

The Power of Networks: How Network Principles Helped the Home Visiting Field Successfully Communicate Program Outcomes

National Home Visiting Network Network Principles in Action

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In 2018, members of the National Home Visiting Coalition Steering Committee talked about a fear. They had spent several years working with congressional staff to build bipartisan support for evidence-based home visiting. With the Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE), the legislatively mandated impact study of the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, about to be released, many worried that the findings might not match the expectations. At the same time, state leads for MIECHV were feeling anxious because they knew the impact study began before the program was fully operating. Further, the state leads who had previously implemented home visiting efforts were unsure whether the MIHOPE study would capture the full breadth of potential positive outcomes. Similar concerns were being voiced by the members of the National Alliance of Home Visiting Models as the impact study was looking at some, not all, evidence-based home visiting models.

Reflecting on learnings from the tumultuous aftermath of the Head Start impact study, the home visiting community felt they needed to be proactive to ensure that MIHOPE findings would be interpreted within the larger context of the wealth of evaluation studies of home visiting. “Everyone said, ‘What can we do?’ And there was just a lot of fear that a misinterpreted evaluation would undermine home visiting and the goodwill that advocates built in Congress for MIECHV,” said Karen Howard, then chair of the National Home Visiting Coalition Steering Committee.

With her connections to the home visiting policymakers, advocates, state administrators, model leaders, and researchers, and her indefatigable spirit, Catriona Macdonald of the Association of State and Tribal Home Visiting Initiatives (ASTHVI) reached out to the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and proposed the development of a white paper that would tell the story of the breadth and depth of MIECHV in a way that would be accessible to the policy community and prompt conversations about how to strengthen the program. “It felt important to put forward a more global picture of research on home visiting outcomes and then to do an introduction that would put all of that in the context of evidence-based policy. We also felt that it was

important to show how research could be used to build, strengthen, and perfect programs,” said Macdonald.

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With funding in hand, Macdonald brought together key thought partners and representatives of the stakeholder networks to help shape the criteria for and development of the white paper. For example, she met with the National Home Visiting Coalition Steering Committee and the National Alliance of Home Visiting Models and asked some of their key members and others in the field to serve as advisors. Knowing that people with research credentials needed to be part of this too, Macdonald met early on with Jill Filene of James Bell Associates (JBA) and Kay O’Neill of Johns Hopkins University, as well as others in the research community. Later, ASTHVI provided subcontracts to Johns Hopkins, JBA, and the Education Development Center (EDC) for their staff to do the detailed work of preparing technical summaries of the selected studies and their significant findings. And ASTHVI brought together writers with policy backgrounds to translate what the researchers gathered into themes and learnings that could speak to policymakers.

Multiple network principles were at play throughout the effort. “The whole reason for doing this was about mission,” said Filene. No one person could have done this alone with as much success. Simply put by Macdonald, “This is a project that could not have happened without the connections between the partners.” Filene adds, “We each had roles in the field that could contribute.” Trust was an important factor too. “We voiced concerns early on and then had to trust that those concerns were understood and would be addressed,” said Filene.

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Could things have gone differently? Of course. Early on there was some concern within the research community that the white paper might inflate findings and create an unrealistic picture of the outcomes. That concern was assuaged in part by having researchers from JBA, JHU, and EDC part of the team that reviewed data collection forms and undertook the actual research review and abstract development, but disagreements of perspective continued as folks grappled with this being

a communications document versus a pure research document. Nevertheless, Macdonald reflects, “The most difficult part of the project was trying to reconcile - and we never really succeeded - a ‘purist’ vision of the researchers regarding what had to be included in the white paper in order to be complete, and ASTHVI’s emphasis on producing a document that was useful to policymakers and other home visiting stakeholders.” Some home visiting stakeholders suggest it could have been helpful to have conversations about the messages that would be lifted up in the paper rather than leaving that to ASTHVI and the writers. Further, some suggest it would have been nice to have a chance to preview the draft white paper, but time was of the essence as ASTHVI wanted to get this to Capitol Hill policymakers in advance of the MIHOPE release.

In the end, the white paper was presented at a well-attended congressional briefing and the top line messages were well received. In attendance at that briefing were policymakers, advocates, home visiting participants and practitioners, researchers, and state administrators. And when the MIHOPE findings were released, these stakeholders were able to implement a rapid response communications strategy to articulate a consistent message about the results within the broader context of home visiting research. Even more important is that this exercise seemed to strengthen ties and build trust among participants and across networks.

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