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Tuscaloosa mental health program called Project LAUNCH starting

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Multiple mental health services and resources in Tuscaloosa are partnering to promote social and emotional wellness in early childhood development through Project LAUNCH in an effort to address mental health gaps that, when filled, could prevent future problems.



Staff photo | Michelle Lepianka Carter

Larry Turner holds up a sign that reads "I have a voice!" during a Mental Health Awareness Rally held at Snow Hinton Park in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Monday, May 11, 2015.

Project LAUNCH is a program with a purpose to promote the wellness of young children from birth to age 8. It addresses the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of their development. The project is a partnership between the state and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The federal administration recently awarded the Alabama Department of Mental Health \$3.2 million over a five-year time period to determine the state's mental health needs and address the needs by linking existing resources.

"LAUNCH is an acronym that stands for linking actions for unmet needs in children's health," said Amy Crosby, Project LAUNCH Young Child Wellness coordinator. "We want to enhance and expand services that are already available."

She said in its first year, Project LAUNCH, which is operated by a Young Child Wellness Council, did an environmental scan to determine resources and unmet needs.

She said the scan determined major gaps in assistance with the social and emotional wellbeing of children.

"Our focus is social and emotional wellness. We really hear about physical and cognitive development, but we haven't, in the past, really looked at them socially and emotionally as it being important in the healthy development of an individual," Crosby said. "We're trying to create this atmosphere that social and emotional development is just as important as physical and cognitive development."

Gail Piggott, executive director of the Alabama Partnership for Children, said the program will address those issues by implementing prevention and promotion strategies, including screening and assessment in a variety of child-serving settings, enhanced home visits, mental health consultation in early care and education programs, family strengthening and parent skills training and integration of behavioral health into primary care settings.

The program will do this by linking the already existing resources that have funds from other sources.

Some Tuscaloosa resources include the University of Alabama Child Development Research Center, Tuscaloosa's One Place, Easter Seals, Community Service Programs of West Alabama, United Way of West Alabama's Success by Six program.

Statewide, the program links Tuscaloosa sources with the Alabama Department of Mental Health and the Alabama Department of Public Health.

Piggott said the Alabama Department of Mental Health chose Tuscaloosa as the state's pilot community because of its location is accessible to more poverty-stricken areas and it has established resources.

Pilot communities bring together child-serving organizations to develop policies, financial mechanisms and other reforms to improve the integration and efficiency of the child-serving system.

The money will be used to help with those improvements and implementations in an effort to attack mental health issues on the front end with a focus on childhood development in social and emotional wellbeing, Piggott said.

"A young child's social and emotional development is really the thing on which everything else hinges," she said. "If we take some preventive actions and promote healthy development on the front end, then we don't have to pay as much in the future."

Alabama's high poverty rates and high rates of children growing up in single-parent homes, violent communities and families with little education lead to more expensive mental and physical health problems, from drug abuse to heart disease, Piggott said.

She said addressing social and emotional mental health at an early age can prevent these things in the future.

A Project LAUNCH Summit on early brain development and social and emotional health will be held at the Bryant Conference Center, 240 Paul Bryant Drive, on Thursday. To register, go to www.training.ua.edu/launch.

"This will hopefully help us make a better environment for our children to succeed," Crosby said.

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