

Using the Story of Brain Development to Unify Partners, Systems

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin frames housing as child health issue

Overview:

The release of Matthew Desmond's Pulitzer-winning book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* sparked a national conversation about the complex interrelation of poverty, housing, and homelessness on families. Centering on Milwaukee, which has one of the highest poverty rates in the country, the book highlights the role housing stability plays in health and resilience.

According to Milwaukee-based Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, 81 percent of parents with children entering foster care report historical or current housing instability, and housing is consistently one of the most requested resources from the hospital's community health navigators.

"We had been measuring adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and housing as part of our well-being assessment in child welfare, and we saw what you would expect. The higher the parents' ACE scores, the more housing instability they had," said Director of Child Well-Being Gabriel McGaughey. "Then we really started to focus on, 'Now what?' It's great information to know, but what do you do with it?"

At the time of *Evicted's* release in 2016, Children's was in the process of establishing the Institute of Child and Family Well-Being (ICFW) in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Helen Bader School of Social Welfare. ICFW sought to conduct and apply research on the social determinants of health to programs with the goal of policy and systems change.

The intersection of these pursuits—increasing resilience, addressing housing instability, and achieving change through policy and advocacy—coincided with Children's involvement in the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities' Change in Mind initiative. Change in Mind, which sought to better understand how advances in neuroscience can be leveraged to create broader systems and policy change, was developed in partnership with Palix Foundation's Alberta Family Wellness Initiative and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

"We wanted to be part of a group focused on well-being and brain science. That was our biggest interest at the beginning," said McGaughey, who is also co-director of ICFW.

Through access to brain science experts, partners, and fellow sites, Children's learned how to reframe conversations on homelessness and housing instability to focus on building resilience and



health and well-being. Changing the dialogue proved to be a key strategy for bridging sectors and achieve greater systems change.

Advances in Neuroscience:

It may sound odd or unusual for a children’s hospital to focus on homelessness, but the adverse effects of housing instability range from poor physical and mental health to an inability to attain educational success and economic security. As McGaughey noted, it’s unsurprising that the stress caused by an ongoing lack of consistent housing correlates so closely with higher ACE scores.

After the hospital’s community health navigators and well-being assessments identified housing as a significant child welfare concern, ICFW launched the Housing Opportunities Made to Enhance Stability (HOMES) initiative. HOMES is a concerted effort to connect sectors, including health, child welfare, and housing, in order to integrate and streamline services to support stable housing for families.

“Change in Mind helped us move forward with frameworks for addressing systems change by understanding multiple drivers within a system—the community, health care, child welfare, housing authorities—and engaging those drivers in order to facilitate behavior change that, hopefully, will lead to improvement in population-level outcomes,” said McGaughey.

Efforts to measure and incorporate knowledge of ACEs and related trauma into programmatic frameworks were underway prior to Change in Mind. However, Children’s sought a more cohesive vision for conveying current breakthroughs in neuroscience and the relationship between the developing brain and systems like housing.

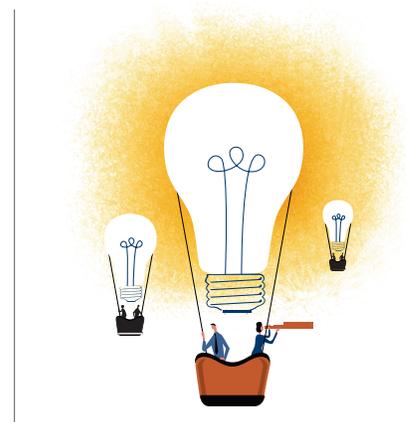
According to McGaughey, “We were aware of ACEs and the impact they have on child development and well-being in some of our programmatic areas, but we were taking more of a traditional mental health approach to care. Our efforts were scattered, to say the least.”

Change in Mind:

As Children’s progressed in the Change in Mind Learning Collaborative, it went beyond its organization, pursuing a concerted effort to connect disparate entities and align systems with the goal of better assisting families experiencing complex, interconnected challenges in a more cohesive, intentional way.

“I think once everyone in the Change in Mind Learning Collaborative figured out what systems change could be and what that meant for policy, developmental evaluation, and communications, it made things a lot easier,” said McGaughey.

Change in Mind provided several methods and turnkey tools that sites could use to better engage and develop relationships with partners. Communications training from the FrameWorks Institute offered guidance on how to talk about brain science to gain understanding and buy in among various audiences. Children’s was able to use their recommended concepts and metaphors to successfully educate housing authorities, policymakers, and other groups on brain science and housing’s relationship to resilience and child welfare. Specifically, the hospital began reframing housing instability as a child health issue.



Armed with new language for engaging stakeholders, the hospital sought to grow its network of allies in the community. It invited community partners focused on addressing housing to participate in a free organizational training on early brain development using the Brain Architecture boardgame created by Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child. Participants gained a better understanding of brain science and child development, the role of resilience in well-being, and the impact of housing instability as a specific kind of adverse experience. They also learned that Children's is a leader in accelerating the application of brain science.

While broadening its network of partners, the hospital invested deepening many of its relationships to achieve goals around systems coordination. Among the methods and tools Children's used to facilitate this work was human-centered design. Through this process, it focused on the experience of Milwaukee residents and solicited human feedback throughout a problem-solving process to foster mutually beneficial relationships between the hospital, the community, and organizations heavily involved in housing including Community Advocates, a housing resource organization, and Legal Action of Wisconsin.

"Our Change in Mind work shifted us to more of a project approach that uses design-thinking concepts that puts more rigor around how we do things—how we translate the research into evidence, how we factor in brain science, how we design or implement programs, how we address unmet needs, and how we do innovative work," recalled McGaughey.

Their expanded brain science lens led to additional unique projects anchored in policy and medical-legal partnerships. For example, the hospital continues to work with community advocates and Legal Action of Wisconsin's policy team toward enabling housing-specific Medicaid benefits in Wisconsin.

Through the Change in Mind Institute, human services community-based organizations and other partners looking to improve health and well-being can take advantage of the same resources, and see similar results, as Children's. The institute offers learning collaborative administration, policy consultation, grant management, event program development, and access to experts, all of which bridge the latest findings in brain science to measurable improvements in health and well-being for children, families, and communities.

"Organizations need to understand that brain science encompasses not only the challenges faced around toxic stress or trauma, but also the potential for solutions and resilience in brain science. Having a better understanding of the problem gives you more opportunities for creative solutions," McGaughey explained. "The Change in Mind Institute leverages a network of people, who are aligned and have built relationships with one another, to help additional organizations and communities."

"Our relationship with the Alliance has been really strong, and one of the great things about Change in Mind has been access to new ideas and to folks who are thinking about things differently. It's really helped us build a North American network of connections around brain science."

Gabriel McGaughey, director of child well-being and co-director of the Institute for Child and Family Well-Being, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin