

PIC Series for Web

PIONEERING PEDIATRIC INTEGRATED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND PRIMARY CARE

A multi-part series to learn alongside Palm Beach County pediatricians, community partners, and parents.

The Palm Beach County Pediatric Integrated Care Project (PIC) is a collaborative physician, parent/caregiver, provider, and youth-serving system workgroup committed to integrating behavioral health into pediatric care and contributing to Florida wide efforts to expand comprehensive care for all children, especially the underserved.

Far from integrated today, children's mental health care is isolated from primary care in practice and in insurance payment. Families face their own isolation as parents feel alone in their struggle to find help as they encounter lengthy wait lists and barrier after barrier to care in the face of skyrocketing rates of childhood depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

PIC, guided by two Palm Beach County physicians, Dr. Shannon Fox-Levine and Dr. Tommy Schechtman, is a bright light offering immediate, innovative solutions to meet the needs of county children and youth. We invite you to follow The Well of PBC's "Pioneering Pediatric Integrated Behavioral Health and Primary Care" series as we share the stories of how our community is uniting to provide holistic treatment for our children.

We invite you to read our "Pioneering Pediatric Integrated Behavioral Health and Primary Care" series as we share the stories of how our community is uniting to provide holistic treatment for our children.

Part 1: The Vision for the Road Ahead

What should a mental health system of care look like for a child?

If you ask pediatrician Dr. Shannon Fox-Levine, she will tell you, "It should be no different than if a child has a physical condition, such as asthma. We know our patients from the beginning of their lives and have the capability to serve as the hub for their comprehensive care, consulting, collaborating, and communicating with psychiatrists, school mental health professionals, and especially parents who know their children best, as a village of care."

Primary care physicians, mental health nonprofits, and systems leaders have converged and diverged on the best way to come together, encountering obstacles at every turn, but never losing sight of what was possible.

“There are pediatrician practices and community children’s mental health champions who have held onto the vision for decades, working together to overcome what have often felt like impossible barriers to care—lack of insurance coverage, mental health professional shortages, and spiking mental health needs made worse by the pandemic,” said Lauren Zuchman, BeWellPBC executive director. “Now the vision is in focus and Palm Beach County is grabbing onto this moment, inviting more partners to come together and take action, with pediatricians as first responders in a comprehensive system of care.”

Renée Layman, president and CEO of the Center for Child Counseling, has been a passionate advocate and major partner in the county helping move from talk to action.

“It’s been such a relief to get through that hard and messy middle where there was distrust between the systems and we had to have really hard conversations to make things right,” she said. “Now we have more trusting, open relationships, and we’re collaborating on data and outcomes for patients. That’s huge.”

Since 2010, Layman and Dr. Fox have been building the relationship between their two organizations and a model for a closed-loop referral system to treat the whole child as an example for the rest of the county.

Together, Dr. Fox, Layman, and Zuchman, along with more than 35—and growing—PIC individuals, organizations and entities, are on a mission to identify challenges and opportunities for pediatric practices, address specific systemic barriers to integrated care, and document standard of care guidelines that are scalable for other practices to learn from and follow.

Momentum is on their side. Multiple initiatives are converging to bring the vision to fruition, including:

- The Florida Department of Health Children’s Medical Services (CMS) invited PIC partners BeWellPBC, Florida Atlantic University, and Southeast Florida Behavioral Health Network, to develop a local behavioral health hub/Pediatric Behavioral Health Collaborative site as part of a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 5-year grant and an expansion of original statewide efforts.
- The PIC Parent Advisory Council is providing insights and influence to pediatricians and partners while offering support to caregivers based on their lived experiences.

- The Palm Beach Pediatric Society is preparing to relaunch with pediatric integrated care as its central focus.

For Sherrah Hill-Lavin, a mother of six children and a member of the project's Parent Advisory Council with her husband Brandon, PIC is coming into focus for her as well. "We're hoping the outcome from this project is that the process is streamlined and mandated across the state of Florida for every child to get the proper mental health services."

SIDEBAR:

Studies show that 75% of children under age 18 present to primary care for psychiatric needs, and 50% of primary care visits are related to psychosocial, emotional, and behavioral concerns.

Originally published in The Well of PBC October/November 2024

PART 2: Building a Continuum of Care

In Part 1 of our series, we closed with words from Sherrah Hill-Lavin, a mother of six children and a member of the project's Parent Advisory Council with her husband Brandon: "We're hoping the outcome from this project is that the process is streamlined and mandated across the state of Florida for every child to get the proper mental health services."

To realize Sherrah's vision, PIC is concentrating on five integrated focus areas:

1. Provider Communication – Streamlining solutions for connecting youth to care and follow-up across partners (pediatricians, behavioral health providers, school district, hospitals, etc.) serving patients.
2. Policy & Procedure – Key areas for policy and procedure to address.
3. Standard of Care/Research – Palm Beach County partner best practices within a pediatric integrated continuum of care; capturing progress and impact.
4. Consultation/Community of Practice – New opportunities for psychiatric consultation for local pediatricians and physicians; creating a community of practice for pediatricians, physicians, practice staff, and behavioral health providers to explore best practices, offer trainings, network, provide each other support, etc.
5. Parent Advisory Council – Parent/caregiver group offering perspective and experience/feedback about care for youth and families.

At PIC's October 2024 workgroup meeting, PIC partners came together to share progress and the promise for building a child and youth integrated continuum of care in Palm Beach County.

CLOSING THE GAPS

It's no wonder that provider communication is a focus area. Parents like Nancy Alexander have struggled to find an integrated system of care—through doctor's offices, the school system, and psychiatrists offices—for her daughter who is now an adult. What she found in years past was a frustrating, broken system where parents and children felt helpless and alone. "You can't let them fall through the cracks," she said.

PIC partners are identifying the cracks and creating synergies so parents today don't experience Nancy's pain and frustration over the many years it took to find her daughter appropriate care. As one example, Alpert Jewish Family Service suggests focusing on the "parent gap," the place between caregiver understanding of mental health and knowing how to best advocate for their children. This takes systems and providers supporting parents, not blaming them, and creating those opportunities for learning.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), founded by parents, SURVEY RESULTS is one organization aiming to foster a community where parents and caregivers can learn, connect, and lead the way in improving mental health outcomes for youth and families. The NAMI Palm Beach County chapter offers a comprehensive lecture series, providing essential information and resources for professionals, families, and those impacted by behavioral health conditions to learn alongside each other, free of charge. Parent voice in informing systems is critical, according to Katherine Murphy, CEO. "At NAMI Palm Beach County, we recognize the vital role that parents and caregivers play in the mental health journey of their loved ones," she said. "Their presence and active involvement are crucial in advocating for better care and support."

Another idea offered by PIC partner, Alpert Jewish Family Service, is providing training to caregivers through their pediatrician offices. According to Elaine Rotenberg, Ph.D., Chief Clinical and Impact Officer at Alpert JFS, "we would welcome the opportunity to partner with pediatric practices to create a seamless opportunity for parents to take Youth Mental Health First Aid, a training helping to normalize and reduce the stigma that is too often associated with mental illnesses, and create a population of parents who are able to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges that might respond well to treatment and enhance the quality of life for that child and family."

ADVANCING INTEGRATED CARE

Youth mental health access to the care system isn't just a concern for caregivers. Palm Beach County pediatricians surveyed by BeWellPBC/Florida Atlantic University reported challenges understanding and tackling behavioral health care for their patients, too. Workgroup members shared just a few current solutions for educating pediatricians together with behavioral health providers to better serve parents and children in an integrated approach.

- At HCA Florida JFK North Hospital, a new generation of physicians—28 graduate medical residents—are actively involved in the treatment of patients, seeking to increase communication with pediatricians and providers.
- FoundCare, a Federally Qualified Health Center, is embedding therapists and care coordinators, responsible for making sure a child is connected to everything they need for their mental health, to work alongside their medical staff.
- Health Care District of Palm Beach County will open their flagship clinic in November, offering physical and dental care with psychiatry and therapeutic services on site for youth and adults.

As PIC partners continue their work, they are learning where all the pieces of the system can seamlessly come together, offering care and comfort to people like Nancy and her daughter. “The puzzle is there's got to be somewhere for people to get help if they need it.”

SIDEBAR:

Survey Results

Beginning in summer 2023, BeWellPBC with the help of Florida Atlantic University researchers launched the Pediatric Integrated Care Behavioral Health Services Questionnaire for Palm Beach County pediatric practices to capture their integrated care workflow, successes, and challenges.

Initial key findings:

1. The majority (63%) of respondents said between 40% and 100% of their patients present with behavioral health concerns.
2. Half of the practices surveyed offer some level of behavioral health services starting with behavioral health screenings up to medication management and therapeutic support.
3. The majority of respondents (58%) agree to strongly agree they are interested in increasing behavioral health integration at their practice.
4. Practices want easier access to behavioral health care for their patients.

5. Accessibility, affordability, long wait times are cited by pediatricians as greatest barriers to care.

6. Less than half of the practices felt their doctors and staff had adequate behavioral health training.

7. 74% reported great interest in training, support, and learning alongside other practices.

Originally published in The Well of PBC December/January 2025

Part 3:

In Part 2 of our series, we highlighted a few ideas and programs offered by PIC partners locally. With a promise to do better for children and youth in Palm Beach County, PIC understands even more support is needed to fill the gaps left wide open by the current system.

Nancy Alexander, a parent, was quoted in the article putting out a challenge to partners: “There has to be somewhere (all) people can go for services.” Nancy is an important voice powering our understanding of what children, youth, and families need in our county. As a member of the Pediatric Integrated Care Parent Advisory Council (PICPAC), Nancy joins additional caregivers meeting regularly and also participates in PIC workgroup activities to guide new PIC opportunities, explore resources for families, and offer insights on seeking assistance for children from primary doctors and linking to the best mental health care. PICPAC members are integral to the PIC process, inspiring providers to think about the parent perspective and how to support caregivers as they receive help for their children.

Sherrah Hill-Lavin, another PICPAC member, shares, “we are providing feedback and we're bringing our expertise. A lot of times there are pediatricians and policymakers and people making changes for our kids who are not parents, so we're bringing our lived experiences about what's happening around mental health in the pediatric sector.”

Sherrah adds, “We need to make sure there is access for parents, but also for kids too, because a lot of times we don't get it right. We all need to work together and include everyone in the process—the child, the parent and the provider.”

With PICPAC leading out to fit the system to our community's needs, local pediatricians are also raising their flag to stress the need for increasing their skills and practice capacity to support “the right” behavioral health care for their patients and families.

A vital space for physician support is The Palm Beach Pediatric Society, a membership-based organization of pediatricians, pediatric subspecialists, and pediatric ancillary service providers in Palm Beach County for over three decades. In 2024, the society was

revitalized in partnership with the Center for Child Counseling's Lead the Fight series after a hiatus due to the limitations to meeting during the pandemic. As part of the transition, Susie Graham passed the baton of society director after her 30 years of leadership to Renée Layman, Center for Child Counseling President and CEO. In the next year, the society will return to three meetings a year providing CME/ CEU educational sessions taught by our local experts. The year will culminate in a resource fair showcasing the numerous resources we have in our community for our children and teens. It has been 10 years since the last event of this magnitude but it will be back due to popular demand.

As a next step in support of the refreshed society and with PICPAC direction, BeWellPBC and the PIC Workgroup are creating a regular newsletter for pediatric and family practices to receive information about services and supports, parent/caregiver tips and tools, and upcoming trainings and events throughout Palm Beach County.

With all of these developing pathways and more to be shared as this series continues, the Palm Beach County Pediatric Integrated Care Project is determined to effectively supply a continuum of integrated care, giving Sherrah the hope that, “parents can rest assured that they're going to get the proper mental health services for their kids.”

Coming Soon

The next parts of the PIC series will continue in [The Well of PBC](#). You may also check back here as we update the series on BeWellPBC.