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Discovery Station Early Head Start
Community Assessment Update
Program Year 2019-2020



2019-2020 Community Assessment Update

Family Services' Discovery Station Early Head Start (EHS) produced a full *Community Assessment Report for 2015-2016* based on census data, program surveys, and relevant research reports. This update is an amendment to the full report and provides new information that should be considered as EHS seeks to meet community needs and maximize partnerships in the 2019-2020 program year.

Documents reviewed for this update included *Readiness Matters: The 2019-2020 Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Report (MSDE and Ready at Five, 2019)*; *Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan 2017 (MCDHHS, 2017)*; *Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montgomery County, Maryland (Maryland Community Action Partnership 2018)*; *Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors (Montgomery Moving Forward, November 2016)*; *Child Care Demographics 2020: Montgomery County Report (Maryland Family Network, 2020)*; *Child Care in Montgomery County (Office of Legislative Oversight, 2016)*; *Montgomery County Commission on Child Care Annual Report 2017-2018 (Commission on Child Care, November 2018)*; *Demographic Snapshot for Montgomery County, MD (Montgomery Moving Forward, Fall 2016)*; *Revised Head Start Program Performance Standards (Office of Head Start 2016)*; *Annual Update of the HHS Federal Poverty Guidelines (Department of Health and Human Services, January 2020)*; *Montgomery County Head Start Community Assessment (Montgomery County Community Action, January 2020)*; *Montgomery County Department of Health & Human Services FY17 Annual Report (July 2018)*; *Child Welfare Services Annual Report (MCDHHS, 2015)*; *COVID Trends Operational Child Care Operational Survey (Child Care Resource & Referral Center 2020)*, *Unemployment Rate in Montgomery County (Bethesda Magazine 07/2020)*.

Strategic Planning for Early Care and Education in Montgomery County, MD

The Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan 2017: Investments in Our Future (MCDHHS, 2017) was released after significant research and study. It was developed with input from the early childhood community including the Commission on Child Care, the Early Childhood Coordinating Council, and the Organization of Child Care Directors—all of which EHS participates in. The plan documents the population trends and school readiness concerns noted in the *Community Assessment Report for 2015-16*. The county is experiencing increased diversity and significant needs among young families. There are growing numbers of families who are low income; those who speak English as a Second Language; those who have children with disabilities; and minority groups whose children are at risk of coming to school lacking the skills necessary to help them be successful.

The strategic plan calls for the development of a system of early care and education to meet the needs of all the County's children with the following five goals:

1. All infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in Montgomery County experience high quality early care and education in formal and informal settings.
2. Montgomery County provides adequate resources to ensure eligible families can afford early care and education that is high-quality, accessible, and meets their needs.
3. The Montgomery County early childhood workforce is diverse, professionalized, well-compensated, and has access to ongoing professional learning supports.
4. All infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in Montgomery County experience continuity in transitions as children develop and continuity across settings and sectors.
5. Montgomery County has the necessary infrastructure and funding to support a high-quality, affordable accessible early care and education system.

Demographics

Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF), a cross-sector group of business and community leaders in Montgomery County committed to finding innovative solutions to critical issues for the community, has identified early care and education as the key issue for its collective action again this year. MMF released its *Demographic Snapshot* of Montgomery County, Maryland in fall 2016. This report shows that the county has been a majority-minority county since 2010.

There were 1,040,116 County residents in 2015, and of these:

- One third are foreign born
- 39% speak a language other than English
- 45.2% are Non-Hispanic White; 19.1% are Black or African America; 19% are Hispanic or Latino; 15.4% are Asian; 1.3% are Other
- There are 67,600 children under the age of 5
- One in 4 residents is between the ages zero to 19

In Fall 2019 (Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Data)

- 33% of kindergarteners entering Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) were Latino/Hispanic, 27% were White, 20% were Black or African American, 13% were Asian and 5% were two or more races
- 25% of kindergarteners are English Language Learners (ELL)
- 33.8% of MCPS students are direct certified*. From 2007 to 2016 the overall number of students participating in FARMS increased from 33,580 to 54,542 students
- 391 children were served in Foster Care in 2015 compared to 387 the previous year

*Through direct certification, school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program, match the names of children living in households that receive SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance (TANF), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits with school enrollment records. This match is then used to certify students for free school meals without the need for their families to complete a school meals application.

According to the PY19 Program Information Report for Discovery Station EHS:

- 66% of EHS parents had completed education equal to or less than a high school graduate degree
- 79% of families spoke a language other than English as their primary language at home
- Of the 191 families served, 77 were single-parent family homes
- Of those single-parent families, more than half (47/77) were unemployed

According to the *Montgomery County Early Care and Education Strategic Plan*, four out of ten of Montgomery County's young children are economically vulnerable living below 300% of the federal poverty level. Almost 7,000 children under age 6 in the county live at or below the Federal Poverty Level.

Self-Sufficiency Standard

MMF's *Demographic Snapshot* released in fall 2016 notes that the cost of living in Montgomery County is the highest in Maryland and among the highest in the nation. Cost of housing in the county increased 62% from 2001 to 2014. According to the *Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Report* released in January 2018, a family with two adults, one preschooler and one infant needs \$105,925 per year to cover the basic costs of child care, housing, food, transportation, health care, taxes, and miscellaneous, such as clothing, etc. This number represents 304% of the January 2020 Federal Poverty Level. Housing, child care and food accounted for more than half of the expenses with child care exceeding the cost of housing by more than \$1,000 per month. It is becoming increasingly more difficult for low income families to be able to afford to live in Montgomery County.

Child Care Needs and Quality

Data reported in MMF's *Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors* (November 2016) reflect the data reported in our 2015-16 Community Assessment, highlighting a tremendous strain on families and employers resulting from a lack of affordable quality child care options. Additional challenges families face due to the gap in services for 3-year-old children were underscored in this survey.

The *Child Care Demographics Report* shows that for many of the areas served by EHS Discovery Station, there are 2 to 4 children per regulated child care slot and in some areas, there are 4 or more children per regulated slot. Parents surveyed through the LOCATE: Child Care program report cost of child care as the number one reason for not finding child care in Montgomery County, followed by location, then location and no vacancies for infants. According to the *Child Care in Montgomery County* report, there are approximately 10 children for every regulated slot available for children under 2 years old.

Locating care for children with special needs can be even more challenging. EHS Discovery Station served 55 children with special needs during PY19. On the EHS Discovery Station Parent Interest Survey for PY18 to date, more than half of the parents (51%) identified “accessing quality child care” as an area where they need additional support. Locating quality early childhood programs for children aging out of Early Head Start continues to be a challenge as well. There are approximately 60 Head Start slots available for 3-year-olds in a County of over 1 million residents. Limited subsidies and the high cost of child care are prohibitive for many families in accessing a high-quality early childhood learning environment. For that reason, many families end up placing their children in unlicensed child care situations where the quality and safety of the care is unregulated. In 2013 according to IRS filings, there were 2,595 non-employer establishments in the child care service industry, nearly three times the number of regulated Family Child Care Homes (*Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors*).

In Maryland there are several quality indicators that child care programs can obtain such as state or national accreditation or a higher check level in Maryland EXCELS, the state’s Quality Rating Improvement System. Typically, programs that have these quality indicators tend to have a higher cost than programs that do not participate. Even without the restriction of cost, access to a regulated child care program that has been accredited or deemed high-quality is challenging. In general, the number of regulated child care programs have decreased, particularly Family Child Care Programs (FCCP). Last year there were 544 regulated FCCP in the Discovery Station EHS service area and this year the number has reduced to 506 FCCP according to the *Child Care Demographics 2018: Montgomery County Report*. Currently in EHS Discovery Station service area, there are 34 Family Child Care Programs (FCCP) that have attained national accreditation through the National Association for Family Child Care out of 506 licensed programs in the service area. That means only 6.7% of FCCP are accredited and currently only three programs are accredited out of 33 FCCP in the same zip code as Discovery Station EHS CDC. Of the 145 Center Programs in the EHS Discovery Station service area, 21 are accredited through the Maryland State Department of Education or the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This is 14.5% of the centers in the service area. Although that is higher than the percentage of FCCP, it is important to note that not all the 21 accredited programs are full-day or full-year or serve infants, and some are targeted or business-sponsored programs and are not open to the public. Only 6 of the accredited programs provide full-day, full-year care for children infants and up. There is only one program in the same zip code as the EHS Discovery Station Center. This program is a nursery school program and only offers part-day, part-week, and part-year options for families.

Child Care Cost and Subsidies

According to the *Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Report* a family with one parent, one preschooler and one school-aged child spends approximately \$1,929 a month for child care in Montgomery County, \$181 more than on housing. For a family with two adults, a preschooler and an infant, 31% of the monthly Self-Sufficiency Standard goes towards child care compared to 20% spent on housing. According to the *Early Care and Education Trends and Key Factors*, a year of child care for a young child costs more than in-state tuition at a public university. A single mother making \$58,000 would spend 50% of her income on care for an infant and a 4-year-old.

In July 2016, there were 1,000 children in Montgomery County participating in the Child Care Subsidy Program according to the *Child Care Demographics 2017: Montgomery County Report*. A monthly average of 691 children received WPA in 2016. That equates to less than half (46%) of the children under 5 living below the Federal Poverty level as receiving childcare subsidies. According to the Child Care in Montgomery County report, the proposed FY16 WPA rate for a family of four was 265% of the Federal Poverty level, still falling well below what is required for Self-Sufficiency Standards. Many families are unable to afford childcare even when receiving subsidies as they are unable to pay the mandated copay let alone any additional costs associated. There are approximately 13.7 eligible children for every subsidized child receiving Child Care Subsidy and 44.1 eligible children for every subsidized child receiving WPA.

In 2016, Montgomery County revised their local childcare subsidies program, Working Parents Assistance (WPA), to provide higher reimbursement for child care and include families with higher level incomes, to better reflect the cost of living in the community. In 2017, WPA received an additional \$1 million from the County Council. According to the *Montgomery County Department of Health & Human Services Annual Report*, the increase in funding provided an additional 556 children with WPA vouchers and 555 children with supplemental vouchers to the State Child Care Subsidy program.

In August 2018, the Maryland State Child Care Subsidy program renamed itself the Child Care Scholarship (CCS) Program. New income guidelines were released which significantly increased the income limits for all families, in some cases doubling the income cap. Previously the eligibility guidelines for a family of four was \$35,702, under the new guidelines the income eligibility for a family of four is \$71,525. Maryland will continue to increase subsidy reimbursement rates over the next ten years. This change in income eligibility will result in the majority of families currently receiving WPA to be eligible under the Child Care Scholarship Program, most likely with higher voucher amounts. Changes in the WPA are still under review.

School Readiness Data

Each year the Maryland State Department of Education releases its *Readiness Matters* report in partnership with Ready at Five. The data is based on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment administered to incoming kindergarten students each fall. The report highlights the importance of quality early childhood education experiences for children to prepare them for the demands of school as achievement gaps start early. This year of the children assessed, 53% of Montgomery County kindergarten students demonstrated overall readiness compared to 47% for Maryland. This is an increase from 47% for Montgomery County and 45% for Maryland in 2018. The average scores for the different learning domains were similar with Physical Well-Being & Motor Development being the highest and Language & Literacy the lowest. There are significant disparities among racial and ethnic groups demonstrating readiness:

- 31% of Hispanic/Latino students
- 52% of African American students
- 64% of students reporting two or more races
- 63% of Asian students
- 75% of White students

There are also alarming gaps that exist between other demographic subgroups:

- 22 point gap between children from low-income households who are “direct certified” (33%) when compared with children from mid-/high-income households (55%)
- 38 point gap between English Language Learners (24%) and English Proficient children (62%)
- 46 point gap between children with disabilities (12%) and children without disabilities (58%)

Additional Areas of Concern

Immigration Policies: Montgomery County Police have a policy directive not to ask for information on the status of immigrants who report a crime or need assistance. However, the deportation fears noted in the report for 2015-16 continue to increase with proposed changes to immigration policies proposed at the federal level. Residents fear increased deportations, the building of a wall on the border with Mexico and immigration bans from predominantly Muslim countries. Despite the County’s efforts to reassure the community, enrolled families are extremely fearful, and families have become more isolated. Families are hesitant to access services such as Early Head Start and Head Start, WIC, TANF, Infants and Toddlers Program and other available services. In addition, families report more difficulty in accessing services such as ESOL classes and health clinics.

Strained Resources: Although Montgomery County offers more services for families and children than most other jurisdictions in Maryland, the severity and intensity of their needs is on the rise. This combined with the continued influx of new immigrants demonstrating a new variety of challenging needs is putting a strain on resources that are already stretched thin. Many

programs such as the Judy Centers, Child Care Subsidies, Working Parents Assistance, including the local Early Head Start programs, are carrying a waiting list. MCPS's Head Start program does not carry a waitlist, but many children who are eligible for are placed in a half-day prekindergarten classroom as opposed to a full-day Head Start class due to the limited spaces available. Funding and government hiring freezes continue to affect the ability of currently existing programs to serve children and families as well.

COVID-19

In March of 2020, a national emergency was declared due to the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). With Montgomery County having the second highest number of confirmed cases in Maryland, unemployment spiked to a 9% rate resulting in 123,500 initial claims (March-July 2020).

As a result of this unprecedented disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of equity and access were amplified. Some of the many inequities in social determinants of health that put racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19 include:

- Healthcare access and utilization
- Occupation
- Educational, income, and wealth gaps
- Housing

In addition, Montgomery County's 311 help line experienced a six-fold increase in request on how to apply for public assistance (i.e. state benefit programs like food stamps/SNAP, TCA, and Medicaid).

At the height of the pandemic, out of the 1,302 regulated childcare providers in Montgomery County, only 197 reopened as an Essential Personnel School Age site, family childcare or center-based program therefore showing the need of quality childcare during this unprecedented time.

Conclusion

Strategic Opportunities

The population that Discovery Station EHS serves continues to face challenges in accessing quality early childhood programs, especially for 3-year olds. At the same time, Montgomery County is engaging in multiple efforts to involve all stakeholders and policymakers in addressing key early care and education issues. This effort provides new opportunities for EHS to:

- Advocate for increased opportunities for 3-year olds in the implementation of the County's strategic plan.
- Strengthen transition agreements with Head Start and other early childhood programs.
- EHS Program Director will continue to participate in conversations with Head Start and other local programs to advocate for more 3-year-old Head Start slots to be available for Early Head Start families transitioning out of the program.

- Participate in the Montgomery Moving Forward collective action process to demonstrate the positive impact of comprehensive supports and quality child care for vulnerable infants and toddlers.
- Share data and empower families to share their stories directly with policymakers.

Addressing Immigration Concerns

Of continued focus are the immigration concerns that impact many enrolled families. These fears must be addressed effectively to support family well-being, a foundation for healthy child development and learning. EHS will need to partner with immigration experts and other community programs that provide support to immigrant families. It will also need to ensure that staff is competent and well supported to address these sensitive issues effectively both through home visiting and in the center. Staff will utilize a Trauma Informed Care approach when interacting with families as many have experienced traumatic events when immigrating to the country. In addition, we continue to focus on family engagement to provide opportunities to bring families together to reduce isolation. This year parent participation in the Policy Council and Parent Committees has increased in part due to the Policy Council Chair who is bilingual and conducts all meetings in both English and Spanish to facilitate access for all parents.

Meeting Program and Community Needs

Based on parent surveys and feedback, community and conversations with staff, parents and stakeholders there is a high need for understanding child development, nutrition and discipline. These categories represented most of the responses of parent interest during the enrollment and application process. Parents who indicated interest in any of these areas will be given the opportunity to receive information individually as well as in a group format. It is apart Discovery Station's mission to ensure that parents are guided, well informed, and driven to make a change based on their interest and needs.

Strategic Opportunities

Recommendations in the *Strategic Plan for Early Care and Education in Montgomery County* have been funded. EHS will focus on building its capacity to provide services for diverse families, helping families apply for subsidy and building partnerships and strengthen transition agreements. This includes partnering with the Community Action Agency, part of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services to provide more Early Head Start slots in the community.

Additionally, the Discovery Station Child Development center completed its final MSDE Accreditation visit on March 8, 2019 and was awarded accreditation on April 9, 2019. The current accreditation is valid until April 30, 2022. Currently, the Discovery Station Child Development center is at a Level-4 and will continue the process of accreditation at the highest level possible.



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