

Summary and Conclusion

This Needs and Assets Report is the second biennial assessment of early education and health services in the First Things First La Paz/Mohave Region. It is the first that has devoted a large effort to speaking with parents of young children and those who serve these children, to understand the needs and assets of communities throughout the Region from their perspective.

Through both quantitative data assembled, and through these conversations with providers and parents, it is clear that the Region has substantial strengths. These include a concentration of health and social services available in larger communities in the Region, and a network of local clinics and community health clinics in smaller communities; Head Start and Early Head Start programs that provide high quality care and early education opportunities for young children and access to support and education for their parents; school districts in small communities that serve as resources for the identification of and referral to services; and a number of culturally appropriate services to support families, including an innovative domestic violence program, offered by the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe. A table containing a full summary of identified Regional assets can be found in Appendix P.

However, there continue to be substantial challenges to fully serving the needs of young children throughout the Region. Many of these have been recognized as ongoing issues by the La Paz/Mohave Regional Council and are being addressed by current FTF-supported strategies in the Region. Some of these needs, and the strategies proposed to deal with them, are highlighted below. A table of La Paz/Mohave Regional Partnership Council First Things First planned strategies for fiscal year 2011 is provided in Appendix Q.

- **A lack of affordable, high quality and accessible child care** – Three strategies are focusing on this crucial area. One strategy will provide planning, start-up and quality improvement grants to allow new child care centers to open and existing centers and homes to expand enrollment in quality and regulated settings. Another will fund an additional 10 Quality First sites in the region. Child care health consultation will provide expert advice training and information on best practices related to child health and safety to child care providers.
- **A lack of well-qualified early childhood education staff and limited opportunities for continuing education and training in more rural areas** – 20 T.E.A.C.H. scholarships will be provided, and community-based training to support professional development in early childhood education will facilitate the completion of educational milestones.
- **Insufficient early educational settings** – A need for increased availability of places for both special needs and typical children in preschool settings was a recurrent theme with parents in both La Paz and Mohave counties. Tuition vouchers will be provided to increase pre-kindergarten slots in public school district programs where known shortages exist.
- **Inadequate prenatal care, low birth weight and high infant mortality** – Preventative health outreach and screening will attempt to increase children's access to preventative health services, including prenatal care, well-child checks, developmental screening and oral health.
- **Under-identifying children with developmental delays** – Preventative health outreach and screening (above) may identify more at-risk infants and young children. Providing tuition

reimbursement to increase the number of mental health professionals with expertise in infant and toddler mental health.

- **A need to raise the awareness of the importance of early childhood and a parent’s role in supporting health and development** – Family support programs will be supported, enhanced and implemented to provide parents and caregivers access to high quality information, resources and social support. In addition, a cross-regional communications campaign is being developed to expand public awareness of, and the financial and political support for, early childhood development and health.
- **Budget cuts in the child welfare system have severely affected available resources** – Court teams for maltreated infants and toddlers will provide specialized training and technical assistance on infant and toddler mental health to early intervention and behavioral health providers, child welfare professionals, dependency court judges, CPS workers, probation officers, CASAs, and other health and mental health providers serving children birth through five.

This report also highlighted some additional needs that could be considered as targets by stakeholders in the Region.

- **Increased availability and access to services for children with special health care needs** – Time and again key informants and parents cited a lack of available therapeutic services for their children with special needs, either because of an absence of providers, because of the need to travel long distances to obtain services, or because of the untenable cost of services. Key informants cited difficulty in hiring therapists for open positions, and parents cited failure to meet severe deficit criteria to qualify for DDD-covered services. The low population density in the area, and the generally low wage structure and educational attainment in the Region, are serious barriers to recruiting and retaining highly skilled and in-demand medical and developmental specialists. The limited infrastructure for general medical care in the more remote areas is another substantial hurdle.

In addition, there are few appropriate special educational placements for very young children, and limited staff with expertise in special education. A certification course in early childhood special education is available at Northern Arizona University, and there was interest by stakeholders in Kingman in the possibility of providing the course at their NAU satellite campus.

- **Improved coordination and communication of services** – In addition to an overarching goal of better quality of services, be they child care, health care or support services, a common theme that arose throughout the qualitative work was the need for better coordination of services and communication of services from both a parent’s and a provider’s perspective. Parents frequently reported that they didn’t know where they needed to go for services, and key informants who were often provider’s themselves often had trouble locating personnel or services for their clients. Published materials, community forums or meetings, or “one-stop shops” were recommended as ways to better communicate the breadth of services available throughout the Region to both service providers and parents. There is an opportunity to leverage the sense that “everyone knows each other” in smaller

communities. These close-knit social networks can be leveraged to spread the word about services and programs available. Recruiting and training local members of the community (“Promotora-like”) into programs, perhaps providing them with a stipend to help raise awareness of early childhood issues, services and programs could be beneficial, especially in communities that are more resistant to ‘outsiders’.

- **Age appropriate infrastructure and activities for young children and their families** – Very little was available in any of the communities in the way of a community center or other focused, easily accessible place for socialization and recreation with younger children. Particularly desired are activities such as mommy and me; daddy and me; grandma and me; grandpa and me. Head Start also sounds as though it serves as a hub for families enrolled there, with referrals to other services, resources and information. This would be a good model for what might be made available through parks and recreation or through partnerships with other agencies.
- **Promote and facilitate networking opportunities among foster parents**– The creation of a listserv, and/or a newsletter could greatly benefit foster parents. These resources would help locate other parents in their area, provide an easier way to get information on activities for children in general and for children with special needs that might be going on. Interviewed parents seemed to be well aware of the fact that it would be too difficult in the current times to get any additional help from state agencies involved in the child welfare system. Promoting the creation of alternative ways of supporting themselves in their role as foster parents (such as networking with other foster parents) seems a viable palliative solution (at least to some extent) to budget deficits.
- **Outreach in communities with large Hispanic population** - Proper outreach and collaboration with local institutions (e.g. schools) that people are familiar with or where stakeholders see themselves as advocates of this population would be important. There is a lot of distrust among this population due to the perception of a current anti-immigrant climate and recent legislation. Providing Spanish-speaking liaisons in schools with a large population of Hispanic children whose parents are monolingual Spanish-speakers would promote better parent involvement in early education.

It will take a continued concerted effort involving collaboration and cooperation among First Things First and other state agencies, The La Paz/Mohave Regional Partnership Council and staff, state and regional providers of services to young children, parents and caregivers of young children, and other interested community stakeholders in the Region to successfully address the needs outlined in this report. Doing so, however, will continue to strengthen the “small, safe communities” that draw families to the Region.