



WHOLE CHILD HEALTH ALLIANCE

# Advancing the Key Elements of Whole Child Health: Provider Case Studies

*Cincinnati Children's*



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## Reviewers

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The analysis in this report reflects the viewpoints of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of others engaged in the development of this report (e.g., interviewees, reviewers) or the institutions or programs they represent.

# Introduction

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[Cincinnati Children's](#) is a nonprofit, pediatric health system based in Cincinnati, Ohio, with [28 locations](#) across Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. It is one of the five largest children's hospitals in the U.S. based on bed capacity. Cincinnati Children's provides care across [33 specialties](#) and provides a range of [telehealth](#) services to support patients and families from home to reduce travel and transportation barriers. About 50% of Cincinnati Children's patients have Medicaid coverage.

Propelled by strong support from health system leadership, Cincinnati Children's takes a [population health approach](#) to advance Whole Child Health, leveraging an innovative [financing model](#) that incentivizes providers to address each child's full spectrum of needs. Furthermore, external partnerships with other children's hospitals, payers, schools, the Ohio Department of Health, the Ohio Department of Medicaid, community organizations, and families help Cincinnati Children's realize its goals and extend its reach. This approach advances its [vision](#) to be a leader in improving child health and its [mission](#) to improve child health and transform delivery of care through research, education, and innovation.

The programs and initiatives outlined below showcase specific elements of Cincinnati Children's journey to support Whole Child Health and do not include the full range of all programs offered by the health system. While the various initiatives are at different stages of maturity, they come together to address the holistic needs of children.

## Cincinnati Children's Whole Child Health Approach

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### Implementing an Integrated, Preventive Approach to Address Children's Holistic Needs

Cincinnati Children's offers a variety of services to address the holistic needs of children. Often, Cincinnati Children's provides this array of services in the primary care setting.<sup>1</sup>

**Integrated Behavioral Health.** To increase access to mental health services, Cincinnati Children's provides [Integrated Behavioral Health](#) (IBH) services in its primary care clinics and community-based practices. As a part of this model, primary care providers universally screen children for mental health needs during well-child visits, and they refer children who need mental health services to integrated and/or co-located behavioral health providers. IBH providers deliver a combination of universal, prevention-based interventions (e.g., HealthySteps), mental and behavioral health interventions, and crisis stabilization services while collaborating with primary care providers by co-treating the patient during the primary care appointment, conferring with each other outside appointments, or consulting the shared electronic health record. This [approach](#) removes barriers for patient-families to [access](#) mental health care, and creates opportunities for a whole-child approach to care, integrating [expertise](#) across team members and streamlining communication

#### Cincinnati Children's Integrated Behavioral Health Model in the Community

Cincinnati Children's has proactively expanded access to IBH services by training community-based providers to implement their IBH model so that children can receive mental health care at their regular pediatrician's office. [Data](#) show that over four years, community practices participating in Cincinnati Children's IBH model had a lower number of patients with a depression diagnosis admitted to the emergency department with behavioral health concerns than practices that did not have an IBH therapist.

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<sup>1</sup> Cincinnati Children's operates two autonomous primary care networks. [General Pediatrics Primary Care and Medicine](#) serves a primarily Medicaid population. [Children's Health Services Network](#) serves a majority commercial insurance population and also operates Cincinnati Children's school-based health centers, which serve primarily a Medicaid population.



and collaboration with families. Studies of Cincinnati Children's IBH services show that participating in IBH services is associated with [increased adherence](#) to the recommended well-child visits and vaccine schedule up to 5 months of age, increased self-efficacy among [mothers](#), and increased [medical provider satisfaction](#).

**Supporting Healthy Development.** To support early childhood health and development, Cincinnati Children's leverages an adapted version of the [Healthy Steps Model](#), created by ZERO TO THREE. This model supports the development of strong relationships between babies and caretakers to support healthy development. Additionally, Cincinnati Children's partners with [Cradle Cincinnati](#), a collaborative effort among parents, caregivers, health care providers, and the community to reduce [infant mortality](#), through family supports like community health workers and dietitians, a provider learning collaborative, and state and local advocacy for policy change. Since the program's inception in 2013, the infant mortality rate decreased by [29%](#) in Hamilton County.

**Addressing Children's Nonmedical Needs.** Cincinnati Children's addresses children's holistic needs by offering robust services to screen for and respond to nonmedical needs in the primary care setting. They use a standardized screening tool, which patient-families complete on a tablet during intake or registration. They leverage a multidisciplinary staff, including social workers, community health workers, and care managers to effectively respond to identified needs, helping families lead a healthy lifestyle, prevent chronic disease, and mitigate health-related risks and needs. They also refer patient-families to partners in the community to address nonmedical needs, like food insecurity. Based on longstanding successes screening for nonmedical needs in primary care, Cincinnati Children's convened a psychosocial taskforce focused on developing an institutional approach to screen across four domains, including nonmedical needs, depression, suicide, and substance use. This approach will first be scaled to ambulatory specialty care.

## Fostering Thriving Communities

Cincinnati Children's has focused on fostering thriving communities through several clinical-community partnerships. Through these programs, Cincinnati Children's meets children and families on their home turf to focus on improving overall community health.

**Population Health School Program.** Cincinnati Children's [Population Health School Program](#) aims to improve health outcomes and expand access to health care by providing physical and mental health services at local elementary, middle, and high schools via telehealth, mobile health, and school-based health centers. School-based health center staff provide well-child checks, sick visits, behavioral health screening, medication management, and care for children with acute and chronic conditions. They also partner with the Divisions of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics and Behavioral Medicine and Clinical Psychology to provide specialty developmental and behavioral health services. School-based health providers bill Medicaid fee-for-service, and the hospital budget and philanthropic funds support other costs.



**Clinical-Community Partnerships.** Cincinnati Children's collaborates with the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati to operate the [Cincinnati Child Health-Law Partnership](#) (Child HeLP), a medical-legal partnership that addresses patient-families' nonmedical needs that are amenable to legal remedies (e.g., public benefits denials or delays, eviction and poor housing conditions, and unmet educational needs). If Cincinnati Children's clinical team identifies that patient-families are facing challenges that could benefit from legal support, the provider can refer them to legal services from attorneys and paralegals. Notably, [Cincinnati Children's](#) found that providing legal advocacy reduced hospital admissions by 38%. In a 2022 [Health Affairs](#) article, Cincinnati Children's noted that "interventions such as those provided through a medical-legal partnership may be important components of integrated, value-based service delivery models."

Cincinnati Children's also helps families address food insecurity through partnerships with local food banks as well as the Keeping Infants Nourished and Developing (KIND) program — a clinical intervention aiming to support families with infants. In addition to connecting families with nutrition support, one [study](#) demonstrates that families who participated in the program were more likely to complete a lead and developmental screen, and were more likely to have received a full set of well-child visits by 14 months.

### Patient Story

A teenager with a diagnosed disability was at risk of expulsion from his vocational high school for behavioral issues. The teenager's primary care provider referred him to Child HeLP for legal support. Following the referral, Legal Aid represented the teenager at his Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) (i.e., a required process for students with Individualized Education Plans who face disciplinary action). Ultimately, the school agreed that the teenager's behavior was related to his disability, and the school dropped the expulsion. Additionally, Legal Aid advocated for the teenager to receive additional supports that helped the teenager graduate from high school.

## Commitment to Learning and Quality Improvement

Cincinnati Children's is dedicated to sharing with and learning from other leaders in Whole Child Health through local, statewide, and national [Learning Health Networks](#). Their [Learning Health Networks](#) bring together multisector stakeholders (e.g., providers, payers) to [accelerate](#) and improve outcomes through community partnerships, sharing and implementing evidence-based guidelines, and supporting teams on quality improvement efforts.

**Ohio Outcomes Acceleration for Kids:** Officially launched in 2024, the [Ohio Outcomes Acceleration for Kids](#) (OAK) Learning Network is a first-of-its-kind, collaborative effort between Ohio's children's hospitals, managed care entities, and the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM). OAK aims to deliver the highest quality care to Ohio's pediatric Medicaid-managed care population, connect regional partners, achieve superior health outcomes, and ensure Whole Child Health.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, OAK focuses on improving Ohio's childhood asthma, sickle cell disease, mental health, and well-child care outcomes — a subset of measures defined and agreed upon by the OAK Metric Workgroup in 2023. Together, participating entities collaborate to improve metrics that have long been challenging to move. OAK is funded by ODM's quality withhold program, which is a program designed to incentivize the use of science-based quality improvement practices to optimize population health outcomes. The OAK program is a key component of state governmental leadership's vision to shift managed care to focus on preventive health care and positive health outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> [Members](#) include Akron Children's Hospital (Akron Children's Health Collaborative), Cincinnati Children's (HealthVine), Dayton Children's Hospital (Partners for Kids), Nationwide Children's Hospital (Partners for Kids), ProMedica Russell J. Ebeid Children's Hospital, University Hospitals Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital, as well as the following managed care entities: Aetna OhioRISE, Anthem, AmeriHealth, Buckeye, United Healthcare, CareSource, Gainwell, Humana, and Molina.

## Journey To Pay for Health

Supported by a state policy environment conducive to accountable care organizations, in 2021, Cincinnati Children's launched [\*HealthVine\*](#), a pediatric accountable care organization that aims to improve childhood health outcomes for more than [\*100,000 children\*](#) covered by Medicaid in southwest Ohio.<sup>3</sup> HealthVine contracts with four out of the state's seven Medicaid-managed care entities as well as the managed care entity that administers a specialized managed care program for youth with complex behavioral health and multisystem needs. Through this arrangement, the Medicaid-managed care entity pays HealthVine a per member, per month fee and delegates financial and medical responsibility, [\*care management\*](#), [\*quality improvement\*](#), [\*data analytics\*](#), and [\*utilization management\*](#) to HealthVine. All HealthVine primary care and behavioral health providers can earn [\*incentive payments\*](#) for meeting clinical milestones through HealthVine's Financial Incentive Program.



In the four years since its launch, HealthVine has achieved significant engagement and cost-savings milestones. For example, HealthVine has expanded the use of telehealth services, resulting in 693 avoided emergency department visits, 4,158 avoided urgent care visits, and 114 avoided in-person visits, yielding cost savings of more than \$610,000. Moreover, HealthVine increased enrollment in care management by 106% between 2023 and 2024, and HealthVine care managers increased member outreach by 57% that same year. While HealthVine is still young, Cincinnati Children's is dedicated to integrating its lessons to improve the operations and business case for the accountable care organization.

## Conclusion

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Cincinnati Children's takes a population health approach to promote Whole Child Health. It leverages the primary care setting to address each child's holistic needs. It brings community services into clinical settings (e.g., medical-legal partnership) and clinical services into community settings (e.g., school-based health centers). Learning collaboratives ensure that Cincinnati Children's continuously evaluates progress and adapts and develops plans for further improvement. Finally, HealthVine incentivizes the health system and payers to prioritize prevention and promote health in the pediatric population. Strong hospital and state leadership that prioritizes child health has been crucial to Cincinnati Children's ability to advance Whole Child Health. Grounded in a culture of learning and improvement, Cincinnati Children's will continue to advance its initiatives to promote Whole Child Health in Ohio.

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<sup>3</sup> *HealthVine is owned and operated by Cincinnati Children's but is a separate legal entity.*