

Spotlight on Success

Stronger Together in Minnesota

By Anne Barlow, Director MNH&V and Bridget Walde, MPH, MDH EHDI Program

Years in development, the successful partnership between MDH EHDI and the family support organization in Minnesota continues to produce changemaking efforts for families of children who are deaf/hard of hearing. Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) program and Minnesota Hands & Voices (MNH&V) have a strong and collaborative relationship. Minnesota both benefits from and reflects this relationship. In 2007, Minnesota state statute 144.966 (<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/144.966>) was passed and authorized the Minnesota EHDI program. Part of this statute states that family support services must be provided to families with children who are deaf/hard of hearing (DHH); specially through a contract with a nonprofit organization to provide support, unbiased information on communication, educational, and medical options, and assistance to families. MNH&V has been the family support grantee in Minnesota (MN) for many years, and the MDH EHDI program has been making direct referrals to MNH&V for over ten years. When an infant or child up to age 11 is identified through audiology as DHH in MN, MDH EHDI uses a secure data sharing system to direct refer families to MNH&V. A Guide by Your Side™ parent guide at MNH&V will then reach out to the family, connect with them, and provide information back to MDH EHDI through the same secure data sharing system.

Audiologists are encouraged to make direct referrals to MNH&V after identifying a child as DHH, as this is the fastest way to connect a family to parent support. While some families are referred through multiple sources, (self-referral, schools or hospitals/clinics) about 60% of referrals come from MDH direct referrals alone. Family support is an important aspect of how families of children who are DHH feel supported, and without the direct connection between MDH EHDI and MNH&V, these referrals would be missed. MNH&V averages a rate of 89% in connecting with families at least once. (Even that one time connects families with a local Parent Guide, ongoing “passive” support (regular e-news blasts, print quarterly newsletters, social media groups, access to specific information for their child’s journey). We currently provide most of our direct outreach in the first few years after identification and referral. After the first three years of being enrolled, it is up to families to reach back to us if they want information, resources, or support.

The collaborative relationship between MDH EHDI and MNH&V provides not only funding and structure, but also support and opportunities to participate in work groups and other endeavors to improve services for families.

A recent example of collaboration between MDH EHDI and MNH&V was their participation in a learning community of seven entities from across the US and territories that endeavored to improve surveys of family outcomes. The learning community was facilitated by NCHAM (National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management) and H&V. Members from both MDH and MNH&V participated, and the result was a [bank of questions](#) that any family-based organization (FBO) can use to assess family outcomes in the realms of Knowledge, Empowerment and Well-being. MNH&V is committed to using the information as a Quality

Improvement measure to update our family surveys to assess not only on family satisfaction, but also our impact on important family outcomes in these categories.

Evolving Efforts in Family Support

Another collaborative endeavor that is related to outcomes is an assessment regarding our framework for outreach.

MDH EHDI is working with MNH&V to construct a framework for conversations that Parent Guides will have at each of four transition points, based on MNH&V's work groups that identified the topics that are most likely to be of interest at each point.

Our intention is to contact families at **these four key transition points** throughout their child's development and make sure they have access to the information and resources that will help them make decisions as their child grows and changes. While we anticipate that Parent Guides will still provide the majority of information and outreach in the initial years of birth to 5, we will **reach out to families roughly every five years** to check in and see how they are doing and offer to send (or resend) information that is relevant to their current situation. We have heard from many families that the amount of information they received at the very beginning was overwhelming. Our goal is to make sure they have continued support and feel the connection and sense of community not only at the onset, but throughout their journey as parents of a child who is DHH.

One of our programs that can have a powerful impact on families is our **DHH Guide Program**. By reaching out to families at transition points, we are able to offer a connection to DHH Adults when new questions or situations might arise. Being able to talk to an Adult Role model who uses similar technology or language modality can give insights that help inform decision making, as well as help foster a sense of belonging and connection. Our DHH Guide program has developed a new framework for facilitating guided conversations with children and families that uses our "The Hero Within" Superpower character traits trading cards that were developed 7 years ago and that have been used across the state.

Another program that may be useful in different ways at different times to families is the H&V educational **Advocacy Support and Training (ASTra) program**. By reaching out at transition times, we can make sure that our trained ASTra advocates are available to support families as their child advances through school and on to adulthood.

Both of these programs are either relatively recent additions to our mission or have seen evolution and improvement in recent years. By reconnecting with families over time, we have the opportunity to share new resources with them as well as resources that we have improved upon--all of which have the potential to help families be empowered to create better outcomes for and with their child. Our state's community of family support sees constant change and improvement as well, and shifting our outreach will help us share not only our own evolved resources, but those throughout the state.

MDH EHDI embraces and encourages innovation and evolution. They provide time, space and resources for MNH&V to grow and improve. Our collaborative relationship is key to our success.