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supporting quality
home visitation programs
in Alberta

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Alberta Home Visitation Network Association

Newsletter Launch Celebrates our Vision

Message from the desk of the AHVNA Provincial Director – by Lavonne Roloff

It is with great pleasure that the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association (AHVNA) presents the Home Visitation Quarterly Publication "Connections". This publication has been established to bring current developments and issues relevant to home visitors and community partners in the area of home visitation for families with children aged 0 – 6 yrs.

Our goal is to provide community partners with current and accurate information that will enhance the profile and sustainability of home visitation services for Albertans. This can only strengthen the partnerships that are vital to the delivery of home visitation.

AHVNA celebrates five years of incorporation as a non-profit society supporting quality home visitation programs in Alberta. With over sixty members comprised of community-based agencies, home visitation

programs, Alberta Children's Services, Regional Health Authorities and interested individuals we have been able to engage representation from across the province. We look forward to supporting those who work with families, for many more years to come.

We welcome your input and insights for further publications. Please forward suggestions to info@ahvna.org



AHVNA History Built on Shared Goals

An Alberta association dedicates itself to bringing home a breath of support for young families – by Cheryl Moskaluk

The Alberta Home Visitation Association has a lot to celebrate in its fifth year of incorporation as a non-profit society dedicated to promoting the health of families. Its history is one of collaboration in the common pursuit of a honed vision for early intervention.

The idea of home visitation—to support parents right where they are at in giving their children the best possible start in life—has long been practised in the social service history of Alberta and through the grassroots activism of community groups. The idea of valuing home visitation as a community health initiative in its own right, with established standards for training and practice, floated into Alberta after the Edmonton-based Success by Six initiative became aware of national media attention given to Healthy Families America. The U.S. organization had moved forward in 1992 with its home visiting model, based on a comprehensive evaluation of more than 300 families in the Hawaii Healthy Start program. A standardized training program was developed on the mainland. It wasn't long before a groundswell of support for this model of evidence-based proactive work spread across the continent.

In Edmonton, three local agencies, which were already reaching out to young parents and families at risk, were approached by Success by Six to launch a home visitation project. At the same time, the Muttart Foundation hosted

meetings in Edmonton and Calgary with agencies and individuals, to see if there was interest in working as a provincial group to promote home visitation. With the grant they received, they began to gather people from across the province to discuss best practices and common aims and goals. AHVNA chairperson Shauna Seneca was among the founding group. An initial conference for front-line providers and those interested in home visitation started the ball rolling. Shauna points out that those who gathered around the table then, have stayed to build the Association and are still committed to the future growth of home visitation.

“We’ve always seen home visitation as helpful to families and we knew what a powerful intervention it could be.”

There was a lot of talk in the province about home visitation. And it was the right time for the idea to move forward.

Before Shauna began her own agency to reach out to Aboriginal families, she had started out in 1981 by working with families on social assistance. “Everything was done by home visitation back then. But after a health worker was killed, the pendulum swung the other way.” Home visitation had become predominantly part of child protection checks instead

of a potentially important avenue of support for parents. A dedicated group with a passion for its work had the chance to push the pendulum back again.

When the Muttart Foundation became involved and proposed money that would be matched by the province in a five-year commitment to the project, the group agreed to become a non-profit organization and form a board

of directors “We had to ask ourselves, ‘Will this change what we do?’” Shauna says. The board was absolutely committed to building the presence of home visitation in Alberta, not by rapid-fire growth, but by resolving to create guidelines that would best serve Alberta families and home visitation providers and to develop relevant and often specialized training programs.

Today, AHVNA works to connect and support providers of 35 home visitation programs both in urban and rural settings, from Grande Prairie to Lethbridge. In the province’s 2004 Child, Youth & Family Enhancement Act, AHVNA saw some real gaps that could be filled through good home visitation practice. “We’ve become experts in working as part of interdisciplinary teams, and that has served families well,” Shauna says. “We’ve never lost sight of the fact that we are here because we want families to get better service.”

Cheryl Moskaluk is a freelance writer in the Edmonton area.

On the Home Front

Home visitors: more than a friendly face

What makes it hard for families to give their children a good start in life?

- Inexperience
- Social and geographical isolation
- Lack of community support
- Unemployment
- Illness
- Cultural barriers
- Lack of education
- Poverty

It's relief for any new parent to have friendly personal support, but getting to know a home visitor does more. It can help parents break through these extra challenges and build skills and confidence.

Why can't some families find and use early intervention services in their communities?

- Lack of Transportation
- Financial problems
- Lack of Childcare
- Lack of Confidence
- Course location
- Time of day
- Health concerns
- Past negative learning experience

When home visitors can reach out to families wherever they are, the barriers to service can be reduced or eliminated.



Why Home Visitation

by Connie LeMay

The report of the Task Force on Children at Risk (1999) identified that the "vast majority of Alberta's children and youth are doing just fine." All families will experience problems, stressors or struggles. For many families, solutions may be just a phone call away or entail a visit to a local agency. For others, the answers are more elusive. This is where the role and skills of the home visitor become critical. The research clearly demonstrates that for struggling families and children, the most promising strategy for improving child development outcomes is to start early. Home visitation services are just that—an early start. Home visitation services aim to address two important facts related to the early years. First, these are significant years for influencing positive child developmental outcomes and secondly, the early years are a time of increased risk for children.

A Time of Opportunity

Early childhood development literature clearly demonstrates the years between zero to six are foundational years. Early developmental experiences set lifelong patterns related to attachment, communication, physical development and learning. In the early years the issues of bonding and environmental stimulation are particularly sensitive.

While children have unparalleled developmental opportunities at this time of life, the parent-child relationship is open to influence and change. The perinatal phase and the initial months after the birth of a child are a time when parents are most open to new information and ideas that will shape the parent-child relationship. For this reason home visitation is focused on families with children from newborns to six years of age.

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A Time of Increased Risk

Research tells us the highest substantiated rate for child maltreatment, including physical abuse and neglect, occurs between the age of zero to four years, declines slightly between the ages of five to nine years and then declines relative to the child's advancing years. The documented rates of child maltreatment during the early years are likely higher than what can be calculated from official reports. The reason for this hypothesis is that once children have entered school, a range of community professionals is mandated to report any incidence of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment in preschool aged children is more likely to be hidden. Another factor that contributes to the hidden nature of maltreatment is the fact that very young children do not have the developmental skills to reveal maltreatment to outsiders who are likely to file an official report. Home visitation aims to reduce the incidence of child maltreatment by working with families before there are significant problems.

Given the two conditions of increased opportunity and increased risk, home visitation is an important strategy on the continuum of early child development services. One of the many benefits of home visitation is the use of screening. Screening identifies families that would benefit from home visitation. Families



with few supports, limited experience and challenges related to poverty and mental health are examples of the issues that would make home visitation a practical service option. Screening enhances the likelihood that families that would not access traditional early child development services are given the opportunity to engage in services. The second benefit of home visitation is that of reducing many of the barriers that prevent families from accessing centre-based services. The third significant benefit of home visitation had been identified by the Columbia University School of Social Work's associate professor Neil Guterman in his 2001 report on the role of home visitation in stopping child maltreatment before it starts.

"Home visitation services, by their design, embody an ecological approach to the problem of child maltreatment by acknowledging the importance of delivering services within, rather than divorced from, the natural environment in which parenting and family life transpire," Guterman reported.

The development of a range of service options related to early child development services means that a greater number of children in Alberta are given a good start, which contributes substantially toward the achievement of their full potential.

Connie LeMay is a consultant with the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

On the Home Front

Home visitors: more than a friendly face

In 2004 – 2005, Alberta Children's Services provided funding to 36 home visitation programs. This means that home visitors served more than 3,700 children and 2,400 parents and primary caregivers. Now that's encouraging!

Home visitors are great at connecting families with their communities. Last year, home visitors referred families 15,000 times to help them access food resources, adult education and family resource programs and more.

How can home visitation help your family? Last year, home visitation programs did in-depth assessments with 1,600 families in need, to find out how home visitors or other community services could best assist them. And 175 of those families were still waiting for a child to be born. Now that's prevention!

Reaching Young Parents in Alberta

by Laurie Lafortune

Parents say:

"I have learned a lot of things about child development and the health and welfare of my baby."

"As a young mother with two very active boys that are ages one and two, having a home visitor is a real privilege for me because it provides support, a listening ear, and most of all access to community referrals."

"I am now registered and attending school. I hope my child in the future will be proud of me."

"I don't trust very many people, but I trust my home visitor."



Is home visitation a good fit for your family?

Last year, home visitation programs screened 3,000 families to find out if they needed extra support. And of that number, 240 screenings were with parents expecting a child. Now that's early intervention!

These are just a few comments that reflect the experience of thousands of Alberta families who have received the support of a home visitor in the early years of parenthood. Home visitation is a voluntary in-home support program for parents who want extra assistance

to create the best possible healthy start for their children, from newborns to age six. A trained home visitor works with the families on an individual basis to help parents provide a nurturing, safe, and stimulating environment for their children.

A Home Visitor may:

- encourage positive parent-child interaction through age appropriate games, songs, and stories and by providing strategies for guiding children's behavior.
- bring and share family literacy activities and resources.
- provide information about child development and help parents to recognize if their child is meeting developmental milestones.
- assist the family to connect to community programs such as education and job training, housing, budgeting and financial supports, and counselling services.
- address isolation by helping families make appropriate connections with other families.

Home visitor Judy Scott from the Red Deer area, has been providing home visitation services to families with young children since the fall of 2001. She comments, "I have the best job in the world because I get lots of cuddles and smiles. Home visiting is an opportunity to share resources and watch families grow through the variety of connections that they make within their community." She has seen many successes and accomplishments during her work.

Home visitation is only one of many programs and services that provide supports to families in Alberta. However, home visitation is unique in its individualized, in-home approach. Families who might otherwise be unable to access centralized family supports and group programs, receive the help they need. Barriers are removed because the home visitor comes to the family, bringing resources and information based on the family's individual goals and strengths.

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Providing services to rural families is an ongoing challenge in Alberta. Home visitation is well-suited for rural areas. Linda West, current Executive Director of Healthy Families Healthy Futures agrees that home visitation is the best model for rural areas. "The biggest problems our clients face in accessing services are transportation, geographic distance and child care. Home visitation addresses all these barriers," says Linda. "We reach the families that other programs miss." Home visiting began in May of 2001 in

the north-central region, with a central office based in Westlock. The program has been very successful and is in great demand. Linda points out that the main challenge facing the region is that the need for home visitation has outstripped the funds allocated for it.

Home visitation programs began providing services throughout Alberta in 1998 and can now be found in all regions of the province. Many successes and accomplishments have taken place

due to the support of the home visitors. As Judy Scott says, "There is no doubt that home visitation makes a huge difference for many families."

Laurie Lafortune is the Program Coordinator for the Healthy Families Program with Red Deer Family Services.

Evolution of an Association: Meeting the Challenge

by Connie LeMay

"AHVNA provides an instant connection with home visitation programs all over the province."

-an AHVNA member

Since its inception in 2001, the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association (AHVNA) has successfully worked with home visitation programs to facilitate networking; to provide training, resources for evaluation and information about standards and best practices.

The development of provincial standards and guidelines by AHVNA and the Ministry of Children's Services in 2005 reflects the importance of home visitation as part of the continuum of services for children and families in Alberta. The next logical step is to enhance the ability of home visitation programs to meet or exceed each standard and guideline.

AHVNA is stepping into the arena of delivering technical assistance, after its 2005 assessment revealed a real and significant need. AHVNA members and regional Child and Family Service Authority Contract Specialists are enthusiastic and hopeful about the benefits that technical assistance will bring to home visitation programs across the province.



Guiding principles

The AHVNA membership identified the following principles for developing a system of technical assistance delivery:

Inclusive

Technical assistance must be inclusive and therefore responsive to the diversity within the membership—in program size, resources and experience related to the delivery of home visitation.

Responsive

Technical assistance must be responsive to the challenges and barriers that programs experience in the delivery of home visitation.

Continuous Improvement

Technical assistance must focus on continuous improvement of home visitation service delivery and staff development.

Current Research & Best Practices

Technical assistance must be reflective of current research and best practice information.

Communication Plan

Technical assistance strategies and resources must be reflective of AHVNA's communication plan.

Community Partners

Technical assistance should build on opportunities to develop initiatives with community partners.

Technical Assistance Framework

Utilizing the guiding principles, the next step was to establish a framework for developing and delivering technical assistance. The framework must also address the importance of accountability and sustainability of Alberta's home visitation programs. The AHVNA Technical Assistance Committee settled on the following framework:

Information

Members saw a clear need to have access to information that would support the development of home visitation programs.

Training and Professional Development

The AHVNA membership would benefit from program and staff development opportunities that promote continuous improvement and learning.

Resource Development

Members identified a number of resources and toolkits that would enhance service delivery and program effectiveness.

Dialogue and Networking

Members identified a need to dialogue and network with other home visitation program managers, supervisors and home visitors to promote learning.

Program Monitoring and Evaluation

AHVNA has an important role to play to ensure that the unique aspects and refinements created by its programs and by the regional Child and Family Service Authorities are represented through program evaluation and research activities.

Provincial Initiatives

Provincial initiatives will promote a higher level of excellence through continuous improvement and the advancement of home visitation programs province-wide.

Continued Participation

The evolution of AHVNA in its capability to develop and deliver technical assistance will further the goal of ensuring quality, accountable and sustainable home visitation programs in Alberta. Participation is key to the transition. Become involved by logging on to www.ahvna.org or contact AHVNA at 780-429-4787.



AHVNA

supporting quality
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in Alberta

Meet Us Online

www.ahvna.org

Try our new links:

Developing Logic Models

FOIP

Supports for Independence

Assured Income for the Severely
Handicapped

Financial Assistance for People
Escaping Family Violence

Look for these new resources soon:

Downloadable Tip Sheets, Templates
and Facts on Home Visitor Services

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Upcoming Events

AHVNA Fifth Annual General Meeting

Friday, June 23, 2006

Black Knight Inn

2929 – 50th (Gaetz) Avenue

Red Deer, AB

Schedule:

Annual General Meeting

12:30 – 1 p.m.

Professional Development Topic:

Parental Mental
Health Issues

10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Focus on identification, and
strategies and interventions for
home visitors.

• MORE INFORMATION TO COME •

RSVP by June 12 to:

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Meet with colleagues from around Alberta and take advantage of this professional development opportunity. See you there!