

Onondaga Citizens League meeting notes—Oct. 10, 2013

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Meeting held at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus St., Syracuse

Co-chairs: Paul Predmore and Laurie Black

Attendees: Harold Breon, Ginny Carmody, Chris Flynn, Susan French, Stan Goettel, Connie Gregory, Kathleen Harter, Terri Hargrave, Melissa Hidek, Cynda Lamb, Nancy K. McCarty, Donna O'Mahony Rohde, Theresa Pagano, Janet Park, Linda Peressini, Eric Rogers, Peter Sarver, Addie Silvia

Presenters: Dr. Maritza Alvarado, director of health services at the Syracuse City School District; Rebecca Bostwick, program director at the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion; and Yowali Balume, RN, BSN, clinic coordinator at the Westside Family Health Center

OCL: Sandra Barrett and Becky Sernett

Summary: Today's meeting took a look at community-focused health care, in particular the Syracuse City School District health centers and the Westside Family Health Center, and

Upcoming Meetings: All regular study committee meetings will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., on alternating Tuesdays and Thursdays, at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus Street, Syracuse. The next regular meeting will be:

- Thursday, November 14—topic TBA

Special Presentation:

There will be a special meeting on Wednesday, October 23, from 3 – 4 p.m. at ProLiteracy, with Ralph Smith, senior vice president at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and managing director of their Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

Today's Topic: The Intersection of Health and Learning

Syracuse City School District Health Services

Maritza Alvarado, M.D., the director of health services at the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) said students often come to the school-based health centers with "very evolved health issues." The district has 8 in-school health centers that are staffed by a total of: 39 nurses, 14 health aides, a nursing supervisor and a medical assistant. Alvarado works full time directing the district's health services.

Only children who are enrolled in the SCSD can receive services and parents must register their children for the health services as well. Children who are not enrolled, however, are allowed to have one emergency health visit.

She explained to the committee the district's top three health concerns:

Lack of immunizations—The largest issue the district faced so far this year was the lack of immunizations, which prevented many children from registering for school. Alvarado said part of the problem could be attributed to parents/caregivers not fully understanding what needs to be done before children can register for school. The SCSD used to be able to refer families to the Onondaga County Immunization Clinic, but it now only serves uninsured patients.

Dental Health—Inadequate dental health care is another common health concern for students, Alvarado said. Many families within the district are on Medicaid, and few dentists in the area accept Medicaid. To help bridge this gap, the district participates in CHOMPERS!—a dental health program for pre-K students funded by the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York. The program focuses on helping to educate children and parents about dental health care and offers such preventative care services as dental exams and sealants. If a child has any other dental health needs, he or she is referred to the Syracuse Community Health Center.

Mental Health—Many students exhibit behavioral problems in school that are a result of their unaddressed mental health needs. Oppositional defiant disorder is common. Some schools have guidance counselors and/or social workers, but they mostly do intervention work, not therapeutic work. Thanks to a “Promise Zones” grant, the SCSD is able to provide therapists in some schools, but not all. (See <http://ccf.ny.gov/ChildPlan/cpResources/PromiseZoneSummary.pdf>)

Westside Family Health Center

Yowali Balume, RN, BSN, clinic coordinator at the Westside Family Health Center, said a big concern for the clinic is the high number of children who come in and are overdue for their well-child visits. This is especially true for children in the birth to 2 years old age group, as the visits are so frequent when they are so young. This means immunizations are overdue and some children may have unmet health needs. Parents often don't understand the importance of the well-child visit, and the center is trying to be more proactive about educating families. The center is a “medical home” to many families.

Mental health is a “major issue,” she said. The center has a partnership with St. Joseph's Community Mental Health clinic, and can offer onsite mental health services to children and adults.

Parents face many barriers to obtaining quality health care for their children, and these difficulties include: language barriers, lack of employment and socio-economic barriers. Another barrier parents need to overcome is their lack of education on the health/wellness needs of their children. Balume said the center has to spend a lot of time helping to educate parents, as their other medical providers (in the typical 15-

minute office visit) may not have the time to do this.

Education on getting lead testing for children is important, and the center offers lead testing services. Often, though, parents don't follow up with this test for their kids, she said. This is particularly troubling, because lead poisoning can affect a child's cognitive development.

OCL Study Committee Co-Chair Laurie Black asked about universal screening mandates for children. The panel didn't think Onondaga County had any mandates, but added that the school clinics and Westside Family Health Center would follow the screening guidelines of American Academy of Pediatrics as well as New York State's.

In regard to the mental health, Chandra Smith, director of the Salvation Army's Child Care Services, said she often hears from parents who are concerned about their children's mental health because they themselves have a mental health diagnosis. She asked if the health center provides screenings for kids, and Balume said that yes, St. Joseph's Community Mental Health clinic provides these services.

Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion

Rebecca Bostwick is the program director for the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, which is based in Syracuse University's Maxwell School. The center focuses on "place-based" public health initiatives. Place-based initiatives shift the focus from the individual to his/her community or system. This could include an individual's family, neighborhood, zip code, or place of employment. This is a more holistic approach to improving public health, she said. Place-based initiatives focus on changing the environment to allow an individual to make necessary health and/or lifestyle wellness changes. For example, perhaps an unsafe neighborhood prevents someone from going out and walking daily. Or, perhaps there is no easy access to healthy, nutritious food. Initiatives would focus on fixing these "place-based" problems.

Currently, the center is working with Nojaims Brothers Supermarket to develop a Healthy Rewards shopper program. "If you buy healthy items," Bostwick said, "your rewards could buy you a bike, gym membership or discount on healthy food." Foods will have a score of "healthiness" from 1 to 100. Patients earn reward points when they purchase healthier food.

With a patient's informed consent, the project will also collect shoppers' (and patients') healthy shopping data for medical providers at the Westside Family Health Center. Because the health center is a Level 3 medical home, it must show improvement on various patient data points (such as glucose levels) in order to be reimbursed at a higher rate. Once the healthy rewards program is up and running, shoppers who are also patients (and who have given informed consent) can share

their healthy shopping number with their medical provider. If a patient struggles with diabetes, the medical provider can pull up the patient's shopping list and see what foods he/she is purchasing and point him/her to healthier foods. Patients can also work with a nutritionist who would create a shopping list, which he/she could then bring to Nojaims.

Bostwick said the "program could be a real game changer for how you go interacting with a patient."

The program can also allow the center to compare biometric outcomes for patients who are healthy reward shoppers with those who don't participate in the shopper program. This, Bostwick said, can lead to the development of other program initiatives. The reward program project is in the technological development phase, now.

Q&A Period

A question was asked about the nutritional value of school lunches. "We're doing better than most school districts," Alvarado said. The school menu has become healthier since she's worked there. The district used to offer an "Ultra Donut," which was packed with protein. But it would be confusing to children who would ask for donuts outside of school, and these aren't healthy foods, and so the district took the Ultra Donut off its menu. It also no longer offers Pop-Tarts.

Also, the SCSD superintendent began an initiative in which children eat breakfast in the classroom. Alvarado said this is a good way to ensure children start the day with a good breakfast, and since many children qualify for free or reduced lunch, this helps ensure that kids are getting at least two good meals. Also, she said some teachers find it's a good time to get to know kids during a non-instructional activity.

A question was asked whether they see children who are dealing with or have dealt with some level of trauma.

Yowali said it's "not a big issue," but if it is, they can refer children to a social worker.

Alvarado said that she sees trauma affecting older students, perhaps around 6th grade. By this time, some students have seen someone shot or know someone who has been shot. The violence in their community has been witnessed or experienced, and the children carry this trauma with them. "It's difficult to diagnose these issues early on [because young children can't really verbalize it]," Alvarado said. By 6th grade, though, students may exhibit signs of behavioral trouble that could be related to trauma, and they can talk about it.

Yowali said some parents request an ADD/ADHD test for children, because they think ADD/ADHD may be the cause of the children's problem behavior in school, but

what really is the issue is the children's unaddressed grief and exposure to violence.

Alvarado said some parents are also motivated to pursue an ADD/ADHD diagnosis for their children, because that will ensure the child gets bussed to school.

Theresa Hargrave, a psychiatrist at Upstate Medical University, said, "Trauma is huge in this population." The brain is at its most "plastic" state from birth through age seven, and this is the time for intervention. "The role of trauma is big. Big. Big. Big," she said.

Research supports the impact trauma has on children, she said. For example, she pointed to research that has indicated that prenatal stress/maternal stressors are what correlate most closely with child asthma and early wheezing.

Peggy Liuzzi, director of Child Care Solutions, agreed that trauma has a large impact on this student population. "The No. 1 issue that [pre-k] teachers and providers have [is that] they don't know how to respond to behavioral issues."

Through a program called Child and Adolescent Psychiatry for Primary Care (cappcny.org), Hargrave said she works with providers to help them address children's mental health needs. "Parents are heartsick," she said. "They feel like kids are out of control and don't know what to do."

She also said there are programs to help teachers and schools, such as those that help create trauma-informed classrooms.

Alvarado said that at the school district, there is an organizational barrier to the health services department affecting greater change in the classroom in regards to student behavior. Behavioral issues come under the pupil services department. "There's a disconnect in that way," she said. They are trying to work together more, though, she said.

Peter Sarver said that the Hospice of CNY has a grief center with childhood grief experts who could provide some professional development training for teachers. (<http://www.hospicecny.org/grief-hospice>)

Black asked if there was a systems approach to health for the birth to age 5 population in Onondaga County. The panel said they weren't aware of any. "We seem resistant to this," Black said. She asked if anyone goes to families' homes if a child hasn't been in for a well-child visit. Balume said, no, but a patient navigator might do this.

Alvarado said that "it's very hard" to offer quality service that's also cost effective.

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A question was asked about student absenteeism. Alvarado said that the student management system tracks absenteeism but that there is “no way to correlate absenteeism with specific health issues.”

Next Meeting

The next OCL study committee meeting will be at 11:30 at ProLiteracy on Thursday, Nov. 14.