

Handle with Care Plus+  
INNOVATION PLAN ° VVy ° L  
UPDATE FY 2022-2023



Department of  
Behavioral Health



## Introduction

Handle with Care Plus+ is a \$1,527,000, pilot project seeking to use the *Handle with Care* model and some adaptations to identify and provide timely trauma supports as well as helping a household become trauma informed and increase mental health access. A component of this program is the inclusion of education and engagement for caretakers to compliment the notification process.

This project is funded under the Mental Health Services Act's (MHSA) Innovation component by the Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health (DBH). The pilot program activates timely responses to children and their families immediately after a traumatic or life-changing event occurs using the *Handle with Care* model. The project seeks to provide early support, screenings, and assess children for early indications of mental health symptoms resulting from trauma or a life-changing event. The project is seeking to empower families/households with the tools they need to cope and recover following such events and connect them and their children to any additional resources through a tailored Parent Café model of training/education for families/caregivers.

The Department partnered with the Fresno County Superintendent of School (FCSS), the Resiliency Center, Fresno Unified School District, the University of California Davis's Center for Reducing Health Disparities, and Brainwise Solutions to develop and implement the Handle with Care Plus+ project.

## Background

Initially, the project was developed with a focus on four targeted schools and communities. The program sought to support resilience in families who have experienced a life impacting event or trauma and who have a student/child who attends one of the four identified schools. The children in the pilot schools were ages 4-11 years old. The students will vary in age, gender, and ethnicity, however, based on the location of the schools, Latino students may be the majority. The students in general will be from lower social-economic backgrounds, and who have traditionally been

underserved by the behavioral health system. A small portion of the students will be English learners, and thus the need for bilingual capacity.

When this plan was approved the Fresno Police Chaplaincy reported that on average 60 calls per month came from the neighborhoods for these schools. The average of 60 calls per month, multiplied by two school sites in the first year (over 12 months) would have been approximately 1,440 possible calls for services. As the project was finally implemented, there were a total of four schools in the pilot program. Using the same formula, the project estimated serving 5,760 families/students who may benefit from services. The project had estimated to contact up to a total of 7,200 students. The projected number could not factor in those who may decline services, those who may only participate partially, homes or students who may already be engaged in services, or those who may be duplicated. The Department and its partners were unable to effectively determine the number of parents/caregivers who would be served by the Parent Café, due to some of the same variables noted above. Also, the number of parents/caregivers in each household is unknown and difficult to project. However, over the course of this project, it was anticipated that 25 (eight-week) Parent Cafés would be conducted. It was anticipated that a third of parent/caregivers would participate in one of the 25 Parent Cafés over the three years, estimating 2,400 parent/caregivers could be served through this project.

The development of the pilot and the projected numbers were all based on information that was pre-COVID-19 pandemic. The changes in how schools provided education (virtual or not in person), the closing of retail and community centers, and more families being at home all had an

impact on the project. The impacts of the pandemic have changed as has how people lived their lives during the initial two years of when the project was approved.

The school closures and subsequent distant learning had a significant impact on the project. The implementation of the project and services were delayed by over a full year. Uncertainties of when in-person schooling would resume and in what manner impacted implementation. The project and partner agencies were meeting and working to develop logistics, implementation

plans, care coordination, and other aspects of the program, but nothing could be solidified due to the unknowns posed by COVID-19. Schools were uncertain of when in-person instructions would begin, how they provide on-site services, etc. The ebbs and flows in the COVID-19 rates during that time would allow for some planning and then all the plans to change and so actual program planning was limited or would have to include all contingencies and as such the start was delayed.

In the time that the implementation of the program was pending, one of the partners Brainwise Solutions, developed an eight-week curriculum to help provide trauma informed psychoeducation to parents/caretakers. This curriculum was developed in a manner that allowed participants to join the groups at any point in the eight-week cycle, and thus not delay participation by waiting for the cycle to start over. This critical and innovative approach was intended to ensure timely access and participation to the parent café group and to increase engagement. Brainwise developed the curriculum using trauma informed approaches and an interactive parent café model. The curriculum was developed in a manner to ensure non-clinical personnel would be able to facilitate the groups, with a focus being on parent partners/peers

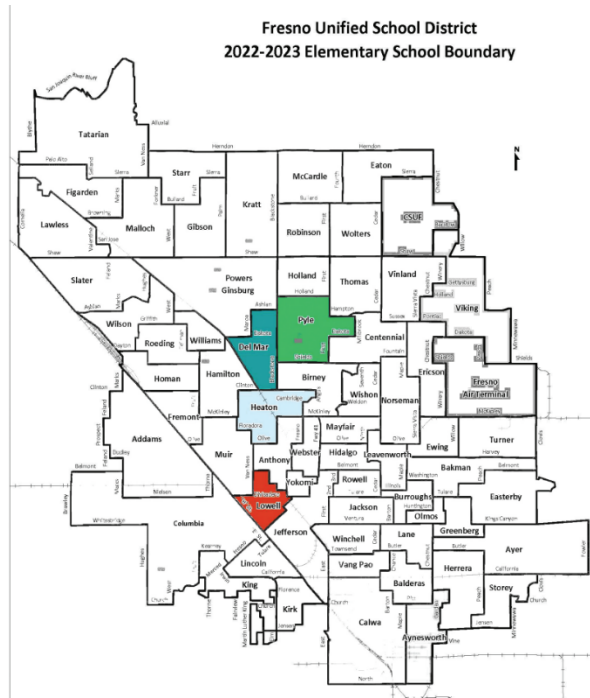


Figure 1. In color are the four school boundaries for this pilot

doing the facilitation. The curriculum was developed in English and Spanish to address the primary language needs of the targeted communities.

The project did receive approval for an extension from the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) to update the project term from a three-year term to a five-year term. The delays caused by COVID would not allow the project to be implemented in the remaining time without extending the term. The approval for the extension was received on June 9, 2022 (the previous fiscal year). The overall project and funding were not changed from the initial plan approved by the MHSOAC in May 2020.

## Project Activities

The project secured all necessary agreements and memorandum of understanding with the direct service providers who would screen the calls from Fresno Police Department, provide Handle with Care notifications, act as points of contact, provide screenings, request caregiver/household engagement, provide linkages to any care, and facilitate Parent Cafés.

There were delays for over two years in being able to secure the evaluation agreement with UC Davis's Center for Reducing Health Disparities (CRHD). The project team and the UC Davis CRHD team did have meetings to plan out evaluation and develop strategies but contracting negotiations and the CRHD's capacity delayed the establishment of an agreement.

The number of cases that would meet a "handle with care" notification for this project and the identified schools were significantly less than what was anticipated in the pre-pandemic development of the plan. The number of referrals for screening, and subsequent services was also far below the anticipated numbers and dwindled with each year.

The number of individuals who opted to participate in the Parent Cafes was drastically lower than anticipated and over the past two years, various efforts were made to increase engagement and participation but with limited success. Some interventions included chaplains making home visits and inviting households, invitations being sent directly by mail, and other promotions to parents

and the community. However, these efforts did not yield intended outcomes, and the Parent Café participation and completion goals were not met.

The project received a significantly low number of referrals over the past two years. In the last year, the program received 36 call referrals. Some of the reasons for the lower calls and referrals were due to delays in the sharing of information between the Resiliency Center and Fresno Police Department (FPD). This curtailed some of the referrals, but even when access to calls for services was resolved the referrals/notifications to the pilot schools had remained low.

The participation for the Parent Cafés (despite flexibility in times, venues, and outreach) was minimal.

The project partners met each month once the project was initialized, to discuss needs, challenges, explore strategies, etc. The meetings increasingly became focused on engagement, as the number of referrals was lower than anticipated, as were notifications, and parent/caregiver participation in the parent café. An idea was proposed to expand the project from the four identified pilot schools to more schools to increase possible referrals, notifications, and overall participation. The Department and the pending evaluators at the time, recommended against that approach, noting the project was a pilot focused on research and learning, and such major change or expansion would both have an impact on the effectiveness of the project. The challenges while not desired would also yield important insights, and the change would hinder such learning. The four pilot schools were identified based on specific data and to change or add more schools could change the measures.

Understanding how the program worked and its impact was important, but equally important was understanding why it may not work, what are the challenges, and future considerations that can support other efforts around the state to implement similar efforts.

## Outcomes

The outcomes in the initial year were lower than projected but that was initially attributed to implementation and the project being new. In the initial year of the program, a total of 96

referrals were made that fell into the project’s parameters and in the pilot school areas. These were calls that were screened by the Fresno Police Chaplaincy which were identified as calls that should be part of the *Handle with Care*.

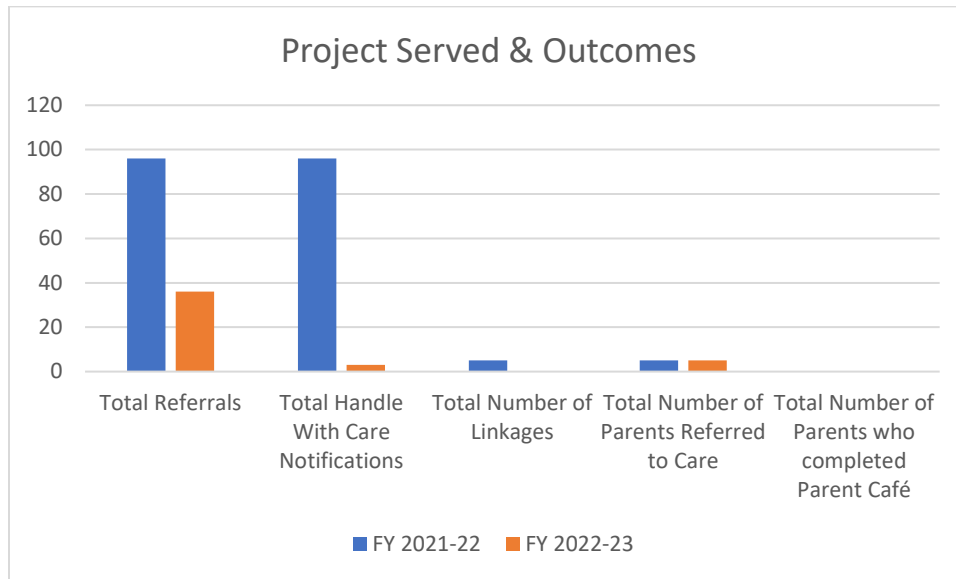


Figure 1. Outcomes Table 2021-2022 and 2022-2023

Of those 96 calls, all 96 were provided with a *Handle with Care* notification. Those were coordinated with the district and the schools. Of those *Handle with Care* notifications, there were five (5) students who were identified as in need of additional supports. Those five students were referred and linked to care services. Of those calls, all households were invited to the Parent Café and offered additional services. There was one parent who engaged in services as a result of the engagement. While several parents sought out some services, none in the initial year completed the Parent Café.

However, in the second year, the number of notifications dropped to three (3). That was a total of three calls that met the criteria for *Handle with Care* notifications for four schools. The initial plan had anticipated the calls to be higher than they were in year one. It also anticipated notifications to increase in the following years, not to fall to such low numbers. There were some delays as the referrals/notifications changed from FPD’s dispatch log to a new reporting smart

phone application (not funded under this project), but even with those delays, the massive shortfall of the calls and referrals to single digits poses a challenge to the viability of the program.

The subsequent low number of notifications, referrals, and participation has dwindled to levels that continuation of the program (even as a pilot) is not cost effective. The cost of staffing the overall project compared to the total number of persons served is disproportional and raises concerns about the fiscal responsibility of these public funds.

In 2022-23 there were a total of three (3) Handle with Care notices, with no screening or linkages. From outreach events, the providers referred five (5) parents/caregivers to the Parent Café but there was no participation, therefore no one completed the eight-week caregiver psychoeducational component.

Thus, the Department began to examine the viability of the program as designed. There were opportunities to focus on aspects of the project still, such as understanding some of the challenges through an evaluation and how the trauma informed parent café curriculum can be expanded in its use. However, the cost effectiveness of the program to continue to seek to identify, refer, notify, and render services is of concern and the use of those critical Innovation funds for learning can be used in other projects.

As there are low number of youths being served and the cost to operate the project without the volume is not an effective use of public resources, combined with the stagnant and limited parent café component, changes are being made to the project.

The delays in being able to establish an evaluation agreement with UC Davis's CRHD for close to two years is also a factor, but there are concerns as to how they would evaluate a program with such minimal data.

## Next Steps

In conjunction with UC Davis's Center for Reducing Health Disparities, the Department and the Center, began working with a Graduate Biostatistics group, a research team at UC Davis (led by Dr. Miriam N. Nuno). The CRHD shared that their fellow team had the capacity and may be better



suited for the evaluation based on the limited data and the pilot thus far. The research team from UC Davis will provide the evaluation for the overall project in the coming year. As there is limited-service data, their focus will be on challenges and will be examining what changes and/or factors impacted the program's participants so that future efforts locally and statewide for use of *Handle with Care* strategies and development.

The Department will seek to sunset most facets of the *Handle with Care Plus* program in the coming fiscal year (FY 2023-2024), but not end the overall plan itself. The project's services and parent cafe will not continue in full to the end of the fiscal year (June 31, 2024) as initially intended.

For the final year of this project, the Department will work with the UC Davis evaluators to complete an overall evaluation to provide lessons learned from the project by the end of fiscal year 2023/24.

The Department has worked with one of the vendors, The Resiliency Center, to end the current Handle with Care Plus+ agreement which included efforts around referrals, notification, and parent café facilitation. Services and funding will also cease for work provided by the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools before the end of 2023 under this project. The Department will allow the Resiliency Center to continue to utilize the Parent Café curriculum, with no changes.

The Department will work with Brainwise Solutions to develop a formal training prior to June 30, 2024, for the use of the Parent Café curriculum so to support the access and expanded use of this trauma informed curriculum. The plan is to develop training and fidelity checks for the Parent Café curriculum, so that other learning educational agencies (LEAs), community-based organizations, behavioral health providers, wellness programs, faith communities, etc. may be able to access and use the curriculum to support efforts for trauma informed parents/caretakers. Part of the planning will be to establish a no-cost use agreement for any interested organization, which will include the completion of a short virtual training and agreement to the use of fidelity checks with the curriculum. This is a means to ensure this resource/curriculum is not wasted but rather can have expanded use beyond the life of this project.

As the curriculum’s use has been limited to a specific population and setting (parents/caregivers who have recently experienced a life changing or traumatic event and are being engaged by a community-based organization), there is an opportunity to expand its application to other settings and educational needs. The Department will seek to have one of its children’s teams facilitate the parent café curriculum in a school-based setting with parents of an elementary school youth who are in care. There is an opportunity to test the curriculum in a different setting with both versions of the curriculum (English and Spanish). Part of this testing will help inform the trainers on what should be included in the curriculum’s facilitator training, as well as to obtain a different perspective on use, engagement, and reaction to the information which can help with the training and increase ways and settings in which it can be used. If time allows and it is viable, the Department will also examine how changes under CalAIM may support the use of this Parent Café for clinical functions, but also prevention and education efforts.

The Department has engaged the MHSOAC (in December 2023) about the project challenges, as well as possible changes to the project. Specifically, how it may be able to use the curriculum in a broader application and focus on some testing. The Department explored the viability of testing the Parent Café curriculum that was developed in other settings and/or broader use to support learning and an outcome of the project (new trauma informed curriculum).

## Budget

The total budget for the Handle with Care Plus+ project is **\$1,527,000**. There are several components to this pilot program. The budget has been divided among the direct service providers (FCSS and the Resiliency Center), administration (which is allotted to DBH), third party evaluation and a portion was allocated for curriculum development by Brain Wise Solutions.

### Handle With Care Plus+

FY 2020-2021	\$50,000
FY 2021-2022	\$287,949.11

Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health  
 Annual Update Fiscal Year 2022-23  
 Innovation Plan: Handle with Care Plus

<b>FY 2022-2023</b>	\$332,460.46
<b>FY 2023-2024</b>	\$113,254.85
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	\$783,664.42
<b>Approved Innovation Plan Budget</b>	\$1,527,000
<b>Remaining</b>	<b>\$743,335.58</b>

Evaluation - The project had allocated \$185,000 for the evaluation by UC Davis, and that will remain the same. While UC Davis’s evaluation will use a different methodology than initially planned, including interviews and some qualitative data gathering, the cost will not increase, and the budgeted amount will support the more intensive evaluation work.

Parent Café Curriculum Development - Up to \$10,000 of the remaining budget will be allocated for the development of the curriculum user training and fidelity checks, so the curriculum can be used beyond this project. Brainwise Solution will develop the training and fidelity checks, as the developers of the curriculum are in a uniquely qualified position to ensure proper training for how the intended curriculum and information are to be delivered.

Parent Café Testing - A maximum of \$25,000 will be allocated to support “testing” of the Parent Café curriculum. The funds will support the personnel time (Department staff) when doing work on the Parent Café (preparation, planning, presenting, follow-ups, documentation, etc.) in a new school-based setting. The allocation is to cover the Parent Café functions, which can include staff’s time related to the curriculum testing, time related to the Parent Café services (follow-up, engagement, documentation) and supports for the Parent Café, which may include the purchase of food, incentives, supplies, etc. for the group participants.

There will be no other changes to the total budget. The anticipated remaining balance from this project will be applied to future INN projects and efforts in alignment with Innovation fiscal regulations.