

FCC TASKFORCE SPOTLIGHT



ERIKA MENDENCE

Patient & Family
Engagement Specialist,
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NICU Parent of Birdie

How were you personally activated to advocate for and support NICU families?

My daughter spent 6.5 months in the NICU in 2019. During that time, I was introduced to a new world, one I had never thought about, but one that amazed me and shone a light on the resilience of the human spirit. After my personal experience, I struggled with my mental health and began to learn more about nervous system dysregulation. This propelled me to want to create tools for families who have children in the hospital, offer opportunities, and continue to assist individuals through this difficult time. I began doing this by teaching trauma-informed yoga classes to parents and volunteering as a peer support volunteer on our unit. Since then, I've joined the team at Children's Mercy Kansas City and have been able to work with QI teams, partner with donors, and host family support events for our unit.

How does your organization/company/hospital support NICU families?

Children's Mercy Kansas City employs a full-time parent partner who works closely with our NICU team. When I joined the team several years ago, I was invited to every QI meeting and have been welcomed with open arms to work directly with NICU staff on behalf of our families. We also have an active NICU Patient and Family Advisory Council (PFAC), which works collaboratively with the team. The group is considered an asset and is utilized often to tackle challenges and celebrate wins on our unit.

Healthcare partners are... *in need of understanding, support, and grace, just like families/caregivers. This is challenging work and when we truly partner with families, it enhances the experience for everyone involved!*

NICU & bereaved parents are... *some of the most resilient people you will ever meet. Their strength and courage will inspire you!*



Meet Erika! She serves as an Executive Council Family Partner for the Family-Centered Care Taskforce.

What are the greatest needs of families in maternal-infant health you observe through your work?

Understanding of and support regarding mental and emotion well-being. There is often a lack of mental health support for families even though they are going through one of the most difficult experiences someone in our society could imagine. We need better support and understanding from health care professionals, more opportunities to connect with other families while in the NICU, more psychosocial support both during and after a NICU stay, and quality peer support programs. I can't tell you how many times I've gone to talk with a family, and just by showing up and listening, I could physically see their shoulders drop from around their ears and see them take their first deep breath in a while. There is power in connection, presence, and tuning in.

What insight or advice do you have for healthcare professionals who want to implement/strengthen FCC practices in their hospital?

Actively listen to families. They have valuable insights and lived experiences that can greatly inform and strengthen FCC practices. To truly understand their needs and perspectives, healthcare partners must remain open, receptive, and willing to engage in meaningful dialogue with families.

What is your greatest wish in terms of the positive impact the FCC Taskforce members can make together in maternal-infant health?

That we bring the principles of Family-Centered Care into our hospitals so deeply that they become woven into the very fabric of our NICUs and that this commitment creates a ripple effect, spreading to other NICUs and healthcare spaces everywhere.

What does being part of the FCC Taskforce mean to you personally?

The FCC Taskforce has been a fantastic place to learn and build community! Working tirelessly to establish FCC in your unit can often feel isolating, and at times, discouraging. Meeting with others who understand its importance and who are working on tangible ways to implement FCC continues to be inspiring and helpful in my personal pursuit. I am inspired by the FCC Taskforce!



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