

My Community Cares:

Strengthening Families and Supporting Communities

By Michelle R. Gros



My Community Cares event in East Baton Rouge Parish. Photo provided by My Community Cares.

What do Louisiana judges and attorneys, pots of gumbo, popsicles in parks, medical mobile units, egg hunts, care baskets, block parties, drive-through services and resources, supporting families, foster care and community conversations have in common? My Community Cares (MCC)!

MCC is a community-driven, neighborhood-based approach bringing together families with lived experience in the child welfare system, community members and agencies to identify and connect families to a network of quality services and support designed to promote child and family well-being and prevent children from entering foster care. The mission of MCC is to strengthen families and support communities. The vision of MCC is for children and families to have access to services, activities, programs, resources and support in the communities where they live.

MCC was developed in response to the 2018 Child and Family Services Review (CFSR)¹ conducted on Louisiana's child welfare system and inspired by the federal Children's Bureau's² new vision to shift from a reactive system to one centered on family strengthening. Many Louisiana judges, attorneys and legal and child welfare stakeholders chose to stir the pot and try something different than a one-size-fits-all approach to preventing children from entering foster care. Stakeholders co-designed strategies with community members to find ways to serve families before they became entangled with the court, juvenile services and foster care systems. To implement MCC, the Court Improvement Program (CIP) of the Louisiana Supreme Court,³ the Pelican Center for Children and Families⁴ and local courts partnered with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS),⁵ the Louisiana Children's Trust Fund,⁶ the Louisiana Children's Justice Act (CJA) Task Force,⁷ the Casey Family Programs,⁸ other agencies, parents and families who had experienced the child welfare system firsthand, and community members.

Importantly, Louisiana's child welfare data showed that many families involved with the child welfare system historically live within the same neighborhoods. The

poverty, employment, housing, crime, healthcare and education data in these neighborhoods further revealed that families living in these areas have the odds stacked against them and that they face layers upon layers of social, physical and economic challenges. Stakeholders agreed to seek the voice of residents in these neighborhoods to find out what community-based programs and support they felt families needed that were supportive, racially equitable, culturally relevant, and built on the strengths of their community. In 2019, four parishes with high numbers of children entering foster care were chosen to pilot MCC — Caddo, East Baton Rouge, Livingston and Rapides. Fourteen priority neighborhoods were identified within those four parishes.

Over the past three years, MCC has partnered with thousands of families in these communities to assess opportunities and challenges and co-design solutions to prevent children from entering or remaining in foster care. While each community took its own approach to implementing MCC, there are key tenets across the parishes.

Guiding Principles. MCC's foundational assumption is that communities know the best solutions to their unmet needs and challenges. While each parish and neighborhood customized their unique approach, every MCC site is purposed to spark community organizing and engagement; connect families in the community; and provide individual family support.

Teaming Structure. MCC neighborhood, parish and state teams meet regularly to actively listen to and support one another, improve communication between community members and agency partners, identify and remove barriers to quality services, advocate for change, promote racial and socioeconomic equity, and build a network of services, activities, programs, resources, and support unique to each community. "In the past, we have been completely disconnected from each other. MCC brings community partners together with residents to learn from one another, share the work they are doing, and find ways to collaborate. It provides a powerful environment to get everyone on the same level and progressing toward a common goal," said Caddo Parish Juvenile Court Chief Judge David N. Matlock.

Leadership. MCC is led by community members and agency partners:

► **Community members** include families with lived experience with the child welfare system as well as individuals invested in the health of the community where they live, such as residents, business owners, service providers, clergy and others unique to each community. Some community members conveyed their mistrust of government agencies and service providers. They further expressed that they are often the last ones to know when someone or something comes into their neighborhood to "save" them and have conveyed that, by the time they know about it, it is too late for their input. Thus, finding trusted and credible members of the community itself to lead within MCC is critical — and takes time.

► **Agency partners** include judges, Family in Need of Services (FINS),⁹ CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates),¹⁰ attorneys, DCFS, Family Resource Centers, service providers, schools, emergency responders, healthcare providers, non-profit organizations, local government, etc. Judicial leadership and the involvement of attorneys are crucial to MCC. Judges are in a unique position to observe and understand the needs of families and convene and support the communities they serve to influence positive community change. Attorneys are experienced in advocating for clients and can apply those same skills to advocating for communities and fighting or addressing systemic barriers families experience in Louisiana's most vulnerable neighborhoods. The role of DCFS is important because it is responsible for the safety and well-being of children in communities and working in partnership with other community entities to ensure the availability of services and supports.

► **A MCC Parish entity** coordinates the work of the local members and agencies in each community. The entities include Step Forward of the Community Foundation of North Louisiana¹¹ in Caddo Parish, Empower 225¹² in Livingston Parish and Fostering Community¹³ in Rapides Parish.

Strategies. Each community has its own strategies, but overall MCC strategies include hosting and supporting



My Community Cares event in Livingston Parish. Photo provided by My Community Cares.

community events and conversations to engage community members in identifying needed support; conducting ongoing assessments of community strengths, challenges and opportunities; using information shared by community members through listening circles, community conversations and activities as well as data collected by parishes and the state to inform decisions and track outcomes; implementing strategies recommended by the community and providing a way for information, strategies and solutions to flow between the neighborhood, parish and state teams to meet the unique needs of communities; and advocating for system changes as needed.

Central Point of Contact. MCC serves as a single point of contact in communities for families in need of support before (or when) crisis hits. Judges and attorneys not only participate in MCC teams and advocacy efforts, but they can refer families to MCC. MCC connects families to each other and/or agencies for support and resources as well as connects agencies to each other to improve coordination, quality and availability of services and referrals. Connections are made to meet basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing. Additional help is provided to identify root contributors of “the cri-

sis” and find resources for employment, housing stability, parenting support and education, financial management, mental health, etc.

Each parish has experienced successes, including:

- ▶ Intentional processes and programs are being created with local government, schools, FINS, courts, law enforcement and DCFS to support parents, caregivers and children. In Rapides Parish, in-school mental health programs have expanded from nine to 23 schools. In Caddo Parish, the school district has adopted a trauma-informed lens and plans to place TBRI® (Trust-Based Relational Intervention)¹⁴ practitioners in all 64 schools. Trauma support and TBRI® trainings are being provided to parents, caregivers and children in Caddo Parish through collaborations between the Caddo Parish Juvenile Court and Volunteers for Youth Justice.¹⁵

- ▶ In Livingston and East Baton Rouge Parishes, communities are overcoming barriers to healthcare in neighborhoods with limited access to public transportation by building strategic partnerships with local healthcare providers.

- ▶ MCC partners have engaged with the community in Livingston Parish through drive-through events where needs assessments were completed and families



My Community Cares event in Caddo Parish. Photo provided by My Community Cares.

were connected with services and support and invited to advocate for their community; “back to school” bashes with petting zoos, balloon animals, free school supplies and parent support; weekly popsicles for children in parks and support information for parents; and partnering with local law enforcement to provide car seats and car seat safety training for families in the community.

- ▶ In Rapides Parish, MCC has a strategic partnership with the court, FINS and local schools to support families and connect them to needed resources.

- ▶ All MCC parishes are offering environments where families and community members can come together to establish relationships, share experiences, support one another and build community resiliency.

Over the last three years, there has been a significant decrease in the number of reports of abuse and neglect and children entering foster care in the MCC pilot parishes. For example, there was a decrease from 325 children in 2018 to 70 children in 2021 entering foster care in Caddo Parish, and a decrease from 187 children in 2018 to 51 children in 2021 entering foster care in Livingston Parish.

While the MCC pilot sites have seen success, recent data shows that Louisiana’s children are faring significantly low as to child well-being than most children in the United States. According to the 2021 Kids Count Profile Data Book,¹⁶ Louisiana ranks 48th as it relates to overall child well-being, 49th as it relates to family and community well-being, 49th as it relates to economic well-being, 48th as it



My Community Cares event in Rapides Parish. Photo provided by My Community Cares.

relates to education, and 48th as it relates to health. Also, 27% of children residing in Louisiana are living below the poverty level compared to a national average of 17%; 33% of parents residing in Louisiana lack secure employment.

In the federal fiscal year 2020, Louisiana received 45,158 reports of child abuse or neglect, 6,181 children were served in foster care, and 3,162 families were served in their homes.¹⁷ Due to the continued need to support Louisiana families and the successful impact of the pilot of MCC, MCC will be expanded to all nine regions of Louisiana by the end of 2022. MCC lead agencies will continue to be selected in the parish in each region with the historically highest number of children entering foster care, which includes Rapides Parish in Alexandria Region; East Baton Rouge Parish in Baton Rouge Region; Livingston Parish in Covington Region; Lafayette Parish in Lafayette Region; Calcasieu Parish in Lake Charles Region; Ouachita Parish in Monroe Region; Orleans Parish in Orleans Region; Caddo Parish in Shreveport Region; and Terrebonne Parish in Thibodaux Region.

The leadership and advocacy of judges and attorneys has proven to be pivotal to the success of MCC and the prevention of child abuse and neglect across the state of Louisiana. Judges and attorneys are encouraged to join their local MCC team.

There are numerous ways for judges and attorneys to get involved with MCC and even obtain pro bono hours. “We are better together, and together we can strengthen Louisiana children and families.”¹⁸

To get involved or for more information on My Community Cares, contact:

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► Michelle R. Gros, Chief Operations Officer, Pelican Center for Children and Families, specialprojects@pelicancenter.org.

FOOTNOTES

1. Child & Family Services Reviews (CFSR), Children’s Bureau (July 1, 2021), www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/monitoring/child-family-services-reviews.

2. Administration for Children & Families, www.acf.hhs.gov.

3. Louisiana Court Improvement Program, Louisiana Supreme Court, www.lasc.org/Children_Families?p=CIP.

4. Pelican Center for Children and Families, <https://pelicancenter.org/index.html>.

5. Department of Children & Family Services, <http://dcfs.louisiana.gov>.

6. Louisiana Children’s Trust Fund, www.louisianacftf.org.

7. Children’s Justice Act, Department of Children & Family Services, <http://dcfs.louisiana.gov/page/425>.

8. Casey Family Programs, www.casey.org.

9. Family in Need of Services Assistance Program, Louisiana Supreme Court, www.lasc.org/Children_Families?p=FINS.

10. Court Appointed Special Advocates, Louisiana Supreme Court, www.lasc.org/Children_Families?p=CASA.

11. Step Forward, Community Foundation of North Louisiana, <https://cfnl.org/stepforward/>.

12. Empower 225, <https://empower225.org>.

13. Fostering Community, www.fosteringcommunity.org.

14. What is TBRI®, CROSSROADS NOLA, <https://crossroadsnola.org/tbri/>.

15. TBRI®, Volunteers for Youth Justice, <https://vyjla.org/tbri/>.

16. 2021 Kids Count Profile Data Book, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, <https://agendaforchildren.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/aecf-2021kidscountdatabook-2021.pdf>.

17. DCFS Services Statewide in Federal Fiscal Year 2020, Department of Children & Family Services, www.dcfs.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/searchable/Reports/DCFS_2021_factsheet_state_regions.pdf.

18. See more articles about MCC. “How does My Community Cares in Louisiana build strong neighborhoods that keep families together?” Casey Family Programs (Oct. 27, 2021), www.casey.org/my-community-cares/; “My Community Cares: Building Strong Communities That Bring Families Together,” Louisiana First Foundation, <http://louisianafirstfoundation.com/louisiana-fosters-october2021/> (last visited May 5, 2022); “Pandemic brings struggles in fight against truancy, and opportunities for some,” *Town Talk* (Jan. 9, 2022), www.thetowntalk.com/story/news/2022/01/09/pandemic-brings-struggles-rapides-fight-against-truancy/9124721002/; “Louisiana: A Program Improvement Plan Made Successful Through Agency and Court Collaboration,” Children’s Bureau Express (Sept. 2019), <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=209&articleid=5383>; “My Community Cares: A Multitiered, Multidisciplinary, and Neighborhood-Driven Approach to Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect,” Children’s Bureau Express (April 2020), <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=215§ionid=2&articleid=5536>.

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