Accelerating Brain Science Research through the Nonprofit/Non-Governmental Human Serving Sector

Advancing Systems Change and Influencing Policy

Alliance for Strong Families and Communities
Norlien Foundation
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Request for Applications for Participation in the Brain Science Cohort
United States & Alberta, Canada

Letters of Intent Release Date: April 3, 2015
Letters of Intent Due Date: April 20, 2015
Full Application Due Date: May 15, 2015
Project Overview: The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities and the Norlien Foundation with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seeks to identify a two country cohort (10 sites in the United States and 5 sites in Alberta, Canada) of nonprofit/non-governmental, human serving organizations committed to transforming their capacity to accelerate the integration and application of brain science within their organizations, their communities, and the public sector systems in which they work. A participatory and developmental evaluation will be conducted to measure the effectiveness of systems transformation and accelerating peer learning through a cohort model.

Timeline:

- Technical Assistance Call #1 (LOI Phase)........ April 10, 2015
- Letters of Intent Due.......................... April 20, 2015
- Notification to Advance in Application Process... April 27, 2015
- Technical Assistance Call #2 (Full Application)... May 6, 2015
- Full Application Due Date........................ May 15, 2015
- Follow-up on Applications as Needed............. June 8-10, 2015
- Cohort Sites Notified............................. June 12, 2015
- Cohort Period.................................... July 1, 2015-June 30, 2017
- First Cohort Convening (TBD)...................... July 6-10, 2015
- Second Cohort Convening (Alberta, Canada)..... October 19-21, 2015

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1. Project Overview

1.1 Introduction

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study and related research on toxic stress during childhood has provided significant evidence to support associations between childhood adversity and adult chronic disease, high-risk health behaviors, mental health problems, and early death. ACEs have been associated with many physical health issues including asthma, cancer, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), diabetes and premature death. Individuals reporting ACEs are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking, substance use, and sexual promiscuity, all of which can lead to deleterious physical and mental health outcomes. A similar line of research suggests that changes in brain architecture, resulting from prolonged exposure to toxic stress in childhood, have profound effects on how an individual adapts, including delays in the development of adult capabilities and inability to attach to the workforce. ACEs, toxic stress, and the resulting negative and physical and mental health outcomes have become the leading determinant of public health spending in the United States.

1.2 Background

The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, with support from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, the Norlien Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has engaged in a rigorous process to develop strategies which demonstrate how the nonprofit/non-governmental sector can play a larger systems influencing role. In October 2013, the Alliance hosted a full-day session to discuss the creation of a two-country network of organizations willing to transform themselves through the integration of new scientific knowledge into organizational culture and leadership. Designed as a follow-up to a workshop on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study presented by the Alliance in 2012, the 2013 session, “Accelerating Science through the Community Sector,” was attended by nearly 50 nonprofit human serving organizations in the U.S. and Canada who were committed to think deeper about adverse childhood experiences as the root causes of adult health and social issues (presentations from the organizations at this event).

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1 An ACE is a potentially traumatic experience, which occurs prior to the age of 18, such as child physical or sexual abuse, having a household member who was incarcerated, mentally ill, or who abused drugs or alcohol, or exposure to domestic violence or parental divorce.


conference can be viewed here). Representatives attending the 2013 session were encouraged to examine and identify effective strategies to accelerate the alignment of science into practice, policy, regulatory and fiscal approaches that can influence their ability to be successful within their agencies, and at the larger community and societal level. From a framework for shared organizational learning and transformation around governance, administration, innovation, program alignment, distributive leadership, community education and advocacy, several members of the Alliance and organizations in Alberta have already begun infusing brain science into their practice and policy influencing work. The activities conceptualized for this project are designed to further push out knowledge about brain science, and identify, share and begin to scale best practice models to integrate brain science across the systems that interface with children and families. This project is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Norlien Foundation.

1.3 Alliance for Strong Families and Communities
The Alliance (www.alliance1.org) is a national organization dedicated to achieving a vision of a healthy society and strong communities for all children, adults and families. With a membership network of nearly 450 nonprofit human serving organizations located in North America, the Alliance works for transformational change by representing and supporting this system to translate knowledge into best practices that improve their communities. The Alliance strives to achieve genuine impact by working with and through its member network to decrease the number of people living in poverty, increase the number of people living safe and healthy lives, and put more people onto pathways for educational and employment success.

1.4 The Norlien Foundation
The Norlien Foundation (http://www.norlien.org/) is a proactive private foundation with offices in Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta. The Foundation is active in knowledge translation and mobilization, professional development and training, applied research, evaluation and networking. The Norlien Foundation established the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (AFWI) in 2007. AFWI (http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/) aims to mobilize and connect synthesized scientific research about early brain and biological development (i.e. brain science) to better understand how experiences in children’s lives as they grow and develop impact on their health throughout life, in particular on mental health and addiction. Since its inception, the AFWI has funded and initiated a multitude of activities in early childhood development, mental health and addiction meant to ultimately bring about positive change in policy, programs and practice for the benefit of children and families.
1.5 Statement of Need

As research and science evolve and expand, so should practice, policy, regulatory and fiscal systems. However, often times, new practice will not change to scale and the levers of policy, regulatory and fiscal alignment to empirical science is slow to respond limiting comprehensive systems change from occurring. Our collective work with nonprofit/non-governmental organizations suggests that one of the biggest barriers to integrating emerging research into the DNA of organizations and systems is the lack of capacity organizations have to convert new knowledge into organizational practice, systems, and advocacy. Faced with funding pressures, the nuances and intricacies of inter-organizational relationships, growing accountability demands, and the management of multi-dimensional organizational structures, the nonprofit/non-governmental organization is increasingly challenged to attend to innovation and systems influence and to ensure that strategy is aligned and executed consistently across all aspects of the organization and throughout the larger systems context. A specific barrier to the adoption of brain science into practice, policies, regulatory and fiscal systems has been the lack of an integrated, cohesive approach for studying and translating research across the social ecological model. To address those challenges, the Alliance and Norlien Foundation will be using a cohort model that offers CEOs and other key staff a focused, peer-learning and peer reinforcement opportunity to identify and share challenges in pursuing innovation; to discuss effective strategies to overcome those challenges; to facilitate the integration of new knowledge, practice and policy throughout the organization's leadership, staff and culture; and to transform the systems which fund and support nonprofit work. To realize this transformation, a partnership has been created between the Alliance and the Norlien Foundation to develop and implement a cohort experience that will include U.S. and Alberta (Canada) agencies coming together to learn, engage in R&D, and take steps to integrate brain science into their work, organizational culture, and advocacy.

1.6 Project Purpose and Objectives

The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities and the Norlien Foundation are committed to advancing efforts to create a culture of health in all communities by engaging nonprofit/non-governmental organizations willing to transform themselves through the integration of emerging brain science and to capitalize on the larger systems influencing role of the sector. Framed by an overall goal to infuse, align and accelerate brain science research into nonprofit/non-governmental agency practice, policy, and systems across the social ecology, the primary purpose of this three year project is to identify, support and evaluate the processes that 15 agencies in the U.S. and Alberta,
Canada will use to align the science across their organizations and influence systems to impact outcomes across the life course. Through this work we aim to advance a culture of health by focusing on the following overarching goals:

1. Promote and support healthy brain development at the two critical brain growth stages (the early years and puberty).
2. Reduce adversity and enhance resiliency at the individual, community and societal levels.
3. Enhance the capacity of individuals, neighborhoods and communities to prosper and contribute to society through a greater emphasis on health and wellbeing.

The agencies selected to participate in the cohort will address the following goals at the organization level and as a collective of agencies in the cohort:

4. Accelerate the integration of brain science within organizations, communities, and the public sector systems in which agencies work to advance policy, regulatory and fiscal changes.
5. Elevate the unique role of the nonprofit/non-governmental human serving sector as community leaders, educators and advocates in systems transformation.
6. Leverage the collective impact of the cohort to influence policy change in national and international systems.

2 Cohort Site Application Process

2.1 Cohort Description

Ten U.S. and five Canadian sites in Alberta will be selected through a competitive process based on their proposed work to infuse, align and accelerate the application of brain science through ultimate policy shifts that advance real systems change. Each agency will comprise the two country cohort and will participate as a collective in peer learning opportunities through in person convenings and webinars. During the duration of the initiative, selected cohort sites will receive financial support totaling $50,000; access to expert faculty-led workshops and webinars; a library of relevant research studies and papers; training and coaching from FrameWorks Institute on strategic communications; and consultation and technical assistance in developing a theory of change and measurement systems from an independent evaluation team. A participatory and developmental evaluation will be conducted to measure the effectiveness of accelerating learning through a peer network using a cohort model and creating sustainable systems change. Successful applicants will be contracted by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities for work in the U.S. (10 Alliance member agencies) and separately with the Norlien Foundation (5 non-governmental organizations) in Alberta, Canada.
2.2 Cohort Eligibility Criteria
Agencies must answer all the questions in the “Eligibility Criteria” section of MyRWJF. We are looking to select agencies and organizations that respond favorably to each of the questions.

2.3 Application Timeline
- April 3, 2015: Letters of Intent Release Date
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- May 6, 2015: Technical Assistance Call #2 (Full Application Phase)
- May 15, 2015: Cohort Site Applications Due
- June 8-10, 2015: Follow-up on Applications as Needed
- June 12, 2015: Cohort Sites Notified
- July 1, 2015: Beginning of Cohort Period
- July 6-10, 2015: First Convening of Cohort Sites (TBD)
- October 19-21, 2015: Second Convening of Cohort Sites (Alberta, Canada)
- June 30, 2017: Cohort Period Ends

3 Supporting Information
3.1 Frequently Asked Questions and Technical Assistance Sessions
A list of commonly asked questions with answers will be available on the Alliance and Norlien websites in order to ensure fair and equal access to information during the application process. Reviewing the Frequently Asked Questions document on a regular basis will be beneficial. Additionally, the Alliance and Norlien Foundation will offer two technical assistance webinars (April 10 and May 6). The webinars will provide additional clarification regarding the application process. Details regarding the technical assistance webinars will be posted on the Alliance and Norlien websites and on MyRWJF. A recording of the webinars will also be available through the Alliance and Norlien websites for those who are not able to participate.

3.2 Contact
For questions, please contact:
U.S. Sites:
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3.3 Feedback to Applicants
Staff from the Alliance and Norlien Foundation will thoroughly review each Letter of Intent. Due to the anticipated high level of interest in this opportunity, neither the Alliance nor The Norlien Foundation will be able to provide comments or feedback on the Letters of Intent.

3.4 Definitions
The Core Story of Brain Development – Brain science is the branch of neuroscience concerned with the brain. According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child:
http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/briefs/inbrief_series/
  • The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood (brain architecture).
  • Brains are built from the bottom up: basic circuits lay the foundation for more complex circuits and behaviors that follow (skill begets skill).
  • Interaction between genes and experience shapes the developing brain, and relationships are the active ingredient in this serve and return process (serve and return).
  • Executive function skills help us plan for the future, reason, focus, solve problems, and use information in new and complex ways. These skills can be taught and should be geared up in children as early as possible (air traffic control).
  • Cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined: learning and behavior are inter-related with physical and mental health over the life course (can’t do one without the other).
  • Toxic stress damages the developing brain and leads to problems in learning and behavior and to increased susceptibility to poor physical and mental health over time (toxic stress).
  • Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decreases as we mature: getting it right early is easier and less costly to society and individuals than trying to fix it later.
**Culture of Health** – A key platform of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, building a culture of health includes: “1) good health flourishes across geographic, demographic and social sectors; 2) attaining the best health possible is valued by our entire society; 3) individuals and families have the means and opportunity to make choices that lead to the healthiest lives possible; 4) business, government, individuals and organizations work together to build healthy communities and lifestyles; 5) everyone has access to affordable, quality health care because it is essential to maintain, or reclaim health; 6) no one is excluded; 7) health care is efficient and equitable; 8) the economy is less burdened by excessive and unwarranted health care spending; 9) keeping everyone as healthy as possible guides public and private decision-making; and 10) we understand we are all in this together.”

**Developmental Evaluation** – “supports innovative development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments” (Michael Quinn Patton).

**Systems Change** – According to Foster-Fishman, “a system is a collection of components that interact with one another to function as a whole. Systems change is a shift in the way that a community makes decisions about policies, programs, and the allocation of its resources.” Examples of systems that are changing based on brain science research are Alberta, Canada (http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/initiative/alberta-solutions), The Center for Youth Wellness (http://www.centerforyouthwellness.org/) The Health Federation of Philadelphia, Philadelphia ACEs Project (http://www.healthfederation.org/portfolio/philadelphia-ace-project/) and Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, Washington (http://acestoohigh.com/2012/04/23/lincoln-high-school-in-walla-walla-wa-tries-new-approach-to-school-discipline-expulsions-drop-85/).

**Theory of Change** – According to the Center for Theory of Change, the theory of change “is a specific and measurable description of a social change initiative that forms the basis for strategic planning and evaluation.”

3.5 **Resources**
ACE Study
http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html

ACEs Too High
http://acestoohigh.com/

Alberta Family Wellness Initiative
http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/
- Sharing the Brain Story: The AFWI’s Knowledge Mobilization Strategy

Alliance for Strong Families and Communities
- Resources on Brain Science and ACEs
  [http://www.alliance1.org/alliance/BrainScienceResources](http://www.alliance1.org/alliance/BrainScienceResources)

Canadian Medical Association
Early Childhood Development CMA Position Statement

Center for Theory of Change

Center on the Developing Child
[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/)
- Logic Model for Driving Science-Based Innovation in Policy & Practice

Developmental Evaluation
- Michael Quinn Patton
- Kathy Brennan

Foundation for Healthy Generations
ACEs Learning Institute

FrameWorks Institute

National Public Radio Series “What Shapes Health”
National Scientific Council on the Developing Child
http://developingchild.harvard.edu/activities/council/about_the_council/#CouncilHistory

Raising of America
http://raisingofamerica.org/

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Culture of Health

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
Early Childhood Development Royal College Position Statement

Social Ecological Model

Society for Research in Child Development
http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/spr_28_1_final.pdf

Stanford Social Innovation Review
The Dawn of System Leadership
http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership

University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute & the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
County Health Rankings
http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/