



Helping Families

By Bonnie Jackson

The internet is full of thousands of memes to express the burden of our societal expectation to “do it all,” yet there are few practical solutions for when children or adults find themselves in the midst of multiple struggles. The James City County (JCC) Care Team is doing everything they can to meet people exactly where they are. “Support for the family as defined by the family.” Using a two-gen-

erational model, a care team provides professional and natural supports for caregivers and children to begin actively choosing habits that lead to healthy living, economic stability and the ability to build a future.

Courtney Thomas, a social worker for over 15 years and Care Team Coordinator for James City County, is passionate about what she does. “Most social programs identify the child or the

parent, but we do both. Our ‘Family Partners’ voluntarily work with us to make progress toward whole family wellness,” she says. “I came to the Care Team five years ago because I was really tired of seeing the same moms come through the system and getting reported when it really wasn’t necessary. Over the years, I saw that many of the moms weren’t raised with the best set of parents or caregivers, or they had



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trauma with no intervention, and they were really doing their best. They just had no one to guide them.” Unlike other social service programs which identify families and implement punitive measures, the JCC Care Team is providing preventative support through nurturing relationship.

Eight years ago, the original Williamsburg City Care Team was created through funding from the Williamsburg Health Foundation (WHF). Beginning as a pilot program, the JCC Care Team was created two years following. Comprised of a Coordinator, Registered Nurse, and Social Worker, care teams work in partnership with families to reach self-defined goals for whole family wellness on a voluntary basis. Using data collected through the partnership with the WHF, records showed children and families who were eligible for support through early childhood intervention programs often lose access to support and therapy programs when moved into the primary grade levels. “It wasn’t until kids were in middle school with behavioral or interpersonal problems that missed intervention opportunities became more visible,” Courtney explains. “The WHF was looking to support preventative measures before families get into Child Protective Services CPS.” The creation of a hybrid health and socio-economic program was innovative. “In my 16 years of social work, I’ve never seen a nurse and a social worker come together for a hybrid program like this. But it just makes sense.”

It makes sense because the whole health of the family is a complex issue. In fact, research from the WHF breaks down health into four core areas: 40% socio-economic factors, 10% physical environment, 20% health care, 30% health behaviors. Practically speaking then, education, job status, family and social support, income, and community safety have the largest impact on the wellness of both the adult and the child. It’s not only about access to a primary care physician and vegetables. “It’s taken teamwork with our partners to understand that we can’t just plug money and [a health class] into a family that’s been living in poverty and trauma and think it’s going to automatically make things better,” Courtney says. “This is why we have no fixed time frame. Some families we have for six months, some for three years. We are like scaffolding that’s being built around the family. When the caregiver has some confidence and efficacy, we slowly start to break off.”

And because every family’s needs and goals are different, the team works to create a new plan for each partner. Using evidence-based protocols with data-driven outcomes, the JCC Care Team assesses 12 core indicators, or lifestyle measures, on behalf of both the child and caregiver. These range from physical health, positive developmental support, and economic stability, giving the team a means of measuring growth during their time in the program. “A lot of people ask about accountability,” she says. “But we simply point our partners back to their own goals and words. When things fall off track, we go back and say ‘Okay, Ms. Smith, you said you wanted to...’ and this is what is motivating them. They want better. We like to say we do it with them, not for them.”

The data show the JCC Care Team is truly doing it with them. Since 2020, the JCC Care team has served over 40 families (137 individuals: 85 children and 52 adults). In nearly 1,800 encounters with fam-

ily partners, team members have accompanied medical appointments and school meetings, home visits, health promotion events and other meaningful engagements with the child and/or family. What is more, for partners between 2020-2023, safe and stable housing went from 33% to 67% from program entry to exit. Up-to-date well-child visits for children went from 60% to 100%. Physical activity for children increased 35%, and Healthy Living and Financial Literacy also increased over 35% during participation. The numbers are statistically significant, but the social and community significance is immeasurable.

In view of the Child Health Initiative's two-generation model, the generational growth, prevention and healing possible from Care Team success is staggering. Children growing up in more stable, healthy environments will naturally fold in these habits for all future generations. The JCC Care Team is changing the life trajectory for children not yet born and creating wellness that ripples through the entire community.

Many organizations are stepping up to support this effort. In addition to JCC Social Services and the Williamsburg Health Foundation, Child Development Resources (CDR), The WJCC School Division, WJCC Parks and Recreation, Olde Towne Medical and Dental Center, Literacy for Life at William & Mary, and even American Pride Automotive are opening doors for access, education, and building social capital. Family Partners have benefited from financial literacy classes, workshops on automotive care and car purchasing, and affordable access to summer camps and educational programming. "Many families are working full-time jobs, but without financial education on budgeting, loan APR and financing, there is no possible way to get ahead. Working with American Pride Automotive has been very beneficial in ensuring caregivers have reliable transportation for school and work," Courtney says. Each of the partnering organizations have become safe, reliable community contacts for future information and guidance. "This trustworthiness helps our community by strengthening the relationships with our Family Partners and community resources."

Courtney was born and raised in the Williamsburg area, and both sides of her family are deeply rooted in the community. Following high school graduation, she moved to the mountains of the Shenandoah Valley where she attended college and began a career in Child Welfare. Heeding the personal needs in her own family, Courtney returned to Williamsburg to assist with the caregiving of relatives and began with employment with JCC.

Growing up in a hard-working family that still lived paycheck to paycheck, Courtney brings a personal understanding to the families working multiples jobs and still struggling to get ahead. "When my team and I introduce ourselves to Family Partners, they look at us and maybe they think we look put together or maybe are something to aspire to. But we assure them we are people, just like them. We have had different circumstances or opportunities, and while we don't have it all figured out, we're willing to work together to find a way forward." From an empathetic and non-judgmental lens, Courtney and the care team give the invaluable gift of support. And maybe for the first time in some of the Family Partner's lives, they don't have to do hard things alone. NDN



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