



Commonwealth of Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services

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Kentucky project aims to bring families together at the dinner table

FRANKFORT, KY (Sept. 24, 2019) - Kentucky behavioral health experts are working to expand a program designed to bring families together at the dinner table, promoting bonding and communication to improve family relationships.

The Dinner Table Project was created by Four Rivers Behavioral Health Regional Prevention Center in 2015, building on research showing families that have dinner together are closer, and function better as a family unit. The program encourages at least once-a-week sit-down meals where families come together to share food and conversation, while distracting items, such as phones, televisions, and electronic devices, are put away.

“The Dinner Table Project is a simple premise that yields many positive rewards for families who adopt its philosophy of taking time to share a meal with loved ones and have open, positive communication,” said Koleen Slusher, director of the Division of Behavioral Health in the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental, and

Intellectual Disabilities (BHDID). “This program fosters good communication, positive emotion, and good self-esteem for kids.”

Initially launched in the Four Rivers region, which includes the Paducah area and far western counties, BHDID is working with all Kentucky Regional Prevention Centers to expand the program statewide. This will include providing resources that schools and other youth-serving agencies can utilize to promote parents eating dinner regularly with their children, as well as resources for parents to utilize during these meals to spark conversation with their children.

“The support has been overwhelming and we are excited to see this program grow into something that will support even more families,” said Samantha Powell, prevention specialist and creator of the Kentucky effort.

Research indicates children of families that share meals together have better academic performance, higher self-esteem, a greater sense of resilience, lower risk of teen pregnancy, lower risk of depression, lower rates of obesity, and a lower likelihood of developing an eating disorder.

BHDID program staff members are encouraged by the early success of The Dinner Table Project. Statewide, the goal is to build upon the program’s efforts to strengthen protective factors that shield young people from engaging in potentially harmful behaviors.

“If children have better relationships with their parents and siblings, they are less likely to try drugs and alcohol,” said Patti Clark, program manager for the Prevention and Promotion branch within the Division of Behavioral Health. “We have to equip our young people with the skills that enable them to make good decisions about their lives, and that starts at home. Part of our mission in prevention is supporting families and The Dinner Table Project is a great way to do that.”

Clark added this project’s spread across the state is made possible as a result of increased capacity to deliver prevention services stemming from the State Opioid Response (SOR) grant. “As a result of SOR, we’ve added two additional prevention staff

at each of the 14 Regional Prevention Centers serving all 120 counties in Kentucky,” she said. “Because of SOR, we can impact more families, reducing the issues that increase the consequences of substance use even before a child has had a chance to take his or her first drink, for example.”

“The need for evidence-based prevention practices in schools, youth service organizations, and in the home has never been more pronounced,” said Slusher. “With alarming rates of substance use and mental health concerns, including the prevalence of suicide attempts and suicidal ideation, our communities must take action to intervene in the lives of young people in a positive way.”

[The Dinner Table Project](#) includes resources to guide families through positive communication, educational tools and games, and healthy recipes. The program incorporates the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets that young people need to succeed and The Strengthening Families™ and Youth Thrive™ frameworks developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

“The Dinner Table is a simple concept supported by research and designed to incorporate many evidence-based practices,” said Powell. “Through the years, The Dinner Table Project has changed but the core has stayed the same. We encourage families to eat together at least once a week with no electronics! “

The public can sign up for a monthly newsletter with more helpful resources and information online. To learn more about prevention or to find the Regional Prevention Center in your area, visit <http://dbhdid.ky.gov/cmhc/>.

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The Cabinet for Health and Family Services is home to most of the state's human services and healthcare programs, including the Department for Medicaid Services, the Department for Community Based Services the Department for Public Health, the Department for Aging and Independent Living and the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities. CHFS is one of the largest agencies

in state government, with nearly 8,000 full- and part-time employees located across the Commonwealth focused on improving the lives and health of Kentuckians.