

Insights

NICHQ Employee Spotlight: Kelly Edwards

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Kelly Edwards, MPH, Senior Project Manager

Full name and title: Kelly Edwards, MPH

Years with NICHQ: 3 years

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

My background is in neuroscience, specifically centered around psychology and the development of children. I received my undergraduate degree at the University of Arizona, and when I started there were two core paths to choose from: aging and development, and neurobiology. I was deeply interested in psychology and childhood development so I naturally fell into the development and aging path. My work was pretty heavily rooted in research science, and I volunteered in a research lab that was working with kids on the autism spectrum disorder to study their neural pathways associated with learning new words. This was my first introduction to working with populations of children in the public health sphere. And while I enjoyed it, I decided research wasn't really for me. That led me to get my master's in public health in Boston where I chose to concentrate on maternal and child health (MCH) because of my background in early development. I was thrilled to continue learning about children's health. I loved the opportunity to learn about so many different areas within MCH, and that is what really drew me to NICHQ when I interned here in my last semester of graduate school.

How did your time as an intern prepare you for your role at NICHQ? Tell us about your involvement with NICHQ's current internship team.

I started out at NICHQ as an intern, which gave me great insight into the working world of a non-profit. They graciously allowed me to come on board to support both the [Florida CMS-LAN](#) project, which I'm now working on as a senior project manager, and [ECCS CoIIN](#). As both projects were focused on early childhood, I was able to really utilize my skills developed during my MPH program. Then, as I like to say, the stars aligned and there was a job opening that allowed me to join NICHQ's staff as a project manager. I initially continued working on ECCS CoIIN and was also brought onto a project called Pediatric Supporting Parents – another early childhood project that was right up my alley, combining children's health and quality improvement. It was an exciting experience to support two pretty large early childhood projects across the country right out of graduate school.

We've worked really hard to revamp the internship program at NICHQ. In the vein of quality improvement, we are always looking at how we can improve the internship process and experience, getting feedback from every intern that participates in the program. Our goal is to hold an equitable and meaningful internship for students, and provide them with the opportunity to really understand what it's like to work at a non-profit and come away with tangible skills and baseline knowledge of quality improvement. I'm really proud of how the internship program has grown, and look forward to seeing it continue to grow!

Biggest lesson learned when working on a project:

The biggest lesson I've learned and the biggest takeaway from this job is that no matter what you're doing, what level you're at, what project you're on, relationships are key. Communication, being genuine and transparent, and being a good partner to people is so important. This work can often change on a dime – things like funding changes, administration and policy changes, turnover, etc. Being able to lean on developed, positive relationships with people to get through challenges together, no matter if they're small challenges or systemic challenges, is key. In my time at NICHQ, I have been able to develop my skills in communicating with partners, externally and internally at the organization, and problem solving in order to come to the table with solutions. It's important to remember that we're all here for the same mission, to improve the lives of children and their families.

What are you most proud of from your time with NICHQ?

I am most proud of being a part of the ECCS CoIIN team, and bringing that project to a really strong end. We developed such positive relationships with the project participants. Specifically, we built authentic relationships with family partners and brought them to the table with a series of Community of Practice meetings, where we developed this group of family partners all across the U.S. who are working on the ground to improve the systems of care that support children and their families. They were all individually doing such amazing work in their communities, and I was honored to get to be a small piece of supporting them by connecting them with other family leaders with similar passions.

I had the opportunity to present at a conference with a few of the outstanding family leaders we partnered with to further promote their work in the early childhood systems field, and it was

amazing to see the impact they had and how they were able to inspire others.

How has the family partner work translated across projects?

On the FL-CMS LAN project, we are seeing amazing work with the family leader group as well. Families are the experts



(Pictured (L-R): FL CMS LAN Improvement Advisor Ginna Crowe, Sandra Widland, Kelly Edwards, and FL CMS LAN Improvement Advisor Sue Butts-Dion at a Tampa, FL meeting.

in their health and their children's care, and need to be an integral part of decisions made about their care. With support from our partners at the Department of Health, we are starting monthly meetings with family partners to support them in their role as family leaders on this project and support their participation in the quality improvement projects taking place across healthcare institutions in Florida. Similarly to what was done on the ECCS CoIIN project, we hope that these family leaders will create a network of support for each other and plan to continue to develop and share resources that can be used across the U.S., not just in Florida. These resources will showcase how to successfully integrate family leaders on quality improvement projects and how to have authentic and meaningful family partnerships.

You've worked pretty extensively in NICHQ's rare disease portfolio, what are some of the cross-project connections you're able to make with the FL-CMS LAN project?

At first, I was intimidated because I don't have a background in rare diseases. [NICHQ's Disseminating Results: Missed Sickle Cell Disease Clinic Appointments and the Health Belief Model](#) initiative was my first introduction to our rare disease portfolio. That project was my first education-centered project where we created resources and webinars for providers, community-based organizations (CBOs), and families and caregivers of individuals living with sickle cell disease. In the process of creating the educational webinar and resources, I was able to learn along with them and increase my knowledge base of sickle cell. I was specifically in charge of bringing together the experts in the field to host educational panels and develop resources for dissemination. We conducted key informant interviews to learn about barriers to accessing sickle cell disease care, and it was a really good learning opportunity for me. It was a useful introduction to sickle cell disease and was able to prepare me to be a current team member of the [Hemoglobinopathies National Coordinating Center project](#) and continuing NICHQ's work in

sickle cell disease.

What are your goals for NICHQ's future?

I hope to continue to grow, further developing my MCH knowledge and leadership skills. I'd like to continue to diversify the kind of projects that I work on and continue to learn about new areas in MCH, whether it's with rare diseases or back to early childhood – there's always more to learn. I hope to continue to be a leader at the organization with initiatives like the internship program that have made an impact on the organization. I think there are always opportunities for improvement and I am looking forward to continuing to make a positive impact!