

# The Follow Along Program Community Connectors Milestone Update

August 2024

## Background information

The Community Connector project is part of the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Follow Along Program redesign. The Follow Along Program is funded through the Healthy Beginnings, Healthy Families Act in Minnesota 2023 Statute 145.9575. An overview and background information on the Follow Along Program is provided below.

## Follow Along Program Overview

The Follow Along Program identifies developmental and social-emotional areas of need in young children, connects them with services as early as possible and continues to support them in their development throughout early childhood. Families complete periodic questionnaires (called Ages and Stages Questionnaires) focused on developmental and social-emotional skills. When needs are identified, staff from local public health departments then follow-up with families. [Follow Along Program webpage \(www.health.state.mn.us/mnfap\)](http://www.health.state.mn.us/mnfap).

Minnesota is commonly at the top of state rankings for overall health, education, and economic outcomes. Ninety-five percent of parents of young children (0-5 years old) and 92% of parents of all children (0-17 years old) report their child's health as excellent or very good. However, underneath the impressive averages lie deep disparities that fall primarily along racial lines, with African American and American Indian communities experiencing the brunt of these inequities. Myers and Ha coined a term for this incongruity between the state's overall high measures of disparities, "the Minnesota Paradox." There are long-standing and enduring gaps in infant mortality, poverty rates, third grade reading proficiency levels, and a host of other indicators between white children and children of color and American Indian children.

Minnesota faces significant challenges in implementing a coordinated and equitable system that supports the well-being of young children and their families – leaving many without receiving needed services and supports. For instance, though 15-17% of children under age six are estimated to have one or more developmental disabilities, under 5% of children in that age group were served by early childhood special education (ECSE) services.

Minnesota's Follow Along Program was developed to help fill a gap in our state's early childhood system. The program does this by working with families to complete periodic questionnaires focused on developmental and social emotional skills and then connecting families with services and supports based on areas of need identified through the questionnaires. The program does not have any

eligibility requirements (other than children must be between the ages of birth to three years of age and sometimes up to kindergarten entrance, depending on the local Follow Along Program) and is provided at no-charge for families. Participating in the Follow Along Program does not require a face-to-face visit, nor any documentation to verify immigration status or citizenship. However, the program is not reaching all families in an equitable way. For instance, the program has low levels of enrollment and participation from families who speak a language other than English in the home, families new to the county, families with lower literacy levels, families from the more rural areas of the state, and families from other historically oppressed communities (such as Tribal Nations and African Americans).

For the Follow Along Program to be more inclusive for all families, MDH is in the process of evaluating and improving the program. The program updates will be implemented in phases and will include the following components – based on ongoing input from a wide variety of families, providers, and community partners:

1. A cohesive program brand and culturally and linguistically inclusive and accessible communications/outreach materials.
2. A centralized, statewide electronic screening platform (i.e., a mobile application) where families can access information about child development and complete developmental and social-emotional questionnaires.<sup>1</sup>
3. A cadre of Community Connectors available to support families in more culturally and linguistically inclusive ways as they enroll and participate in the program for the duration of the Community Connector project (February 2024-July 2025).
4. A community engagement team will be called on to give input to the process. The community engagement team is a group of partners that support young children and their families that meets on a monthly basis. The team makes recommendations and provides feedback to inform program updates. Members include local and tribal public health staff, families, staff from community-based organizations, schools, higher education, Head Start, child care, healthcare, social services, and interagency state partners.

## Community Connectors Project Overview

MDH sought collaboration with a group of organizations to support a Community Connectors component of the Follow Along Program Redesign. The goal is to better reach populations that have been historically underserved by the Follow Along Program. Since February of 2024 the grantee organizations have been recruiting and deploying a group of Community Connectors to provide culturally and linguistically inclusive outreach and navigation support for families as they enroll and participate in the Follow Along Program. The Follow Along Program Community Connectors specifically serve families from a focus population group(s). Focus population groups are historically oppressed groups, including (but not limited to) Tribal Nations, American Indian, African American, Somali,

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<sup>1</sup> MDH expects to start piloting this platform in the Fall of 2024.

Hmong, Latino, and Karen communities, as well as those from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

There are eight Community Connectors organizations:

1. Baby's Space
2. Centro Tyrone Guzman
3. Change Inc.
4. Dodge-Steele County CHB
5. FamilyWise
6. Northfield Healthy Community Initiative
7. Project FINE
8. Restoration For All

## **Outreach, Enrollment, and Family Support**

Community Connectors provide culturally and linguistically inclusive navigation assistance to families as they learn about the Follow Along Program, enroll, complete developmental questionnaires, and receive follow-up services. This includes providing outreach to families and caregivers with young children via social media, virtual meetings, and training events to teach them about the program. MDH provides outreach materials to Community Connectors to distribute electronically and/or at events. Community Connectors are available to interpret and translate materials as needed for families.

Once the Community Connectors have assisted a family or caregiver with enrollment into the Follow Along Program, they coordinate a collaboration plan that may include the local public health agency implementing the program. This allows the Connectors to assist families who may need language support in completing paper or electronic questionnaires, being connected with services, etc.

## **Community of Learning**

Grantees participate in a community of learning facilitated by MDH. The community of learning includes monthly virtual opportunities for grantees to gather and learn collaboratively with and from one another. At least one Community Connector from each grantee organization is expected to attend all community of learning meetings.

As a part of the community of learning, grantees discuss and share promising practices that provide culturally and linguistically inclusive methods for assisting families. This includes how to support families in completing Ages and Stages Questionnaires, how to best share results and developmental activities, as well as recommendations for specific resources and/or service providers who specifically serve young children from the focus populations. MDH will compile the learning and development of activities and resources created by the Community Connectors. The result will be a toolkit and resource guide to support families statewide as they participate in the Follow Along Program and access services.

# MDH Approach to ensure program success

MDH has purposefully employed a number of innovative strategies to help create an environment to help the Community Connectors be successful.

## Values and Guiding Principles

First MDH guides the Community Connectors project based on a set of values and principles.

- Changing the power dynamic, with the state government as learners in the project. Community Connectors are teaching those who are traditionally in power.
- There is also mindset of co-creation instead of typical top-down approaches from government to grantees. The orientation to the Community Connector project is around “learning from each other”.
- Community Connectors are helping families navigate the Follow Along program in partnership with the family’s local public health agency. Their focus is on supporting families while documenting what barriers the family faces along the way. In ongoing Community of Learning meetings and activities, the Community Connectors share with MDH what families need to be successful when enrolling and participating in the Follow Along Program. MDH has arranged for one-on-one meeting with local public health Follow Along Program staff as well as coordinating in-person meeting across the state to help build capacity and sustainability within the Community Connector organizations.
- Recognizing that the Community Connectors program is based on relationships and partnerships. The program is an investment in relationship building and trust building. Relationships are at the core of the success of the Follow Along Program.

## MDH Supportive Approaches and Mechanisms

1. **In-person site visits** - To kick-off the grant program, MDH staff visited each Community Connectors organization. MDH facilitated circle conversations using the Circle Way method “where we come together in a place of circle”. MDH staff asked each Community Connectors organization – what calls them or brings them to this work.  
Note: The Circle Way gathers people into a circular shape with participants at the rim and the purpose in the center. Each person has a voice, and everyone can see and hear one another. Social agreements and practices help facilitate respectful conversation. The circle supports a leader in every chair.
2. **Basecamp** – MDH selected a technology platform for sharing parameters of the program as well as materials and ideas between and with grantees. Basecamp is a web-based collaborative workspace where Community Connectors can easily access and post materials that has a shared calendar to tract contract deliverables.

3. **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) resource** – MDH assembled an ongoing list of frequently asked questions and answers/responses. Grantees then have a resource to access on Basecamp that addresses issues and questions for them.
4. **Open office hours** – MDH holds open office hours at least once a month as a mechanism for grantees to ask questions, express concerns, or issues and/or a place for grantees with similar questions to connect with each other.
5. **Community of Learning** – MDH facilitates the Community of Learning using the Art of Hosting as an underlying approach/practice. MDH is employing the philosophy of setting the stage to bring folks together with the Community Connector project. The hosting approach allows the Community Connectors organization staff to lead the conversation in directions that are helpful for them. With the hosting approach, grantees are able to tell a story, share something important to them or ask questions of each other.
6. **Building connections with local public health (LPH)** – MDH convened a series of meetings between Community Connectors and local public health in summer 2024. The goal was to build relationships, bridges, connections, and a sense of trust between Community Connectors and LPH.

## Milestone Update – Summer 2024

### Follow Along Community Connectors and MN Local Public Health Regional Summer 2024 Meetings

Meetings were organized to create an opportunity for Community Connectors and local public health staff to meet and discuss how they can support the Redesign of the Follow Along Program by incorporating culturally, linguistically, and ability-affirming strategies and resources.

MDH facilitated the meetings using relationship-building methods such as the Circle Way approach. The meetings had the group focus on interactions with the following qualities “speak with intention”, “listen with attention” and “look after the well-being of the whole”.

These collaborative meetings between the Community Connectors and LPH were 3-hours in duration. The meetings were hosted by MDH in six areas of the state.

**Metro** - June 26 at *Dakota County Northern Service Center* in West St. Paul (Service area: Anoka, Hennepin, Ramsey, Chisago, Carver, Scott, Washington, Dakota counties)

**Southwest** - July 16 in *Redwood Falls at the Pizza Ranch* (Service area: Big Stone, Brown, Blue Earth, Chippewa, Cottonwood, Faribault, Jackson, Kandiyohi, Lac Qui Parle, LeSueur, Lincoln, Lyon, Martin, McLeod, Meeker, Murray, Nicollet, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Renville, Rock, Sibley, Swift, Waseca, Watonwan, Yellow Medicine counties)

**Northeast - July 31** at *Carlton County Health & Adult in Cloquet* (Service area: Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Isanti, Itasca, Kanabec, Koochiching, Lake, Mille Lacs, Pine, St. Louis counties)

**Northwest - August 13** at *Pennington County Government Center in Thief River Falls* (Service area: Clearwater, Hubbard, Kittson, Lake of the Woods, Mahnomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake, Roseau counties)

**West Central - August 14** at *Otter Tail Government Center in Fergus Falls* (Service area: Becker, Benton, Cass, Clay, Crow Wing, Douglas, Grant, Morrison, Otter Tail, Pope, Sherburne, Stevens, Stearns, Todd, Traverse, Wadena, Wilkin, Wright counties)

**Southeast - August 28** at *Olmsted Public Health in Rochester* (Service area: Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, Winona counties)

## **Benefits of FAP CC/LPH Meetings**

### **Key take aways from meetings with LPH**

- a. Timely communication with families is key, long breaks between connection disrupts relationships.
- b. Trust takes time and can be easily lost. Relationships matter, without it there will not be active participation in the program.
- c. Asset-based approach in what resources communities have and how we can collaborate.
- d. We need to use plain language to communicate what the Follow Along Program is and how it can support families. (e.g., instead of saying development, say learning and growing)
- e. Community organizations have been supporting families for generations and are often the trusted resource families go to first. They are public health.
- f. Not having formal partnerships between Local Public Health programs and community-based organizations is a barrier to coordinated support for families.
- g. Collaboration is critical to meeting the needs of children and families in our communities. We can't do this work alone, collaboration with local partners is key.

## **Hoped for Results and Next Steps from FAP CC/LPH Meetings**

We have spent the initial 6 months of the Community Connector project learning about the Follow Along Program and how we will do outreach and awareness to enroll families. We have the next 9 months to learn how families can best participate and make the connection to supports and services. We will focus our ongoing conversations on the strategies and resources you have been using to shape the Redesign of the Follow Along Program to be culturally and linguistically inclusive.