

aoknetworks.org

St. Clair County

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Serendipity: When Great Things Happen Unexpectedly

St. Clair County is the oldest county in the state of Illinois; its existence actually antedates the establishment of Illinois itself. According to the 2010 census, it has a population of 270,056, of which 20,211 are children birth to five. St Clair County is a part of the St. Louis Metropolitan Area. Other cities in St. Clair County border agricultural or vacant lands. Unlike the suburbs on the Missouri side of the metro area, those in Metro-East are typically separated by agriculture, or otherwise undeveloped land left after the decline of industry. The central portion of St. Clair County is experiencing growth with new homes being built every year, particularly in Belleville, and its satellite cities. St Clair County is a community that boasts great parks, bike trails, and local events that focus on diversity and culture.

The St Clair County All Our Kids (AOK) Early Childhood Network is one of the newest AOK Networks in Illinois. Reestablished in 2012, it was the first community to pilot a model in collaboration with Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) to focus on developing parents as partners. Parents residing in St. Clair were offered opportunities to participate in parent leadership cafes, workshops and trainings, specifically; SFI's Love is Not Enough Parent Café series, Living the Protective Factors training and the Awakening to Your Potential workshops.

In the process of building the Network's capacity to improve its early childhood system of services and supports it was apparent the importance of our parents' perspective in this process. Relationships with parents throughout the county had been established as they participated in SFI's parent leaderships courses. Some of these parents were seeking additional opportunities to contribute as they became aware of the AOK Network's vision.

With this in mind, the AOK Network partners began the process of developing a partnership with these parent leaders and started a dialogue using parent/provider café conversations and appreciative inquiry interviews hosted by parents at AOK Network meetings. From these conversations an agreement was reached to support this parent initiative by inviting parents to participate in a training provided by Community Organizing for Family Issues, better known as COFI. The training, Self, Family and Team is part of COFI's phase one to support parents in developing their leadership skills. In order to support our parents it was important to also offer parents stipends, transportation and childcare for their time working on this initiative.

Which brought us to our next question, how could we acquire the resources to support this endeavor?

In August 2012, opportunities to push our dreams forward became available when we applied for a grant from the State Advisory Council (SAC) and were awarded the Early Childhood Action Partnership (ECAP) grant. This allowed the network to support parents with stipends, transportation and childcare. We held our first Parent meeting on December 12, 2012.

This opened new lines of communication with parents and increased parent involvement in decision making which has supported our AOK mission. In the Spring of 2014, COFI in partnership with our local partner Children's Home and Aid applied and received a grant from Deaconess Foundation to support the Network's continued efforts to engage parents as partners. As a result, our community will be supported to continue providing COFI's

training to our parents through the support of a new full time local COFI trainer. As a result of this parent initiative, parent groups are an active part of community work, volunteering for local agencies, working on projects in the East St Louis community and continuing to build their skills as leaders in their family, in their children's school and in their community.

Keep in touch for updates to this initiative!

What resources are necessary to replicate this approach?

- Parent peer leaders and mentors
- Parent leadership workshops and trainings
- Provide Stipends/Incentives
- Strengthen parent leadership and advocacy skills
- Schedule meetings and activities on Saturdays
- Schedule more than one meeting and activity opportunity
- Provide Food or refreshments
- Provide transportation if possible
- Provide childcare

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