

## Insights

# Taking a Community-Based Approach to Early Childhood Systems-Change



“If we start building supports during children’s earliest

learning moments, we have the potential to change the trajectory of their lives,” says LaTousha Daniels, CEO for Miami Children’s Initiative (MCI).

MCI is located in Liberty City, a Miami neighborhood where crime and violence are chronic, and where the childhood poverty rate is [95 percent higher](#) than the rest of U.S. neighborhoods. Families here face significant barriers to quality health, including lack of housing, insufficient childcare, and food insecurity.

The challenges for families in Liberty City illustrate the urgent need for coordinated systems that account for the many social determinants affecting families’ health. Developing those systems requires community-based partnerships that can better respond to real needs and build off existing infrastructure. That’s why each of the 12 state teams working on the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network ([ECCS CoIIN](#)) is collaborating with a place-based community or initiative, like MCI. These partnerships inspire solutions that are sustainable, relevant and strengths-based.

Driven by a desire to improve the health of children and families, MCI launched a community program based in Liberty City’s housing developments—the places where families felt the most isolated from supports. They converted housing space into two community centers, each equipped with a staff of counselors and case managers. From career path coaching to

homework assistance to transportation services, families can access the resources they need right on the property, including those supporting developmental health. If a family has young children, MCI community staff ask them about their early learning environment—are they in a childcare center, do they know about developmental supports? Together, they create a plan that aligns with the family’s goals and that supports the child’s early development.

MCI Early Childcare and Education Specialist Manager, Terry Rutherford leads the community effort with the motto, “we must invest in our children. That is how we secure our future. They are our legacy.”

“By providing families with wrap-around services, MCI’s approach aligns with two-generational strategies where supporting children’s health means supporting the health and well-being of their parents and caregivers,” says NICHQ Project Director, Colleen Murphy, MAIECD, MSMOB, an expert in organizational behavior. “And by integrating early childhood supports into those same services, MCI and the CoIIN team can provide families with young children with timely, relevant resources.”

MCI is also working with the CoIIN team to revolutionize Liberty City’s early childhood centers, transforming them into what Daniels calls “early learning preparatory academies.” The team surveyed each child care center in the community and assessed their needs. They also reached out to the families in the housing development as well as other community service providers.

“We learned about the early childhood supports that already existed and then built off that foundation,” says Nicole Martin-Bynum, the ECCS Program consultant for MCI. “Now, we’re working directly with the centers—through a shared services pilot project—by helping with office management, creating a strategy to standardize developmental screenings and referrals, and providing teachers with professional development resources that support initial or renewal certification. We’re collaborating with the community, responding directly to the needs they expressed.”

MCI’s success in Liberty City shows how community-based partnerships can be catalysts for [early childhood systems-change](#). As Daniels explains though, launching community-based initiatives comes with its own set of challenges. Below, we’re highlighting three lessons learned from MCI’s work so that other states and communities can better leverage a community-based approach to improve early childhood systems.

## **Change takes trust**

Liberty City has seen too many people and programs come and go. Too many promises of change end with retreating backs, leaving the community mistrustful of organizations who claim

they're there to help. And when MCI launched, they encountered that same skepticism.

To build trust, MCI became invested members of the community. They attended community birthday parties, celebrated with them at football games, and mourned with them at funerals. And, by going block-by-block, knocking on people's doors and asking them what they needed, they made sure the community's needs were at the forefront of any conversations.

"People don't want to know how much you know until they know how much you care," says Daniels. "Care and consistency. That's what convinced the community that we wanted to work alongside them, not impart our own agendas."

### **Shift the narrative to shift perceptions**

A community-based movement relies on powerful partnerships. Religious organizations, county and city departments, local colleges and schools, and other community leaders are all invested in MCI's work and helped raise the initial cry for change. But, as Daniels explains, those partnerships wouldn't have been possible if people had accepted Liberty City's narrative as one defined by violence and despair, an all too common narrative for many urban communities. These narratives can make change seem impossible, she says, both for those living in the community and those that might have offered support.

"When we take an interest in the people behind the narrative, when we realize that we are more alike than we are different, we build the relationships that birth movements for change. Focusing on Liberty City's potential has sparked lasting partnerships and encouraged residents to opt into services. This community is no longer letting a zip code define them."

"MCI is doing more than providing 'services' to the community," says Ghia Kelly, Florida's state team lead for the ECCS CoIIN. "They've literally moved into the community and become one with its residents. This gives them real insight into how the community's barriers and strengths impact family well-being and the developmental health of children."

### **Use data-driven methodologies to respond to needs**

"Everything we've done, every program we've supported, is driven by the data we collected in our initial documentation work—the surveys we distributed to families, community members and

childcare centers,” says Martin-Bynum. “Being mindful of what the community has requested helps ensure that we’re not providing duplicative or irrelevant supports.”

This data-driven approach has lent continued legitimacy to MCI as an organization that genuinely supports the Liberty City community. Moreover, the initial documentation has informed their improvement work: they can now track and measure the success of their changes, as well as compare their findings with statewide data.

“The ECCS CoIIN has helped us really make the most of our quality improvement methodology and measurement strategies,” says Daniels. “Now, we’re able to better measure where we were, where we are, and where we are going.”

*In the coming years, the Florida state and community-based team will collaborate with 11 other states to improve early childhood service systems with the ultimate goal of increasing age-appropriate developmental skills among 3-year-old children by 25 percent. Interested in learning about the other community-based teams working on ECCS CoIIN? [View the project map here.](#)*