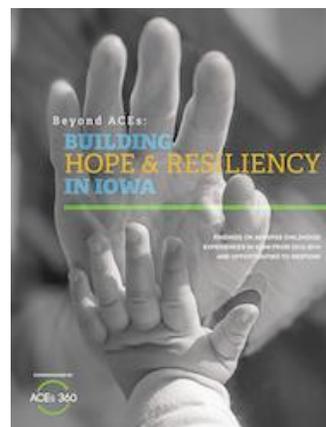


Beyond ACEs: Building Hope and Resiliency in Iowa

About 330 representatives from nonprofit, education, government and business organizations across Iowa gathered in Des Moines last month for “Beyond ACEs: Building Hope and Resiliency in Iowa.” The day-long summit was the fourth such event since 2011, when information about the lifelong effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) first surfaced in Iowa. Since then, the Central Iowa ACEs 360 Coalition has led myriad efforts to raise awareness of the lifelong effects of ACEs and advocate for informed action.



“We’ve done a pretty good job of educating people on what ACEs is,” said Lisa Cushett, coordinator of the summit and program manager for Central Iowa ACEs 360 Steering Committee. “Our goals for the summit were to get folks thinking about how to respond to the information and to shift the conversation to being more hope-based — about how we can build resiliency.”

From Discussion to Action

Summit participants heard from Dr. Amy Shriver, pediatrician at Blank Children’s Hospital in Des Moines and an early advocate for ACEs education and intervention, and from Jane Stevens, founder and publisher of the ACEs Connection Network, which includes two online communities (www.acestoohigh.com and www.acesconnection.com) that highlight trauma-informed and resilience-building strategies being implemented in communities throughout the U.S. They also learned about related topics — such as preventing intergenerational transmission of ACEs — from more than a dozen panelists spread among five breakout sessions.

Most inspiring was an address from Yolanda Harden, a local ACEs advocate. She shared her personal story about childhood trauma (ACEs score of 10) and how nurturing relationships with adults helped her develop resilience as she grew into a healthy adult. She noted that understanding ACEs put her childhood experiences into perspective and enabled her to move forward.

“We’ve always known our experiences frame who we are and what we become. But ACEs has taken the passive thinking about our experiences and moved it to an active level. How we act on the information gives us the potential to build resilience,” said Teree Caldwell-Johnson, CEO of Oakridge Neighborhood in Des Moines and vice president for the board of directors at Mid-Iowa Health Foundation, the summit’s presenting sponsor.

Caldwell-Johnson was a panelist for a breakout session about promoting safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments. Her nonprofit used the ACEs framework to rethink and adapt their service delivery model to better meet the needs of its residents.

“It was exciting to see people from across the state at different points on the ACEs continuum. People early in their journey learned from those more experienced with the issue,” said Caldwell-Johnson. “I got the sense that this has really taken hold in varying places at different levels.”

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Now What?

Cassie Gerst, outreach and grant coordinator for the Burlington Community School District, attended Caldwell-Johnson's session. "So many of our kids have multiple ACEs. As educators, how do we support kids in school while keeping in mind the other things going on in their lives? I came to the summit looking for what's next. What are the steps to building hope and resilience?"

Cushett said there isn't one silver bullet for building resilience. That's why the summit was designed to expose participants to a variety of community-based responses that seem to be working — so people could then adapt some of the strategies to their own environments.

"There is always more that can be done, but I believe the foundational work has created a strong place from which we can extend ACEs beyond the nonprofit and school sectors to other parts of our communities," said Caldwell-Johnson. "Building hope and resiliency in adults and children will forever be felt across Iowa."

— *Sherry Speikers is a communications consultant working with nonprofits in central Iowa.*