



“You can’t have COMMUNITY without UNITY.”

Jackson County Systems of Care, 2024

Good Morning,

I want to express how deeply appreciative that I am for all of you and what you do to improve the lives of residents across the Kansas City Metropolitan area. All of the countless things that you do that often go un-thanked, seemingly unnoticed or un-appreciated, the extra hours you put in, all the while managing personal lives with just as many (if not more) demands. You are all truly remarkable and I am privileged to be learning from each of you. Without all of you, your expertise, and resource sharing, this group would be at most, just another meeting. But because of you, the Systems of Care has been able to clear whatever hurdles blocked pathways and devise solutions to make the things that are critically needed happen. Speaking of that it reminds me of something by Maya Angelou, “you can’t really know where you’re going until you know where you have been.” Before we get to the plan for 2024, here is a recap of 2023 and the many wonderful guest presenters that we have enjoyed:

- **January:** Troy Wulfmeyer-“Metro Lutheran Ministries”. Troy is a financial coach and discussed how people can get their finances in order for the year and build stronger financial futures. Grace Reinicke-“Pathway Financial Education”. Grace discussed mitigating financial inequities and community poverty.
- **February:** Bonita Powell-“Total Man Community Development Corporation”. Bonita presented on evidence-based programs to help fathers be at their best. Healthy Lifestyles and Healthy Women programs were also discussed along with community program for mental/physical health, education, and more. Karen Slaughter-“Center for Conflict

Resolution”. Karen presented on the plethora of programming available through her organization to decrease conflicts and promote healthy alternatives to violence.

- **March**: This month was devoted to recognizing “Disability Awareness Month” and we had a special guest presenter from Evergy to further discuss programs available there to help people with disabilities stay connected. Alicia Duarte-“Evergy”. Alicia is the Senior Customer Affairs Adviser with Evergy and specifically focused on financial assistance for people with special medical needs. Dr. Dot Nary-Retired Professor and Researcher. Dr. Nary spoke on her lived experience as someone with disabilities and stereotypes that she has had to overcome. She further emphasized how people with a range of disabilities can and do lead very prosperous lives. Jason Camis-“Sertoma, Inc.” Jason is the Executive Director and he discussed how his organization improves the quality of life for people with hearing impairments through various aide programs and equipment.
- **April**: The focus of the month was on “Infant-Toddler Mental Health” and how transgenerational trauma impacts development. Diana Perry-“Missouri Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health” or MOAIMH. She is also the Region 5 Director for Missouri First Steps. Michelle Utt, President of the Board of MOAIMH was also present to further discuss development and how to promote healthy starts! Cassandra Bremehr-“The Family Conservancy”. She is the Manager of the Early Childhood Mental Health Team and discussed programming for people in KS and MO and special access to these programs. She further discussed their wanting to expand services and offered access to that for SOC members. Legal Aide gave some information on Medicaid terminations, rights, etc.
- **May**: The focus was on children having a safe, fun, and prosperous summer. Dr. Jami Gross-Toalson-“Children’s Mercy Hospital”. Dr. Jami spoke about the Red Card program that CMH has to address bullying. Helen Li-“Central Library”. Helen is the Librarian for the Teen Library and spoke about the comprehensive services offered for all ages at the library and highlighted special summer programming that was FREE! Charlie’s House provided information about safe practices for children over the summer. Sandra Wallace-“Jewish Family Services”. Sandra presented on a new health program called Raising KC. Specifically also how caretakers can have healthy relationships with children. Kaitee Brown-“Legal Aide”. Kaitee talked about more legal ramifications about Medicaid termination letters which most certainly would impact overall health. Laura Steele-“Bike Walk KC”. Laura discussed bike safety and programming at her agency. Laura had helmets and lights for all that wanted them. The SOC supplemented this with a bike for anyone who requested them through multiple community partnerships.
- **June**: The focus was on it being “National Safety Month.” It was also month 1 of our 4 part series on overall preparedness. Mary McCall-“KCPD”. Mary is the Community Action Officer with the Community Engagement Division. Mary talked about situational awareness to maintain safety when we are providing services under all different kinds of circumstances. Sargent Marino joined her in these discussions. Active shooter and other trainings were reviewed. Kim Vipond and Seth Sonnevile-“Children’s Mercy Hospital”. These speakers are with the Center for Well-being at CMH and reviewed what we as caretakers can do to maintain our own health and well-being while caring for

others. Secondary traumas were also discussed. Stacia Hardyway with Access KC gave a brief presentation on access vouchers and other programs.

- **July:** Part 2 of the 4 part series. The focus was on the safe, healthy, and successful return of children to school. Angela Guzman-“Children’s Mercy Hospital”. Angela gave a very detailed presentation on many community programs for children’s health and well-being. She is the Health Community Education Coordinator for CMH. She was joined with presentations from colleagues, Andrea and Ikira on additional resources. Alexius Ferguson-“Community Partnership Schools”. Mr. Ferguson is the Assistant Director and reviewed the model they that has led to phenomenal success with academics in schools located in highly impoverished neighborhoods. Julie Holland-“Parent Leadership Training Institute KC”. She is the Executive Director and discussed how their programs equip parents with the tools needed to promote children’s academic achievements regardless of risk-factors. Luke Gard-“Children’s Mercy Hospital”. Luke is the Manager of the Healthy Schools program at CMH and how to reduce the transmission of infectious diseases. Brandey Chandler and Tekeyah Lawson with KC Scholars gave a brief presentation on programming.
- **August:** Part 3 of the 4 part series. This month focused on things that may not meet the criteria of a disaster but nonetheless are disasters for our community. Kara LaTessa, Nurse Manager of the SANE program at CMH gave a powerful presentation on childhood sexual assaults. SANE is the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program and in that Kara talked about what they do to help children during this terrible time. Nathan Kim, Kansas City FBI spoke about the human trafficking epidemic right here in Kansas City. Missouri at that time was ranked 9th highest in the U.S. for human trafficking. We learned about warning signs, how to respond, and much more. John Schrock, Kansas City DEA spoke about the Fentanyl crisis and its devastating impact on families and individuals. Also discussed was “Operation Engage” as a means to get involved to address this epidemic.
- **September:** Part 4 of the 4 part series. This month focused on it being “Disaster Preparedness Month.” We specifically looked at children’s reactions/responses to disasters. Jenny Garmon, Civic Engagement Specialist for the Community Engagement Team talked about programming related to preparedness at the Central Library. Jennifer Tarwater, Regional Preparedness Liaison with FEMA National Preparedness Division for Region 7 and her colleague spoke about children and disasters as well as community resiliency, preparation, and responses. The Disaster Prep Team from CMH gave a presentation on children’s unique responses to disasters and built on what Jennifer presented on. I gave my own experience with a natural disaster and things that I learned from having navigated that process after my home had sustained extensive storm damages in 2018 and how that was complicated by then health issues.
- **October:** The focus was on mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence as it related to the upcoming holiday season. Tina Johnson, Manager of Community Partnerships for Hope House discussed programming and how the holidays can impact rates of domestic violence. Jason Lathan, Board President for NAMI gave a very impactful presentation on the impact of holidays on mental health and his personal experiences with it. Discussed was eradicating the stigma of mental illness and resources to support people. Brian Gier of the MOKAN Society of Fire Protection Engineers

supplemented this with an informative presentation on fire safety and the holidays. The SOC provided smoke and carbon monoxide detectors to all who requested such.

- **November:** This was not a formal meeting because it was just 2 days prior to Thanksgiving. The room was open to staff cases (something that is available at any time), ask questions, support one another, etc.
- **December:** This was also an informal meeting but with a presentation on Care for The Caregivers as we all rush around this busy holiday season. Many specific resources were shared by various group members. We were also happy to have CYID or Children and Youth in Disasters group members joining us (some for the first time). In January 2024, CYID will join the SOC as an equal partner in serving children in relationship to disasters.

So, those are the highlights of 2023 but in the interest of transparency and balance, I need to also point out what did not go as well or the way I had hoped. At the top of that list is running over time on an occasion or two. There were a few months where we had so many awesome guest speakers (what a “problem” to have!) that they were not afforded the time they should have to present. I have a hard time saying no to something or someone that I know has incredibly impactful information. Out of respect to those who give us their very valuable time and expertise, I will work on that in 2024! Some of the initiatives that I had hoped would truly make a difference never got the opportunity. The Foreclosure Prevention Program was never picked up by anyone and likely needs to be shelved...for now as I never give up! In short, this is a program that costs half as much as a typical foreclosure and would have kept people in their homes thus preventing disruptions like changes in schools, homelessness, and more. Another time! The book mobile initiative did not work out as planned however, flexibility is a key to success so we rolled with it and instead provide books to educators and day cares directly from the publishers most of the time! We had hoped to sponsor a special needs food distribution and have the funds to do so but, our partner was not able to move forward. This said, I am leaving it as an initiative because we do have the ability to partner with someone to make such an event occur. Maybe in 2024, we will be able to just simply do this on our own! By special needs I am referring to people in need who have special dietary needs such as gluten-free, low sodium, reduced sugar, etc. The majority of food distributions do not have such a focus and give from the heart and what they have to give.

So fortunately, there were I think far more good than not so good points in 2023. All of our guest speakers were truly impactful and gave us so much to think about but I would be remiss if I did not also highlight all of the resource sharing that took place from the SOC members. In each meeting, I saw connections being made and people learning about what one another do and this right here will greatly benefit the people that we are privileged to serve! It has been and continues to be an honor seeing all of our mutual hard work coming to fruition over the last 4 years. We have gone from **30 members to 330** and average attendance at meetings from **3 to 30's and 40's** and beat attendance records in months that are historically less attended because of summer activities. In August and September, we saw numbers in the **50's to about 60**. In 2023, we added our own website to further connect us between meetings in addition to multiple new community-based initiatives such as assistance with small financial needs, books for educators, a program to combat isolation in particular with seniors, and more. All of these member wide efforts were recognized with an award for “Beacon of Health and Wellness Advocate” in

December. This award belongs to all of us because the things it was recognizing were things that would not have been possible without the entire system. With CYID formally joining with the SOC in January of 2024, even greater things are on the horizon because these are truly two amazingly and immensely talented groups of people! Now for the 2024 plan.

Plan for 2024

As you can see from the top of this email, our theme for 2024 is “Unity” because you quite literally cannot have community without unity! I picked that as the Jackson County SOC’s theme for 2024 before knowing that CYID would be joining us so, how perfect is that given we are unifying two amazing groups to provide even more services for more vulnerable citizens! The theme for 2023 as you will recall was “Prosperity” and much of what we did was related to that. Now you might think for example, what did the Fentanyl crisis have to do with prosperity? At first glance, nothing but consider it from the perspective of how prosperous and stronger would families and children be if this was not such a prevalent issue? Our goal in 2024 is to relate what we do back to the guiding premise of unity and tearing down silos that separate us and the resulting division only serves to do a further disservice to the community be it Jackson County, Wyandotte County, etc. Imagine how much better the most vulnerable amongst us would be if we all came together? Along this venue, here is the outline for 2024:

- Taking an approach that begins from the outside in, the SOC will be increasing efforts (and has already started this process) to reach out to people being served by us all in the respective communities. What are their needs, what do they see as most important? Many of our monthly topics will be based on the direct feedback that I am gathering by talking with people in the community and our guiding theme. I think the incorporation of their unique perspectives is critical in ensuring that we are doing what they need from us! That said, it is a multi-fold approach in that the focus will be equally on, what do you all need to accomplish what you want? What are your visions for things?
- Existing initiatives will continue with the exception of the foreclosure prevention program will be temporarily shelved. I am open to any new ones if you have ideas and see unmet needs in the community!
- CYID will be incorporated with the SOC and be an equal partner and not a subgroup. Ready and Steady is the existing SOC preparedness initiative and this will be expanded with the inclusion of Children and Youth in Disasters (CYID). This initiative will be expanded to conduct trainings for day cares and schools on helping children to cope with disasters and emergencies. There will be an emphasis on under-served educational institutions that are the most vulnerable and are sadly often left out of other initiatives. All materials and trainings will be tailored to the specific age group/needs.
- All of the monthly topics will in some way tie into the 2024 year’s theme of community and unity as it pertains to all populations and preparedness. The following have already been booked:

January

- **Jen Black, Executive Director of The Alliance of SW Missouri.** Jen was the lead in the stabilization and recovery for children who experienced the disastrous Joplin tornadoes which as you will recall resulted in tremendous loss of life and property. Her efforts and programming were the reason so many children were able to emerge from that disaster successfully both physically and emotionally. This will be a truly impactful presentation and highly applicable to all sorts of disasters that children may experience including traditionally defined ones such as tornadoes or floods as well as things that are more localized/community-based sorts of disasters that may not meet the criteria of a “disaster” per se but nonetheless **are** disasters for those children. It is important to remember that such events can **permanently impede** development thus altering a child’s life forever. She will show us how a community can come together and unify for the sake of children’s well-being.
- **Foster Adopt Connect** will present on their truly vast array of programming that many are unaware of but need to be because it can make the difference between families being torn apart or remaining together, healthier and stronger than ever! From Foster Adopt Connect will be **Ashlynn Stiles: Kinship Navigator Program Manager, Jennifer Adams: Director of Family Support Programs, and Aly Romero: Fostering Prevention Program Manager.** The emphasis on prevention is critical because anything that can unify, preserve and strengthen a family has the power to interrupt and circumvent a devastating generational chain, the power to forever alter lives in a very positive way! This may take the form of avoiding mental health struggles, substance abuse, maladaptive coping strategies, and so much more.

February

- **Nationally recognized expert on children and disasters, Dr. Lori Peek.** Dr. Peek is a Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado, Director of the Natural Hazards Center, and is a Principal Investigator for the SSEER Network (Social Science Extreme Events Research) as well as ISEEER or, the Inter-Disciplinary Science and Engineering Extreme Events Research Network. Further, Dr. Peek is the Principal Investigator for CONVERGE to advance the social sciences, engineering, inter-disciplinary hazards, and disaster research to coordinate teams in major disasters. She is known nationally for her expertise on children’s unique reactions to disasters and keeping families together in a healthy and positive way. The following is a link to a portion of one of her presentations on children in disasters. It is entitled: “Children and Disasters-Reducing Vulnerability and Building Capacity.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2a0DezEA7Y>

There may be a second guest speaker depending on how long Dr. Peek needs for her presentation. **Please be thinking of questions that you may have for Dr. Peek.** We are very blessed to have such an amazing person like Dr. Peek speaking at our SOC and I am certain that the information she has to share will impact all of us as we serve children and families.

March

- **Gary Brock, Director of Education at KCPT**. Mr. Brock has more than 30 years of experience in education and he will in part be highlighting the plethora of resources that PBS has to offer for children and families health, education, and general prosperity. What is particularly phenomenal about his presentation is that it incorporates resources that are **fully accessible by all** and bring about unity and community by being accessible to all regardless of their economic or other circumstances. How many times have we all found resources that are incredibly enriching but not accessible because of costs??? Gary's presentation will completely take care of that!

- A second presentation is forthcoming.

- More guest speakers will be added on pertinent topics all relating back in some way to our year's theme and most definitely, the health and well-being of our communities. Further each month you will see topics related to the year's theme and emergency/preparedness involving children. The SOC has expanded the definition of "disaster" to include things as previously mentioned that may not meet the typical definition of disaster but nonetheless are a disaster for that child because it has the power to forever alter his or hers respective development. If there is a specific topic that you would like to see a presentation on, please definitely let me know!
- Community Resilience Project: This will come under the "Ready and Steady" initiative and focus on strengthening the poorest and most under-served sections of our community. Research is strong in showing that such communities are statistically least likely to successfully emerge from any sort of disaster because they go into them already behind. To be completely transparent and to demonstrate this project will most definitely be happening, this is my capstone project for graduation in July with an MA in Emergency Management and Homeland Security with a specialized concentration in Community Resiliency. So at least you know this is not just a maybe!
- Our website will be undergoing some revisions to reflect the full inclusion of CYID as an equal partner with the SOC. Further, the website will have content posted on at least a weekly basis that pertains to the year's theme of community and unity. It will more than ever serve as a hub of up-to-date and highly relevant information!
- Name change. I have considered this given the inclusion of CYID and there are most definitely pros and cons to remaining with the current name or changing it. At this point, I believe there are more pros than cons to keeping things as is. My reasoning for this is we have tremendous and very valuable name recognition with the name, Jackson County Systems of Care or SOC. This has opened doors and avenues that have enabled us to have gone from **zero community-based initiatives to more than a dozen since 2020**. I am reticent to give that up for the obvious reasons! Further, the SOC has greater name recognition than CYID and is a larger group even by itself. That said, I do not want to create the impression which the name does that we only serve Jackson County. Even prior to CYID joining us, we had some overlap especially into Wyandotte County, KS and to a lesser extent, Johnson County, KS. I have given thought to an entirely new name which would necessitate a domain name change for the website amongst many other

things. I have also thought about staying as is but emphasizing the SOC part of our name or, Systems of Care because that is truly what we are, a systems of care. Given the prominent name recognition that we currently have as the Jackson County SOC (and the many benefits that brings with it, e.g., partnerships and donations), I am very reticent to simply rip that off like a band aide and begin the year with something completely unrecognizable. It is our reputation that affords us the ability to do much of what we do! So for now that is what we are going to do, keep the name as is but emphasize the SOC part of it. I am contemplating coming up with an entirely new name at some point and going through the arduous process of making all the changes that will entail and using 2024 to gradually become more known under whatever that name is. I am totally open to thoughts and opinions so please do share because this should not and will not be a just me decision. We are all together, a group and it must be a group decision.

- A brochure will be created to reflect the combination of CYID with the SOC and serve as a means to further promote who we are and what we do. This goes hand in hand with having an increased presence in the community. The SOC/CYID will be active participants at various community functions for the main purpose of supporting community and unity via other organization's efforts. I cannot think of a better way to create unity and community than to support the efforts of others to do such. A true systems of care is just that a **system** without silos. Additionally, the SOC will be available to sponsor or partially sponsor various events that promote the same.
- The SOC has an existing organizational membership structure that has been successful in increasing and maintaining membership numbers. CYID will be incorporated into that process. What this means is that targeted efforts will be made to attract and retain people from all walks of life that have vested interests in children's successful emergence from disasters of all types. Prior to CYID joining the SOC, we stood steadily at about **250 members** and are now as mentioned right at approximately **330**. In this membership plan, there will also be a concerted effort to reach out to Veterans that bring with them, a wealth of experience, talent, and training that would have tremendous benefit for our group.
- Meeting structure. This will in large part remain the same even with the combination of CYID and the SOC. One of the reasons that the combination of the two groups was contemplated was because of the overlap between them insofar as topics, guest speakers, etc. Each meeting will continue to have a specific theme with relevant featured presentations and most definitely time for questions and discussions. This will continue to be followed by a round table of updates and announcements. The SOC also remains available to staff cases of all types, ages, etc. where perhaps progress has been limited or you are simply stuck as what to try next. The SOC/CYID will more than ever have a wealth of people from a multitude of disciplines with incredible knowledge and experiences to lend sets of fresh eyes and ears on even the most difficult and perplexing of cases and situations. This is something that we could even do separately at **any time** from regular monthly meetings to devote the time to it that it justly deserves. Simply email me such requests and I am happy to get them scheduled!

I'm sure that I am leaving something out because I can always think of more but my sincerest hope is that this plan will give you a reasonable idea of where the SOC/CYID will be going in 2024. As is always the case, we will remain flexible to meet changing needs in the community

thus nothing is ever written in stone. I am so happy and feel very privileged to have been the Chair of this group since January of 2020. I will fully admit that the task of resurrecting a group at the very beginning of a pandemic was daunting to say the least and honestly not one I was looking forward to given the circumstances. That said, I would not now trade it for the world. Sometimes you don't know what you need or want until you get it. Seeing the amazing connections being made between people and knowing the impacts that it will have on our very most valuable asset, people especially children makes it more than worth the while. I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to continue to serve as your Chair and be a part of this collaborative effort. It truly is a collaborative effort because not one of us singly could accomplish what we are doing together!

Wishing you all a safe, healthy, happy, and prosperous holiday season and new year!

Sincerely,

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