



Strong Families Thriving Children

FINAL REPORT

“Strong Families. Thriving Children”

Final Report October 25, 2019

Introduction

On October 25, 2019, over 140 community and student leaders from Yuma County met together in a Southwest Arizona Town Hall Plenary Session to learn about, discuss and make recommendations regarding the topic, “Strong families and thriving children”.

Those gathered heard informative presentations from a distinguished panel of experts and then separated into five breakout groups each led by a Chairperson and a Panel Recorder. Using information gleaned from research documents furnished to each participant, the knowledge gained from the speaker’s panel, and the background each participant brought to the table, the five groups then addressed a series of questions designed to elicit consensus statements and recommendations regarding the topic. The Panel Recorders skillfully drafted consensus statements from each panel, which were forwarded in real time to a Report Writers. The Report Writers, working rapidly throughout the day, collated and edited the multi panel statements into a cohesive report of the consensus of the Plenary. This, then, is the Final Report of the 23rd Plenary of the Southwest Arizona Town Hall.

Characteristics of strong families and thriving children:

Helping Yuma County’s children prosper and thrive

Strong families and thriving children have identifiable characteristics. Examining these characteristics, and discussing what goals we as a community envision for our children helps Yuma County’s children and families to have the essential support needed to prosper and thrive. The characteristics of strong families and thriving children are varied. At their basic core, healthy families and healthy relationships are essential for strong families and thriving children. But “health” is not limited to traditional measures of wellness—it also includes other measures, such as functioning relationships and educational opportunities. Health starts with life’s basic needs, such as food, safety, and healthcare, and expands to include access to education (including early intervention), economic and job security, affordable and safe housing, and opportunities for success. Beyond these are relationship needs, such as strong adult role models, close familial bonds, and meaningful caregivers.

Strong families spend time together; stability for children, particularly at the family level, is critical. Strong children require parents and extended family members involved in their lives, so that the children know that they are in a safe and secure environment and that they are loved. Even simple things, such as breakfast at home with the family, are important. Where family may have other demands limiting its time, such as jobs with long hours, the community connection of neighbors linked as extended family is needed. This community support helps children, particularly those at-risk (also known as kids-at-hope), in times both good and bad, as role

models, caregivers, and support. Indeed, our strength in Yuma County is our residents' sincerity in helping families and children belong.

To foster these objectives—strong physical, social/emotional, and educational health—we envision strengthening certain aspects of our community to provide buttresses for these goals, particularly in early intervention. For example, our community should provide good opportunities for parents and children to have positive experiences together, particularly those that are little or no cost. This could include school facilities, parks, recreational programs, and special events. There are several relationships/networks that serve as an umbrella over families, including faith-based organizations, schools, non-profits, social clubs and events, the parks and recreation division, and healthy food and food security programs. Community-based schools that include services beyond traditional education are a model of how the community and these umbrella organizations can be directly involved with helping families gain easier access to services while protecting children's well-being and preparing them to succeed with a whole-child approach.

Additionally, opportunities for outreach to parents so that they can gain an understanding of child development and the knowledge to implement best practices are critical, as parental involvement is such a key indicator of childhood success. Being informed is essential for families to be able to help their children thrive within the unique circumstances of each family. Parents need access to tailored adult education to assist with understanding child development and the importance of providing a stimulating and educational home life, and schools can then supplement to help create well-rounded students. It is critical for the community to not just provide these services but to also make community members aware of them and to assist with getting families physically to the resources they need. This may mean providing transportation, or it may mean creating various contact points throughout the community that are within a reasonable distance of neighborhoods. Integrating employers may help too, as there are unique services and resources within particular industries available to employees.

Further, children need safe spaces in which to develop their own personalities and characteristics, where they can exercise some independence and have say-so in decisions affecting their lives. As such, economic security and safe housing are critical, as is educational attainment and early-access to developmental programs.

Obstacles and barriers to strong families and thriving children:

The challenges faced by some Yuma County families and children

In Yuma County, there are some unique barriers and obstacles that children and families experience. With Yuma County's rural location, it is difficult to find skilled professionals, causing families to travel long distances to larger cities, which for many families often results in financial hardship and an overall disruption in daily life. This also limits the availability of funding and grant opportunities, particularly funding for education and mental health.

In Yuma County, incomplete education and inadequate training, and the lack of awareness about available resources, are significant obstacles affecting the region's economic development, gainful employment, and the future of the community. Educators and parents need more access to training and resources to support children in school and the home, including mental health education and an understanding of the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Parents need access to education to assist with understanding child development and the

importance of providing a healthy and stimulating home life. Parents also need greater access to medical resources, and efforts should be undertaken to remove any stigma from utilizing “no cost” and free screenings (a hand up, not a hand out).

With Yuma County housing two military bases and having agriculture as one of its main economic drivers, many families are in transition, experiencing constant change in their lives. Further, there is a large population of immigrant families, and the majority of these are living in two cultures simultaneously. Language barriers exist between resource providers and families, creating a barrier to certain needs.

Yuma County has high unemployment rates, along with low wage jobs, causing parents to work many hours or multiple jobs, limiting the amount of time spent with their families. Low wages create a dilemma for families in choosing between the needs of the family and paying for support services. Employment, among other things, may also create separation in a family, and Yuma County is lacking in resources for such an obstacle. Affordable housing and accessible transportation is also a barrier to our population.

Opportunities and solutions:

The greatest avenues for strengthening Yuma County families and children

There are multiple avenues within Yuma County available to provide opportunities to families and children. These paths serve different goals, including increasing protective factors (parental resilience, social connections, knowledge, support, and social/emotional competence) through a variety of organizations. As the environment shapes the child, children need to be provided the most optimal environment possible to grow into stable and strong people, which includes access to education, healthy foods, parks, and healthcare.

The most obvious answer is to strengthen and empower our schools to provide support and services to its students and their families. The school system is something that virtually all children and families interact with, and thus it is a very logical hub for providing access to services. It can aggregate the offerings of multiple non-profits and government agencies for the families that need those services and struggle with accessibility. Teachers can be a trusted resource that help parents utilize support resources that they may not otherwise seek out. Social workers are another important asset the schools can provide. For example, certain schools are already discussing creating model child care programs for their students to create a new generation of informed parents as they enter adulthood. This also has the added benefit of increasing awareness of the services and jobs provided in the field of early childhood development. At least one elementary school in the area is already embracing the community school model, and this can be expanded on a larger scale to other schools in the county, providing more access to preschool and health care. Involving parents in the operation of schools and educational programs serves to inspire the parents and, in turn, the parents have the means to inspire the child.

These types of services can also be integrated into community-based centers located in housing communities. This local approach provides resident families with easy access to education on how to maintain a family and thrive. Connecting communities, such as young children, older students, working and stay-at-home parents, and the elderly, can benefit all groups by building a social network of support and mentorship. Through these means, we need to expand our services to reflect the “business hours” of our community members, which is not

Monday through Friday, 8 to 5. This need can also be met through community-based support groups for parents, which allow parents to share and learn from experts and other parents, providing critical knowledge and ideas.

Availability of services also needs to be publicized. Yuma County already has many non-profits and government agencies that offer education and services to families, but knowledge of their availability is often limited. Accessibility but lack of engagement seems to be the greatest challenge to getting resources to families. Outreach about these programs needs to be strategic in order to remove stigma around assistance in such a way that the families are not ashamed or offended by being offered the services. One such possibility would be to utilize current, participating families as a grass-roots effort to advertise the success of the services received and create a positive community ripple effect that the services are a hand up, not a hand out.

As a long-term solution, educational programs such as the Yuma Promise is also opening an opportunity for our students to earn a postsecondary degree without debt while encouraging generations to remain in our community. Educational opportunities such as STEDY, AWC, NAU-Yuma, UA-Yuma, and ASU@Yuma are available to county residents and are building a well-educated community and creating home-grown specialists who remain in this medically underserved area. Other volunteer programs are available to help students learn confidence, public speaking, and other skills useful for gainful employment. Additional programs that help our population communicate with each other, both in English and Spanish, would help our members and families connect.

Yuma County's Priority:

The top solutions to ensure our vision of healthy families and thriving children

The top three recommended actions reached by consensus of the Southwest Arizona Town Hall that our community must commit to in order to ensure our vision of healthy families and thriving children are:

1. **Community centers and resource hubs.** Developing a unified, one-stop-shop approach to services where families and children can learn about programs and opportunities available and utilize them in the same place would provide greater access and resources to families. This would require a consortium of providers and programs that communicate with one another and coordinate, in order to better meet the basic human needs of nutrition, healthcare, childcare, safety, and education.
2. **Economic opportunities and training.** Changes must be made at the local and legislative level to foster development of Yuma County by attracting commercial developers to create more affordable housing and investment in job creation. This focus should include initiatives to encourage year-round employment opportunities, attract trained professionals (particularly in healthcare), and train adults in marketable job skills.
3. **Expanding current school services.** Current successful school programs should be expanded upon and offered to more students, such as early childhood education and

preschool for all, childcare and expanded school hours, and youth leadership training. The focus should be on obtaining adequate funding to allow for these services