

May 29, 2007

Agency targets preschool expulsions

State funds Central Mass. endeavors

By Richard Nangle TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

rnangle@telegram.com

Its efforts to nearly eliminate local child-care expulsions has won the Worcester-based Together For Kids a grant of \$641,143 to provide early childhood mental health consultation services throughout Central Massachusetts.

The agency's success comes in the wake of a 2005 nationwide Yale University study that ranked Massachusetts with the ninth highest rate of behavior-related preschool expulsions.

"These children come from all types of families and backgrounds, emphasizing the need for universal screening and supports for child-care programs," said Dr. Carole Upshur, associate dean with the Department of Family Medicine/Community Health at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and lead evaluator for a recently completed four-year TFK study.

State Department of Early Education and Care Commissioner Ann Reale recently awarded the grant to Community Healthlink on behalf of Together For Kids.

The Together for Kids model has been implemented and evaluated in five local child-care centers with funding from The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, the United Way of Central Massachusetts and the Fred Harris Daniels Foundation. The model includes child-care center teacher training and support, classroom observations and consultation, child and family assessment, short-term interventions with children and families and parent education.

"TFK is an example of the best kind of community collaboration — professionals from many service organizations, working with researchers and enlightened funders, have truly 'moved the needle' on this issue," said Deborah Ekstrom, CEO and president of Community Healthlink. "This is not an abstraction. Real kids in the city of Worcester are able to stay in pre-school and to enter kindergarten better ready to learn and to succeed in school."

More than one-fifth of the children in the Worcester area programs involved in the study were found to have significant problem behaviors. More than one-third were found to need early childhood mental health services.

Dr. Upshur said preliminary results from a recent follow-up study suggest that TFK services in preschool may have long-term effects on improved behavior, reduce the need for special education services in kindergarten, and improve children's school readiness.

Lynn Hennigan, director of services for the young child at Community Healthlink, said the TFK research results, state public policy achievements in the area of children's mental health and a recent National Institute of Mental Health grant award to TFK/UMass Medical School "clearly position the state of Massachusetts to be the national leader on young children's mental health."

"We could not be more impressed with the outstanding return on our investment," said Dr. Jan Yost, president and CEO of The Health Foundation. "The TFK coalition documented the efficacy of their model for helping preschool children develop socially and emotionally so they can enter school ready to learn. Armed with the data, they encouraged statewide public policy changes so that the Department of Early Education and Care recognized the value of this model and has offered training and support for implementing the intervention. We commend the TFK Coalition and are pleased to continue to support their efforts."

The Together for Kids Coalition is made up more than 40 agencies and about 100 members, including parents, child-care teachers and directors, mental health clinicians and agencies, philanthropic organizations, colleges, public schools and human service providers from Greater Worcester and across the state. The child-care agencies implementing the Together for Kids model of mental health consultation are Worcester Comprehensive Childcare Services Inc., YWCA of Central Massachusetts, YMCA of Greater Worcester, Rainbow Child Development Center, and the Worcester Community Action Council Head Start Program. In addition to Community Healthlink, YOU Inc. and Jewish Family Services also provide clinical services and training for staff within childcare programs.

Contact Richard Nangle by e-mail at rnangle@telegram.com.