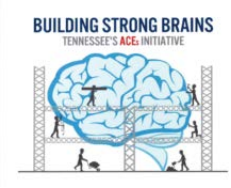


***BUILDING STRONG BRAINS: TENNESSEE ACEs INITIATIVE* – AN OVERVIEW**

Overview: The future prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. The early years of life matter because the basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built, establishing either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows.

As the latest brain science shows, chronic trauma—what experts call "adverse childhood experiences," or "ACEs"—can disrupt this brain-building process. Like building a house in a storm or with below-grade materials and tools, ACEs are toxic to brain development and can compromise the brain's structural integrity. Left unaddressed, ACEs and their effects make it more difficult for a child to succeed in school, live a healthy life, and contribute to the state's future prosperity—our communities, our workforce, and our civic life. At present, public policy and practice lag behind the brain science. That is why Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, First Lady Crissy Haslam, Deputy Gov. Jim Henry, and the ACE Awareness Foundation in Memphis launched the Tennessee ACEs Initiative in November 2015.

What we strive to accomplish: The *Building Strong Brains: Tennessee ACEs Initiative* has set the bar high. Over the next three years this initiative, working under the auspices of the Three Branches Institute and guided by an ACE coordinating team will strive to:

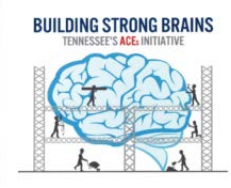
- Establish Tennessee as a national model for how a state can promote culture change in early childhood based on a philosophy that a focus on ACEs and how to prevent and mitigate their impact is the most promising approach to helping Tennessee children lead productive, healthy lives and ensure the future prosperity of the state.
- Encourage government and private organizations to revise their policies and create innovative practices focused on ways to strengthen the social and emotional health of families, reduce the impact of toxic stress on young children, and take steps to ensure Tennessee children have safe, stable, nurturing environments. In short, we need to move away from after-the-fact interventions that do not consider the social contexts affecting people's outcomes and move toward effective service-delivery approaches that do. The culture must shift from "what is wrong with you" to "what happened to you?"
- Enhance Tennesseans' knowledge about the latest brain science related to childhood adversity so people across the state can talk with authority and accuracy about ACEs and toxic stress and understand the need to address these issues to improve outcomes.
- Embed sufficient political, governmental, philanthropic and private support for this culture change effort so state agencies, local communities and those concerned about future generations of Tennesseans will have the resources needed in the years ahead to continue to build on this ACE prevention/mitigation approach.
- Enable innovation in both the public and private realms to help communities develop ACE-prevention/mitigation plans that both strengthen the core capabilities of children, parents/caregivers, and

neighborhoods and also successfully address the impacts of violent, threatening, or unpredictable environments.

- Effect positive changes more quickly by encouraging state agencies, health care organizations, social service programs and other partners to work collaboratively on research and development of projects and approaches that mitigate ACEs/toxic stress and build resilience and hope into the lives of future generations.

A final word: The importance of making this pivot from after-the-fact treatment toward early ACE intervention/prevention is difficult to overstate. The journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics puts it this way:

> *Advances in the study of **toxic stress represent a paradigm shift** in our understanding of health across the human lifespan. Although debates about early childhood policy today focus almost entirely on education objectives, science now indicates that sound investment in interventions that reduce toxic stress and childhood adversity are likely to strengthen the foundation of physical and mental health and **generate even larger returns for all of society.***



MISSION AND GOALS OF *BUILDING STRONG BRAINS: TENNESSEE ACEs INITIATIVE*

Mission: In order to secure our state's social and economic prosperity, now and in the future, *Building Strong Brains: Tennessee ACEs Initiative* works to change the culture of Tennessee so the state's overarching early childhood philosophy, policies, programs and practices utilize the latest brain science to prevent and mitigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences. The Tennessee ACEs Initiative includes public and private sector partners from across the state. The partners will work collaboratively to identify breakthrough approaches to help communities provide safe, stable, nurturing environments where children can develop the social, emotional and behavioral skills they need to secure long-term health, succeed in school and in life, and contribute to our shared future.

Approach: *Building Strong Brains: Tennessee ACEs Initiative* is a public-private partnership among the state of Tennessee, the ACE Awareness Foundation, and a growing list of partners across the state. All partners are committed to creating a new culture in Tennessee that focuses on preventing ACEs and toxic stress from damaging future generations and harming the state's prosperity. The partners may intersect with the Tennessee ACEs Initiative statewide at four different levels:

- Development or refinement of an ACE prevention philosophy to guide the organization or agency;
- Formation of new policies and funding priorities that focus more resources on the prevention and mitigation of ACEs;
- Adaptation or refinement of existing programs and services to reflect a greater focus on prevention and mitigation of ACEs and ACE-related toxic stress;
- Changes in day-to-day professional practices that are informed and guided by ACE awareness and prevention.

Goals of the Initiative: In each of these four domains, the *Building Strong Brains: Tennessee ACEs Initiative* will work with agencies, community leaders, and service providers to align their philosophy, policies, programs and practice to address the following goals:

Goal 1 – Increase the potential that every child born in Tennessee has the opportunity to lead a healthy, productive life. This is good public policy and good for the future prosperity of the state.

Goal 2 – Raise public knowledge about ACEs. This means building a knowledge mobilization movement around early childhood brain development. With the help of the FrameWorks Institute, an international leader in knowledge mobilization and how to communicate complex issues in ways that everyone can understand, the initiative will train leaders in all sectors about ACEs, brain architecture and why addressing these issues is critical to the future of Tennessee. This knowledge mobilization means developing a common understanding about early childhood through a shared, up-to-date, clear storyline based on science: *(3 examples)*

- The architecture of a young child's brain is shaped by the interaction between genes and experiences, and this can have either a positive or a negative result;
- Science makes it clear Adverse Childhood Experiences negatively impact the architecture of the developing brain.
- Children thrive in a safe, stable, nurturing environment of supportive families, caregivers, neighborhoods and communities.

Goal 3 – Impact public policy in Tennessee to support prevention of ACEs and to reduce community conditions that contribute to them. This means more government agencies, social services, health care providers, insurance companies, private businesses, community organizations and philanthropy shifting resources to a prevention and early intervention approach that addresses ACEs/toxic stress. State agencies will focus internal discussions on needed policy reforms over the life of this project. The University of Memphis Law School will be a resource for all partners to help define this public policy shift through an ACE Policy Lab.

Goal 4 – Support innovative local and state projects that offer fresh thinking and precise measurement of impact in addressing ACEs and toxic stress in children. In 2016, the Tennessee legislature approved $1 million to support ACE prevention- and treatment-related activities. Under the guidance of the Three Branches Institute, the *Building Strong Brains: Tennessee ACEs Initiative* coordinating team will oversee allocations of these funds and has developed a checklist of criteria for assessing proposals requesting funding.

Goal 5 – Seek sustainable funding to ensure the state maintains a long-term commitment to reduce the impact of adverse childhood experiences. This sustainability strategy begins with encouraging governments and philanthropy to shift existing resources to ACE-related interventions. The sustainability plan also will seek to develop new funding mechanisms.

Goal 6 – Embrace open, responsive governance through the Three Branches Institute (3BI) and statewide planning groups. 3BI represents the leadership of the legislative, judicial and executive branches of state government and will help the initiative maintain a collaborative, coordinated strategy. In addition, a statewide ACE coordinating team and both public and private sector steering groups will ensure communication about the ACE initiative is open and vigorous across the state.

Chris Peck, State Director

ACE Awareness Foundation