

Home Visiting Programs Increase Well-being In Fulton County

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Fulton County elected officials gathered virtually on March 31 with Fulton County Family Partnership leadership, home visitors and parent participants to discuss how the county's voluntary home visiting and parent coaching programs help increase parenting effectiveness, boost young children's school readiness, and can reduce rates of child abuse and neglect. All of these and other outcomes help prevent crime, increase public safety and save taxpayer dollars.

Elen Ott, executive program director of Fulton County Family Partnership, provided an overview of the program, which serves about 140 families living in challenging circumstances each year in the Parents as Teachers and Early Head Start programs. She discussed how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program switched to virtual visits.

"The Parents as Teachers and Early Head Start programs we offer help to strengthen families by capitalizing on parents' strengths to help them understand child development and build their parenting skills," said Ott. "Our staff and families have done an amazing job of connecting, whether virtually or in-person."

Fulton County elected officials also joined the call, with state Sen. Judy Ward, state Rep. Jesse Topper, Fulton County District Attorney Travis Kendall and Fulton County Commissioner Paula Shives all sharing their impressions of the difference that evidence-based home visitation programs make for county families. Home visiting programs are especially critical during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as many families face continuing isolation and need

concrete support and social connections for family health and well-being.

"Law enforcement leaders are certainly not alone in believing that strong families are the foundation of our communities, and that children from strong families have a greater chance of being healthy, productive and law-abiding citizens," said Fulton County District Attorney Kendall. "Parents are, of course, their children's primary teachers and influence. That's why evidence-based home visiting programs are so vital for parents who can most benefit."

These anecdotes supplement a recent Fight Crime: Invest in Kids report – Increasing Public Safety with Evidence-Based Home Visiting – which explains the collective broad benefits of home visiting programs. The General Assembly created a competitive grant program for eligible providers in 2017, with \$16.27 million in new state dollars invested in home visiting since the 2017-18 budget. Participants are hopeful that the 2021-22 state budget will include a modest \$6.3 million increase for evidence-based home visitation and family support services.

Through a mix of federal and state funds, Pennsylvania is currently funding six evidence-based home visiting models that meet federal standards: Parents as Teachers, Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership, Family Check-Up and SafeCare® Augmented. Each program has established model-specific standards, accountability measures and fidelity requirements. Each also serves a different target population, has distinct characteristics and meets families' needs in different ways.

The six evidence-based home visiting programs operating throughout Pennsylvania only reach about 5 percent of children (17,161 of 329,650) who live in households whose income is under 200 percent of Federal Poverty Income Guidelines. Fulton County is doing significantly better by serving 37 percent of children (142 of 380) in low-income households through the Parents as Teachers and Early Head Start programs.

For reference, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids is a national anti-crime organization of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, attorneys general and violence survivors, with 225 members in Pennsylvania and over 5,000 members nationwide, whose mission is to protect public safety by promoting solutions that steer kids away from crime. For more information, visit www.strongnation.org/FightCrime.

Childhood Begins at Home – an initiative of Early Learning PA – is a statewide campaign to help policymakers and the public understand the value of evidence-based home visiting and support public investments in the programs. Since 2017 when the campaign began, we have won funding increases more than doubling the state investments. This has helped serve many more Pennsylvania families, yet it represents only a fraction of those who could benefit. For more information, visit www.childhoodbeginsathome.org.

Fulton County Family Partnership Inc. is a comprehensive human services organization with the vision of a high quality of life with a bright and healthy future for all Fulton County residents. For more information, visit www.fcfpinc.org.