Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Wolf Administration Releases New Pennsylvania Statewide Report Categorizing County Need on Maternal, Child & Community Health Issues

Harrisburg, PA – The Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), a joint office between the departments of Education and Human Services, today released a new Family Support Needs Assessment covering needs and challenges experienced by families with young children and opportunities to address these needs and better serve families across Pennsylvania. The assessment, which was developed in partnership with PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, found that substance use, intimate partner violence and mental health challenges are among the most pronounced issues facing young families across urban and rural communities, and shows overall improvement in maternal and child health outcomes across many of Pennsylvania's 67 counties since the last statewide needs assessment in 2014.

"Policymakers should not make decisions without understanding real needs to better inform allocation of resources. The Family Support Needs Assessment gives us the opportunity to monitor progress made through investments and opportunities to better support children and families around Pennsylvania," said Human Services Secretary Teresa Miller. "We know, though, that the COVID-19 pandemic has strained circumstances for families, and needs may be further exacerbated. Data collected through this assessment will be a valuable roadmap as we help the commonwealth and its families recover and move forward."

The federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) requires states to complete a needs assessment every four years to document the statewide landscape of maternal, young child and family health, and assess capacity and scope of home visitation services. The target population for the needs assessment included families with expectant parents or families with young children identified as having elevated needs, particularly around poverty or substance use/opioid use. The needs assessment is a tool by which policymakers can compare maternal and child health county-level metrics across the state and prioritize communities for funding of family support services, including home visiting.

Informed by community surveys, interviews, and statewide data sets, the 2018-2020 Family Support Needs Assessment categorizes Pennsylvania's counties as having "elevated need," "moderate need," and "low need," across six domains: maternal and child health, socioeconomic status, substance use, child safety and maltreatment, community environment and child care. Overall, the findings show that 44 counties have elevated need in at least one of the domains and 15 counties across the state met elevated need thresholds in three or more domains. There was no defined pattern among counties with elevated need (e.g., geography), underscoring that each county has unique strengths and needs. Importantly, the data collection occurred prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in Pennsylvania, and the researchers anticipate that the pandemic will exacerbate many areas of community need.

Despite the elevated need recorded in the report, maternal and child health outcomes have dramatically improved across much of the state since the 2014 federally mandated statewide needs assessment. For example, nearly every county (63) saw improved rates of preterm birth and teen birth; 60 percent of counties saw improvements in infant mortality rates; and half of counties saw a reduction in the percentage of children under age 5 living in poverty. Furthermore, more than half of the 2,220 individuals surveyed for the needs

assessment have a favorable view of the availability and quality of health and social services in Pennsylvania for families with young children.

“The Family Support Needs Assessment gives us a rich understanding of the diversity of Pennsylvania’s communities, specifically a review of the social and environmental factors affecting families with young children and the structural aspects of communities that contribute to inequities in well-being,” said Meredith Matone, DrPH, MHS, scientific director of PolicyLab and lead investigator on the project. “By incorporating the voice of Pennsylvanians and involving stakeholders throughout the process, we believe this report is responsive to the priorities of communities and the data paints a comprehensive picture of child, family and community well-being across the state. We hope this assessment provides individual communities with the information they need to set priorities for and make informed decisions about the delivery of local programs to meet the needs of their families.”

The needs assessment also includes a review of the capacity and scope of the state’s home visiting programs, which provide voluntary, in-home services to under-resourced pregnant moms and families of young children. Pennsylvania significantly increased its investment in evidence-based home visiting over the last four years so that today, six evidence-based home visiting models serve a total of 10,150 families, or about 5 percent of the total eligible population, across all counties.

Additionally, the report spotlights local service providers who are making a difference in addressing the elevated needs of their communities. For example, the needs assessment profiles the Healthy Maternal Opiate Medical Support (MOMs) program in Lackawanna and Susquehenna counties, where maternal substance use needs are elevated. This collaborative, regional effort involving more than 15 community partners is supporting moms struggling with opioid use disorder by providing medical and social support services, such as coordination of medical care and legal and housing support, to mothers before and after the birth of their child.

PolicyLab at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is dedicated to achieving optimal child health and well-being by informing program and policy changes through interdisciplinary research. Founded in 2008, PolicyLab is a Center of Emphasis within the CHOP Research Institute, one of the largest pediatric research institutes in the country. With more than 30 highly regarded faculty and 60 passionate staff who bring expertise from myriad of fields covering health, research and health policy, our work focuses on improving public systems, improving health care delivery and improving child health outcomes. For more information, visit http://www.policylab.chop.edu.

For more information on the Office of Child Development and Early Learning and programs for children and families around Pennsylvania, visit www.dhs.pa.gov or www.raiseyourstar.org.