



MedStar Georgetown University Hospital

The Powerful Combination of Lived Experience and Clinical Training

How the Family Leadership Certificate Program is launching
a new generation of Community Mental Health Workers

Summary

When a family leader's lived experience is combined with clinical training in infant and early childhood mental health, a powerful combination emerges. Family leaders become Community Mental Health Workers, who can bring their insight and training to serve their community in unique ways, and at the same time, can improve their own career prospects and economic empowerment. The Family Leadership Certificate Program at Georgetown University, in partnership with the Early Childhood Innovation Network's Community Mental Health Worker workforce development program through MedStar Georgetown University Hospital, provides a powerful and efficient pathway for this innovative approach to community health.

About ECIN

Formed in 2016 as a partnership between Children's National Health System (CNHS) and MedStar Georgetown University Hospital (MGUH), the Early Childhood Innovation Network (ECIN) is a community-wide initiative to build resilience in families and catalyze systematic changes for entities that serve children and families in DC. ECIN has grown into a broad partnership among grass-roots community organizations, government agencies, and social support networks. ECIN is nationally recognized for its family-driven and community-based approach, addressing racial inequity in its efforts.

ECIN recognizes that strengthening families' overall mental well-being, physical health, financial stability, and parent-child relationships will enhance child outcomes. ECIN's strategy is to enhance adults' capacities to provide nurturing environments for children from underserved communities in DC to buffer the impacts of toxic stress and to prepare children for a lifetime of optimal health and well-being. To accomplish these objectives, ECIN identifies, adapts, and implements strategies that show promise in building the capacities of parents, caregivers, and providers such as pediatricians, early educators, and social service agencies, to improve early childhood behavioral-health outcomes through education, action, research, and advocacy.

The Need for Community Mental Health Workers

Family functioning directly impacts young children's wellbeing and life-long outcomes. Washington, DC communities need expertise in infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH). Factors such as distance, cost, and stigma lead to low access rates to mental health (MH) care. Over 22% of DC children have experienced two or more adverse childhood events (ACES) including trauma, abuse, and neglect—all strongly correlated to MH issues. Structural racism in DC has impacted 70,000 youth and has led to MH conditions. Only 20% under age 18 receive any MH care. Medicaid and MH Rehabilitation Services serve a scant 30% of DC children diagnosed with a MH need. Family social determinants of health (SDOH), such as housing status, nutritional quality, neighborhood safety, and educational attainment contribute to 80% of health outcomes, including early brain development. IECMH professionals identify children and families at risk. and connect them to resources the adults in households need to buffer



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young children from the impacts ACES and negative SDOH. There are not enough IECMHC providers or MH workers. Community Mental Health Workers (CMHWs) present a cost-effective solution.

The IECMH Family Leadership/Community Mental Health Worker Certificate

CMHWs share common attributes with and/or have a clear understanding of the communities they serve and can help reduce ACEs and mitigate the impacts of SDOH. CMHWs' lived experiences are central to their ability to connect and provide culturally relevant information. While they face many of the same stressors as those they serve, few community helpers and early childhood (EC) providers in DC receive the training they need to identify and provide support for the external factors that impact children and families. In response, we have developed a training and certification program for CMHWs that engages historically marginalized caregivers of young children to train them to work in their own communities to support and connect parents, children, and caregivers to resources. Our CHW educational model and proposed apprenticeship network creates a service and professional development bridge between communities and the medical, early childhood, public health, or social service organizations that need them. Community voices and the students from the pilot year of our program told us that this training is essential. To carry our students and communities forward, we must build a career path for graduates. Our revised certificate program creates this pipeline. The IECMH Family Leadership/Community Health Worker certificate has a compounding, bidirectional purpose: we will train and educate historically marginalized community members to serve their own communities.

Our Successes To Date

The certificate launched 2020 in order promote economic mobility of families in the health and mental health professions and to diversify the workforce of behavioral health by adding a professional role for Black families with lived experience to provide prevention and promotion supports. A total of 32 students are currently enrolled in Cohort 4. In Cohort 3, 23 Certificate students graduated in June 2024. Across Cohorts 1-3, 62 students gained workforce experience through additional practicum experiences in early childhood or healthcare settings. Program graduates in cohorts 1-3 realized income gains post-completion.

ECIN also advanced critical policy changes, including integrating multigenerational clinical mental health supports in early learning settings. The team provided advocacy education at performance and budget oversight hearings on community mental health workers and the Family Leadership Certificate program, and engaged in strategic meetings with DC Health and other key DC stakeholders regarding advancing policies and financing to support CMHWs.

For example, ECIN provided advocacy education at DC Council performance and oversight hearings on community mental health workers and the IECMH Family Leadership Certificate Program. ECIN's policy team served as a policy practicum site, engaging a Family Leadership Certificate student who had an interest in policy and advocacy. The team also presented on opportunities for local advocacy for parent leaders in the IECMH Family Leadership Certificate Program.



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There were several changes to the Medicaid Physician Fee Schedule (PFS) in 2024 that will benefit our program and the population that we serve. In March, the District of Columbia approved the Home Visiting Services Reimbursement Amendment Act of 2024, and the DC Department of Behavioral Health approved a code for the ABC intervention. This intervention is a strengths-based model that focuses on building positive parent-child relationships. The brief program, consisting of 10 one-hour weekly sessions, will be delivered in the home by CMHWs. Sessions will emphasize nurturing care, synchronous parenting behaviors, addressing negative parental behavior, and understanding the influences of parents' past experiences. Additionally, at the federal level, the PFS was also changed to allow reimbursements to Community Health Workers. These changes will enable us to develop our workforce pipeline for CMHWs.