



REIMAGINING SUPPORT SERVICE PROVISION FOR FAMILIES IN NEED: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO INTERCONNECTED ISSUES

Michael Niyompong, Mental Health Center of Denver

Access to strong, reliable health and human service resources is critical to helping families move toward economic security and educational success. The research is clear — the best way to prevent problems is not to narrowly reduce risks, but to broadly strengthen individuals, families, and community assets around children. But too often, we try to disassociate these outcomes or address them separately without acknowledging the inherent interconnectedness. Instead, imagine a scenario where families in need could access high-quality education and health and human services all in one place. That is my vision for children and families in Colorado.



In 2016, the Mental Health Center of Denver — where I work as vice president of strategic community partnerships — opened the 57,000-square-foot Dahlia Campus for Health and Well-Being in the Northeast Park Hill neighborhood. In addition to the standard portfolio of mental health services, the campus offers a comprehensive array of services and resources, including early childhood education, a pediatric dental clinic, access to naturally grown produce and protein, and spaces to foster community connection, play, and growth. The full array of services offered on the campus is the result of a concerted, three-year effort to listen to and incorporate the most pressing needs of the Northeast Park Hill community as defined by the people of the community.

More recently, alumna of the 2015 class of Ascend Fellows and CEO of Starfish Family Services Ann Kalass celebrated the grand opening of a comprehensive, one-stop shop to connect Michigan families with young children to the development, social, and emotional health care services they need. So this idea is not new, but making related services more easily accessible for families who need them is transformational. I want to replicate and scale models like the Mental Health Center of Denver's Dahlia Campus in Northeast Park Hill and Starfish Family Services' center in Michigan for Denver's Sun Valley and surrounding communities.

To do so, we will have to break silos across the education and health and human services sectors. Through increased collaboration, visibility, and understanding, we will build systems to support capacity building and leveraging and coordination of services.

This work cannot be done without engaging community members and those for whom this project will be built. So we have to employ human-centered approaches like design thinking to make sure that we are building exactly what the community needs.

We began a process to identify potential construction sites this past fall. By fall 2019, we should be well underway in a community engagement and design process to flesh out details. As service providers with genuinely good intentions, it is easy for us to become hyper-focused on the services we provide and the avenues through which we work on behalf of families. But we know that families' hardships do not exist in vacuums. If we can appreciate that perspective and — even within our niches — honor the value of greater coordination of services for those we serve, we can amplify our individual and collective impacts on families in ways that are life changing.



Michael Niyompong
Vice President of Strategic Community Partnerships
Mental Health Center of Denver

Michael Niyompong is the vice president of strategic community partnerships for Mental Health Center of Denver and is responsible for working with community partners and businesses to meet the mental health and well-being needs of the community. Previously, he served as chief operating officer at Clayton Early Learning, Colorado's leading catalyst in providing access to high-quality early care and education.

"The Colorado Children and Families Fellowship at Ascend at the Aspen Institute enabled my co-Fellows to build and deepen our relationships which in turn facilitated collaborative efforts that would otherwise likely not happen for the benefit of children and families in Colorado."