

Building Block 3: Comprehensive Home Visiting for Vulnerable Families

What is Comprehensive Home Visiting for Vulnerable Families? While there is no silver bullet for ending childhood poverty, or the negative health, educational, and child welfare impacts it can have, evidence-based comprehensive home visiting programs for vulnerable pregnant women and families with new born children comes close. Comprehensive home visiting refers to a constellation of supports that serve to strengthen vulnerable families with young children by meeting with families in their homes and directly providing or connecting them with health, psychological counseling, parenting education, and other community resources, depending on each family's unique needs.

Home visiting takes a dual-generation, whole-family approach to strengthening families with young children. For parents, it focuses on developing parenting skills and helping them address stressors in their lives (i.e., poverty, unstable housing, social isolation, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse). For children, it serves to enhance their social-emotional and cognitive development, while working to improve the physical and mental health of both the parents and the children. In the short-term, home visiting helps to prevent or reduce the frequency and severity of child abuse and neglect because, through home visiting, parents learn how to manage frustration, discipline effectively, and ask for help when they need it.

Why does Comprehensive Home Visiting for Vulnerable Families matter? Over the last several years, the number of children involved in and rate of indicated reports of child abuse and neglect in the North Country region (Clinton, Essex, and Franklin Counties) has remained steady, but significantly higher than the statewide rate. In 2010, the number of children involved in indicated cases of child abuse and maltreatment in the North Country was 1,004 and the rate was 23.6 per 1000 children. The rate for New York State was 18.6. By 2015 the number of children in indicated cases was 991, but due to a decline in the population, the rate rose to 29.8 per 1000 as compared to a statewide rate of 13.8.

Many families can raise healthy and happy children with only occasional and limited supports and services from outside the family. A small but significant percentage of families, however, 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 and Franklin counties and Early Head Start in Essex and Franklin counties have been developed to provide vulnerable families with a comprehensive range of supports and services 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 services on a weekly basis for anywhere from one to five years.

Comprehensive home visiting has proven benefits for all members of participating families, including improved birth outcomes for newborns; increased high school graduation rates for children; increased workforce participation and lower rates of welfare dependency of parents; and reduced instances of child maltreatment in families. Home visiting is effective because it builds on each family's strengths, and addresses each family's weaknesses either directly or by connecting the family to other community resources.

What is the return on dollars invested in Comprehensive Home Visiting Services for Vulnerable Families? While the cost-benefit ratio varies by program, overall, the benefits of evidenced-based home visiting programs have been shown to outweigh the costs by a range of \$2.24 for each dollar invested to as much as \$5.70. The average annual costs for home visiting programs serving each family ranges from \$2,400 to \$7,600. At the same time, the average annual cost of foster care averages between \$23,000 to \$56,000. Some of the gains achieved by home visiting programs include:

- 50 percent decrease in child abuse and neglect and need for child welfare services;
- 50 percent reduction in the number of babies born with low birth weight and associated health care costs;
- 50 percent reduction in language delays and improved reading and math scores; and
- Improved economic stability and self-sufficiency of families who participate in the programs.

What needs to be done to make Comprehensive Home Visiting Services for Vulnerable Families available to all families who need these services in the region?

The goal of the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance is to make these services available to all vulnerable families across the region. Until recently, there were no comprehensive home visiting services in Franklin County and the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. To address this service gap, the Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance supported grant writing efforts to expand 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. In addition, JCEO Head Start recently received permission from the Office of Head Start to convert 36 Head Start slots to Early Head Start. These additions will help meet the need, but it is estimated that there are at least 60 additional vulnerable families that will remain unserved across the region without additional resources.

The Adirondack Birth to Three Alliance will continue to work with Behavioral Health Services North and Early Head Start in Essex and Franklin Counties and others to accurately gauge the need for comprehensive home visiting and seek funding to meet those needs.

Note: A significant portion of this brief was drawn from two documents developed by the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy: *Home is Where the Start Is: Expanding Home Visiting to Strengthening All New York Families* and *The Home Visiting in New York State Info Graphic*.