



Early Childhood Self-Assessment for Family Shelters in North Carolina

Technical Assistance Project

Year 2 REPORT

October 10, 2022

“When we were approached about doing the assessment, we thought we had to check all the right boxes. We soon found out that this was a tool to start reframing our mindset.”

-Shelter Staff Participant

Report prepared for Child Care
Services Association

by



Partners for Impact, LLC

Beth Bordeaux, MSW
Co-owner/Sr. Advisor

Charlene Reiss, Ph.D.
Consultant

Alma Davis
Consultant

Fiona Dunn
Design Consultant

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Introduction

In December 2020, Child Care Services Association (CCSA) contracted with Partners for Impact to develop and implement the *Early Childhood Self-Assessment for Shelters in North Carolina Technical Assistance Project*. This report describes the work of Partners for Impact in the second year of this three-year project to improve services for very young children experiencing homelessness in shelters across North Carolina. More information about the project and findings from the first year of the project can be found in Partner for Impact's report on their [website](#). Other reports on early childhood homelessness can be found on the [CCSA website](#).

Early Childhood Self-Assessment for Shelters in North Carolina Technical Assistance Project

The purpose of this project is:

1. To ensure that the parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers **experiencing homelessness** receive early childhood services to promote their children's wellness and readiness to **succeed in school** and are **connected to needed resources** for their young children.
2. To help shelter staff members **create shelter environments** that are **safe** and **developmentally appropriate** for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Partners for Impact are contracted to **provide training** and **technical assistance** to Emergency Homeless Shelters and Transitional Housing programs serving families with children ages 0-5. Using the validated and revised [Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters \(ECSAT\)](#), Partners for Impact consultants are **providing shelters assistance** to create environments that facilitate the physical, socio-emotional, and intellectual development of young children as they experience homelessness. Project consultants are also helping to **develop and deepen relationships** between shelters and local Early Care and Education (ECE) programs. The project budget also includes funds for small "mini-grants" for each shelter to implement changes based on their assessments and action plans.

Partners for Impact

Partners for Impact, LLC is a North Carolina based consulting firm that reimagines and engages the systems and organizations that make people vulnerable to create more equitable opportunities and solve community problems. This company partners with community collaboratives, agencies, and leaders to gain maximum impact through system-level thinking, targeted planning, data utilization, innovative programming, intentional communications, skilled facilitation, and continuous learning. Their consulting team has strong and diverse program design, implementation, and evaluation skills, and uses an equity lens in all the work they do.

Partners for Impact senior consultants have over 60 years of combined experience working directly with a wide variety of nonprofit human services agencies, including work with families and youth in health and in crisis (health/mental health/developmental well-being, homelessness, domestic violence, aging out of foster care, etc.). The team has extensive experience working with organizational and community change initiatives within and comprising various types of organizations (government, philanthropy, nonprofit, faith communities, and community coalitions). They use a wide variety of tools to gather data and implement processes for the purposes of organizational and community change.

Partners for Impact consultants have worked with CCSA to design and implement the ECSA NC Pilot Project. Partners for Impact has managed the project; recruited shelters; created data collection tools, agreements, project management tools, and communication materials; gathered data; provided technical assistance and support for shelter staff; met regularly with the CCSA team, the PDG grantees, and the [Yay Babies!](#) statewide task force. Since the start of this project, Partners for Impact consultants have presented along with the CCSA team at the 2021 [North Carolina Annual Smart Start conference](#), the [2021 PDG Birth to 5 Annual Convening](#), the 2022 Annual [North Carolina Head Start](#) conference, and the [2022 North Carolina Bringing it Home conference](#) for homeless service providers. As part of a [Schoolhouse Connections](#) webinar series, Partners for Impact also highlighted the work of this project in conjunction with the [People's Emergency Center](#) whose team initiated the use of the ESCAT tool with Philadelphia shelters in 2016 through the Bell Project.

Child Care Services Association

Child Care Services Association believes in a future where all children have equitable access to affordable, high quality early care and education to lay the foundation for successful life outcomes. This organization leads efforts to strengthen accessible and affordable quality early care and education by providing supports for families, communities, and the workforce. Specifically, CCSA provides free childcare referral services; financial assistance to low-income working families; technical assistance and training to childcare businesses; and meal services for children enrolled in participating childcare programs. CCSA also provides local, statewide,

and national early childhood systems research, and educational scholarships and salary supplements to childcare professionals. CCSA is one of the three lead agencies of the NC Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Council. As such, CCSA provides management and oversight of five Regional Lead Agencies to ensure the delivery of high quality CCR&R services, and access to special statewide initiatives, including the Birth-to-Three Quality Initiative. CCSA also works with partners on early childhood homelessness and food insecurity at the local, state, and national level.

Review of Year 1

Partners for Impact began this project in year 1 by establishing criteria for recruiting shelters to participate and designing materials for the work that each shelter would undertake. Partners for Impact consultants developed a protocol for working with each shelter and a pre-assessment instrument to collect data about staff training and experience working with young children. They also created an online version of the Early Childhood Self Assessment Tool for Shelters (ECSAT) to enable each shelter to share their results among their staff and with the Partners for Impact team. Participating shelters, plus an additional agency that had extensive experience with the ECSAT, began meeting regularly as a community of practice in 2021. At these gatherings, shelters asked questions, shared their learnings, and found support from others facing similar challenges and opportunities.

Based on the established criteria and through consultation with the Emergency Solutions Grants office at NC Division of Aging and Adult Services and others, two shelters were recruited to meet the goals for year 1, followed shortly by two additional shelters, for a total of four. All four initiated their participation from mid- to late-2021. This included completing the pre-assessment, providing information about their agencies, and setting timelines for meeting with Partners for Impact consultants. All four of the shelters that started in 2021, completed the ECSAT and created action plans by August 2022. The ways in which the shelters went through the process varied, with different time frames, number of staff participating, and level of assistance from Partners for Impact consultants. They all report positive experiences and that participating in this project has improved their ability to serve young children and their families in their facilities.



Year 2: Completing the ECSAT and Creating Action Plans

In year 2, the first shelter completed the ECSAT and action plan by early spring 2022. This urban shelter in western North Carolina, has a staff of approximately 39 and has been in operation since 1981. In the 2021-22 fiscal year, they report providing specialized Child and Family Advocacy and Children's Services to 839 children (birth to age 18) impacted by domestic violence. They reported 63 children who resided in the shelter during 2021, 39 of whom were between birth and five years old.

Three staff members completed the ECSAT, reviewed the results, and identified their priorities for improvement. This shelter has staff whose responsibilities include focusing on children in the shelter and a staff member with prior experience in early childhood education. This enhanced their understanding and motivation to gain as much out of this experience as possible. Their focus coming into the project was to improve the space and services for young children in a new facility currently being planned. As a result of completing the ECSAT, they identified multiple changes that they could implement in their current location. They began making those changes immediately and have continued to add to their action plan.

The second and third shelters to complete the process followed a similar but slightly longer timetable. Both of these shelters operate with very few staff members, making completion of the ECSAT more difficult. These shelters required more hands-on direction and support from Partners for Impact consultants. This was not due to a lack of knowledge or ability but because of the difficulty of prioritizing longer-term planning over the everyday crises of serving families in an emergency housing facility.

The second shelter, located in central North Carolina, has been in operation since 1977 serving several largely rural counties. The Executive Director and staff Social Worker were involved in this project, completing the ECSAT and developing the action plan. In reviewing their practices, the staff recognized that they had discontinued many programs and lost several important community connections because of COVID. They identified immediate changes that could be made to improve their services. They have begun to reconnect to community partners to provide more resources for their clients and are considering additional improvements. This shelter reported having 57 total children in residence in 2021, 30 of whom were between birth and five years old.

The third shelter, in an even more rural area of the west-central part of the state, was founded in 2005. In addition to the shelter for women and children, it operates a three-star rated childcare center. This shelter reported a total of 20 children in residence in 2021; 10 of these were between birth and five years old. The Executive Director of the organization and the

Shelter Director completed the ECSAT and collaborated on drafting the action plan. Working together through the assessment, they recognized that the agency had existing resources and experience in providing services for young children, but some of those resources were not being utilized at the shelter. For example, the childcare had protocols and connections for developmental assessments and referrals while the shelter did not have a process in place for assessing and referring their clients to services. Conversations through this process and a different perspective on the opportunities to utilize the resources of the childcare center to improve services for young children in the shelter helped identify areas for short and long-term changes for the organization.

The fourth shelter to complete the ECSAT and Action Plan is part of a large agency in a more populated area of the state. The agency has been operating since 1963, opening their family shelter in 1998. In 2021, they reported having 19 total children reside in the shelter, including 17 between birth and five years old. The Shelter Director and the Program Manager completed the ECSAT. They expressed appreciation for the community of practice created by this project that introduced them to staff from other shelters doing similar work. This agency has recognized that while it is doing good work and meeting the needs of its clients, it needs to delve more deeply into all of its areas of service to identify where improvement is needed. Its action plan includes small, immediate changes and larger, longer-term reviews of policies and procedures.



Recruiting Additional Shelters

As the first four shelters have moved through this process, Partners for Impact has recruited the next two shelters into the pilot project. Learning from the first round of recruitment, consultants created a more competitive process and began with a widely circulated request for letters of interest from shelters that wanted to participate. In the interest of not putting a significant burden on shelter staff, shelters had only to explain why they were interested and commit to devoting staff resources to ensure a timely completion of the ECSAT and action plan. With a better understanding of the assistance needed and a streamlined process, Partners for Impact expects that these two shelters will complete the work in a shorter time frame. As of the writing of this report, they have joined the pilot, engaged their teams, developed a design process for completing the work, and completed the pre-assessment. One has completed the ECSAT and the second will begin the self-assessment shortly.

The first of these two agencies is a large, urban organization that operates shelters for domestic violence survivors in two communities in central North Carolina. They employ a large staff that provides a wider array of services than the other shelters in the project to date. In their letter of interest, they viewed participation in this project as “an opportunity to develop

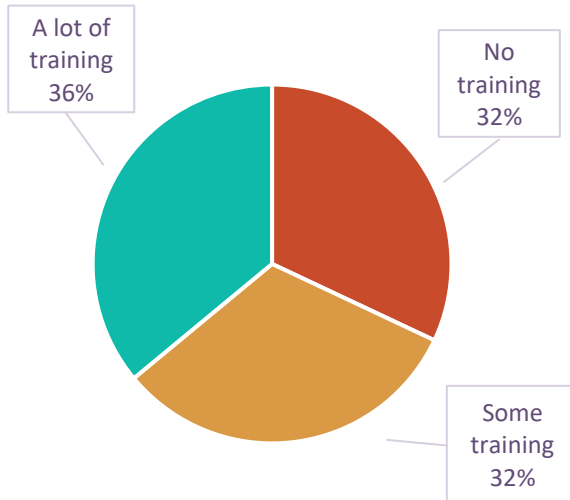
prevention and intervention programming that will buffer children from negative experiences and mitigate potential trauma. This project will also assist in building resilience in children who are served and will assist in creating a holistic plan for the parent/caregiver and child that will improve connections to community services and supports.”

The second shelter in the new cohort provides services to domestic violence survivors in a small, rural community in the western part of the state. In their letter of interest they said, “We would like to see shared experiences and learn best practices; additionally, this will give us the opportunity to ‘self-evaluate.’ The assessment/tool will allow us to shine light on our services, how we can better improve the work we do around keeping children and families safe while in shelter. Further, I see this opportunity to contribute to an exciting/forward-thinking project and it will give us an opportunity to strengthen our community collaborations.”

Recruitment efforts have begun to add two to three additional shelters that will begin and complete the assessment in Year 3. This report gives preliminary results for the four shelters that enrolled in the first year and additional information about all six shelters that are active in the project at this time.

Summary of Pre-Assessment Data

Figure 1. Training and/or coursework on child development/working with children ages 0-5 (n=22)



Prior to completing the ECSAT, shelter staff completed a pre-assessment survey about their levels of training, their understanding of and confidence in working with young children, and familiarity with related procedures in their organizations. A total of 22 people from the first four shelters completed the survey, including individuals who were not part of the ECSAT process. The data collected show that across the shelters, about one-third have had a lot of training or coursework on child development or working with children ages 0-5, a third had some training, and a third indicated they had no training or experience (Figure 1).

Most of the respondents have had some or a lot of training on trauma (Figure 2) with similar results for training on resilience (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Training on trauma (n=22)

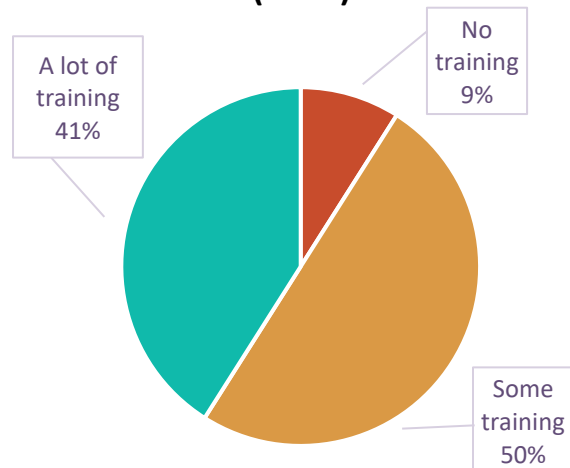
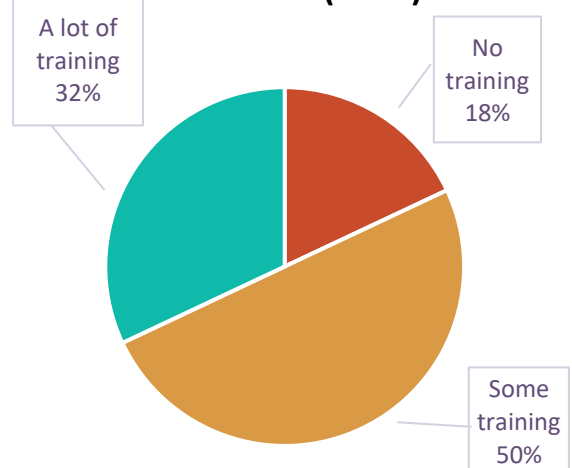
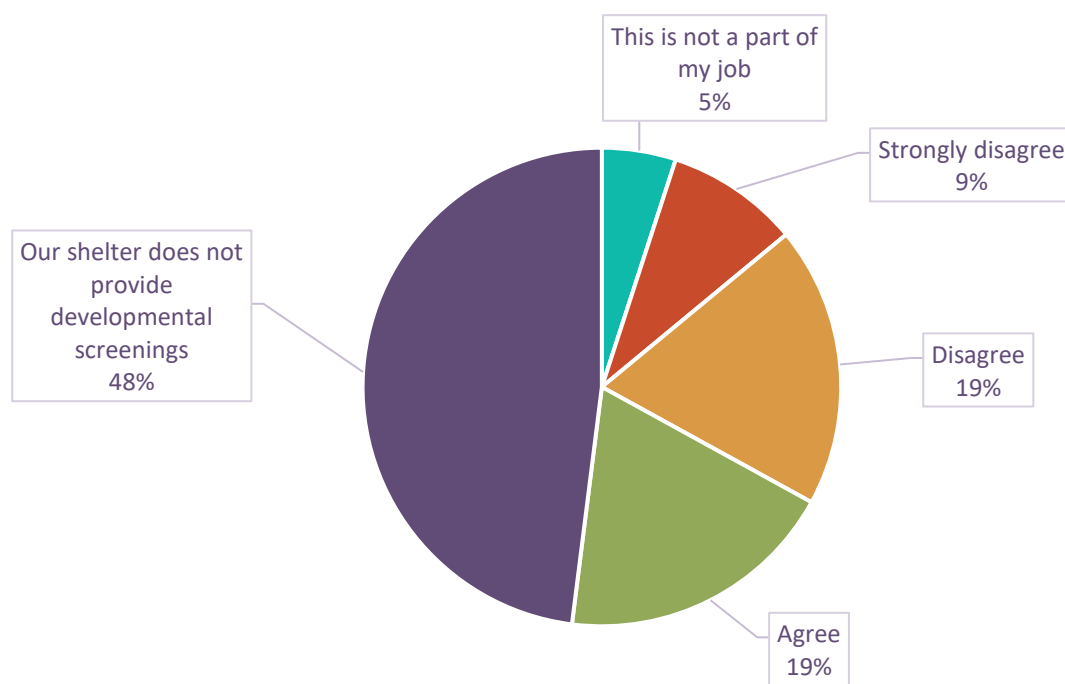


Figure 2. Training on resilience (n=22)

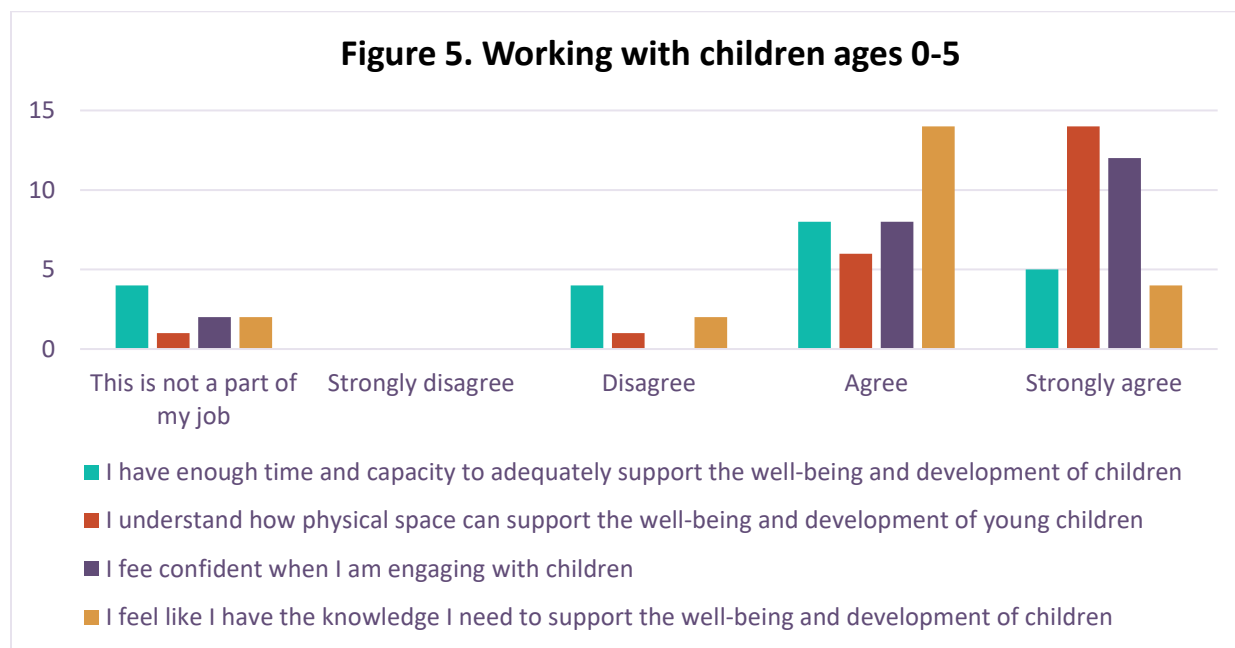


Most respondents agreed (45%) or strongly agreed (36%) that they knew how to access community resources, such as childcare and early intervention services for children. The majority of respondents agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (32%) that they understood their shelter's procedures about connecting families with outside resources that support the well-being and development of young children. In contrast, few respondents (19%) indicated that they understood their shelter's procedures for screening children for developmental delays, with 28% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they understood these procedures (Figure 4). One person said it was not part of their job and the other 48% responded that their shelter does not provide developmental screenings. It is noteworthy that all four shelters had a mix of these responses - some who understood the procedures, some who did not, and others who answered that the shelter did not provide developmental screenings. Further inquiry during the course of the project determined that none of the four shelters are providing developmental screenings at this time. The mix of answers may indicate a lack of clarity among staff members about what constitutes a developmental screening. Given the many ways that shelters adapted during the COVID pandemic, these answers may also reflect past but not current practices.

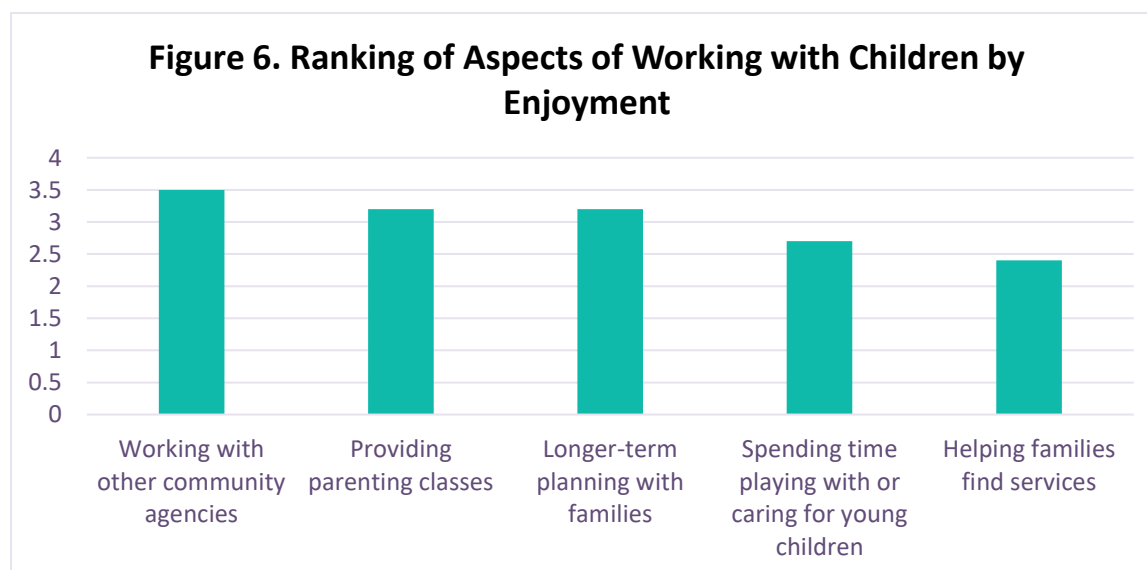
Figure 4. I understand our shelter's procedures for screening children for developmental delays



Responding to questions about working with children ages 0-5, most staff agreed or strongly agreed that they had time, capacity, knowledge, and confidence to support young children in their shelters (Figure 5). Some indicated that working with children was not part of their job. These were generally staff who worked in other parts of the organizations and did not participate in the rest of this process.



The pre-assessment asked respondents to rank five different aspects of working with families and children according to how enjoyable they find them. In Figure 6, most enjoyable is given a value of 5 and least enjoyable is valued at 1. “Working with other community agencies” received the highest average score while “Helping families find services” ranked lowest. Given the scarcity of resources for families in most communities and the difficulty in connecting clients to needed services, this result is not surprising.



In responses to open-ended questions, participants shared information about their shelter's expectations for working with children, the best and most challenging aspects of serving children, and barriers to connecting families to childcare. Shelter expectations varied across the four sites. Some respondents indicated that the primary focus was on getting families into stable, permanent housing, serving the adults, and providing a safe space for parents to take care of their children. Another person said, "We expect every child's emotional, physical and educational needs to be met." Many answers mentioned providing a safe environment and resources for the entire family.

The challenges identified in the survey were as expected. Respondents wrote about the difficulties of witnessing and navigating trauma experienced by children and their parents, including "observing the negative effects of 'instability' that living in a temporary shelter involves." Others spoke of the frustration of trying to connect children to scarce resources and the obstacles that families face in accessing services. Several expressed a lack of enough time to work with families to meet their needs, including one who said, "Many times families do not stay long enough to establish a working/learning routine with them. It's a hurry to get them into housing."

Similarly, the challenges to getting families into licensed childcare were not surprising. Respondents named a lack of availability of space in childcare facilities and most respondents mentioned financial barriers - low-wage jobs, high-priced care, not enough vouchers. Transportation was also mentioned in multiple answers.

"There is too much red tape. Families get discouraged and confused about if they qualify for something or how to gain access. Having to go to one place for one thing and another place for something else. We need easier access to resources so that families don't feel like they are given the runaround."

– Shelter Staff

Several common themes emerged from the answers to open ended questions about the greatest enjoyment of working with children and families in the shelters. Staff most enjoyed watching the children grow and learn, providing a safe space where children can feel less stressed and be happy, and celebrating with families when they get into permanent housing. One respondent said they most enjoyed "Empowering parents to give their children a voice, seeing children grow and gain confidence and autonomy." Another provided this insight: "Children bring a lot of brightness into this space. Additionally, mothers often see their children as a central motivating factor for creating new lives for themselves and their presence is usually a great anchor for a strengths-based approach to case management."

The ECSAT Process

The ECSAT has five parts:



Within each section of the ECSAT a number of questions are ranked from lowest (“We do not do this at this time”) to a highest expectation that could include consistent implementation or monitoring to ensure the action is strongly integrated into practice. Completion of the ECSAT tool by multiple staff members could show varying results that require discussion and comparison. For example, management with more tenure in the agency could provide a high ranking for an item and newer front-line staff with less experience at the organization may provide a low ranking on the same item. Moving up from lower to higher standards varies from more simple improvements to longer-term, complex changes in policy or programming. For example, staff of one shelter realized that some health and safety signage had been removed when families were temporarily relocated to hotels during the pandemic. They immediately re-posted the signage now that families are living on site again. In other examples, shelters identified that better relationships with partner agencies needed to be established, and that time and effort would need to be allocated to making that happen.

The specific process for completing the ECSAT that Partners for Impact designed went through several iterations and varied by shelter. One shelter was able to complete the entire assessment independently before reviewing the results with Partners for Impact consultants. Once their staff had entered their answers in electronic format, consultants met with them to talk through their learnings, provide feedback as they created their action plan, and develop next steps.

While two other shelters tried to set aside time to complete the ECSAT on their own, the low staffing and constant demands of the shelter made this too difficult. The staff of these shelters

were able to more quickly go through the assessment verbally in meetings with Partners for Impact consultants. The Partners for Impact team recorded all of the answers and created a report showing the areas with opportunities for improvement. Based on the ideas for change generated in a discussion of that report, Partners for Impact consultants created a first draft of an action plan for each shelter as a starting point. Having an initial framework for the action plan helped staff generate more ideas, timelines, and potential connections to meet the identified needs.

The fourth shelter required more hands-on support to move through the process. Various internal barriers made it difficult for them to follow through with meeting plans and assignments between meetings. This shelter did complete the assessment and their action plan by the end of August 2022 and Partners for Impact has provided additional support as they review and revise their intended improvements.

Post-Assessment Survey

Following completion of the ECSAT and action plan, shelters have been asked to complete a post-assessment survey about the experience. Not all of the project participants have completed the survey as of this writing. Insights from the answers received to date are included in the Preliminary Results section of this report. Partners for Impact will follow-up with all of the shelters to increase participation. Consultants will also conduct a brief interview with the staff at each shelter to capture their feedback on the pilot project, the ECSAT process, and the impact that their involvement has had on their own mindset and that of their organizations about serving young children.

“All shelter staff are now aware of the framework we are creating in our approach to children and are growing to serve them with equity. We also have new staff on our committee for child empowerment.”

– Staff Post-Survey

Preliminary Results

The action plans for the four shelters show a range of intended improvements in all areas of the ECSAT. In the area of health and safety, all of the shelters met most of the basic standards. Not all of the items were relevant for all shelters; for example, food safety policies were not relevant for shelters that do not provide meals. In another example, all shelters considered the ECSAT standards associated with breastfeeding, but none recalled having a breastfeeding mother in recent years. All shelters identified some necessary changes. In the post-assessment survey, one respondent wrote, “We learned gaps we had in shelter safety, e.g., slip mats for tubs and baby gates and how to organize toys for age-appropriate play.” Other changes include increasing signage about food and bottle safety, updating procedure manuals on universal safety, and considering policies on providing epi-pens and other medications.

All of the shelters have policies about parental supervision of children at all times. For some shelters, completing the ECSAT highlighted their heavy reliance on this policy to keep children safe rather than putting extensive time and effort into creating baby- or child-proof environments. At least one shelter has committed to a full review of all of its safety procedures and is making an effort to put the policies and procedures into writing. While they have been operating within the guidelines recommended by the ECSAT, some of the policies were only shared orally among staff and awareness of procedures was inconsistent. For another shelter, the project has provided an opportunity to bring more of their staff together to care for children.

All of the shelters are investigating options for providing onsite developmental assessments for young children. Some are connecting or re-connecting with community partners to provide these services. Others will be using funds from this project to purchase materials and staff training on the [Ages and Stages Questionnaires](#).

Other changes that shelters are reporting that they have or will make include:

Shelter Space Improvements

- Creating a space for a permanent counselor or counseling intern to hold sessions with children in shelter
- Identifying space outside of client rooms for breastfeeding
- Adding more educational games in the shelter library which gives families time to bond
- Making sure all furniture is secured to walls to minimize tip hazards
- Installing receptacle covers, cabinet locks, and non-slip bathtub mats
- Ensuring that age-appropriate snacks are available at all times

Shelter Services Improvements

- Providing constant support for pregnant women and mothers of 0–1-year-old babies to prevent mortality
- Partnering with local agencies to provide classes to clients, e.g., positive discipline, nutrition, cooking, child health and well-being
- Updating shelter wish lists with items specific to young children
- Re-establishing connections with a local health care agency to provide services for families while in shelter

Internal Procedures Improvements

- Strengthening procedures for background checks for all staff and volunteers
- Connecting to local resources for staff training on trauma-informed care, early learning, nutrition, food safety, etc.
- In the client intake process, adding a form specific to assessing the needs of each child separate from their caregivers
- Identifying professional development needs of staff to provide higher quality care to young children
- Updating and putting into writing procedures for natural disasters, shelter emergencies, missing child, and active threat situations

Communication Improvements

- Instituting a client feedback survey
- Strengthening connections to more high-quality childcare centers and local early childhood agencies; ensuring that staff know who to call at Head Start, school system, early intervention, and other agencies when families need to be referred

Training in Response to Identified Needs

As part of the community of practice, Cass Wolfe from CCSA and a staff member from one of the participating shelters co-presented a short training on creating child-friendly environments. This provided guidance and inspiration for shelter staff to take a much closer look at the spaces they have available for children in their facilities. One shelter transformed an unused space into a children's play area with soft furniture, toys, and books. Another shelter began improving their children's playroom by removing all of the contents and deep cleaning the rugs, walls, and windows. When returning items to the space, they created separate areas for different age groups. In a second phase of renovation, they will be painting the walls, changing the lighting, and putting in new furniture.

Staff members from several shelters remarked that the ECSAT and the child-friendly environments training have helped them see that even small changes could make a difference in their services for young children. In the post-assessment, all respondents strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of how physical space can support the well-being and development of young children ages 0-5 compared to before completing the ECSAT. One respondent wrote, "We have gained more knowledge about how our physical environment can help support parents and promote positive interactions with children and staff."

Going through the ECSAT provided an opportunity for an honest appraisal solely for the agencies' own use to learn from and grow without trying to satisfy outside evaluators. The assessment also helped shelters recognize what they were doing well and where they were meeting the highest standards for services. Shelter staff reported that it helped them think outside the box. Some thought they would need an extensive process and realized they could just make small changes now. One shelter reported, "We have always thought about things we wanted to change in the shelter but were thinking that they had to be big changes to make an impact. We made some immediate small changes and strive to continue to look at the need." All of the shelters found ways to make impactful changes without disrupting entire programs, and they recognized that even solid programs had room for improvement.



Connections to Early Childhood

Partners for Impact is also providing technical assistance to shelters on making stronger connections to high-quality childcare programs and early childhood services. Similar to the space and programming changes, the results of these efforts have varied across the four shelters. The shelters with more staff capacity have reached out to their local early childhood

agencies to establish stronger ties. The shelters with very few staff have had more challenges in creating the time for these meetings. All of the shelters had more connections prior to the COVID pandemic and recognize the need to re-establish those relationships.

In the post-assessment survey, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their shelters have better connections to early childhood resources in their community than prior to completing the ECSAT. One respondent said, “We now have connected with resources on the McKinney Vento website and have been connecting with more local resources that specifically help children instead of just parents.” Another said that through a meeting with their county’s Partnership for Children, “they have created stronger relationships with their local AHEC, DSS, Head Start, WorkFirst, and several other organizations including early learning.”

Shelter staff make referrals for all families to mainstream services as a standard practice of case management. However, shelters reported that clients are often already connected to these services when they arrive. Many families have case workers from the county social services department, are receiving benefits such as SNAP and WIC, and are familiar with other assistance programs. Shelter staff have the difficult task of helping clients find the resources that are less available and accessible, including safe, affordable housing, steady employment, and reliable transportation.

All four shelters reported making referrals for Head Start, Early Head Start, and other childcare options as a standard practice if parents identify this as a need. With high barriers, waiting lists, COVID, transportation, and income challenges, connections are not always made before a family leaves the shelter even when the need is identified. In addition, connections to services and resources are sometimes disrupted if the transition from shelter to housing takes a family too far from the support service location (i.e., out of county or beyond limits of transportation).

Developmental Screenings

In 2021, all four shelters reported that they did not refer any children for developmental screenings. As a result, the Partners for Impact team devoted one of the community of practice meetings with the four-shelter cohort to early childhood developmental assessments, tools used, and how shelter staff can be trained. All four shelters expressed interest in additional training opportunities following that session. As a result of the ECSAT and the community of practice discussions, shelters are also evaluating and modifying their intake forms and procedures. They recognize the need for child-specific intake questions that will help them identify needed services and increase appropriate referrals.

Lessons from Year 2

While working with the shelters, Partners for Impact has been documenting not just the changes occurring at the individual and organizational level, but also the more abstract learnings about helping shelters center young children in their services. The four shelters in the project have different levels of experience working with young children - some have many in their facilities at all times and for longer stays. Others only occasionally have children under 5 and often for only short periods. All of the shelters found areas of strength and opportunities for improvement when completing the ECSAT.

Benefits of Participation in Pilot Project

In discussions with the shelters, Partners for Impact has collected evidence that the shelters are benefiting not just from completing the self-assessment tool, but from participating in the entire project. The ECSAT tool has served as a positive gateway for exploration. The decision to embrace the process of assessment and improvement is shifting the way shelter staff think about their work. As one respondent wrote in the post-assessment survey, “The opportunity to learn more is invaluable and to understand further how to support children in a trauma-informed way.” It is giving them a chance to lift their eyes from what is needed from one moment to the next and to think about the bigger picture and longer-term vision of their agencies. They are moving from seeing children solely as the responsibility of the

parents to recognizing the role that the shelter environment and staff can play in supporting the well-being of the children in their care. Participating in this project has prompted staff to recognize more fully that they need to shift their focus, their policies, and their practices to more intentionally identify and address the needs of each child that enters their shelters.

The process of improvement has been iterative for all of the shelters. With each change they make, they learn more about what is working and what else is needed. The action plans they have created are intended to be living documents and they continue to add and adjust items as they identify additional improvements. In the third year, these shelters will re-visit the full ECSAT and continue to add to their action plans.

Adjusting to Shelter Timelines

To provide the most useful assistance to the shelters, Partners for Impact has continually adjusted its approach to the project. Understanding that working from an equity framework that respects the needs of the participants is imperative, the consultants have been committed to moving at the pace of the shelters and providing the support they need. In action, this shifted from expecting shelters to complete the assessment online between meetings to making time in meetings for shelters to talk through the questions and answer verbally. The commitment to being present for appointments with Partners for Impact seems to make it easier for staff to step away temporarily from the constant demands and focus on the project.



The 24/7 nature of shelter work also presented challenges to scheduling meetings with all staff who interact with children. Often special arrangements had to be made to include evening and night staff in meetings. Without resources from the project to cover the cost of this additional staff time, these meetings were minimized to reduce the burden on shelters. Providing shelters with larger grants to pay staff to participate could ease this stress and allow more employees to benefit from the process.

Building Strong Relationships with Shelter Staff

In this project, Partners for Impact placed significant emphasis on building strong relationships with shelter staff to facilitate and support them in the ECSAT process. In many nonprofit organizations, outside agencies require reporting and provide oversight that often feels punitive. Partnering fully with these shelters required gaining their trust and assuring them that they were not being judged on the results of the self-assessment; there were no wrong answers. It took varying degrees of reassurance to convince shelters that the assessment results were solely for their own use.

A Partners for Impact consultant checked in with each shelter weekly by phone or email. This helped to keep the project at the forefront for shelters, where non-urgent business can easily be pushed to the back burner. More importantly, it built trust between Partners for Impact and the shelters so staff could be more comfortable asking questions, answering the ECSAT honestly, and seeking assistance when needed.

Another aspect of building trust was the decision not to bring other agencies into the process to help with the ECSAT. The Partners for Impact and CCSA team had considered inviting local early

childhood services agencies to be part of the teams completing the ECSAT at each shelter. Ultimately, the team chose not to invite anyone else and to support the shelters in completing the assessments on their own. This allowed the shelters to be fully honest as they evaluated their practices without feeling judged or rated by outsiders. Connections to early childhood providers have been encouraged later in the process once more specific needs were identified.

This trust issue and feeling of scrutiny also emerged in the project “pre-test.” While the Partners for Impact consultants assured the shelter staff that the short 17-question instrument was solely to collect baseline data for the project, shelter staff expressed concern about providing the “correct” answers on the “test.” With this feedback, Partners for Impact changed the terminology to “pre-assessment questionnaire” and further emphasized that it was just collecting information, not testing any knowledge. This may seem like an insignificant matter of semantics, but it is an important lesson about building trust. A “pre-test” that creates stress and worries about being judged at the very outset of the project puts up an unnecessary barrier to a trusting relationship. Better to change the narrative about the instrument and focus on building positive relationships from the very start.

Staff Capacity

While all four shelters ultimately completed the ECSAT and action plans, the length of time required from start to completion varied greatly. As mentioned earlier, staff capacity played a large role in what shelters were able to do in a given time frame. One facilitator to completion is staff who have positions related to working with children. For these staff, focusing on improving services for young children falls within their job descriptions. They easily see the connection to the outcomes associated with their positions. In this cohort, not all shelters had staff specifically assigned to working with children.

Ideally all shelters serving families would have staff designated to provide services for children. Unfortunately, traditional funding streams to family shelters do not always make this possible. Inadequate and restricted funding may limit the number of staff positions that shelters can create to focus on children and move shelters to lean more heavily on volunteers for additional support services beyond what government funding requires. The shelters in more rural counties have expressed that finding employees from a limited labor pool in their areas can make this even more difficult. Shelters may also prioritize staff time to school-age children over 5 years old for whom mainstream services are often more available and accessible.

At a more general level, low staffing at some of the shelters means less time and capacity to spend on planning, looking at the longer term, and making connections to community partners. A very small staff is focused on meeting the most urgent needs of their clients while they are in

the shelter. Often, the emergency housing mindset concentrates on working with the primary caregiver to find permanent housing, not on delivering services in the shelter and not on addressing children's needs beyond making sure those over age 5 are enrolled in school. Providing any additional services in the shelter is seen as less a priority than moving clients into permanent housing as quickly as possible. Parents and caregivers in shelters are in a state of crisis that may prevent them from focusing fully on the needs of their children beyond providing a safe place to sleep. These dynamics can push programs for children to the bottom of the priority list for staff and clients.

Effects of COVID

More than in many areas of society, COVID has had a significant negative impact on emergency shelters, their residents, and their staff. Issues of staffing, testing, isolation and distancing, and access to resources have been and continue to be stressful and costly for shelters. As in childcare facilities, the services of shelters are vital and cannot be provided remotely. Staffing shortages due to COVID have continually stressed the capacity of the shelters to maintain full services and have prompted shelters to scale back to the most essential functions. Shelters also moved their residents out of congregate living into hotels and only began in late 2021 and 2022 moving residents back into their facilities.

Social distancing has reduced the availability of volunteers, including those who had been helping with childcare, food delivery, and parent education. Increased community need has stretched already-thin resources at shelters and their partner agencies. Staff in all four shelters identified programs and connections that had been lost due to COVID. The continuing crisis in staffing has limited their time to reconnect with partners and re-establish programming.

Equity

By centering our society's most vulnerable children in a system that has historically focused primarily on adults, this project strives to create a more equitable environment for children experiencing homelessness. Families experiencing homelessness face discrimination and marginalization as they navigate services not designed for their realities. Siloed services, limited resources, eligibility hurdles, and societal attitudes rooted in systems of white supremacy create impenetrable structures that hold the problem of family and young child homelessness in place. Traditionally, efforts to address homelessness have focused on "fixing" individuals and families and providing services to enable them to improve their circumstances. By working with organizations, this project seeks to shift the burden of change from families experiencing homelessness to the agencies and systems designed to serve them. Moving the focus can

transform the narrative from a story of homelessness as a moral failing to recognition of homelessness as a system failure.

Because of centuries of structural racism, black and brown children are overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness. At the same time in North Carolina, the undervaluing of the care economy has created an early childhood workforce, comprising primarily women of color, that is underpaid and often at risk of homelessness. Bringing attention to the challenges of connecting young children experiencing homelessness to high quality child care and services casts a light on these intersections. It highlights the many layers of structural change required to create a system that can provide high quality care for every child, including those in families at the lowest socioeconomic levels.

Strengthening connections between the homeless services sector and early childhood services can lead to more children receiving the early screening, services, and care that they need while reducing the discrimination children and families experience in services due to the stigma of homelessness. While early childhood systems have been making efforts around awareness of bias, homelessness has not historically been included in that awareness training. By building relationships with homeless shelters, early childhood providers can improve their understanding of issues facing children and families experiencing homelessness and the ways in which traditional systems need to be transformed to better meet the needs of these vulnerable children.

Impact of this Project on Organizations and Systems Serving Children Experiencing Homelessness

Shifting Mindsets Toward Focusing on Children

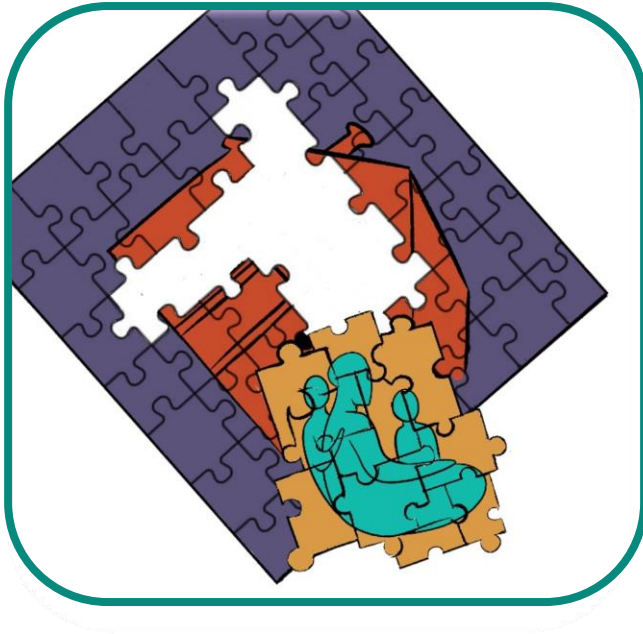
Making tangible changes is important in improving the environment and experience of young children in these shelters. Longer-term sustainable change requires shifting the mindsets of the staff toward recognizing that young children have separate and different needs than the adults caring for them. The shelters started in different places in this regard and as each has worked through the ECSAT and begun to implement their action plans, their understanding of what can and should be done continues to evolve.

For some, this is a series of small improvements on the extensive programming and services they already have for young children. For others, it is a significant shift away from serving the family as a single unit to identifying and addressing the needs of each member of the family as an individual. One staff noted their shelter's expectations about working with young children changed to reflect "how important it is to have a relationship with all children (small and big)" as a result of participating in this project.

Nurturing a Learning Culture

Feedback from the shelters shows that participation in this project has been a catalyst for changing how staff think, not just about serving children, but also about organizational learning. Staff from one shelter said, "When we were approached about doing the assessment, we thought we had to check all the right boxes. We soon found out that this was a tool to start reframing our mindset." Another shelter wrote, "Some of the questions I had not even thought about. Our shelter does so much work and a lot of things right with dedicated and caring staff. However, the assessment got me brainstorming about some things I want to do and improve upon. For example, the nursing stations and the way we connect parents to resources and just numerous things. I am interested to know the results of our assessment so we can acknowledge and understand the gaps and get tools and resources to address our gaps." In the post-assessment survey, respondents described the opportunity to learn as invaluable and that it changed their awareness of what is needed to work with children.

Conclusion



Working with six agencies in the first two years of this project has provided information and insight into what is needed for shelters to complete the ECSAT and improve services for young children experiencing homelessness. Working with more shelters in year three will generate additional data as Partners for Impact further explores the facilitators and barriers to implementing change. These learnings will strengthen the resources available to shelters across North Carolina and the country interested in using the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool and can amplify its impact on the health and well-being of children experiencing homelessness.

About Partners for Impact, LLC



Partners for Impact, LLC is a North Carolina based consulting firm with over 60 years of combined experience working with a wide variety of nonprofit human services agencies. We believe that **existing systems do not provide all people with the same opportunities**. **Reimagining and engaging** the systems and organizations that make people vulnerable can create more equitable opportunities, solve social problems, and strengthen the health and well-being of the whole. **Successful systems change can't be done alone**, so we partner with community collaboratives, agencies, and leaders to gain maximum impact.

Partners for Impact is a values-based company. This means we lead with our values in mind and seek projects that fit that value base. Our core values are **applying frameworks**, such as the collective impact framework, the social-ecological model, and more; being **data driven**; using an **equity lens**; being grounded in **human services systems**; engaging at the **systems level**; and being **nimble and accountable**.

Project Consultants

Alma Davis

Alma is a longtime Community Advocate for people and families experiencing bouts of homelessness. For over 25 years, she has been on the forefront in galvanizing community partnerships, fundraising, and evaluations. Her career has been built on policy reform for Domestic and Sexual Violence— specifically, working in shelters across the state identifying, advocating, and developing trauma informed services, while victims are moving forward from the aftermath of violence and homelessness. Her span of work includes development, improvement, and implementation of programs that serve families and children that have been forced into homelessness. She is committed to empowering families in distress by coordinating tangible resources in the community.

Beth Bordeaux, MSW

Beth cares about organizations-- their systems, metrics, budgets, and processes-- because she cares about people. She knows that to provide the support community members need to live and thrive, human service systems must be strong from the inside out. Beth is an executive leader with over 30 years of nonprofit and local government experience. She has worked in programs supporting individuals and families with many types of needs, including mental health, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, housing, childcare and childcare quality, early intervention, maternity care, domestic violence, faith support, education, and basic needs such as food and shelter.

Charlene Reiss, Ph.D.

Charlene has worked with Partners for Impact since 2018. As a consultant, she has 30 years of experience working with nonprofits, government agencies, academic institutions, and community collaboratives. Charlene's skill set includes creative problem-solving, evaluation, program planning, strategy development, systems change, and project management. As part of her own personal and professional journey, Charlene strives to use her white-woman privilege to surface issues of equity in white-dominated spaces and disrupt the systems that hold inequities in place.

Fiona W. Dunn

Fiona serves as the design consultant for Partners for Impact and lends a digital native's technological expertise when needed. She graduated from the Savannah College of Art and Design with a BFA in Sequential Art and a minor in Scientific Illustration. Fiona has a longstanding interest in social systems and community-based problem solving, and she enjoys being able to bring her artistic skills to the team and their projects.