

***Rights, Resources, and the Next Generation:***  
**An MLPB Interview Series with**  
**Early Childhood System-Builders**



compiled  
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as part of the 18-month  
*Building Legal Problem-Solving Capacity in the Early Childhood Sector*  
planning process

Thank you to our planning process partner communities  
for contributing to this interview series:



Thank you to [The JPB Foundation](#) for making the planning process possible.



## Rights, Resources and the Next Generation: An Interview with Leaders from First 5 OC's Engaged Neighborhoods Initiative

Edited by [Samantha J. Morton](#) – CEO, MLPB  
January 27, 2022

### Background

MLPB has convened a planning process with three partner communities invested in *Building Legal Problem-Solving Capacity in the Early Childhood Sector*, thanks to support from [The JPB Foundation](#). One of these partner communities is [First 5 Orange County](#), and specifically [Engaged Neighborhoods](#) – an initiative designed to engage families *directly* to advocate for their children while also better connecting early health and development systems.

We asked colleagues from *Engaged Neighborhoods* to talk with us about their perspectives on topics relating to [legal information and rights education](#). Here's what these stakeholders told us:

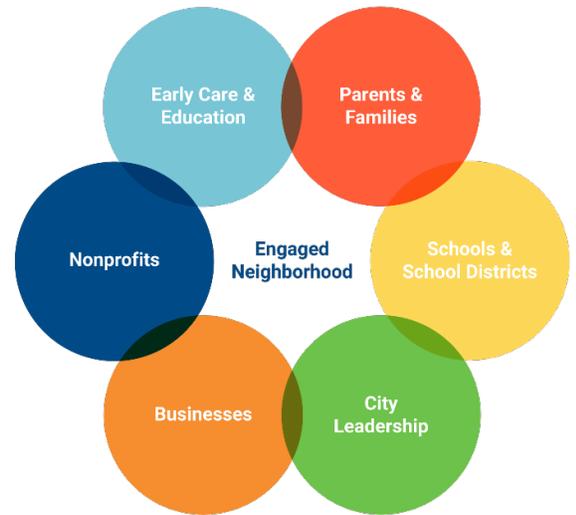


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First 5 Orange County

**Question 1:** Can you share examples of the kinds of barriers that Orange County families have confronted when they try to advocate for their children? How did this become clear to you?

- “Per conversations and experiences, one of the first challenges faced by many is **language and lack of empathy** from service providers, especially those of their own race. Although entities hire bilingual staff, written information is not in native language, and bilingual staff is limited. When they connect with someone in their own language, some feel a lack of understanding or support. The second is **limited providers open in the afternoons**. Lastly, there is a **lack of clarity on which entities can help address your challenges** and at times multiple calls need to be made to different servicers to receive support.”
  - [Benjamin Juarez](#) (Parent, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)
- “Some of the barriers . . . families face stem from: (1) **Not being aware** of the community resources within their communities; (2) If they do hear of resources, they **do not know who to contact** and solely rely on the information from friends, family, neighbors; (3) General understanding of programs and services and how the service is beneficial. Whether it's the client not understanding the information or the program's communication regarding the services, **some families may need additional support navigating resources**; and (4) Depending on the area . . . , **language** is a barrier when trying to advocate for their children.”
  - [Yolanda Alvarado](#) (Early Childhood Coordinator, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)

- “As we work with various cities, we see similar issues affecting families’ ability to grow to their fullest potential. Many families are faced with **inflated costs or unfair treatment by landlords** when [seeking] quality housing. In addition, families do not have easy **access to quality, healthy food they can afford**. Since the pandemic, it has been eye-opening to see the need for **access to the Internet, mainly wi-fi**, for not only students, but working families. During virtual learning, there were students sitting in the parking lot of McDonalds or Starbucks, in order to log into class. Another barrier has been inadequate **access to translation or interpretation of resource materials.**”
  - [Cristina Blevins + Ana Page \(Consultants to First 5 Orange County\)](#)

**Question 2:** What does Engaged Neighborhoods mean by better connecting early health and development systems? Can you give an example of how families have experienced disconnects in those systems?

- “When connecting health and development providers, . . . we can assist families [by] **outreaching to [them] in the community** and letting them know about our local resources. **Collaborating with school districts and other community partners** to ensure information is getting out there. One way that families experience disconnection is . . . **not knowing where to go to get help**; [and] . . . **not having a point of contact** that can help and guide them through the process. Currently with the pandemic, it may be harder to get a hold of someone to speak to [who can] provide general information . . .”
  - [Yolanda Alvarado \(Early Childhood Coordinator, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce\)](#)
- “When referred to an agency, there is often a **long waiting period** to receive specialized services. And when trying to access services, the **enrollment process is onerous and duplicative**. For example, after completing forms for a referral, when [the family] is invited to access the service, the application process starts all over. [This] include[s] [re-submitting] MediCal applications . . . [depending on] e length of time between referral and initial visit. . . . [Also,] **[i]nformation isn’t shared amongst systems**. When a parent has a bad experience, and shares this with other parents, it discourages them from requesting services. We might prevent the disconnect, if resource providers focus on breaking down barriers that prevent families from having easy access to resources by sharing information with each other and building positive relationships with families.
  - [Cristina Blevins + Ana Page \(Consultants to First 5 Orange County\)](#)
- “I believe one way to better connect families to health and development systems is to provide a phone number like 211 where **families can get resources over the phone or be directed to web-based platforms** for those who are technologically capable. One example of a family's experience with disconnection is the process in attempting to get an IEP [individualized education plan]. Since the [home] was in Santa Ana, the case worker assumed Santa Ana Unified was responsible when in fact it was Garden Grove Unified. By the time the process with both districts [finished], the child had aged out of the program!”
  - [Benjamin Juarez \(Parent, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce\)](#)
- “Historically, fewer Anaheim families were accessing preventive dental care for children under 5. However, over the past 10 years, our strong partnership with Healthy Smiles has ensured dental screening and referrals for all pre-kindergarten children enrolled. The program makes direct referrals and follow ups for children at their local dental clinics and **we have seen this approach [increase] access to preventive care and [promote] early dental health for children.**”
  - [Wendy Dallin, Lynda Durand + Viviana Jelinek \(Network Anaheim Manager + School Readiness Coordinators, Anaheim Learn Well\)](#)

**Question 3:** Keeping up with complicated laws and policies that impact families' rights can be challenging. If legal information and rights education was shared more systematically with parents, caregivers and the early childhood workforce in Orange County, what do you imagine might happen?

- “If families and early childhood workers were [given] policy and rights information, **children would be the ones receiving the greatest benefit**. Parents would be empowered and could possibly bring clarity to systems, especially those that need to be changed. Lastly, the more information shared, the more will trickle into the community making it more accessible.”
  - **Benjamin Juarez** (Parent, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)
- “We would see:
  - [1] [M]ore empowered parent advocates (in school and/or community).
  - [2] More individuals being curious and asking questions.
  - [3] Increased enrollment in early childhood programs.
  - [4] **Better prepared children** within the five domains of early learning.
  - [5] Collectively greater [a] discussions as a community and [b] connectedness.”
    - **Yolanda Alvarado** (Early Childhood Coordinator, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)
- “**Education, knowledge and a systematic approach is proven to increase parent and child healthcare access** in Anaheim. In 2016, only about 30% of the children who failed the vision screening were actually being seen by an [eye health professional]. In 2017, [the local school district’s] Early Childhood program established a partnership with UCI and a Mobile Eye clinic to screen, refer and schedule appointments for eye exams, for children ages 3-5. The Mobile Eye Clinic comes directly to the school and the doctor does the exam right there at school. Parents sign an authorization and attend the exam, but are not required to be there. Children are fitted for glasses in the mobile clinic. Glasses are ordered and delivered directly to the school to be distributed to families. We saw an increase in access and treatment with this program and our **numbers jumped from barely over 30% access to more than 80%** [access – in fact these children got both eye care and] FREE glasses!”
  - **Wendy Dallin, Lynda Durand + Viviana Jelinek** (Network Anaheim Manager + School Readiness Coordinators, Anaheim Learn Well)
- “[This kind of information] would need to be **to the point, transparent, and [have] great clarity**. We have seen success in **building strong relationships with families** in order to **create more trust** among community and resource providers. Educating family members could help empower them to advocate for themselves and their children.”
  - **Cristina Blevins + Ana Page** (Consultants to First 5 Orange County)



## ***Rights, Resources and the Next Generation: An Interview with Leaders from the Rhode Island Department of Health Office of Family Visiting***

Edited by [Samantha J. Morton](#) – CEO, MLPB  
February 28, 2022

### ***Background***

MLPB has convened a planning process with three partner communities invested in *Building Legal Problem-Solving Capacity in the Early Childhood Sector*, thanks to support from [The JPB Foundation](#). One of these partner communities is the [Rhode Island Department of Health Office of Family Visiting](#) – which coordinates programs through which a diverse workforce “meet[s] regularly with new or expecting parents, evaluate[s] their needs, and provide[s] tailored services to help families develop positive parent-child relationships, promote early learning and development, encourage positive health outcomes, and reduce risk.”



Building on our [first blog interview with First 5 Orange County stakeholders](#), we asked colleagues from the RIDOH Office of Family Visiting to talk with us about their perspectives on [legal information and rights education](#). Here’s what these stakeholders told us:

***Question 1:*** The Office of Family Visiting (OFV) offers a range of supports to families in the Ocean State. What are some of the barriers to health, wellbeing and flourishing that families are experiencing and sharing with you?

- “I think [one] barrier is access to interpretation services for health and mental services. Another barrier is lack of insurance for undocumented families and children. Another huge barrier is available housing, families have vouchers and income and still cannot find [apartments] that are accepting them.”  
— [Wendy Lincoln, Ma CLC](#) (HFA Supervisor at Comprehensive Community Action, Coventry, RI)
- “The social determinants of health affect overall health of families. Some areas that continue to come up are access to transportation, and not enough affordable quality housing, and easy access to affordable healthy food.”  
— [Sidra Scharff, MPH](#) (Implementation Specialist, RIDOH Office of Family Visiting)

**Question 2:** RIDOH has been a leader in spotlighting and engaging with inequities that impact families (at the household level) and neighborhoods and communities (the population level). How do you envision translating OFV's partnerships with families into broader, population-level change?

- “The pandemic has continued to shine the light on inequities for families. State-level policies need to break [down] barriers to allow better access to basic needs, [such as] quality higher education at affordable prices for all. In addition, workforce opportunities and [the] ability to expand leadership roles to individuals across SES [socio-economic status], race, and education levels, to be more inclusive of leaders that represent the communities where they may live, work or identify with.”
  - **Sidra Scharff** (Implementation Specialist, RIDOH Office of Family Visiting)
- “I would hope they can advocate for families and put pressure on health and mental health providers to offer services in other languages or the required interpretation services.”
  - **Wendy Lincoln, Ma CLC** (HFA Supervisor at Comprehensive Community Action, Coventry, RI)

**Question 3:** Keeping up with complicated laws and policies that impact families' rights can be challenging. If legal information and rights education was shared more systematically with parents, caregivers and the early childhood workforce in RI, what do you imagine might happen?

- “Families would have a better knowledge of their rights and be better able to ask for and advocate for what they need/are entitled to.”
  - **Wendy Lincoln, Ma CLC** (HFA Supervisor at Comprehensive Community Action, Coventry, RI)
- “Families would be able to advocate for themselves and their rights more easily, as long as the information was provided [at] the correct reading level for all families.”
  - **Sidra Scharff** (Implementation Specialist, RIDOH Office of Family Visiting)



## Rights, Resources, and the Next Generation: An Interview with Smart from the Start



Edited by [Samantha J. Morton](#) – CEO, MLPB  
March 29, 2022

### Background

MLPB has convened a planning process with 3 partner communities invested in *Building Legal Problem-Solving Capacity in the Early Childhood Sector*, thanks to support from [The JPB Foundation](#). One of these partner communities is [Smart from the Start](#) – a trauma-informed, multi-generational family support and community engagement organization with a mission to promote the healthy development of young children and families living in the most underserved communities of Boston and Washington D.C.

This blog interview series elevates perspectives on [legal information and rights education](#) from our partners. Our first interview was with [First 5 Orange County stakeholders](#), and the second interview was with [colleagues from the RIDOH Office of Family Visiting](#).

Here’s our interview with Smart from the Start parent-leaders **Dounia Belmir and Erin Connors** – alongside “echoes” of their valuable thinking from CA and RI stakeholders interviewed earlier in this series:



Erin Connors (left) with her son Daniel, and Dounia Belmir (right) with her son JJ

**Question 1:** Smart is not your typical "early childhood program." What makes its work in communities in Boston and Washington, D.C. so unique?

- “The staff at Smart are unique because they **genuinely care** about the families they work with. Whether it be because they have lived similar lives[,] or they see the potential in us that we have yet to discover. Not only do **they see our potential**, but **they help us set goals and reach to attain, said potential.**”
  - [Dounia Belmir](#), Smart from the Start parent-leader
- “Smart is definitely not your typical program. They are the type of people who **stick by you when things are tough**. Smart doesn’t just give you a resource and say ‘here you go’, they **see the process through**. They are always there to support their families, whether it’s help with IEPs or . . . mental health [support] or more.”
  - [Erin Connors](#), Smart from the Start parent-leader

An “echo” from Orange County, CA of these reflections on  
the importance of a relationship of caring and trust:

- “Per conversations and experiences, one of the first challenges faced by many is **language and lack of empathy** from service providers, especially those of their own race. Although entities hire bilingual staff, written information is not in native language, and bilingual staff is limited. When they connect with someone in their own language, some feel a lack of understanding or support. . . .
  - **Benjamin Juarez** (Parent, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)

**Question 2:** Do you see legal information and rights education as an important ingredient in healthy and flourishing communities? If so, why? If not, what other tools are on your mind right now?

- “I do see legal information and rights education as an important factor in creating healthy communities. As a community we should be able to have access to legal information for [day-to-day] situations. Not everyone is aware of their rights, [and] some families . . . are not aware of resources for legal information. **These resources can save families from being illegally separated, evicted, jailed or even deported.**”
  - **Dounia Belmir**, Smart from the Start parent-leader
- “Families need to know what can be done to prevent uncomfortable situations, such as **eviction, [child welfare authority] involvement, family separation** and more. Not every family is aware of their rights and resources in every community.”
  - **Erin Connors**, Smart from the Start parent-leader

An “echo” from Orange County, CA about the  
very high stakes people are navigating with without sufficient information

- “Some of the barriers . . . families face stem from: (1) **Not being aware** of the community resources within their communities; (2) If they do hear of resources, they **do not know who to contact** and solely rely on the information from friends, family, neighbors; (3) General understanding of programs and services and how the service is beneficial. Whether it’s the client not understanding the information or the program’s communication regarding the services, **some families may need additional support navigating resources**; and (4) Depending on the area . . . , **language** is a barrier when trying to advocate for their children.
  - **Yolanda Alvarado** (Early Childhood Coordinator, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)

**Question 3:** One aspect of civil rights work is holding systems accountable for the commitments they've made to individuals, families and communities. Another aspect is raising the bar on what those commitments to people are. And there are many more dimensions of course. What barrier to family health and flourishing in our country are you most concerned about right now?

- “The barrier to family health and flourishing that I am concerned with is **rights and equality. Every family deserves to be treated with care and respect.** There are families being ripped apart because of **racial injustice, immigration status, wealth [gaps]** and so much more **unfairness.** The only way to create flourishing communities is by having families . . . create said communities. **We can’t have families if we tear them apart.**”
  - **Dounia Belmir**, Smart from the Start parent-leader

- “The barriers I am most concerned about are **special education . . . , housing, [child welfare authorities] and their involvement in families, and the racial barriers in schools.** All of these factors are impacting my family and families . . . in my community.”
  - [Erin Connors, Smart from the Start parent-leader](#)

An “echo” from Rhode Island regarding  
**fundamental challenges to family unity and thriving communities**

- “The pandemic has continued to shine the light on inequities for families. State-level policies need to break [down] barriers to allow better access to basic needs, [such as] quality higher education at affordable prices for all. In addition, workforce opportunities and [the] ability to expand leadership roles to individuals across SES [socio-economic status], race, and education levels, to be more inclusive of leaders that represent the communities where they may live, work or identify with.”
  - [Sidra Scharff \(Implementation Specialist, RIDOH Office of Family Visiting\)](#)



## About MLPB

Care should systemically account for people’s legal rights, risks and remedies; and empower care teams as strengths-based, role-aligned partners in problem-solving.

MLPB equips communities of care with legal education and problem-solving insight that fosters prevention, health equity and human-centered system change. Through training, consultation and technical assistance — our *team-facing legal partnering* framework — we help teams and organizations better connect people and populations to the resources and legal protections they seek.