



COMMUNITY STORY

# Community Alignment in Guilford County, North Carolina



By Julie Pratt, THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT

Stormi Covington fell in love with serving families with young children while working for the Greensboro Housing Authority. Through a partnership between the Housing Authority and the nonprofit [Ready for School, Ready for Life \(Ready Ready\)](#), she facilitated a program for babies, toddlers, and their families. When she was offered a job in 2019 to work directly for Ready Ready, she eagerly accepted.

Covington became a Community Alignment Specialist, a newly created position with the [Get Ready Guilford Initiative \(GRGI\)](#). Her position is also affiliated with Family Connects, a program that provides support to newborns and their families. For the past 18 months, Covington has been on the ground floor of implementing GRGI, which receives major funding from The Duke Endowment (see sidebar).

## Get Ready Guilford Initiative (GRGI)

Every child deserves a chance to succeed in school and in life. However, research shows that children born to wealthy families tend to become wealthy adults, while those born to poor families tend to remain tethered to poverty. Nowhere is that reality starker, perhaps, than in North Carolina's Piedmont Triad region, where children of families at the bottom of the economic ladder stand less than a 5% chance of rising to the top as adults — one of the worst rates of upward mobility in America.

The Duke Endowment is supporting an ambitious 10-year strategy that uses large, targeted investments in early childhood to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty in Guilford County, a major population center of the Triad. The strategy, called the [Get Ready Guilford Initiative](#), is spearheaded by the Endowment and Ready for School, Ready for Life (Ready Ready), an organization helping to lead the fight for better early childhood outcomes in Guilford County. By expanding proven programs and weaving disjointed early childhood resources into one seamless system of care, the Get Ready Guilford Initiative aims to ensure those critical developmental needs are met.



GRGI focuses on families with children prenatal through 8 years old. It aims to improve outcomes and reduce disparities in five key areas: (a) planned and well-timed pregnancies; (b) healthy births; (c) on-track infant and toddler development at 12, 24, and 36 months; (d) school readiness at kindergarten; and (e) success by third grade.

Community alignment is basically the alignment of people, processes, and supporting technologies, according to Covington:

The people are those we're building relationships and partnering with, including the collaboratives we attend and advisory boards we sit on. The processes are the communication and feedback loops needed to understand and respond to what's happening in the community. And the supporting technology includes working with the Integrated Data System Team, with the 2-1-1 call center, and with resource directory databases.

Community alignment is a core component of the Family Connects model. The goal is to improve the accuracy and efficiency of connecting families with the right service, at the right time, in the right amount. Covington recalled working at the Housing Authority and not having enough time to research every service and contact person a family might need. "And that's what I get to do now," she said. "I'm like the worker bee for those who are serving families. When they run into the smallest thing, I can use my contacts and get a response to them."

### Community Partners

Covington's singular position has grown to a team of three Community Alignment Specialists. Their work currently focuses on supporting the three evidence-based early childhood programs slated for expansion under GRGI and the emerging work of community navigators:

- **Family Connects** nurses provide home visits to parents of newborns to perform health assessments and connect parents to community resources. The program was established in Guilford County in 2001 as the Universal Newborn Home Visiting Program and



transitioned to the Family Connects model in 2015. The program is administered by the county Department of Health and Human Services.

- **HealthySteps**, a program of ZERO TO THREE, promotes nurturing caregiving, which supports families and fosters the healthy development and well-being of babies and toddlers, preparing them for school and life. Child development experts called HealthySteps Specialists meet with parents of children birth to 3 years old during well-child visits in pediatric-serving practices in Guilford County. The program began in Guilford County in 2018 and is administered by Children's Home Society.
- **Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)** has been serving Guilford County since 2000 as a program of Guilford Child Development, a multi-service nonprofit agency. NFP provides nurse home visits to first-time moms and children living in poverty or with other risk factors. Services are provided prenatally to the child's second birthday. Families may then transition to Early Head Start, which is administered by the same agency.
- **Community Navigators** are being hired to partner with obstetric and/or pediatric practices in Guilford County to offer developmental screenings, referrals and support to pregnant women and families with young children who are not served by the other three early childhood programs.

- **Community Navigators**, employed by the Children’s Home Society, will collaborate with the three early childhood programs to ensure that all families with young children get the services they need, when they need them. Prenatal Community Navigators have been hired and are based out of OB practices. The system will eventually include universal assessment prenatally, at birth, and at 12, 24 and 36 months; targeted referrals based on assessment results; and ongoing support for families.

## How the Community Partners Collaborate

Under GRGI, the partners are working to strengthen their collaboration with each other, as well as with the broader community. Their efforts occur in two overlapping areas: serving families and strengthening systems.

### SERVING FAMILIES

Referrals include families referred to the four partnering entities, as well as referrals made by the partners to other services families need. The primary source of referrals to Family Connects is hospitals, where a Family Connects nurse visits families with newborns. HealthySteps works exclusively with families served by the pediatric serving practice where they are based. NFP is the only partner that begins serving families prenatally and receives referrals primarily from health care and social service providers. Because of the distinct roles and timeframes of each of the partners, they have limited occasions to refer to each other.

“If you are trying to reach people to give nonprofit services without thinking about how your services interact with their smartphones, you’re missing a big part of your target population.”

—Leonard Lawson, Director of Integrated Data Systems at Ready Ready

Each community partner is, however, connected with a variety of organizations, which can meet the needs of their families. A detailed, online directory of services is being developed to assist in this effort.

Service coordination is another area of frequent collaboration among the partners. One strategy is what Natalie Tackitt, North Carolina Coordinator for HealthySteps, calls tag-teaming. HealthySteps and Family Connects often work together to help families secure basic resources (e.g., diapers and cribs) and stay engaged with needed services:

For example, HealthySteps Specialists tell me they sometimes tag team with Family Connects nurses to follow up with families. If the nurse makes an appointment, goes to the home and there’s nobody there, they can call the pediatrician’s office and ask the Specialist to keep an eye out for that family. The HealthySteps Specialist will help follow up with the family and emphasize the value of the Family Connects home visits and then help them get connected. The Specialist may even say, “why don’t we call your Family Connects nurse right now and get you back on their schedule?”

Another example of service coordination involves NFP and HealthySteps. NFP sends letters to inform obstetricians and pediatricians when NFP services are being provided to their patients. HealthySteps Specialists in pediatric practices provide support for all patients birth to 3 years old, using a three-tiered system based on need. NFP and HealthySteps often overlap with the highest need families and try to coordinate their efforts accordingly. Both programs are looking forward to the new Integrated Data System, which will help them to track and coordinate their services more easily.

### STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS

Maximizing resources to reach all families is a high priority for GRGI and the community partners. A good example is the planning for universal developmental assessments to be conducted at five time points, from prenatal to the child’s third birthday. Currently, all three programs are providing a portion of those assessments to a portion of the families in Guilford County. The plan will take into account what is already in place, formalize the responsibilities of each of the

three existing programs, and determine which assessments will be provided by the Navigators.

The three partners are hopeful about the positive effects GRGI will have on families with young children. Mishawne Carrington, NFP Supervisor, noted:

I think this has been revolutionary in that no other counties in North Carolina have tried to do something like this. I am hoping that it will be successful. It's very easy to say we're going to collaborate with other groups or organizations. But more importantly, we need to work collectively to do the most good for the neighborhood and community. It's about doing the most good.

Identifying and addressing systemic barriers is another key to reaching all families equitably. For example, Covington credits a conversation with a HealthySteps Specialist for triggering efforts to address one of those barriers:

I learned from a HealthySteps Specialist that many of our immigrant and refugee families were trying to access services in our community and were hitting a language barrier and lack of interpreters. This was happening at multiple organizations, so we conducted a survey and focus groups to learn more about where, when, and why this was happening and ideas for addressing it. We're now working with the [Center for New North Carolinians](#) on solutions and next steps.

## Using Supporting Technologies

Collaboration among the four early childhood programs will be bolstered by two important tools — an online directory of services and an integrated data system.

### AGENCY FINDER

The Agency Finder is a comprehensive, online directory of services for families with young children in Guilford County. Covington is spearheading its development in collaboration with a community alignment design team that includes representatives of the four early childhood programs. The group meets biweekly to work through the details of content, organization, and format.

*"We need to work collectively to do the most good for the neighborhood and community. It's about doing the most good."*

*—Mishawne Carrington, NFP Supervisor*

The team reached its goal of collecting data on the first hundred programs by the end of 2020. Each listing will include a brief description about the program, the services offered, location, contact information, eligibility, wait list information, availability of language interpreters, and other relevant details. In early 2021, the first iteration of the Agency Finder will be released for use by agencies participating in GRGI. The ultimate goal is to make the directory available to the public, with family-facing and provider-facing portals.

During the summer, the team also worked on a special [Covid-19 Directory](#), which provided information to the public on program changes necessitated by the pandemic.

### INTEGRATED DATA SYSTEM (IDS)

The IDS will connect all GRGI services and support referral management, care coordination, and evaluation. The four early childhood programs are looking to the new system to help them avoid duplication, coordinate their services, and prevent families from falling between the cracks. They also see a significant benefit to families, who will have more streamlined access to programs and will no longer have to repeat their stories for each one.

Leonard Lawson, Director of Integrated Data Systems at Ready Ready, is in charge of developing the IDS in collaboration with the GRGI programs that will be using the system. Lawson came to Ready Ready in January 2019 after serving as the IT systems manager for a community foundation and as a database developer for a national organization.

Key considerations in developing the IDS include alignment and agreement among the partners about what they want the system to accomplish. "It's not just



that we want an integrated data system,” said Lawson. “We have to be very precise about what end result we want from that system in order to get the buy-in to make it happen.”

Lawson favors a “land and expand” approach. The Application Programming Interface technology widely used by Facebook, Lyft, and Airbnb can also be applied to the nonprofit sector, making it easier to add agencies and data elements as the system grows. “Start with a very defined thing,” Lawson suggests. “Share a small bit of data for a very precise reason so you build up the infrastructure to share the data. And then go on to the next bit of data you want to share and create a cycle of adoption.”

The experience of families seeking services online is another important consideration. One example is the widespread use of smartphones to access goods and

services. According to the Pew Research Center, four out of five adults in the US have smartphones. For one in four Black and Hispanic adults, smartphones are their only access to the Internet. Across all races, dependency on smartphones alone increases as income decreases. Lawson cautions that “if you are trying to reach people to give nonprofit services without thinking about how your services interact with their smartphones, you’re missing a big part of your target population.”

Lawson sees the work he and his colleagues are doing as creating the infrastructure for an affordable IDS that could be widely used. “Once you build the foundation across all these nonprofit services and you spread that cost out, then it’s very affordable and it scales,” he said. “You can use the same infrastructure in Forsyth County right next to us, and the cost isn’t that much more.”

---

## ABOUT THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT

Four national early childhood models—Family Connects, HealthySteps, Help Me Grow, and Nurse-Family Partnership—are exploring ways to have a greater impact on young children and their families in communities where their programs overlap. The project is a multi-year initiative, with leadership and facilitation from [ZERO TO THREE](#) and funding from the [Pritzker Children’s Initiative](#). While the four models were the starting point for the project, their local experiences reveal a broad range of community partners who play important roles in early childhood collaboration. For links to additional stories and briefs from the Model Convening Project, see the [Hand in Hand Directory](#).

Published May 2021