

Research team makes progress on system to screen for trauma in foster youths

October 24 2014, by Mike Krings

Researchers in the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare have completed initial efforts to learn more about adoption and the foster care system in Kansas, particularly about the challenges and facilitators of successful adoptions. The efforts are part of the Kansas Adoption Permanency Project, created to enact trauma screening and functional assessment for all children who enter foster care and improve adoption outcomes for children, families and the state.

The project, also known as KAPP, is a public-private-university partnership among the School of Social Welfare, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, the Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services and the state's network of private foster care contractors – KVC Kansas and Saint Francis Community Services. The partners are members of the KAPP Steering Committee.

Researchers analyzed state administrative [child welfare](#) data and conducted surveys, interviews and focus groups with youths in foster care and youths who have been adopted from foster care, parents, child welfare and mental health professionals, judges, district attorneys, court-appointed special advocates and others to determine how they can best create an integrated child welfare and mental/behavioral health system that promotes well-being, family functioning and positive permanency outcomes.

KAPP is funded by a five-year, \$2.5 million grant from the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families, part of the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services. Many [children](#) entering foster care have suffered some form of [trauma](#), but Kansas does not currently have a system to help screen them for such trauma or to help professionals develop plans to treat resulting problems and monitor their progress as they grow.

"We had kids, parents and professionals from all over the state, both rural and urban," Susy Mariscal, research associate, said of the interviews and focus groups. "Parents often think that, because they are young, kids will forget the trauma they've suffered. Or that with love, they'll be fine. That's not really the case with complex trauma; we need to provide tools for professionals to help these children, and we need to prepare parents to understand and address the trauma and behavioral health needs of their children, both current and future."

One of the top findings from the study was that youths in foster care have substantial trauma and behavioral health needs. Young children are much more likely to be adopted. However, most children are not screened for trauma, and mental health issues in children 5 and under are rarely treated, and often not even identified.

Trauma suffered, including separation from families, substance abuse by or death of family members, exposure to domestic violence or abuse, among others, often manifests itself later in life as significant behavioral health problems that may lead to adoption disruption or dissolution. KAPP hopes to change that by enacting screening and functional assessments of every child who enters foster care with standardized measures and to enact research-based interventions to address trauma.

In the analysis of child welfare administrative data, the researchers identified that the No. 1 predictor for a child being adopted is disability. However, the system is not set up to provide consistent and ongoing services for families and children with disabilities. That can lead to

adoption dissolution or children going back to [foster care](#).

"Many parents feel like they are on their own once they adopt, and that is something we need to change," said Becci Akin, assistant professor at the [social welfare](#) school and a co-principal investigator of the grant.

The Kansas Youth Advisory Council, the voice of youth in care across Kansas, is part of the KAPP Interagency Advisory Council, collaborating with KU researchers and statewide professionals to address problems that exist in the system now and how they can be addressed. The group has provided information regarding service gaps and will provide insight on experiences of those in the system and guidance for issues for researchers to address.

"I think everybody's voices are beginning to be heard and the gaps in service are beginning to be identified," said Tina Woods, a junior in the social welfare school and president of the Kansas Youth Advisory Council. "There is buy-in from stakeholders at all levels, because of the collaboration, which will help make this a much stronger program than just those of us at KU telling people what is best."

Researchers are in the process of developing an implementation plan for screening tools and interventions for trauma-informed care to be put in place across Kansas. As they are put in place they will be continually tested for effectiveness and improved. KU will continue to work with social workers, [mental health professionals](#), judges, attorneys, parents and others who serve children during the process.

By the end of the five-year project, procedures will be in place to ensure that kids across the state, including those who move from one region to another, receive consistent service. Very few states in the nation have such screening and treatment plans, and the research team hopes that the Kansas Adoption Permanency Project will serve as a model for states

across the nation.

Provided by University of Kansas

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