

# Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance

## Building Blocks to School Readiness

The Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance (Bt3) was established in April 2015, to develop a regional approach toward ensuring that young children living in Clinton, Essex, and Franklin counties and the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation have the resources they need to succeed in school and life. Our mission and vision are as follows:

**Vision** - All young children are healthy, learning, and thriving in families that are supported by a full complement of services and resources essential for success in school and life.

**Mission** - Create a regional structure to design and manage strategies that support a comprehensive and sustainable early childhood system as evidenced by school readiness.

To achieve its vision and mission, Bt3 organized its work around five key strategies or building blocks. It is the Bt3 Alliance's belief that by making these five building block services available to all children and families in need, we will have come a long way toward ensuring that every child in the region has the supportive environment they need to be successful. What follows is a description of each building block and the Alliance's progress to date in making these building block supports and services readily available.

### **Building Block 1: Universal Nurse Home Visiting for Pregnant Women and Families with Newborn Children**

**Description:** Anyone who has had a child knows that there are times when you have doubts and questions and wonder whether you have the skills and knowledge needed to be a successful parent. We are fortunate in the North Country that each county has public health nurses who visit pregnant women and families with newborn children to answer questions and make sure families are aware of and connected to the community resources they need to raise healthy children. This is a community resource that is targeted at all families. In making these visits, the nurses represent the community in welcoming every child to the community, while answering parents' questions, supporting breast feeding, and making sure every child is connected to a pediatric practice. Typically, families only receive a single visit, but occasionally family request repeated visits over a short period. An important component of universal nurse home visiting is that families needing additional resources are referred to other providers.

**Target population:** All pregnant women and families with new born children.

**Goal and Challenges:** Our goal is for every family that would like a nurse home visit would receive one or more visits and that each home visit would offer the opportunity to provide information on the range of resources available in the community to support families. Currently, due to declining state and federal funding, county nurse home visiting programs only serve a small proportion of pregnant women and families with newborns.

**Progress:** Bt3 is working to ensure that all pregnant women and families with new born children have the opportunity for a home visit. In addition, Bt3 has been chosen to participate in a pilot test of a New Parent Kit developed by the NYS Parenting Education Partnership. The New Parent Kit includes the *New Parent Guide* – a kind of owners’ manual for families with newborns. The Guide provides advice for new parents, including information on available supports and services. The kit also includes a helpful book - *What to Do When Your Child Gets Sick*. Bt3 and the Adirondack Foundation are also working to provide families with Safe Sleepers and other materials that families need. Bt3 will be working with each of the county nurse home visiting programs and others who work with pregnant women and families with newborns to provide the New Parent Kit to the families they visit. The BT3 Alliance will also investigate ways to access funding opportunities made available through health care reform and Medicaid redesign to support the expansion of these services.

## **Building Block 2: Family Resource Centers and Evidenced-based Parenting Education**

**Description:** Family Resource Centers can serve as lifelines for families with young children. In 2014, 1,682 individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and socio-economic levels made a total of 20,740 visits to the four family resource centers in our area. They attended parenting education classes in family-friendly settings, received referrals to resources for basic needs, brought their children for developmental screenings, learned about maternal-child health, borrowed parenting books and dvd’s, and built social support networks with other families. Family Resource Centers build the parenting skills and confidence which help ensure children function well at home and at school. They are an especially valuable resource in rural areas where there are few opportunities for networking, and social isolation of parents with young children can become a serious problem.

**Target population:** All families in the region.

**Goal and Challenges:** Our goal is to make these centers and resources readily accessible to all families across the region. It would be preferable to have an established family resource center operating on a regular basis within 20 miles of every family. Due to limited funding, however, our strategy is to maximize existing locations (e.g., schools, libraries, and Head Start centers)

and existing resources to make family resource center services accessible in as many areas as possible on a regular basis. The challenge is that there is no existing dedicated source of funding to support center development.

**Progress:** The Bt3 Alliance is currently working with parents in Saranac Lake on the design and development of family resource center in that community. In addition, Bt3 established a small group that investigated the availability of existing facilities and resources in Essex County.

### **Building Block 3: Comprehensive Home Visiting Services for Vulnerable Families**

**Description:** Many families can raise healthy and happy children with only occasional use of supports from outside the family. A small but significant percentage of families struggle with child rearing often due to the effects of poverty, mental health and substance abuse issues, and other challenges. Despite the need to overcome numerous obstacles, these families love their children and, like every family, they want what is best for them. Programs such as Healthy Families New York in Clinton County and Early Head Start in Essex County have been developed to provide vulnerable families with a comprehensive range of intensive and ongoing resources directed at both the parents and the children, so that the families can become self-sufficient and the children are prepared for success in school. Comprehensive home visiting programs provide very intensive supports on a weekly basis for anywhere from one to five years.

**Target population:** All vulnerable pregnant women and families with new born children (i.e., families living in poverty or suffering the effects of mental illness, substance abuse, and other issues).

**Goal and Challenges:** Our goal is to ensure that all vulnerable families across the region have access to comprehensive home visiting programs. That means providing these resources to unserved vulnerable families in Franklin County and the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. Until recently, there were no comprehensive home visiting programs for vulnerable families on the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. In Franklin County, JCEO Head Start recently received permission from the Office of Head Start to convert 36 Head Start slots to Early Head Start. That will help meet the need, but it is expected that there are at least 60 additional vulnerable families that will remain unserved without additional resources. There is also a need to serve vulnerable families in Essex County that have incomes above the Early Head Start eligibility guidelines (100 percent of poverty and below).

**Progress:** The Bt3 Alliance has supported grant writing efforts to expand Early Head Start and Healthy Families New York to meet the comprehensive service needs of vulnerable families across the region. Recently, the Office of Children and Family Services announced that it has awarded a five-year grant for \$1 million to Behavioral Health Services North to expand Healthy

Families New York home visiting services to Franklin County and the St. Regis Mohawk Nation. Grant reviewers remarked that the existence of a strong alliance of service providers was one of the reasons why Behavioral Health Services North was awarded the grant. The Bt3 Alliance recently contracted with a grant writing specialist to support the Alliance and its member agencies in writing successful proposals. Efforts will continue to identify and address the unmet need for comprehensive home visiting programs in the region.

#### **Building Block 4: High-Quality Early Childhood Education**

**Description:** There are numerous early childhood education programs serving young children and families throughout the region. These programs include family, group-family, and center-based child care, Early Head Start and Head Start, Universal Prekindergarten, nursery schools and preschools, and programs for children with developmental delays and disabilities. Most of these programs are regulated by either the state or federal government. While Early Head Start and Head Start performance standards are comprehensive and support programs in improving program quality, child care regulations are basically designed to ensure the health and safety of the children without regard to other aspects of high-quality programming. Decades of research have shown that high-quality early childhood education results in long-term benefits for children. Study after study has shown that those children who receive high-quality early childhood education are more likely to succeed in school and in life, starting in kindergarten and continuing through adulthood. One study (i.e., High Scope) has tracked children who participated in a high-quality, comprehensive early childhood education programs for over 40 years. The study found that participating children were less likely than their peers, who did not participate in such a program, to become involved in the juvenile and criminal justice system, had lower rates of teen-age pregnancy, were more likely to graduate from high school, and had higher incomes. The foundation for this success must be laid early on, when children are infants and toddlers. High quality care is essential for enhancing learning and development for the long term with high economic returns.

**Target population:** All children 6 weeks to five years of age in need of care and education.

**Goal and Challenges:** Our goal is to make high-quality early childhood education readily accessible to all families in the region. While some early childhood education programs, such as Universal Prekindergarten, Early Head Start and Head Start receive state and federal funding that pays for the cost of high-quality services, the largest proportion of programs (i.e., child care) rely on child care subsidies and parent fees to cover the cost of care. Unfortunately, with the exception of programs serving predominantly higher income families, neither of these sources of funding is sufficient to cover the costs of high-quality services.

**Progress:** The Bt3 Alliance has been actively supporting the expansion of QUALITYstarsNY in the region. QUALITYstarsNY is New York State’s early childhood education continuous quality improvement program. Programs participating in QUALITYstarsNY receive guided quality improvement planning, technical assistance, fiscal support for professional development and, curricula materials, and supplies and equipment. Bt3 works closely with the quality improvement specialist working with programs in the region to provide whatever assistance she needs to help the programs improve their services. This includes program recruitment and making information about QUALITYstarsNY readily available to early childhood education programs and providers. Other activities in this area include making information available about the Small Grants for Small Children program. Small Grants for Small Children is an Adirondack Foundation project that supports early childhood education programs buy equipment, pay for professional development, and other program needs. Bt3 also supported the Child Care Council of the North Country and the ACAP Child Care Resource and Referral Program’s successful application for the Adirondack Foundation’s Generous Act funding to recruit and provide preliminary training to new early childhood education providers in areas of the region that lack providers. In the meantime, Bt3 is working with ACAP to replicate School Fuel in Essex County and, if it is successful, Bt3 will support its expansion across the region. School Fuel was developed in Connecticut and is designed to support early childhood educators help parents limit the amount of screen time that their children engage in and make sure that the programming their children do watch is developmentally appropriate.

### **Building Block 5: High-Quality, Comprehensive Health Care**

**Description:** Children cannot learn and be successful in school if they are not healthy. Therefore, receiving high-quality comprehensive health care is critical for every child to get a good start in life. By providing routine developmental screening, pediatricians can help identify problems with development early to ameliorate problems and maximize growth and development. While 15 percent of children will suffer from a developmental disability and the positive effects of early intervention are well known, only 22 percent of children receive routine developmental screens. Since nearly every child goes to a pediatrician for well child visits, primary health care providers can serve not only to provide high-quality health care, but also act as the gateway to other supports and services the child and his or her family may need.

**Target population:** All children birth to five years of age.

**Goal and Challenges:** The North Country region is fortunate in that is a well-organized rural health care network and a high percentage of children (93%) have health insurance. There are no statistics to show what percentage of children receive routine developmental screening, but statistics on routine screening in New York State and the nation at large are low. This is true even though studies have shown that intervention prior to kindergarten has huge academic,

social, and economic benefits, including savings to society of \$30 000 to \$100 000 per child. While the rates of routine developmental screening are low, primary health care providers often identify children and families who need additional supports and services for a wide variety of issues and problems. Unfortunately, it is difficult for primary care practices to have a thorough understanding and connections to resources that exist in the community to meet child and family needs.

**Progress:** The Adirondack Bt3 Alliance is working on replicating a national program model *Help Me Grow* in the region to support primary health care practices implement evidenced-based screening approaches and to make it easier for pediatricians and other health care practitioners to connect their patients to community resources. A small work team has been established to investigate the benefits of replication and has decided that establishing a *Help Me Grow* initiative in the region would support significant system improvements that would greatly benefit children and families. Currently, the Western New York Help Me Grow initiative, which is being supported by the Western and Central New York Health Foundation to replicate the program model statewide. Bt3 is working with them to be one of the first communities in the state to replicate this proven model.