

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

2027 – 2029



Message from the Executive Director



Darnell Byrd McPherson
Executive Director
Darlington County First Steps

The 2025 survey results clearly show that Darlington County families need stronger support in three interconnected areas: parenting education, healthcare access & navigation, and mental health services. More than half of respondents identified parent education and mental health support as top priorities, reflecting both rising stress levels among parents of young children and gaps in early childhood development support. Families also reported significant barriers to healthcare—transportation, cost, and confusion about insurance—indicating a need for dedicated healthcare navigation that helps parents secure & optimize coverage for their family and access primary care. There is an urgent opportunity for First Steps to expand parent education programs, build pathways to mental health resources, and strengthen our partnerships in healthcare navigation. With strategic investment, we can position Darlington County First Steps as a trusted hub for whole-family well-being and early intervention.

Darnell Byrd McPherson

Needs Assessment Process

SURVEY

Distributed surveys for completion to **98** participants and developed a vision for young children and their families

July 2025 – November 2025



UNDERSTAND

Reviewed local data and map assets to understand the state of young children, their families, and the early childhood system

July 2025 – November 2025

PRIORITIZE

Organized the insight gathered from the surveys and data to prioritize the concerns, needs, and gaps the partnership wants to address, and formalize the Needs Assessment

July 2025 – November 2025

“Having a chance to voice our thoughts & concerns means a lot.”
-Participant

“Children & families need support from the community.”
-Participant

Priority Area One: Expand home-visiting/ parent education program.

52% of respondents said families with young children in Darlington County need parent education and classes most.

Darlington County First Steps (DCFS) offers the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, which uses the Evidence-Based Home Visiting Model that has been rigorously tested since 1984. More resources are needed to support the expansion of the program throughout the county.

PAT aims to increase parents' knowledge of child development, prevent child abuse, promote positive parenting practices, and improve children's school readiness.

SC First Steps Evaluation of PAT, 2017

The Institute for Families in Society & Pacific Research & Evaluation (2021) notes positive impacts on child health and well-being — PAT families had better compliance with health screenings / developmental checks/connections to health resources.

PAT serves as a bridge to health services, not just early learning — this supports a holistic, two-generation approach.

Priority Area Two: Increase mental health support.

54% of respondents said families with young children in Darlington County need mental health support most.

Over **40%** of parents in South Carolina report high parenting stress. **27%** report symptoms of depression or anxiety during the early childhood years.

Children's Trust of South Carolina Protective Factors Survey

1 in 8 mothers in South Carolina report postpartum depression symptoms. Among low-income mothers, rates approach **1 in 5**.
South Carolina PRAMS (Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System)

These data trends mirror the concerns expressed in the needs and resource assessment survey. The alignment between statewide and local data demonstrates a critical gap in services for parents of infants and young children.

Interventions like preconception counseling help to reduce mental health challenges before, during, and after pregnancy. DCFS partners with Morehouse School of Medicine Center for Maternal Health Equity to provide preconception counseling to men and women planning to have children within a year.

Parent Cafes are therapeutic experiences that allow parents to find community and have conversations in safe spaces. DCFS partners with Be Strong Families to offer this service to parents.

Benefits Counseling with parents educates them about available resources, including mental health support. DCFS has three Benefits Counselors on staff to provide support.

Priority Area Three: Strengthen health care navigation.

52% of respondents said healthcare access is most needed for families with young children in Darlington County.

After the pandemic protections ended, **SC lost about 65,000 children from Medicaid / CHIP**, a **9% drop** in child Medicaid enrollment.

South Carolina Daily Gazette

According to the Children's Trust of South Carolina's Darlington County Child Well-Being Profile, about **29%** of children live in households below the poverty level. Lower income is strongly correlated with challenges in accessing healthcare . This economic pressure suggests a strong need for healthcare navigation support.

The Community Health Alignment Initiative (CHAI) includes Darlington County First Steps as a partner, aiming to connect uninsured and underinsured residents to insurance, health care, social supports, and community resources.

DCFS is a school readiness organization and one that serves as a navigator for social determinants of health- helping parents understand and maintain health coverage for the family, access clinics, and connect to primary care.

Next Steps



