, isn't available during the hours families need it (such as non-traditional working hours).
- ▶ Children don't have the consistent, stable care environments that they need, because families must piece together care across multiple formal and informal providers
- ▶ Siloed services
 - ▶ Care coordination across providers does not happen as well as it needs to.

Other challenges:

- ▶ Trauma
 - ▶ Both parents and children face trauma due to issues including, but not limited to, violence in their communities, substance abuse, home violence, and mental health issues.
 - ▶ There are insufficient services to help families with these issues, and there is a stigma attached to seeking help for mental health.
- ▶ Immigration and language
 - ▶ Families that have more recently immigrated to the United States face language barriers (primarily Spanish, but also including other languages) and immigration-related challenges.
 - ▶ Immigrant families are also more likely to struggle to navigate the different systems of support that are available.

2. Top challenges facing families that impact their young children 0-5: Families' perspectives

The challenges noted by providers are also seen as challenges by families themselves, especially those related to basic needs like housing and income. Additional challenges that they hear families share include:

- ▶ Service navigation
 - ▶ Families struggle to navigate different service providers and are often intimidated by the eligibility and referral processes.
 - ▶ Families often face long wait times to access services.
- ▶ Access to quality spaces (nice parks, etc.)
 - ▶ Related to the housing crisis, families may have little or no home space for their young children to move and play.
- ▶ School culture
 - ▶ Families report that their children are bullied but that it isn't addressed by the school.
 - ▶ Families may feel that their children are treated unfairly by their teachers.
 - ▶ These frustrations affect the family's view of education and its value.
- ▶ Eligibility gap
 - ▶ Families are frustrated when they feel that they need support but do not meet eligibility requirements (for example, a parent may want to work but doesn't qualify for child care subsidies).

3. Ability of current programs and services to address families needs and gaps in services

- ▶ Effective programs and services exist to address most needs, but the demand exceeds the capacity of local organizations to meet it.
 - ▷ This was universally agreed with the exception of one participant who noted that her organization was not at capacity in providing mental health services. It was suggested that this could be related to mental health stigma.
- ▶ Effectiveness could be improved with increased coordination and warm handoffs between programs and organizations.
- ▶ There should be a focus on upstream system improvements (including policies at the county and state level.)
- ▶ A few significant gaps where there are no or not enough services to meet needs were noted:
 - ▷ Substance abuse, which is especially a concern with the legalization of marijuana
 - ▷ Immigration advocacy and support related to deportation concerns
 - ▷ Mental health
 - ▷ Educating parents, including foster families, to understand the effects of trauma
 - ▷ Housing affordability
 - ▷ Housing support and navigation services, specifically in East County
 - ▷ Navigation from the regional center, which provide developmental services to children 0-3, to school districts, which provide those services to children 4 and older

4. Services that make the biggest difference for families

The services mentioned fall into two categories:

- ▶ Services that support essential needs
 - ▷ Housing
 - ▷ Support getting children insured and connected to care
 - ▷ Mental health services
 - ▷ Quality child care
 - ▷ Regional centers
- ▶ Services that build parents' capacity
 - ▷ Parenting support to promote healthy attachment with child care provided, or offered family style
 - ▷ Parent education/leadership training,
 - ▷ First 5 Centers
 - ▷ Parent advocacy groups

Participants feel that these services are effective because:

- ▶ They are available at no cost to families.

- ▶ Meeting their most basic needs enables families to focus on other aspects of their family life and their children's lives.
- ▶ Services are “well placed” and match the needs of their communities.
- ▶ The programs are staffed with community members; clients see themselves reflected in staff.

5. New programs or services that should be developed

- ▶ A one-stop shop for families to access support that has co-located space for key public entities and community-based organizations (CBOs) (following a family resource center model but focusing on co-location of services and not just case management and referral.)
- ▶ More parent education options should be made available with childcare or focus on serving the parent and child together.
- ▶ There should be better coordination between school districts and CBOs, and opportunities for CBOs to partner with districts to serve families.
- ▶ There should be more emphasis on county-level coordination and advocacy. Participants would like to see greater investment at the county level, and mentioned the bond measures that nearby counties have recently developed.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The following considerations and opportunities were identified during the course of the interviews and listening session.

Considerations

- ▶ By beginning its early childhood investment strategy with a period of listening and learning, the Lesher Foundation has started a valuable and much-appreciated dialogue with the people and organizations working in early childhood in the county.
 - ▷ Interviewees were very happy both that the Lesher Foundation has decided to invest in early childhood (“Early childhood is where it’s at.”) and that the Foundation reached out to them as part of the strategy. They expressed the desire to continue to have dialogue as the Foundation begins to invest.
 - ▷ Listening session attendees were excited to make connections with one another at the session—almost all of them were unknown to one another despite doing similar work in the county.
- ▶ “Early childhood” can be defined narrowly or broadly when considering the organizations that impact it. During both touchpoints, participants mentioned non-traditional early childhood partners who could be brought to the table: An interviewee mentioned the Foundations’ strong connections to the arts as an opportunity to engage the broader community on early childhood issues. Listening session participants noted the absence of housing and immigration organizations at the session.

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- ▶ The importance of parents was woven throughout the conversations. Participants noted both the significant challenges facing parents and the huge opportunities. Mental health, trauma, and poverty are significant, high-priority barriers parents face that must be addressed. But participants have also seen huge gains through efforts to simply support parents, give them a community, and build their skills—and therefore their confidence. As a few interviewees said, “Making parents feel good about being parents is so important,” and, “We heard a mom at one of our programs say, ‘I didn’t just want to be a mom, I wanted to be a parent.’”

Key Opportunities

- ▶ **Host Provider Cafés in East County.** The café model has been growing in recent years as a low-cost but effective method of making connections and building community capacity by raising awareness of available services and general resource and information sharing between front-line community-based organizations (CBOs) and public agency staff. They can create opportunities for idea sharing, thought partnership, and collaboration. They can also include partners who aren’t traditionally at the table for early childhood discussions.
- ▶ **Invest in parent-focused programs and services.** Support parent education and skill-building to help them understand child development and learning, as well as efforts to create communities for parents. Similar to the Provider Cafes mentioned above, Parent Cafes are a tool to serve this purpose, as are place-based approaches such as the First 5 Centers. Services need to include child care or have a child-parent component.
- ▶ **Advocate for a greater presence of public agency critical services, such as housing in East County.** Participants across the board noted the growing need in East County.
- ▶ **Support outreach efforts that aim to break down stigmas and raise awareness of services.** These might be dedicated outreach campaigns or efforts embedded in organizations’ programs and services.
- ▶ **Co-located services.** Advocate for or fund the basic infrastructure of a “one-stop shop” site where different county agency staff and CBO staff could be co-located. In this model, rather than having one CBO staff and coordinate services for families, this site could be more of a shell, perhaps with one office manager, where the space and functionality is sustained by agencies and organizations paying to use the space.

APPENDIX

Interviews were conducted with:

Sean Casey, Executive Director, and Ruth Fernandez, Deputy Director
First 5 Contra Costa County

Molly Wertz, Executive Director
Tandem, Partners in Early Learning

Pete Caldwell, Executive Director, and Kelly Ransom, Director of Mental Health Services
We Care Children

Cathy Botello, Executive Director
C.O.P.E. Family Support

John Jones, Executive Director
CoCo Kids

Camilla Rand, Community Services Director
Community Services Bureau, Employment and Human Services Department

The following participants attended the listening session:

Ali Uscilka, MPH, Program Director
Healthy & Active Before 5

Candida Duperroir, Rand & Program Manager
Coco Kids

Ellen De Senna, Assistant Manager
Community Services Bureau, Contra Costa County

Gabi Rivas, Community Engagement Program Coordinator
First Five Contra Costa

Gloria Pantoja, Family Case Manager
Village Community Resource Center

Joe Briseno, Facilitator
COPE Family Support Center

Laura Rodriguez, Community Literacy Specialist
Tandem, Partners

Melissa Cassem, Family Intervention Specialist - In-home Behavior Support
We Care Services for Children

Nicole Hermann-Metzger, PsyD, Clinical Psychologist
Brighter Beginnings

Odessa Caton, MA, District Director
Aspiranet

Priscilla Vasquez, Childcare Facilitator
Ujima Family Recovery Services

This report was prepared by



This report was created for

