



Champions for Inclusive Communities Star Community

Martinsville, VA

The community members of Martinsville, Virginia have one overarching goal: **to provide families with a place to start when they come looking for services.** It's only fitting, then, that the name of the community's "one-stop-shop" organization is The Starting Place.

Gathering Services into One Place

Martinsville and Henry County formed the idea of integrating their community's services ago when they applied for funding from the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation to look at their early childhood infrastructure and started to pull key players together. As Dr. Judith Fleming, Educational Consultant for Care Connection for Children, noted about the preliminary planning process, "We hadn't really started up a lot of things – they were already there." The committee excitedly realized that many strong systems were already in place, only they were disjointed. The only thing left to do was bring them together. This was the beginning of the beginning – Smart Beginnings, that is.

Then, in February 2009, months of planning by the sixteen service providers at Smart Beginnings of Martinsville and Henry County (MHC) resulted in the opening of The Starting Place. They decided upon a unique, but brilliant, location for their one-stop center: the local shopping mall. What better way to serve the community than in a convenient spot where many families visit anyway?

Starting with Family Input

The idea for the Starting Place originated not with professionals and organizations, but with families. A community assessment was given to parents and caregivers in the community to find out what the key problems were for their young children. When it was discovered that families wanted services to be organized in one easy-to-access location, the idea for the Starting Place was born. Today, the community continues to involve parents in decision-making processes, and they strive to empower parents in every way possible.

Core Focus: Developmental Screening

The Starting Place has many areas of focus, including providing information, resources, and referrals to the community. Their core area, however, is developmental screening for children ages three months to five years. Families who come to the Starting Place have many different options available to them. One of the most popular is the "My Child and Me" program. This class is held once a week for caregivers and children. Students from the local community college volunteer to play with the children while the caregivers participate in a parenting

What makes a Star Community?

ChampionsInC has created the Star Communities program to recognize exceptional communities.

Star Communities will show excellence in **6 Performance Measures**:

- Families are partners
- A "Medical Home" provides coordinated care
- Children receive early and continuous screening
- Families have adequate funding/insurance to pay for services
- Services are organized so families can use them easily and are satisfied
- Youth receive necessary services to make the transition to adult life

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workshop conducted by Pam Toney, Starting Place Director. After the workshop is over, the caregivers then join their children and spend some time with them practicing the techniques just learned in the class. Many times, through these workshops or other activities, suspected developmental delays are reported.

The Ages & Stages Questionnaire, a helpful screening tool, is also used to catch developmental delays early on. Once the delays are identified, partner agencies such as Infant & Toddler Connection of Piedmont are called in for further examination. The Ages & Stages screening doesn't just serve the child when they are young. Dr. Dawn Holley with Henry County Schools finds this screening especially helpful because it eventually accompanies the child when they start school. This means school administrators have a ready-made, detailed record of the child's diagnosis and progress over the last five years.

A Medical Home Loop

Working to provide children with a medical home is, as in many communities, a continual work in progress. The Martinsville community is currently working on the "communication loop" between the Starting Place and community physicians. Referring children to the right physicians is often the easy part for the Starting Place. Getting the physicians to complete that circle by communicating back about whether the family is getting the care they need is more difficult. Barbara Jackman, Director of the Martinsville-Henry County Health and Wellness Coalition, points out that the community is working on improving this return of communication. They hope that printed material about the Starting Place in every practice will serve as a visual reminder.

Right now, the Martinsville & Henry County community is faced with a more basic challenge. Since they are a much-underserved community, there is a shortage of primary care physicians. On the same note, unemployment in the area is also high (at least 20%). Because of these two situations, the community coalition of service providers is focusing on simply making sure children have a medical provider despite potential insurance barriers.

Access for EVERY Family

The community as a whole works together to ensure children of all ages, cultures, and socioeconomic status are being served. A variety of resources come together to make this possible. Much of the Starting Place's funding comes through public and private partnerships and foundations such as the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the Harvest Foundation. Support is also received from diverse sectors of the community such as the Charity League, the Memorial Hospital Auxiliary, the Chamber of Commerce, as well as local businesses. The United Way also provides support and serves as a fiscal agent for the coalition. Especially commendable is the degree to which agencies throughout the community spend hours of their time per month in reaching out to families.

Transition: Just a Few Steps Away

Finally, the Martinsville and Henry County area does not simply forget about children and families as they grow older and get ready to transition into adult life. Sherry Winn from the Infant & Toddler Connection of the Piedmont emphasizes that transition is discussed with families from the day they begin seeking out services in the community. Whether it's transitioning to Head Start or school, or later, transitioning out of school into the adult community, staff at the Starting Place are there to provide support. In fact, both an Education Station and a Career Hub, both operated by Henry County Schools, are located just steps from the Starting Place in the mall.

Sheryl Agee sums up the community efforts of Martinsville, Virginia best:

"We still have some challenges ahead of us, but we've got some good support and we feel like we have all the key partners at the table who are willing to work with us and share information so that we can provide a holistic approach to early childhood development."

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