

Focusing on Prevention and Resiliency to Mitigate the Impact of Abuse

Since 1991, Greater Richmond SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now) has been working to prevent and treat child abuse and neglect by protecting children, promoting positive parenting, strengthening families and creating a community that values and cares for its children. Although the mission hasn't changed, SCAN is constantly exploring new research and approaches to deliver what works to create healthier environments for children.

"Our mission has always been in prevention of child abuse and neglect, but we are shifting more to help the community understand the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), the importance of Trauma-Informed Care, and the power of resiliency," says executive director Jeanine Harper. "Despite factors that affect their safety inside or outside the home, kids are amazing and strong and resilient, so we want to create systems and conditions that allow that to come forth." [READ MORE]

Parents and other caregivers who may pose threats to children are often victims of abuse or neglect themselves, and part of a continuing pattern. Historical trauma, generational poverty and racism also lay the groundwork that increases the risk of abuse and neglect. SCAN works one-on-one with parents and families through its Child Advocacy Centers, Family Support Program, Community Programs, Richmond Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the Circle Preschool Program. In addition, SCAN convenes other nonprofits through the Trauma-Informed Community Network (TICN) to create a continuum of care and support.

Paying attention to underlying trauma can not only deliver better outcomes, but can help address inequities. For example, the rates of opioid use among mothers of color and white mothers is roughly the same in RVA, but they are not receiving the same rates of treatment.

"We see implicit bias where moms of color are pushed more toward the justice system than the treatment system," says Sarah Mersereau, Community Engagement Coordinator. "So we're creating a collaborative response that allows all moms with substance abuse disorders access to best-practice treatments during pregnancy and the first three months of their babies' lives."

Called the Central Virginia Resiliency Project, this effort combines the expertise and resources of SCAN, Family Lifeline, and Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU to provide parenting and baby bonding support, home visits, and clinical treatment, respectively.

"We've brought people who have lived with a substance abuse disorder to the table to be fully part of the process," says Mersereau. "They are part of our strategy team, informing all of the processes and procedures — everything from when and where we hold group meetings to other issues and barriers our participants may face."

Harper sees a direct connection between broader social determinants of health and outcomes for children in RVA. "We work a lot in the deep end [dealing with abuse and neglect], but there is so much we could do by addressing issues of equity, supporting caregiving across

generations, and changing systems. When there are safe neighborhoods, good jobs, access to food and healthcare, etc. many of the bad outcomes can be prevented.”

But perhaps the most important path to prevention is simply talking, Harper says. “We, as a society, keep issues of trauma like child abuse and neglect in the dark. People who are hurt feel such shame and stigma. But it’s not their fault, and we need to lift them into the light. And remember that most people who hurt others have often been hurt themselves. The more we talk openly about abuse and neglect with compassion, the more likely we are to prevent it.”