

PHILADELPHIA CITY COUNCIL HEARING

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 2016

Testimony for Dr. Stephanie A. Bradley, Managing Director, Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support Center (EPISCenter), and Research Associate, Prevention Research Center,
The Pennsylvania State University

Good afternoon, I am Stephanie Bradley, the Managing Director of the EPISCenter – which stands for the Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support Center. The EPISCenter is a grant-funded project of PCCD and the Dept. of Human Services, and is housed within the Prevention Research Center in the College of Health and Human Development at Penn State University. It is an honor to represent the Prevention Research Center here today and to have the opportunity to share with the Council members the work of the EPISCenter.

Every year billions of federal dollars are spent on researching the causes of some of society's most pressing and most vexing problems. Universities, think tanks, and other research entities are funded to carry out research projects to answer very specific questions. More often than not, it's a long process of trial and error to truly understand the root causes of problems, how they develop, and how we can effectively intervene. In the process of doing research, we learn a lot about what we don't know, we find programs that make things worse not better, we learn about what doesn't work and why. We go back to the drawing board again and again. Often, this process is painfully out of step with the pace of problems, the variety of them out there that we want to fix, and the passion we have for improving the lives of children, youth, and families.

So, when we DO find a program or an approach that works, we want to be certain that policymakers, service providers, and community members know about it. When we find something

that causes harm, we likewise want to be sure that you all know about it. Our goal is to ensure that when research identifies something that we CAN use to take action on a problem, that decision makers and consumers have access to that information.

A key focus of our work is in assisting policymakers and service providers to understand what works (and what doesn't), how to choose programs and strategies that meet your local needs, and how to run those programs so that they get the results you seek. PCCD recognizes the value of using programs and practices that actually have evidence of effectiveness, and the value of providing support to communities to use data to make decisions about what programs they need through the Communities That Care prevention planning model. So, they have invested in the EPISCenter as a state-level center of excellence to provide that support. We provide free training and technical assistance to communities and service providers across a number of different programs and practices.

Mr. Pennington discussed Communities That Care (CTC) earlier; this is a model for which EPISCenter provides training and technical assistance. CTC is a process that takes communities through a well-defined and structured sequence of steps to prevent adolescent problem behaviors and promote positive youth development. CTC communities form a broad-based coalition, with representation from multiple sectors of the community, and then collect local data on risk and protective factors shown by research to be associated with delinquency, violence, substance use, and school failure and dropout. After collecting this data using the PA Youth Survey (PAYS) the community identifies 3-5 specific risk and protective factors to focus on, and then seeks evidence-based programs and strategies to address those priorities. After 2-3 years of implementing these strategies, the community re-assesses their risk and protective factors to measure impact and identify new emerging priorities.

Research on CTC has shown that youth in CTC communities fare better than youth in non-CTC communities, including being less likely to be negatively influenced by peers, less likely to engage in delinquent behavior, and more likely to be engaged in school and performing well.

CTC draws its strength and effectiveness from its focus on a coalition approach, use of risk and protective factor data, and use of evidence-based programs. EPISCenter has three full-time trainers and technical assistance providers for CTC who support communities in building their readiness to adopt the CTC model, engage key stakeholders, and move those stakeholders through the CTC process. We regularly work with communities who are interested in learning more about developing a CTC coalition in their area, and PCCD regularly provides funding for communities to run CTC. We currently provide support to 70 CTC sites across the state.

EPISCenter also provides free training and technical assistance for eighteen different prevention and intervention programs that have strong research evidence of effectiveness, which Mr. Pennington referred to earlier as the Blueprints programs. These Blueprints programs are for youth from pre-Kindergarten to high school, some programs are for parents with disruptive and aggressive children, others are for parents and their adolescent youth to strengthen family bonds. All of these programs target important risk and protective factors for youth problem behaviors. They focus on key skills for children and adolescents like good-decision making, strategies for refusing peer pressure, managing stress, and regulating emotions. They help youth develop important knowledge about the myths and realities of using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and the role that media plays in portraying substance use and violence. Parents learn how to use consistent and reasonable discipline, and effective ways of using praise and rules. All of these are important individual and family level protective factors for keeping youth out of trouble.

Each year through the state Violence Prevention Program budget PCCD provides funding for communities to adopt and implement these programs. As part of that funding, grantees work

closely with the EPISCenter to successfully run these programs. From getting training in the programs, to ensuring the programs are delivered according to the developer's design, to gathering and analyzing data, and finding resources for ensuring the program can continue to run after the grant ends, the EPISCenter provides free support from start to finish. We have a wealth of resources on each program posted on our website, available for public use for free, and we are always also willing to provide support to agencies who are not currently funded by PCCD. We are currently providing support to 57 grantee sites, and since 2008 have supported well over 200 provider agencies in the state running evidence-based programs.

EPISCenter regularly conducts a statewide gap analysis using data from the PA Youth Survey and juvenile court data, like disposition and recidivism reports. Using these data we identify emerging needs for programs within the state. We then identify if the current programs are meeting the needs, and identify relevant new programs to be considered for statewide support.

We also regularly field inquiries about the level of evidence, or likelihood of success of particular programs and practices. The research base and registries that catalogue evidence-based programs can be complicated for determining whether a certain program is worth investing time, money, and other resources. So, we are available to assist in understanding what research is available and how much confidence a community can have in a particular program or approach.

I have read the City's strategic plan to reduce violence that was released in 2013, and I commend the City for its comprehensive and courageous plan. I believe that many important risk and protective factors are being addressed by it. In it I noted that the City is invested in using an evidence-based strategic plan that emphasizes data collection and evaluation. Our work can meaningfully connect with yours.

We can provide support related to developing a local coalition or coalitions, finding appropriate evidence-based programs, and have extensive experience scaling up programs that are effective.

We are currently working with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern PA, the Positive Parenting Program (otherwise known as “Triple P”) in Philadelphia, and providers of Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy in Philadelphia. These programs span mentorship for youth 8-18, parenting education for parents of young children, and a multi-system approach to addressing youth problems for adolescents who have come in contact with the juvenile justice or child welfare system. These programs are achieving great results and could become an important part of addressing key risk and protective factors for violence in this city.

Lastly, the PA Youth Survey is a rich source of information on youth risk and protective factors, which are valuable data for driving decisions. The PAYS provides insights into youth perceived risks of substance use, interactions with antisocial peers, gang involvement, attachment to community, family conflict, parent’s attitudes about substance use and antisocial behaviors, trauma, grief, depression, and gambling. The City could further inform its future planning efforts by enrolling in the next administration of the PAYS.

It’s been an honor to have this opportunity to provide testimony to the Council. As the City continues to pursue ways to reduce youth violence, we encourage you to consider EPISCenter as a resource available to Philadelphia for achieving your goals.

