



Discovery Station Early Head Start Community Assessment Update

Program Year 2017-2018



2017-2018 Community Assessment Update

Family Services 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 2018-2019 program year.

Documents reviewed for this update included *Readiness Matters: Equity Matters; Maryland and Montgomery County School Readiness Data (MSDE and Ready at Five, 2018)*; *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 2017: Montgomery County Report (Maryland Family Network, 2017)*; *Child Care in Montgomery County (Office of Legislative Oversight, 2016)*; *Montgomery County Commission on Child Care Annual Report 2016-2017 (Commission on Child Care, November 2017)*; *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 2018)*; *Montgomery County Head Start Community Assessment (Montgomery County Community Action, February 2017)*; *Child Welfare Services Annual Report (MCDHHS, 2015)*.

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 last year 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 is involved with. 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 with 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 school readiness skills.

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 find 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
- 30.5% of kindergarteners entering Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) were Latino/Hispanic, 28.3% were White, 20.9% were Black or African American and 23.8% were Asian
- There are 67,600 children under the age of 5
- One in 4 residents is between the ages zero to 19

- 34% of kindergarteners are English Language Learners (ELL) and from 2007 to 2016 the number grew from 16,072 to 22,250 students
- More than 1/3 of MCPS students participate in FARMS and from 2007 to 2016 FARMS participation increased from 33,580 to 54,542 students
- 391 children were served in Foster Care in 2015 compared to 387 the previous year

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 live 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 \$105,924 per year to cover the basic costs of child care, housing, food, transportation, health care, taxes, and miscellaneous, such as clothing, etc. Housing, child care and food accounted for more than half of the expenses. This number represents 525% of the Federal Poverty Level. For a family with two working parents, a preschooler and school-age child, families need to be at 450% of the Federal Poverty Level to pay for basic living costs including housing, food, child care and transportation. The previous report in 2012 reported the same family would need to be at 400% of the Federal Poverty Level, indicating that the gap is widening 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. In a PY16 EHS family survey, half of the 111 families now receiving home based services indicated they are interested in finding child care for their infants and toddlers so they can work. 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 schedule and no vacancies for infants. According to the *Child Care in Montgomery County* report, there are approximately 5.5 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 45 children with special needs during PY16. This year the program has already surpassed that number serving 61 children with special needs half-way through the year. On the EHS Discovery Station Parent Interest Survey for PY17, almost half of the parents (49%) 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 less than 70 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 a number of 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. Currently in EHS Discovery Station service area, there are 30 Family Child Care Programs (FCCP) that have attained national accreditation through the National Association for Family Child Care out of 544 licensed programs in the service area. That means only 5.5% of FCCP are accredited and currently only one program is in the same zip code as EHS Discovery Station. Of the 141 Center Programs in the EHS Discovery Station service area, 45 are accredited through the Maryland State Department of Education or the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This is 31.9% of the centers in the service area. Although that is higher than the percentage of FCCP, it is important to note that not all of the 45 accredited programs are full-day or full-year and some are targeted or business-sponsored programs and are not open to the public. 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 Update

Last year, Montgomery County revised their local child care subsidies program to provide higher reimbursement for child care and include families with higher level incomes, to better reflect the cost of living in the community. Although additional funds were included in the budget, it was not sufficient to meet the demand. As a result, this year the program has gone from being underutilized to having a long waiting list of over 400 eligible children who are not being served. In 2016-2017, 506 children were served by the allocated budget for Working Parents Assistance (WPA), Montgomery County’s local child care subsidy program, according to *Montgomery County Commission on Child Care Annual Report*. Approval of a supplemental allocation allowed an additional 68 children to be served, still falling well below the demand.

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 child care 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 child care 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.

School Readiness Data

Each year the Maryland State Department of Education releases its *Readiness Matters: Equity 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, 47% of Montgomery County kindergarten students demonstrated overall readiness compared to 45% for Maryland. In the domain of language and literacy, 42% of demonstrated readiness, in mathematics 44%, in social foundations and physical well-being and motor development 56% demonstrated readiness. There are significant disparities among racial and ethnic groups demonstrating readiness:

- 24% of Hispanic/Latino students
- 42% of African American students
- 53% of students reporting two or more races
- 63% of Asian students
- 67% of White students

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

- 35 point gap between children from low-income households (25%) when compared with children from mid-/high-income households (59%)
- 39 point gap between English Language Learners (21%) and English Proficient children (59%)
- 37 point gap between children with disabilities (14%) and children without disabilities (51%)

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 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.

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

New Head Start Program Performance Standards led the program to reduce enrollment in PY17 to ensure that home visitors are able to meet expectations for direct services, child observations and case documentation; as well as to promote family engagement through more direct involvement in parent programming. The program continues to struggle with staff retention and needs to ensure that staff expectations are realistic and achievable on a weekly basis and that staff have the tools and guidance they need to support families.

The new Performance Standards require an assessment as to whether children who are from diverse economic backgrounds and supported by other funding sources, including private pay, could be served in addition to the funded enrollment. Currently EHS Discovery Station offers an Extended Care program through an MSDE Federal Child Care Block Grant for families. Staff continue to assist families in accessing both local and state child care subsidy. However, the subsidies received to date are not sufficient to sustain the program once the grant funding ends in summer 2018. We will continue to explore options, but at the present time stable funding has not been secured to cover teachers and classroom expenses.

The increased needs of families and children have led the program to evaluate the mix of enrollment between center-based and home-based options. Since many parents are searching for affordable or free quality child care so they can work or attend school or other job training opportunities, the program is considering opening an additional classroom in the center-based option to meet the needs of parents. This change would also provide the opportunity for more intensive, quality early childhood experiences to be offered for more children.

Strategic Opportunities

In the future, we hope that recommendations in the *Strategic Plan for Early Care and Education in Montgomery County* will be funded. In the coming year, 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.

In addition, EHS will pursue Maryland State Department of Education Accreditation and work towards the requirements of the highest level of Maryland EXCELS, as we continue to provide a high-quality, free child care option for children in the designated service area. This will allow EHS Discovery Station to be eligible to receive state funding to support additional services for children and families and to receive child care subsidies for eligible families at a higher rate as the program moves up the Maryland EXCELS scale. Participating in these programs will also ensure high quality early childhood education experiences for our most vulnerable and at-risk children.



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