

# Toxic Stress Steering Committee

## Meeting Summary

January 16, 2015

### Attendees

In person: Samuel Meisels, Katie Bohn, Jan Goracke, Ivy Bloom, Betty Medinger, Heather Leschinsky, Richard Mettler, Paula Eurek, Tiffany Mullison, and Mai Dang (reporting)

On phone: Brandon Verzal and Dr. Gina DiRenzo-Coffey

### Welcome & Introductions

Richard Mettler called the meeting to order at 10:00am. Steering Committee members introduced themselves. Tiffany then previewed the agenda.

### Review December 12, 2014 Meeting Summary

Members accepted the December Meeting Summary as presented.

### The Buffett Childhood Institute

Dr. Samuel Meisels, Founding Executive Director, gave an introduction about the Institute. Members not in attendance were mailed the materials.

The Buffett Childhood Institute is a four campus interdisciplinary institute of the University of Nebraska. Created through a generous founding gift by Susie Buffett, the Institute has been around for 18 months. The University of Nebraska is the only public university nationwide that commits to young children at risk. Their focus is on children from birth to 8, particularly children living in poverty or familial challenges, or children with disabilities or developmental delays. They use applied research to improve or transform lives of these children and to prepare people who work with them. Dr. Meisels spent the first year on strategic planning, and through that process he identified two signature programs. The first one is called **achievement gap challenge**, trying to reduce or eliminate the income gap between children. The second one is **workforce development**, aiming at improving quality and skills of the workforce working with young children.

For the achievement gap, they are working with the Learning Community in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. Leveraging authority, they have developed a program that will assist 10 schools in the Learning Community to create continuous care for children from birth through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. There are 3 elements to it: home visiting for birth to 3 years old, intensive preschool for 3 and 4 years old, and aligned curricula approach for pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. They work with schools where 50% or more of children enrolled are eligible for free or reduced lunch. They also offer technical assistance, and have program coordinators working with families. They are the only program using schools as the hub focusing on birth to 8. Why birth to 8? Other childhood programs usually serve birth to 3, birth to 5, 3 to 4 etc. They are good, but stand the risk of fading out. The Institute believes, by research findings, that persistence of effort is going to result in persistence of outcomes. Omaha efforts are just the first step. They will be reaching out rapidly to other communities in the state focusing on these goals.

On the workforce front, they are doing an inventory of all childhood degree programs at all levels. On another stance, they do a randomized survey of people working with young children to understand their background, attitudes, motivations, distractions. Another initiative is State-wide survey with Gallup about early childhood, early intervention, and, responsibilities for children at risk. Down the road, the Institute will also move in the area of children's mental health.

## **Group Discussion**

Parents may not be aware of the toxic stress – the definition and impact. In fact, the level of stress is rising immensely for parents due to matters such as the cost of childcare, absence of high-quality childcare, and overwhelming information from 24-hours news cycle. It is hard to get young families to support one another. The peer-to-peer support environment is hard to build as young parents are too busy with their phones, Internet, and devices to have interaction with their children or other people.

## **Review Goals**

First, Richard reviewed the 5 goals set out during the last meeting. Richard indicated that none of these goals had a “How” to show the direction nor a projected date. Therefore, Richard suggested members to first reflect on the Charge to recheck the fundamentals, then assess the goals if they are smart, do-able, measurable, and comprehensible.

From the December meeting, 5 goals were established:

- 1: The message of toxic stress;
- 2: Define the problem;
- 3: Optimize effective partnerships;
- 4: Evidence-based strategies: guiding principle;
- 5: Infrastructure.

Richard asked members to pick the goal(s) which represent something this committee’s committed to make a Goal Statement. Members were divided about determining the best language for the initial goal statement.

Some members felt Goal 1 was the top priority because this group had well defined the problem. Therefore, the next step is to have a message about toxic stress using understandable, everyday language, and get the message to parents, educators, and other stakeholders. Nevertheless, the panel stumbled over developing a definition for toxic stress. Even HRSA has reworded the toxic stress Strategy 1 to include trauma.

Others felt that the committee didn’t thoroughly “Define the problem.” Without a written message on the problems basing on national literature or survey data, the strategic plan wouldn’t have any foundation. The group has not broken the problems down, either quantitative or qualitative. We’ve got some preliminary data collected that fairly accurately mirrors national information (BRFFS surveys, 2010-2011). We also have data about children living poverty and in divorced/single-parent families. However, there are other gaps the data couldn’t answer.

Members are also dividing in deciding if the focus should be “how to recover from stress” or “how to prevent/mitigate stress”. Members provided food for thought:

- According to Dr. DiRenzo-Coffey, stress-free is not good for kids, and not realistic either. Kids need stress to grow up into resilient people. The goal is to train parents, families, and care providers how to be a buffer for kids when they experience stress. As a result, kids that get stressed out can return to the baseline, learn something from that, and move on. We need to teach parents that they can’t stop everything bad in life.
- On a separate note, the target of 0-3 group should be readiness at Day One Kindergarten. Bigger goals may shy at-risk families away. A simple, realistic, and close-range goal would work better with them. The most important thing is to maintain sustainability for this fight. To do this, we need support from the general public, legislature, families and providers, and parents. Therefore, education tasks are crucial. When the general public see the importance of the issue, law-makers cannot look away.

- Dr. DiRenzo-Coffey also thought this group might need a member from family medicine practices. Many kids do not have a pediatrician, but see a family doctor.
- According to Betty Medinger, absence of emotions lead to prolonged problems in brain development.

Members agreed:

- There are four categories of audiences: general public, legislators, families, and service providers;
- There should be a name for public to associate this committee with;
- The committee needs to lay out what we mean by toxic stress, what it does, and why we care. This is something the panel can refer to as to not miss the ultimate purpose of this committee. We need a baseline problem to bring us together. Tag lines then can be established as a call for action, but an understanding needs to precede that to lend agreement to the tag line. People are easy to respond to what affects their pocket. We can have a formal problem statement, and several marketing statements that resonate with the needs of specific groups of audience; and
- We need data to back our statements up.

The panel came up with the following suggestions for the Problem Statement:

1. Kids who experience stress early in life make parenting and educating difficult and are costly to everyone.
2. Kids who experience stress early in life without a healthy safety net of family, friends, and educators are very expensive to society now and in the long run.
3. 40% of Nebraska's young children [2 out of 5 young children] in Nebraska are at risk of costing you tax dollars.
4. Children who are stressed out are difficult to parent, educate, and expensive to society.
5. Children experiencing distress have short-term and long-term negative outcomes.
6. Unaddressed distress hurts kids.
7. Babies need us to respond to their needs/distress.
8. Healthy kids grow up to healthy adults, and hence healthy employees.
9. Unhealthy kids are expensive.
10. When bad stuff happens to your kids, be there for them.
11. When babies' needs are not met for a prolonged period, their brain development is at risk, which poses short-term and long-term costs to us all.
12. Children without toxic stress: happy, resilient, and healthy.

### **Next Steps**

Members are welcomed to send suggestions or research to Tiffany. The meeting concluded at 12pm.

### **2015 Meeting Dates**

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Meetings are from 10am – 12pm, on Friday morning at the Nebraska State Office Building, 301 Centennial Mall South in Lincoln.

March 20, Room 5B	April 17, Lower Level Room F
May 15, Room 5B	June 19, Lower Level Room F
July 17, Room 5B	August 21, Room 5B
September 18, Room 5B	October 16, Room 5B
November 13, Room 5B	December 11, Room 5B