

A Family in Crisis Doesn't Just Happen

Many factors contribute to the high number of children, youth and families entering Marion County's social, welfare and juvenile systems.

Picture a family of four living on Indianapolis' Eastside

The father lost his job as a machine operator at a manufacturing plant that has closed. He has found a few part-time jobs doing home repair, but, after months of fruitless searching, he is sinking into depression, smoking more than ever, and thinking about having just one beer—even though he quit drinking over seven years ago.

His wife, employed at a cleaning agency, has taken more shifts in an attempt to cover their expenses. She doesn't even think about where her life and career will be—this is it for her. Bills are overdue. Should she buy food or pay the water bill?



After school, the children, ages 11 and 7, often come home to an empty house. Their parents can't afford childcare and don't want to leave the kids home alone, but they feel like they can't turn down any opportunity to make money. Since the kids don't have a parent at home who can help with homework or encourage them to stay on task, the children's assignments are incomplete.

The family lost their insurance, so the youngest child's poor vision hasn't been diagnosed. At school, he has withdrawn from class participation because he can't see the chalkboard. His grades are deteriorating, and so is his confidence. To redirect the class's attention from his failures, he has become the class clown.

His older sister has done well on the standardized school tests, but, after the summer break, she has fallen behind in math and reading. Since she has to watch her little brother after school and her parents don't have the money for fees, she hasn't joined any of the school clubs that interest her.

The father starts attending a free support group for alcoholics. He continues to stay sober but still can't find a job. While he's less likely to fall into the abusive patterns that were associated with his drinking, more and more he feels worthless and can't stand to see the concern on his children's faces. The family continues to struggle. **Their "at-risk" status is close to becoming a "family in crisis."**

It doesn't have to be this way.

If this family took advantage of ALL the low-cost and free programs that are available to them—afterschool youth programs, work skills development and career placement, utility and food assistance, medical and mental health services—how does the outlook change? What would happen if the facilitator of the father's support group connected him with the Eastside community center that had helped her find a job? What if that community center were part of a network of resources for youth and families? What if teachers, ministers, social workers and youth development professionals across Marion County knew where to direct families so that they could access all of these resources?

Early Intervention & Prevention: It Works

Both common sense and science indicate that addressing the risk factors in a child's life as comprehensively and as early as possible can make the critical difference in changing that child's life—and his or her potential to make positive contributions to our community—for the better.

The Problem

Opportunities Missed

Public systems like child welfare and juvenile justice are designed to intervene only “downstream,” when a child or family is already in crisis and long-standing problems are difficult and expensive to treat. Nonprofit organizations have more flexibility to focus on “upstream” prevention and intervention services for at-risk children, youth and families, but suffer from a lack of coordination.

The Need & The Numbers

- Nearly 200,000 children and youth in Marion County face one or more issues—such as poverty or financial instability, problems in school, mental or emotional illness, drug and alcohol use or trouble at home—that increase their risk of abuse, neglect, or delinquency.
- Over 38,000 of our young people shoulder the burden of four or more barriers to healthy development; studies show that exposure to three or more risk factors greatly increases a child's risk of victimization and antisocial behaviors.
- More than 56,000 children in Marion County live in poverty, and over 100,000 are considered low-income.
- Indianapolis' high school graduation rate was only 30.5% in 2004-05—last place among the 50 largest U.S. cities.
- Up to 10% of our children have a diagnosed learning disability or emotional disorder.
- Nearly 15,000 Marion county children are known to have experienced abuse or neglect (the actual number may be much higher).

In a recent survey of Marion County nonprofit providers, 66 percent agreed that failure to coordinate has resulted in many gaps in services, and 68 percent agreed that a coordinating agency is needed to alleviate service gaps and duplication, as well as prevent children in need from falling through the cracks.

The Solution

The Early Intervention & Prevention Initiative

Responding to the urgent need to make a system-wide change, the Marion County Early Intervention Planning Council (EIPC) announced an ambitious plan to coordinate youth services in Marion County and reduce the number of children entering the county's child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

MCCOY has been selected to coordinate the Early Intervention and Prevention (EIP) initiative, which will expand access to and improve the quality, coordination and range of programs and services available to families and youth. The EIP initiative will:

- Identify and catalogue all local prevention, intervention and youth development services and programs into a common, searchable and accessible database, making it easier for young people and their families to find the services they need and for service providers to make targeted referrals.
- Build relationships and improve communication between public and nonprofit providers who serve children and families, including the juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health and education systems, along with families, churches, faith-based and community organizations and the general public.
- Provide training and resources to those who work with families and youth to assess and identify risk factors and develop referral processes.
- Assess financial and other resources and aggressively pursue funding from both public and private sources to meet providers' resource development needs and improve their capacity to serve.

Participation Needed

To improve the outlook for youth and families in Marion County, the EIP initiative needs participation from all facets of the community—public systems, schools, community-based and faith-based service providers, public and private funding agencies, families and concerned citizens.

For more information or to find out how to get involved, contact Shanna Malott, MCCOY's Early Intervention Community Coordinator, at 317-921-1233 or shanna.malott@mccoyouth.org.