

FALL 2018

The Story of North Carolina Counties
County **QUARTERLY**
MAGAZINE



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TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY'S PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD OUTCOMES

A Rural Model and Gateway to Sesame Street in Communities

By Lacy Pate | NCACC Public Relations Manager

Starting in 2015, Transylvania County embarked on a new approach to address the needs of children ages zero to five. The Early Child Initiative or "ECI" was established to collaborate with community partners on shared goals, using data to prioritize county efforts to improve outcomes for kids.

Transylvania County Commissioner Page Lemel and County Manager, Jaime Laughter joined forces to spearhead the initiative, which brings together a wide range of local stakeholders, including government agencies like Transylvania County Parks and Recreation, the public library, the department of social services, the health department, public and private schools, and non-profit organizations like

Smart Start, United Way, Family Place, El Centro, and Rise and Shine. ECI is also supported by county administration and the Transylvania County Board of Commissioners.

Commissioner Lemel discussed the impetus for trying a new approach to early childhood outcomes. "When I saw data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction that showed our children were far below kindergarten readiness standards, I wanted to understand the full range of issues that may be contributing factors. I brought an idea to Jaime to bring together everyone who touches this issue to make data driven decisions and leverage all the collective resources in the

county," she said.

Using Commissioner Lemel's position as an elected official and Laughter's excellent planning skills, the duo was able to organize the key stakeholders to develop a common vision for progress on early childhood outcomes. "As an elected official, you have a lot of opportunity to make a difference in your community and bring people together. If you hold a meeting people will come," Commissioner Lemel explained.

"We created a platform to allow the community to rally, and everyone stepped up. We began our first meeting by introducing each organization, which was an accomplishment in its own right. It increased awareness about who was doing what in the community," said Lemel.

The concept behind ECI is to facilitate engagement among all the stakeholders in the county that play a significant role in the lives of children. The group convenes on a regular basis to identify opportunities and challenges, prioritize

goals, and devise strategies to collectively meet them.

"We kept the time commitment realistic for stakeholders, who agreed to attend an hour long meeting once a month. Each subcommittee is responsible for reporting out key developments to the entire group. This approach keeps everyone accountable and it keeps us moving forward," explained Commissioner Lemel.

In some ways, the concept is similar to the collective impact model because it establishes a community-wide focus on a shared set of goals. The difference, as Jaime Laughter explains, is that the collective impact model typically involves the creation of a separate non-profit entity to manage the initiative. However, rural counties like Transylvania County, with limited resources and few donors typically don't have the means to stand up a separate collective impact organization.

Transylvania County, embracing the collective approach, got creative and



Jaime Laughter, Transylvania County Manager delivers remarks at unveiling of GET SET Transylvania on October 27, 2018. Photo by Jenni Chandler Photography.

"We created a platform to allow the community to rally, and everyone stepped up..."

“We all own the initiative and the thing I am most proud of is that our collective mentality is ‘we.’”

developed a collaborative strategy that communities with limited means can pursue. ECI’s approach leverages all the capabilities that the stakeholders bring to bear and organizes everyone into a focused effort to address specific goals chosen by the group. This maximizes the impact to the community. “As the county, our role is to hold the space, serve as the facilitator, and advocate as part of the county platform whatever we decide collectively,” Laughter explained.

The absence of an overarching organization managing the initiative, means that ECI does not take a top down approach. The leaders consist of a small and manageable group, making it easy to adapt to new challenges as they arise. Everyone is committed to the relationships that were built through the initiative and no one seeks individual credit. “It’s all about shared values and

interest in working toward our shared goals,” described Laughter. The first major deliverable produced by ECI was the release of the State of the Young Child in Transylvania County report in December 2015. The report was a culmination of a series of summer and fall meetings that discussed various aspects of children’s issues such as health and mental health, education and child care, family life and poverty, and recreation, and narrow down the focus for the initiative. Commissioner Lemel spoke about the importance of the report, “once we pulled the data together, it refined our work. We redirected our efforts as a result of the findings.”

“We sought out data to identify the major issues children in the community were facing and compared Transylvania’s performance with other counties and state averages,” said Laughter. The report drew on a lot of sources for data

including the census, state economic reporting, information collected by the health departments and the Department of Health and Human Services, among others.

Comparing Transylvania County data to state averages helped the county understand which issues are common across the state, and which are locally unique. As the report was developed, it also became clear that the data driven approach was helping to distinguish between real and perceived issues in the community.

For example, initially, there was interest in focusing on educating parents about the dangers associated with co-sleeping. However, when

infant death data was reviewed, it became apparent that this was not a statistically significant issue for Transylvania County. As a result, the issue was taken off the priorities list, allowing the group to focus time, attention and resources on more critical areas of need.

The report also brought to light issues that no one expected. The county learned that the rate of babies being born addicted to substances was seven times the state average for per 100,000 births

in 2015. The report also found that 78 percent of kindergartners tested below or far below proficiency at the beginning of the 2015 school year.

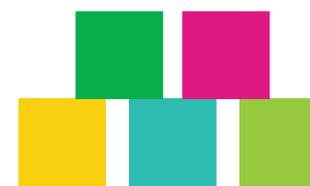
In addition, the disparity between family income and child care costs also emerged as a major issue in Transylvania County. Specifically, the data showed

that Transylvania County’s child care rates are the sixth highest in the state, while the average weekly wage for workers is significantly less than the state average.

According to the report, the average two-income working household in Transylvania County can expect to spend 27.8 percent of its income on one child in care and over half for two children.

Laughter added more context to the data. “It costs almost double to send an infant for care in the county than to send a child to a public college in the state,” she said.

Since the creation of ECI and the release of the 2015 report, Transylvania County has seen improvements in services to children and new partnerships. The following list of activities highlights some of the things the county attributes to the ECI approach, and the list keeps growing.



Transylvania County Early Childhood Initiative Activities

- Transylvania Public Health engaged with Dr. Jim Hartye, the chair of the monthly Substance Abuse in Pregnancy Workshop through the Behavioral Health division of Mission Health, to address drug addiction during pregnancy and in newborns and has identified in-county treatment options;
- Head Start slots were expanded through a partnership between Western Carolina Community Action and the school system;
- NC Pre-K slots through Smart Start were expanded by four times the level of pre-ECI levels;
- A mental health forum was held and a kiosk by Vaya Health was installed at the health department;
- Hendersonville Pediatrics added a behavioral consultant and has a partnership with Smart Start for “Reach Out and Read;”
- A workshop was held for preschool and kindergarten teachers to increase communication and discuss different approaches to learning;
- Kindergarten readiness rallies coordinated by Western Carolina Community Action were held to inform parents of available resources to support their child’s learning;
- A town hall meeting was held on child care, which was attended by 119 people;
- A resource was created to provide families information about summer events and programs;
- Partnerships were created between the Family Place and the library;
- Family Place started play and learn kits and Circle of Parents Groups;
- Parks and Recreation added indoor preschool playtime and a summer camp for preschoolers, as well as Start Smart Basketball for 4-5 year olds;
- A family dinner series, from healthy cooking to parenting classes, was coordinated through Family Place and is expanding to Rosman this year;
- Community Resilience Training in March was tied in with ECI;
- The library has preschool kits and new programming for children 0-5 years old;
- Breakfast with Santa program was expanded to include more than 200 participants in the first year and around 600 in 2017;
- Brevard College is starting a new early education program with outdoor focus; and
- Community Play-groups is starting as a partnership between the Family Place and El Centro, thanks to a United Way grant.

Laughter views Transylvania County’s commitment to investing in early childhood success as part of a long-term plan for economic viability. “If we are a community where it’s great to be 0-5 then we are a great community. When children feel cared for by their whole community family, then we

have succeeded. And, there is a clear economic return on investment. Early learning is critical to developing strong productive citizens, and ensuring access to affordable, quality childcare enables our citizens to participate in our workforce and economy.



Investing in early childhood is investing in your economy,” expressed Laughter.

Transylvania County’s approach to improving early childhood outcomes is gaining attention. In February, Commissioner Page Lemel was a featured panelist at the 2018 Emerging Issues Forum “kidonomics: Investing Early in Our Future.” The forum featured leading national and local experts in business, early childhood, economic development, education, finance and government, nonprofit and workforce development to help communities design, implement, and fund, childhood initiatives that can make a difference in local communities.

After the event, Commissioner Lemel had the opportunity to meet Dr.



Page Lemel, Transylvania County Commissioner (right) and daughter Catherine pose for a photo in Big Bird's nest on the set of Sesame Street. Photo courtesy of Richard Termine, Sesame Street Workshop.

Jeanette Betancourt, the Senior Vice President of Social Impact at Sesame Workshop, the non-profit educational organization behind Sesame Street. Dr. Betancourt delivered the keynote speech on behalf of the organization’s Sesame Street in Communities program, which works with local community providers to deliver professional development resources and multi-media learning tools for young children and their caregivers. They discussed the unique challenges rural communities face and Transylvania County’s ECI approach.

“I told Jeanette how much I appreciated her comments and shared my perspective as a commissioner from a rural area. ‘Most of America lives in a small rural community with limited resources and a rural pilot would be a great addition to the Sesame Street in Communities program,’” Commissioner Lemel recounted.

The conversation sparked interest and Commissioner Lemel immediately followed up with Dr. Betancourt to share more information about Transylvania

County’s ECI initiative. This set the wheels in motion and within a few months, representatives from Sesame Street made a site visit in May to Transylvania County to discuss the prospect of a partnership.

“Within minutes of meeting Page, it became clear that Sesame Street in Communities had a home in Transylvania County. The collaborative effort across the county to give every child a healthy and resilient start is incredible,” said Dr. Betancourt. “Transylvania County is dedicated to aligning services to best serve children and families, particularly those most vulnerable, and we knew Sesame Street in Communities could support them in those efforts.”

The partnership would be part of a larger effort to provide resources and information customized for the local community. By June, preparations were underway to launch the initiative, “Get Set Transylvania.” While Sesame Street in Communities has launched similar pilot projects in Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Guilford County,

North Carolina, its partnership with Transylvania County will be the first pilot in a rural area.

Commissioner Lemel described the advantages to being a rural community. “We know each other and have established a great partnership with a collaborative spirit. We realize efficiencies without duplicating services, and no one is in it to receive credit. Everyone

is truly committed and sincere in their intentions,” she said.

Transylvania County’s collaborative approach to early childhood outcomes helped make possible the partnership with Sesame Street in Communities. It was the gateway that enabled the partners to develop a county-specific toolkit designed to meet the unique needs of children in Transylvania County.

“This is a tremendous effort on the part of Sesame Street to work with us to address the challenges for children in our community. It’s a matter of building trust, and here is this wonderfully trusted brand that only wants to do well by children. Sesame Street is well known and respected, and the brand will help us introduce parents to all kinds of new, free resources. It will also provide free

materials for early educators, who can take the curriculum and put it in the hands of children,” said Commissioner Lemel.

This October, Transylvania County and Sesame Street in Communities officially launched their new partnership, “Get Set Transylvania.” For more information visit [www. https://getset-tc.org](https://getset-tc.org). ■

GET SET Transylvania stakeholders celebrate their new partnership with Sesame Street in Communities. Photo by Jenni Chandler Photography.

