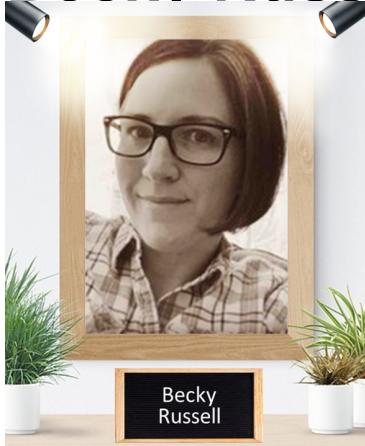


Insights

NICHQ Employee Spotlight: Becky Russell



Each month, we profile a member of the NICHQ team and learn more

about their work and contributions to children's health. For this month's NICHQ Employee Spotlight, we speak with Becky Russell, MSPH, Senior Director of Applied Research and Evaluation at NICHQ, as she shares her expertise in driving data to create the necessary changes to reduce preterm birth rates.

Data collected as part of NICHQ's leadership of IM CoIN ([Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network to Reduce Infant Mortality](#)) has enabled us to explore and document systems and infrastructures that promoted or hindered improvements in four states: Kansas, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. These efforts were funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and led by Russell.

Findings and insights from this project are discussed in our recent webinar, [Reducing Preterm Birth: States Share Interventions, Policy Efforts, & Emerging Issues](#).

How has your background/experiences led you to join a national children's health organization?

"I've spent my career working for mission-related public health organizations focused on maternal and child health, so NICHQ's mission and vision are very important to me. In my 20 years working in the field, I have overseen epidemiology and program evaluation. The opportunity to join NICHQ was a great way for me to continue to grow my experience and join a team that is doing really important work that has the potential to impact the health and lives of

children and families across the country.”

What is NICHQ doing to address preterm birth rates and why is this work important?

“Preterm birth is one of the leading causes of infant mortality. For the past five years, preterm birth rates in the United States have been increasing, and the truth is that we really don’t know why. The causes of preterm birth are complex and our clinical solutions are limited. NICHQ is working to address preterm birth through several of our projects, specifically the Supporting Healthy Start Performance Project, in which the Healthy Start program works to reduce preterm birth rates in their communities, and through the Exploring State-Level Strategies to Improve Maternal health and Birth Outcomes project, where we studied what four different states have done to address preterm birth rates.”

Tell us about NICHQ’s “Exploring State-Level Strategies to Improve Maternal Health and Birth Outcomes” initiative. What are some lessons learned from producing high-quality, informative case studies?

“NICHQ led a major national initiative to reduce infant mortality rates, and as part of that initiative, several states chose to focus on pre and early term births as one strategy to lower infant mortality. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we selected four of those states (Kansas, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Oklahoma) to do a deep dive into their work both through that national initiative and since, to understand programmatic and policy solutions that the states implemented and to learn from their successes and challenges. Because preterm birth rates have been increasing and the disparities are growing, the lessons learned are even more relevant today.”

What are the biggest takeaways or findings from the "[Efforts to Address Preterm Births](#)" case studies?

“What we learned from all of the states is that the focus needs to be on the underlying issues that cause the inequities, and in order to do that, we need a shift in how we recognize and change the impact of racism in America. We need to move beyond ‘reducing disparities and addressing implicit bias’ to a clearer focus on anti-racism and full health equity for all. We all have a personal responsibility to advocate for change, but that change needs to happen at a systems level in addition to an individual level. We also need to have a federal focus on policies and funding for programs that work, and a national coordination of efforts. And it’s not all negative...we saw within each of the states effective and promising programs that are being implemented in communities. We can learn from these bright spots and continue to build the evidence for programs that are working.”

Interested in learning more about NICHQ team members? Read last month's [employee spotlight](#) featuring Maddy Schwartz, Project Specialist