

# Mental Health Consultation: A Pathway for Building the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health System of Care in Alaska

Mary Dallas Allen, PhD, MSW

Shawna Ragan, LCSW

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health  
Institute

April 2, 2019

Anchorage, AK



1

## Objectives

- Describe the core components of early childhood mental health consultation in Alaska early care and education programs.
- Explore the knowledge and skills necessary for mental health providers in Alaska to provide ECMHC services.
- Explore strategies for developing the infant and early childhood mental health workforce in AK.
- Provide opportunities for mental health practitioners and administrators to connect and build partnerships.



2

## Prevalence of Childhood Mental Health Challenges

- Approximately 8% of preschool-age children experience emotional and behavioral challenges (Roberts et al., 1998)
- No rural / urban difference in the prevalence of children ages 3 – 17 with mental health challenges (US DHHS, 2005):
  - 9.5% of children in rural areas
  - 9.0% of children in urban areas
- As many as 29% of Head Start children have been estimated to have emotional and behavioral challenges (Sinclair, 1993)
- 1 in 5 children with emotional and behavioral challenges receive mental health services (Gonzalez, 2005; Roberts et al., 1998)



3

## Early Childhood Mental Health Challenges

- Children ages birth – 5 experience high rates of maltreatment (Osofsky & Lieberman, 2011)
- Early experiences are important and influence brain development (Zeanah, 2009)
- Cumulative negative life events have a significant effect on the prevalence of mental health challenges in early childhood (Furniss, Beyer, & Miller, 2009; Snyder et al., 2012)
- When children experience mental health challenges, families experience burden (Houtrow & Okumura, 2011)
- Pre-kindergarten expulsion rate: 3.2 times higher than for students in K-12 (Gilliam, 2005)



4

## Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC)

- A problem solving & capacity-building intervention implemented within a collaborative relationship between a mental health professional & early care and education staff (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2005)
- Challenges in Alaska (Allen, 2008)
  - Shortage of early childhood mental health professionals
  - Limited training for mental health consultants (MHCs)
  - Lack of support and supervision for rural MHCs
  - Isolation of rural MHCs



5

## ECMHC: The Need

- ECMHC is a widely used strategy for addressing the mental health needs of young children, their families, and early childhood care providers
- ECMHC is important for early identification of children's social and emotional needs & for children's school readiness
- ECMHC is a key strategy for reducing expulsion rates in early childhood programs (Gilliam, 2005)
- In rural areas, ECMHC may be the only available MH services for infants and young children



6

## ECMHC: The fit for mental health clinicians in Alaska

- Mental health clinicians have knowledge and skills that prepare them for providing ECMHC:
  - Understand the broad range of experiences that influence children's learning
  - Knowledge of the reciprocal influence of home, school, community
  - Expertise in screening and assessment
  - Experience with collaboration and interdisciplinary service delivery



7

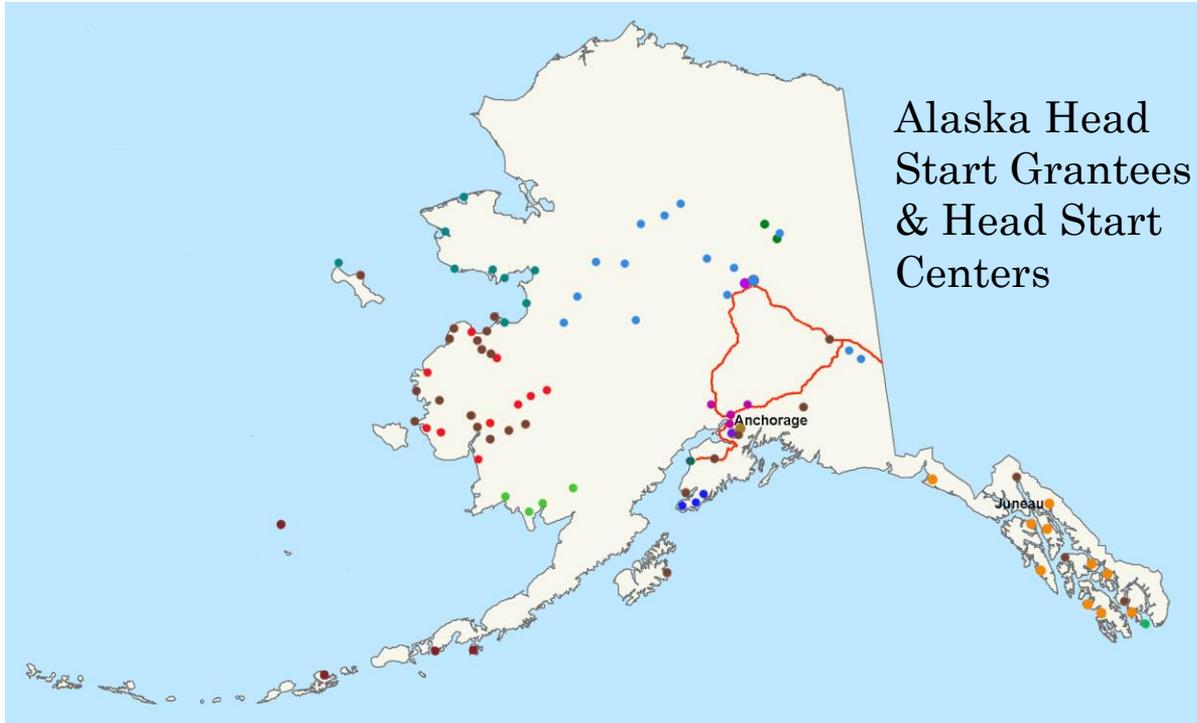
## Alaska Framework for Infant and Early Childhood MHC

- Conducted telephone interviews with Head Start directors and telephone focus groups with Head Start mental health coordinators and mental health consultants
- Participants: 6 directors; 7 mental health coordinators; 6 mental health consultants
- Procedure: Conducted six interviews with directors, three focus groups with coordinators, and two focus groups with consultants



8

## Alaska Head Start Grantees & Head Start Centers



9

## IECMHC In AK: Need Highly Qualified MHCs

- **Mental Health Consultant Qualities:**  
Understand rural communities; be community-minded; willing to travel; comfortable with distance-delivered services
- **MHC Knowledge:** Early childhood education; EHS/HS Performance Standards; early childhood mental health consultation
- **MHC Skills:**
  - Conduct social-emotional screenings, classroom observations, staff and family trainings
  - Comfortable & skillful at discussing difficult topics with staff and families;

## Example: Highly Qualified MHCs

### Mental health consultant

*Trauma affects so many of the children and families and staff in urban and rural Alaska. Clinicians who want to stick with working on child behavior and teaching family and child development (which is, of course, very important in itself but only one part) and miss the larger picture are not "highly qualified" and will not be as effective. Being able to "talk about the hard stuff" and do it well is critically important.*



11

## IECMHC in AK: Need High Quality IECMHC Services

- **Delivery of IECMHC:**
  - Flexible & individualized to the teachers, staff, classroom, center, program, and community
  - Itinerant delivery – flexible, creative;
    - Challenges: cost of travel; limited visits; Interrupted visits due to weather or community crisis
    - Supplemental services: teleconference, videoconference, community partnerships for providing some services (ex: behavioral health aids provide parent training)
- **Amount of IECMHC:** More hours allocated, the more time MHCS spend with children, families, and staff; results in stronger relationships, which allow MHC to provide more services. As a result, increased need for IECMHC services!



12

## Example: High Quality IECMHC Services

### Mental health consultant

*We're pretty remote out here...But then I travel, so most of the sites get one face-to-face contact a year. Some of them don't get that. We do telephonic consultation. Because it's so limited, I really open it up to what does the staff need. The really good thing is most of the sites have experienced staff that – they have a higher retention rate, so there's an expertise right there in the classroom that's wonderful.*



13

## IECMHC in AK High Quality IECMHC Services

### • Types of IECMHC Services

- Classroom observations
- Screening and assessment
- Child consultation
- Program consultation
- Staff consultation



14

## Example: High Quality IECMHC Services

### Head Start director

*But we've also had some family tragedies and needing some short-term support through tragedies. So we've had some deaths with family members in our program, so even our teachers knowing - having to deal with the death of a parent that has been in their classroom and then knowing how to support the child also, who lost a parent. And so just a wide variety of things going on in our program.*



15

## IECMHC in AK: Need Solid Program Infrastructure

- **Funding:** Most programs do not budget enough for IECMHC services to meet programs' needs
- **Identify & contract with MHC:** Find a MHC who is the right fit for the program
- **Provide training & supervision for the MHC:** Compensate the MHC for training & supervision time
- **Develop community partnerships:** Identify those who can provide non-clinical consultation services
- **Involve the MHC in mental health program planning**



16

## Example: Solid Program Infrastructure for IECMHC

### Director:

*And we've been flat-funded for so long. If her rates change, her hourly rates change, that's going to affect her hours, where we won't be able to have her here as much in order to pay her increased wages. So I think that's probably one of the biggest challenges. I think we could really use her services more than we currently have.*



17

## Acknowledgments

- Early Head Start / Head Start directors, mental health coordinators, and mental health consultants
- This project was funded by the University of Alaska Anchorage Center for Community Engagement and Learning



18

## References

- Allen, M. D. (2008). Attributes of effective Head Start mental health consultants: A mixed methods study of rural and urban programs. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A Humanities and Social Sciences*, 70(1), 349A.
- Cohen, E., & Kaufmann, R. (2005). Early childhood mental health consultation. Washington, DC: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Duran, F., Hepburn, K., Irvine, M., Kaufman, R., Anthony, B., Horen, N., & Perry, D. (2009). *What works? A study of effective early childhood mental health consultation programs*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.
- Green, B.L., Everhart, M.C., Gordon, L., & Gettman, M.G. (2006). Characteristics of effective mental health consultation in early childhood settings: Multi-level analysis of a national survey. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 26(3), 142-152.



## Thank You

Mary Dallas Allen, PhD, MSW

Associate Professor

UAA School of Social Work

[mdallen7@alaska.edu](mailto:mdallen7@alaska.edu)

Shawna Ragan, LCSW

Trinity Family Counseling

[trinitycounselingalaska@gmail.com](mailto:trinitycounselingalaska@gmail.com)

