

MID-IOWA COMMUNITY ACTION, INC.



WHOLE FAMILY APPROACH

LEARNINGS FROM THE FIELD



WHY WHOLE FAMILY?



In 2015, MICA was invited to participate in the White House's Rural Impact initiative. Our agency had a long history of strong commitment to family outcomes, but we had no idea about the journey we were about to undertake.

MICA has always believed in the power of families to create positive change in their lives. Our foundational work in the family development approach is part of our culture. When we started in earnest on our whole family journey, our agency had a long history of successful community-level change in early literacy, but we knew we needed to become more intentional with our work.

For us, embracing a whole family approach has never been a simple and straightforward path. Our working theory has remained constant - more support for families leads to long-term, lasting change. But the more work that we did, the more we learned. Ten years later, we are still making great strides toward creating a seamless experience for families.

The top thing that we have learned along the way? The process to implement a quality whole family approach takes time. Just like any community action initiative, it will look different no matter where you live. It requires resiliency and grit to pursue this path, but the results are worth the effort.

RURAL IMPACT: SETTING THE VISION

2015-2018

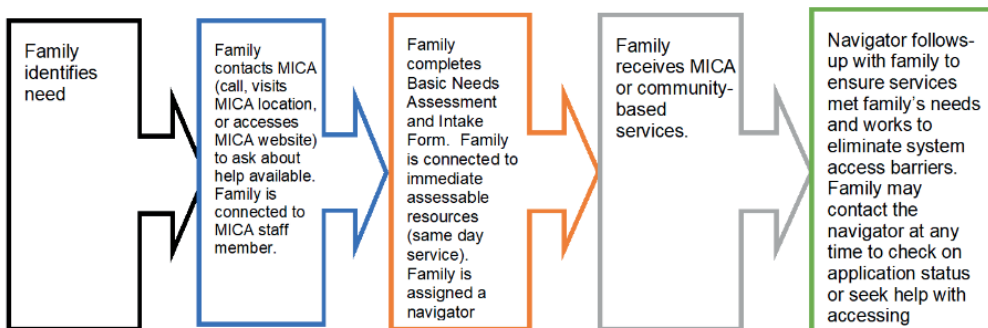
MICA's first steps into whole family work were in setting the vision. The first site action plan drafted on March 2016 declared that when a family's entire needs are addressed through a comprehensive 2 generational approach, children and adults both experience improved outcomes which are shared from one generation to the next.

The initial strategies were to provide **pathway to employment** programs in conjunction with the local community college, **co-locate** programs, adopt a "**no wrong door**" practice, strengthen the **developmental component** of programming, implement **trauma-informed** care practices, and provide trainings on Adverse Childhood Experiences (**ACES**).

To begin, we traced the journey a family takes when they visit MICA, and envisioned what that might look like in an ideal model. The original **journey map** looks similar to some of the strategies we employ today.



MICA's 2 Generation Ideal Journey Map



Original Proposed Family Journey Map (Mar 2016)



MICA staff learn techniques from Dr. Linda Henderson Smith in a Trauma-Informed Practices training, June 2017.

EARLY STRATEGIES

Bringing in Families' Voices

MICA held focus groups with families who were participants in intensive programs like FaDSS, Early Head Start, and Head Start to gain their insights and feedback into needed supports and services.

Providing Targeted Trainings

All MICA staff received targeted trainings to support components of the new approach, including trauma-informed care. A Trauma-Informed Care Team was established to move this area of MICA's practice forward.

Coalition Building

MICA was a lead agency in Marshalltown for extensive work on early literacy. We strengthened our existing partnerships with entities like the community college to offer early whole family pilots like cohort based learning.

Throughout this process, it was a priority to bring in the perspective of the families we serve to help guide our work.

"When a family's entire needs are addressed at once, both children and adults experience improved outcomes."

We conducted **focus groups** in which families told us that barriers included wait times, transportation, and becoming "stuck" in jobs with difficult schedules.

By the end of the Rural Impact pilot, MICA had a much clearer idea of the opportunities and challenges inherent in shifting our culture to a whole family approach. Several challenges like co-location, unified intake, and data integration would take many years to come to fruition.



PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

2018-2024

MICA's next step in our whole family approach was to remove some of the barriers that we saw in our own processes and systems. This was done through extensive work in two consecutive strategic plans, one from FY18-22 and one from FY22-24.

In this era, MICA dealt with two major natural disasters including an EF3 tornado that carved straight through the heart of downtown Marshalltown and led to a five-year recovery effort, a derecho that left one of our offices without power for nearly a month, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these events redirected our agency's energy and resources, they also brought additional funding, practice innovations, and insights that shaped our approach to whole family work.

Some of the key strategies included:

FY18-22 STRATEGIES

Co-location

MICA underwent a major capital campaign in Poweshiek County to support co-location of our Head Start and Family Development services.

Interdepartmental Collaboration

All teams put strategies into place to help increase collaboration with other program areas, including learning about their work in more detail.

Initial Program Pilots

MICA was invited to participate in a Family Development and Self-Sufficiency (FaDSS) whole family pilot program in 2019.



Progress was slow in the FY18-22 plan, but it was meaningful because it taught us where more foundational changes were needed. The FY22-24 plan was greatly simplified and allowed MICA to put our resources in the areas of highest impact.

MICA made great strides forward between FY22 and FY24 because the strategic plan was configured to maximize staff leadership. Each of the three pillars of the plan (data-driven, resilient, advancing equity) had a corresponding **interdisciplinary team** that moved the work forward. These teams, ranging from direct service professionals to top level leadership, determined which strategies would be most effective to reach the plan's outcomes.

Bolstered by supplemental CARES funding, the data-driven team was able to make monumental strides forward, including the **implementation of a new database of record, a universal intake, setting up a robust system of follow-ups and referrals, and piloting efforts to connect teams together.**

For the first time, MICA was able to easily see cross-program data that supported whole family work and bundled services. Complex information like the number of families receiving certain combinations of services (for example, Head Start and emergency food) started reshaping our conversations around what worked for families. The progress made during this plan set the stage for new conversations about a **North Star outcome** for the agency and the need for **unified program leadership.**

Excerpts from MICA's FY22-24 strategic plan. The data-driven plan pillar set several clear goals that would support a whole family approach.



CLOSING THE GAP

2024 ONWARD

As the sun sets on the FY24 strategic plan, MICA has set the stage for the next iteration of our whole family work. Families are facing more of a crunch than ever before in meeting their basic needs, particularly food. Our challenge is to pursue new strategies to meet that growing need while seamlessly connecting families to multiple resources.

Part of the solution is in deepening our connection to the pulse of families' needs and the staff who serve them most closely. To do this, we have created **dynamic feedback loops** where direct service staff have a voice in the change we are creating. MICA is also innovating the ways we touch base with families - knowing that we don't want to place a burden on them but that we must know their individual situation and needs in order to customize their experience.

A second component in our ongoing work is in the background - continuing and strengthening the journey of uniting our programs and staff. This work will be led by MICA's new **Chief Program Officer**, who will work to de-silo programs and processes throughout the agency.

Some of the specific strategies we are pursuing to meet these broad goals are listed on the following page.

One key message we have learned in pursuing a whole family approach is that **continuous process improvement** is key. There is no moment where an agency has "arrived" at a perfect whole family approach. The ongoing dedication to making the family experience better and the resiliency to keep working toward lasting outcomes is essential.

OUR NEXT STEPS: WHOLE FAMILY INTO THE FUTURE

Unified Program Leadership

- Created an executive leadership position - the Chief Program Officer - whose role it is to oversee and unite all programs toward common goals
- Re-configured our executive leadership team to tighten cooperation, knowledge, and collaboration between key operations and program leadership

Create Dynamic Feedback Loops

- Much of the work in the FY25 strategic plan focuses on the idea that an effective agency has no light between its teams, from leadership to direct service
- Created frequent and meaningful opportunities for staff to connect and provide feedback including a monthly meeting with the ED, all staff involved in a program meeting, staff focus groups, and continued work in interdisciplinary teams

Elevate Strategies from Direct Service Staff

- New strategic plan aligns work around a central goal based in the needs assessment and elevates strategies from staff to reach that goal
- New interdisciplinary groups including a basic needs group designed to walk staff through best practices for developing and executing strategies

Seamless Data and Outcomes

- Bringing major programs like Head Start and Early Head Start more fully into the agency's database of record, to enhance coordination and referrals
- Using data to better track program efficiency and verify theories of change around multiple interventions leading to better, stronger outcomes

Pursuing Cultural Changes

- Training staff to use a single family dashboard to view the family's entire situation across programs as a default
- Encouraging staff to frequently use family referrals that lead to warm handoffs, first interagency and then eventually with community partners

Centering Family Needs

- Implementing a short needs assessment into the universal intake to better identify family needs at each point of contact and track progress over time
- Focusing on the family experience - connecting families to services in a seamless but also respectful way that is not overwhelming but feels achievable