

12/16/2009

To: Maurina Erickson
Merced County Department of Mental Health-MHSA

Re: Innovation Component of MHSA
Community Planning Process

THE ISSUE: Merced County families are faced with many challenges that make them more at risk for mental health issues. Children born into “stressed” families are at higher risk for developing mental health issues. Current research findings indicate the importance of parent-infant relationships and their effects on brain development, attachment, and the regulation of emotions and behavior. At this time, there is not any universal service that routinely screens mothers in Merced County for mental health concerns when they are pregnant or have a newborn child. There are no home visiting services for mothers of newborns that focus primarily on promoting infant-family mental health.

THE NEED: Currently, there are no services in Merced County with the primary focus on infant/family mental health. There is a need for early screening and assessment for all families with newborns children, and a need for timely referrals for mental health intervention for infants and their families at risk for mental health issues.

In addition to the need for infant/family screening services there is a need to train existing service providers who work with families about infant/family mental health. Many service providers in Merced County have contact with families on a regular basis. Most of these providers are not trained in infant family mental health. Service providers including teachers, child care providers, home visitors, and others should receive appropriate training to become endorsed as *Core Providers* by California Infant-Family and Early Childhood Mental Health Guidelines.

THE PROPOSED SOLUTION: We envision a system in which all children born in Merced County will receive a home visit from a professional who is trained to screen for infant family mental health concerns. Families that are considered at risk will include but are not limited to mothers experiencing postpartum depression and those with out existing family or friend support systems. These families will be referred to existing mental health service providers or to other existing parent support services.

Many existing service providers in the county have contact with families on a regular basis and can provide powerful proactive mental health services that focus on attachment/bonding and anger/stress management. A collaborative team, including educators, mental health providers, medical professionals will utilize the California Infant-Family and Early Childhood Mental Health Guidelines to **promote** positive parenting and relationship development, provide **preventive intervention** to decrease risk factors and stress in families, and link families to **treatment** options.

THE PROJECTED RESULTS: Infants and families will receive proactive mental health services in a timely manner reducing the need for professional mental health services and higher cost care in the future. Early parent-infant relationships provide the emotional foundations for the development of resiliency and self-esteem. Through patterns of early attachment and interaction, children develop trust and security. Early mental health services promote school readiness, family functioning, emotional regulation and social competence.

This project will be a collaborative effort made by Merced County Office of Education's Early Care and Education and Special Education Departments.