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Head Start Partnership to Expand Pediatric Clinical Opportunities and Prepare Nurse Practitioner Students to Address Social Determinants of Health

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Abstract

Background: Social determinants of health (SDH) are non-medical factors that impact health and contribute to health inequities, such as income, early childhood development, education, employment, and housing. Addressing SDH is an important aspect of health care and a focus of Healthy People 2030. Primary care providers need to be prepared to address SDH to improve patients' health outcomes and decrease health disparities. Thus, it is imperative to prepare Nurse Practitioner (NP) students to address SDH. The shortage of primary care physicians has increased the demand for NPs. The national shortage of clinical sites for NP students, especially pediatric sites, limits the ability of nursing institutions to meet this demand. Thus, an innovative model is needed to address this critical need for pediatric clinical sites. Community-based clinical experiences can not only increase pediatric clinical opportunities for NP students but can also teach students about SDH.

Federally funded Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) programs provide comprehensive early childhood education to low-income infants and young children through the age of five. Enrollment in EHS/HS Centers is contingent on having an updated health record including a physical exam, screenings, and immunizations. The global COVID-19 pandemic magnified the disparities in access to health care for low-income children and families. Less than half of the approximately 3,200 children enrolled in EHS/HS programs in Baltimore were up to date on preventive and primary care services during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Objectives: To develop an innovative model to address the critical need for pediatric clinical sites for NP students.

Methods: The University of Maryland School of Nursing (UMSON) established a partnership with EHS and HS programs in Maryland in 2016 to provide nursing services. In 2018, NP faculty and students began providing supplemental well child examinations on site at EHS/HS Centers in Baltimore City. This past year, the partnership expanded to include EHS/HS Centers in Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, and Prince George's County. This partnership addresses the critical need for pediatric primary care sites for NP students, provides access to required examinations and screenings for children enrolled in EHS/HS programs, and provides a unique opportunity for NP students to learn about SDH.

Results: Since Fall 2020, UMSON faculty and students have provided onsite physical exams and screenings to 517 children at 36 EHS/HS Centers in Maryland. Ten of these centers were located outside Baltimore City. These encounters have provided 52 NP students with 624 pediatric clinical hours. Feedback from students via survey indicated that this clinical experience increased their understanding of SDH. Several health needs were identified during the encounters: developmental delays (23.1%), speech/language delays (15.3%), weight concerns (29.3%), preventive screenings (27.2%), and immunizations (42.2%). Many of the children with developmental and speech delays were not receiving services, which highlights the importance of this partnership. This model can be used by other nursing institutions to increase pediatric clinical opportunities, teach NP students about SDH, and increase access to health care for low-income children.