



## Executive Summary

### Caring Across Communities: Addressing Mental Health Needs of Diverse Children and Youth

*Caring Across Communities: Addressing Mental Health Needs of Diverse Children and Youth* brought school-connected mental health services to immigrants and refugees in 15 communities in eight states. From 2007 to 2010, partnerships developed model mental health programs that engaged schools, families, students, mental health agencies, and other local organizations in building culturally appropriate, readily available services. Most sites also offered supportive services such as case management. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Board of Trustees authorized the program for up to \$7 million.

**Read the full Program Results Report.**

**Read more about the program on its website.**

#### CONTEXT

Children from immigrant and refugee families, a growing segment of the U.S. population, are at higher risk than other children for depression, anxiety, social isolation, lack of social integration, and undiagnosed mental health disorders. They have limited access to mental health care, and often come from cultures where there is stigma attached to mental health issues.

*Caring Across Communities* was part of RWJF's work to help meet the needs of vulnerable communities whose populations are changing—in this case, through immigration. The national program built on RWJF's work in school health, including establishing the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools at George Washington University in Washington.

## THE PROGRAM

*Caring Across Communities* brought school-connected mental health and, in most cases, supportive services, to immigrants and refugees in 15 communities in eight states.<sup>1</sup> The program's sites developed model mental health programs that engaged schools, families, students, mental health agencies, and other local organizations in building culturally informed, linguistically accessible, and readily available services for children, youth, and their families. A number of sites also offered supportive services such as case management to help families with basic needs such as housing or winter clothing.

The sites were all located in communities with many immigrants and/or refugees. While the sites developed different models and approaches, they all:

- Offered at least some mental health services in schools
- Provided families with interpretation and translation services
- Adapted their strategies to the cultural group(s) being served

## KEY PROGRAM RESULTS AND FINDINGS

National program staff and evaluators<sup>2</sup> reported the following results to the RWJF in an evaluation report (available [online](#)),<sup>3</sup> other reports and interviews, and on the *Caring Across Communities* [website](#):

- ***Caring Across Communities* projects provided thousands of immigrant and refugee children and families with access to culturally responsive mental health prevention and treatment services.** They:
  - Supported more than 9,000 students from 55 countries at 36 schools
  - Engaged more than 4,600 parents/caregivers, and partnered with more than 4,500 teachers, counselors, school health professionals, and others
  - Offered services ranging from schoolwide mental health promotion, to group and individual counseling, to home visits
- **Four components of mental health services for immigrant and refugee children are essential:**
  - **Engaging with families**, from which all services build, entails establishing relationships with families and identifying their unique needs and strengths.

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<sup>1</sup> Each site received a three-year grant of up to \$300,000.

<sup>2</sup> The evaluators were Clea McNeely, Katharine Sprecher, and Denise Bates of the University of Tennessee.

<sup>3</sup> McNeely C, Sprecher K, and Bates D. *Comparative Case Study of Caring Across Communities: Identifying Essential Components of Comprehensive School-Linked Mental Health Services for Refugee and Immigrant Children*. Knoxville, TN: Center for the Study of Youth and Political Violence and Department of Public Health, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, May 2010.

Home visits are especially helpful. Providing a consistent, helpful presence—such as by greeting families when parents dropped their children off at school—also helped engage families.

- **Meeting their basic needs**, such as winter clothing, a mattress to sleep on, academic supports, and language classes. Addressing basic needs may be an efficient way to resolve mental and emotional distress for many families, and is an effective way to build trust.
- **Strengthening their ability to adapt to a new culture**, especially through cultural brokers, people who understand the different cultures of refugees and immigrants—and who may have been immigrants or refugees themselves. Program staff from other cultures can assist with cultural adaptation as well, particularly if they understand the culture or are open to learning about it from the families.
- **Providing emotional and behavioral supports**, such as individual and group therapy focused on dealing with trauma; support groups; individual behavior plans; coaching in conflict resolution and relationship skills; and mentoring.

These components follow a hierarchy of needs, and should be seamlessly integrated. It is helpful for the contact people to have a relationship with the family and to be able to help them navigate a wide variety of services and situations.

- ***Caring Across Communities* created tools (e.g., training manuals and guidebooks) to facilitate the design and implementation of school-connected mental health services for immigrant and refugee students.**

## AFTERWARD

RWJF gave the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools two grants to build capacity for school-based mental health programs. Under the first grant,<sup>4</sup> center staff:

- Conducted interviews, focus groups, and surveys with thought leaders, foundation staff, and school personnel
- Analyzed policies and federally funded grant programs related to mental health and lessons learned from *Caring Across Communities* and other RWJF national programs

To help ensure maximum uptake of federal and state policy opportunities supporting school mental health, under the second grant<sup>5</sup> center staff are:

- Identifying and reviewing federal, state, and local policies and regulations with implications for the organizational management and financing of school-connected mental health programs

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<sup>4</sup> Grant ID# 67762 (August 2010 through December 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Grant ID# 68467 (January 2011 through March 2012).

- Exploring strategies and opportunities to increase and institutionalize school-connected mental health services and programs

The center also continues to act as a clearinghouse for resources and tools on school-connected mental health services.

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