



## ***FAMILY STRONG AIMS TO PREVENT FAMILY CRISES AND KEEP KIDS IN THEIR HOMES***

DEMONSTRATION PROJECT FOCUSED ON SOUTHEAST KANSAS WILL SERVE AS A MODEL



The day Kaela Byers, Ph.D., MSW, received the news that she and her team won a \$3,747,804 million grant to strengthen and support families and prevent child maltreatment in Kansas, there was only one thing to do: “We were dancing in the halls!” says Byers, associate research professor in the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare.

As the principal investigator for the initiative, she will guide the five-year Universal Prevention for Strong and Thriving Families project (Family Strong), which will demonstrate a model of a community support system that addresses and alleviates the stressors families experience, preventing them from turning into the kind of crises that can result in them being involved with the child welfare system. The grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration of Children and Families was awarded Oct. 1, 2021.

The Family Strong demonstration project will focus on eight counties in southeast Kansas, a region where the out-of-home foster care placements for children is nearly double that in the rest of the state. Byers says the region also has many strengths the project will build upon, including an existing network of programs and partnerships that can provide the added support families need to stabilize and thrive.



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Family Strong will leverage these existing connections to strengthen and grow an interconnected network of providers, launch new services that will increase access, and conduct grassroots outreach and marketing aimed at promoting and normalizing help-seeking in order to increase network activity to support children and families.


“I want to see families be able to get the things they need, with less contact with the formal child welfare system and much more reliance on resources in their community,” says Byers.

The project combines the strengths of a powerful partnership of organizations, including the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, and three community-based agencies in southeast Kansas: Kansas Legal Services, Kansas Children’s Service League, and the Family Resource Center. The project team will also include a steering committee made up of community members, including those who have successfully accessed resources to address family crises.

The goal is to provide families in the region with a continuum of comprehensive prevention services so they have seamless, universal access to supports. For example, Family Strong will expand and introduce new services at the Family Resource Center, including preventative legal services. It will boost the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS), which connects family-serving agencies to streamline referral and service coordination for families. And, it will promote the use of the 1-800-CHILDREN warm line, connecting families to support services.

The initiative will conclude with an evaluation led by Jared Barton, PhD, MSW, assistant research professor, to determine its effectiveness and expand the knowledge base about proactive approaches as the norm in family services.


“This is an opportunity to demonstrate how we can do things differently, how we can break away from the system we have that feels punitive, to one that meets stress with resources and support,” Byers says. “I’m excited for the opportunity to highlight what we can do here in Kansas.”



## CROSS-CAMPUS COLLABORATION

## AMPLIFIES IMPACT OF INITIATIVE


Kaela Byers, PhD, MSW and associate research professor in the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare has focused her career in social welfare on finding ways to give families the resources and support they need to thrive. When she decided to apply for the grant for Family Strong, she found the perfect partner in Meghan Cizek, MA, LCSW, assistant director at the KU Center for Public Partnerships and Research, who is also engaged in several initiatives focused on creating a system of wellbeing for families in Kansas.



Byers and Cizek are co-investigators for Family Strong, which forges another link in a strong chain of collaboration between the School of Social Welfare and CPPR. The two KU groups are working together on several projects in Kansas that promote child welfare. It’s a great example of the School’s commitment to work with KU partners at every opportunity to have a greater impact in Kansas and beyond.

“The CPPR team has worked in this area a long time, and we want to add our resources to that effort,” says Byers. “Together, we are quite strong and have a wide array of skills to bring to the table.”

“We have a powerful partnership with our colleagues at the School of Social Welfare, and I look forward to seeing how our collaboration will positively impact families in Kansas,” said Cizek.







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