



**On April 9, 2019, Mary's Center's staff members and participants testified at the 2020 Budget Hearing for the Department of Health to underscore the importance of funding for Mary's Center's programs. (Vincent Gray, Chair)**

**Fernanda Ruiz, Healthy Start Director, Mary's Center**

Good morning Chairman Gray and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Fernanda Ruiz, and I am the Healthy Start Director for the Home Visiting program at Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Care Inc. Also, I am a District resident from Ward 4. Mary's Center builds better futures through the delivery of health care, education and social services. Our innovative social change model integrates these three major services with the purpose of saving lives, stabilizing families, and strengthening communities.

I am here today to support the proposed FY2020 budget for the Department of Health (DC Health) to continue their investment in the Home Visiting program at Mary's Center and to include an expansion of local funding for home visiting to serve more families District wide.

I do not intend to preach to the choir. I know Chairman Gray and other Councilmembers are champions of the strategy of home visiting for the District. I know you believe in our work and I am grateful for that. Just in the past year, the Birth to Three for All in DC Act was passed by the Council to strengthen the District's early childhood system. From which home visiting is a key aspect of the bill. Birth to Three supports District-wide home visiting supports and expands on funding. More specifically, Section 105: Home Visiting Program includes a recurring allocation of \$2 million for home visiting programs beginning in FY2020. For this funding to be in effect, it needs to be appropriated in the District budget<sup>1</sup>.

Home visiting programs provide support to vulnerable families in the earliest stages of their child's life to lay the foundation for the health, education, and social development and success of the entire family. The birth of a child introduces new challenges for every family, but families

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<sup>1</sup> Data Source: Home Visiting Council. (2018). 2018 Annual Report of the District of Columbia Home Visiting Council. Retrieved from: [https://www.dchomevisiting.org/uploads/1/1/9/0/119003017/hv\\_council\\_annual\\_report.pdf](https://www.dchomevisiting.org/uploads/1/1/9/0/119003017/hv_council_annual_report.pdf)



facing poverty, homelessness, insufficient education, behavioral health concerns, and other challenges are at higher risk of experiencing poor perinatal health outcomes and child abuse and neglect. Home visiting programs work to ensure access to and delivery of high-quality health and social services to women, infants and families by providing case management and care coordination to participants, and supporting systems integration on the community level.

The life course perspective, the maternal child health research and experience from the field all point to the importance of improving women's health before, during and after pregnancy as a means to improve perinatal outcomes and reduce infant mortality. To improve women's health home visiting programs assess participants' needs and work to ensure their access to comprehensive medical, social, behavioral, educational, and support services. Moreover, home visiting programs align with the DC Health Approach to Improve Perinatal Health Outcomes by using a life-course perspective, addressing social determinants of health and building collective impact<sup>2</sup>.

For every dollar spent on these efforts, at least \$2.00 dollars in future spending is saved<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the costs associated with poor birth outcomes are high. In 2012, the Planning Council reported that the societal economic cost associated with preterm birth in the U.S. was at least \$66,218 per infant born preterm<sup>4</sup>.

In closing, we strongly advocate for DC Health to continue to provide funding for home visiting programs and we recommend the investment in local funding in addition to federal funding. Federal funding like the Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Healthy Start have been strong sources of funding for home visiting services for families of young children here in the District. However, they also come with strict federal requirements, and have national implementation guidelines and program designs that may not fully account for the local context. Additionally, the funding for Healthy Start was significantly cut by almost half by the federal government for the next funding cycle. Having a blended funding of local and federal dollars would increase access to support services for pregnant women and families of

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<sup>2</sup> Data Source: District of Columbia Department of Health. (2018). *Perinatal Health and Infant Mortality Report*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: [https://dchealth.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doh/service\\_content/attachments/Perinatal%20Health%20Report%202018\\_FINAL.pdf](https://dchealth.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doh/service_content/attachments/Perinatal%20Health%20Report%202018_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts: Q & A: The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, February 21, 2014

<sup>4</sup> The Planning Council. (2012). *The Cost of Poor Birth Outcomes*. Retrieved from: <http://www.theplanningcouncil.org/inp/5Wellness/2LowBirthWeight/TheCostofPoorBirthOutcomes.pdf>



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young children, would allow for innovations with home visiting to better meet the needs of our community in DC, and would ensure a more secure funding stream to strengthen these important supports for families in the District.

Thank you very much for your attention and time. I am happy to take any questions.

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## **Sandra Alsakir, Family Support Worker—Healthy Families America, Mary's Center**

Good morning Chairman Gray and Members of the Committee,

Working as a Family Support Worker at MC for the last three years, have been an amazing learning experience. I have grown a lot not just professionally but personally.

Having direct contact with families, seeing their children grow and develop and witness the strength that each family have, have teach me many lessons of resiliency, determination and courage. Families need support, and this is exactly what we provide. For example, when a family is experiencing a situation of crisis, we provide the appropriate referrals to help ease the effects of the crisis. Also, through the child development informational modules and activities we encouraged each mom/dad to continue stimulating the physical, language, cognitive and emotional development of their children. By completing developmental screenings, we support families in identifying delays, refer to early intervention so families can receive the services that they are needing.

From my point of view, each family that receives the right support, have great possibilities to achieve goals, to strengthen the emotional bond with their children and to achieve the financial stability that each family deserves, and I wish that more families have that opportunity.

Thank you for your attention and support to our program.

Sandra Alsakir  
Family Support Worker



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**Leidy Hernandez, Participant of Healthy Families America Program, Mary's Center**

Mi nombre es Leydi. Estoy en el programa de visitas al hogar, al cual me siento dichosa de pertenecer porque si que me ha ayudado mucho. He tenido la dicha de ser visitada por una excelente trabajadora de apoyo a la familia. Este programa me ha ayudado mucho en cuanto a tener una ayuda a encontrar información de cosas que necesito y sobre todo me han ayudado al desarrollo de mi hijo con los temas que desarrollamos cada visita. Gracias por esto.

Por mi parte me gustaría que otras familias tengan acceso al programa como yo, ya que es muy beneficioso y ayuda mucho. Gracias por todo.

Mi name is Leydi. I am a participant of the home Visiting Program, I feel happy participating because the program has helped me a lot. I had the pleasure of being visited by and excellent family Support Worker.

This program has helped me find information about things I needed and above all, they have supported me with my son's developing with the topics that we discussed during each visit. Thank you for this support.

I would like other families to have access to the program because it is very beneficial and helps a lot. Thank you for everything.

**Porfirio Melendez, Participant of Father Child Attachment Program, Mary's Center**

I have been in the Father-Child Attachment (FCA) program since 2013, and one of the things I most remember was the support I received when my older daughter was contaminated with lead. The program helped me learn about lead poisoning and how to prevent it. The support I received was outstanding, facilitating legal information, laws in DC, landlord's responsibilities, assistance with the case at court, and the opportunity to move to a safety home.

The Program also helped me in the development and accomplish of goals, specially in the job look out, application and resume preparation. Thanks to that I have been employed a few times.



Another part that is important to me, simply the fact of having someone that visits me, that hears my concerns, that really reassures me when I feel depressed.

Another part I like are the father's groups, because It helps to understand discipline without need to yell or hit a child. For instance, my son loves videogames, and I have had a hard time trying to communicate with him and make him aware of rules and time frames for videogames. Until one day I had a conversation with my FSW that helped my find a way to effectively communicate with him without conflict.

It is very important to me that this Program continues because of the positive impact it has had in my life and relation with my kids. I would like to keep participating in the father's groups and to receive home visits as well, to continue my path to be a better father.

#### **Carlos Chajon, Participant of Father Child Attachment Program, Mary's Center**

I knew about the Program during a doctor's visit at Mary's Center, where my actual Family Support Worker (FSW) was there and approached to me introducing himself and handed me out information about Father-Child Attachment (FCA) program. At first, I had doubts to have an unknown person going to my house, but later at home talking to my wife, about the lack of support from relatives, because all of them are far from us, I decided to give it a try, and I don't regret.

I have learned things no one has ever told me about discipline, child development, how to access community resources and how to communicate better with my children. Every 6 months my FSW conducts a questionnaire for my children, that help us identify any limitation in their development to act immediately if necessary.

I also benefitted from the fathers' groups, which I think are very powerful, because I feel like it provides a space for Latino's fathers to break taboos apart and traditional beliefs about manhood and fatherhood. Our fathers and grandfathers did not have the tools we have now for parenting, now I know their discipline methods were wrong, and I am glad I know how to not make that mistake. Also, the father's meetings helped me express emotions, which is not normal in our Latino culture.

The Program not only has helped me, but also my family. I remember we had a very difficult time when I lost my job and we literally did not have anything to eat. My FSW connected us with food banks, which we knew they exist, but did not know how to access. After that, the Program always



keep my family connected with food banks and free groceries events. I also want to mention that my older kid's school sent a notification encouraging the family to start talking about sexuality to our children. I had no idea how to start that conversation with mi kid, since we are alone in this country, with no relatives around to help us with this topic. I asked my FSW and he provided me information on this topic, and even an activity book for my kid about body parts.

**Roberto Parra, Participant of Father Child Attachment Program, Mary's Center**

Since I started with the Father-Child Attachment (FCA) program I realized how much I can learn about fatherhood and understand the developmental milestones. I have also learned the importance and the impact the books have on my oldest son, who always appreciates every time my Family Support Worker (FSW) brings a new book for him, especially the one about being an older brother, he loves it.

One component that I really enjoyed was the fathers group meetings. It has been the first and only time that I have experienced such an interested conversation about fatherhood with another fathers, about different topics, ideas and beliefs. It is comfortable to meet with other fathers like me, speaking in Spanish, which is my first language, about common situations. It helps to get involved and have clarity of the conversation.

This service is a tool of information and help to better understand my children and find better solutions to parenting challenges. It is not only a tool to better communicate with your kids, it also a tool to connect with other fathers to create a support network between us to face constant struggles like housing and employment needs.

**Ulizar Vasquez Garcia, Participant of Father Child Attachment Program, Mary's Center**

I like the help with the diapers, books and toys, but what I like the most from the Father-Child Attachment (FCA) program is that my Family Support Worker (FSW) integrates with my family, at my home, and not in a desk from an office. I prefer to be visited at my house instead of me visiting a clinic or office for this kind of services, it is way much convenient and practical, because my FSW can observe how is the interaction with my son through games and videos in a place my son and I feel safe and comfortable.



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I remember a topic about discipline during the fathers group sessions, on how to deal with tantrums and it really help me with my son, because what we do in my country (Guatemala) is hit the child not knowing how to handle the situation, which is too bad. It also helped me with the communication I have with my older son, who lives in Guatemala.

The relationship that develops between FSW and me is important and valuable to build trust in order to share information and experiences about my family, I can perceive it like a friendship.

I would hope this Program continue because I learn a lot with every conversation I have with my FSW and with other fathers during focus groups. And I want to add, that is not just about parenting or child development, but also about interested topics, like that time the program provided me with information about immigrant rights, which really reassured me.