

SECURE Implementation Trial (SECURE IT): Studying Implementation and Effectiveness of Social Care in the Emergency Department

Statement of Problem

Unmet social needs in childhood, such as inadequate access to healthy food and safe housing, are powerful drivers of poor health outcomes across the life course, even despite advanced medical care. Social care, which aims to address patient and family needs like access to nutritious food and safe housing from the health care setting, can facilitate family connection with resources and support thereby improving caregiver quality of life and child health outcomes.

The emergency department (ED) is a key setting for social care, as [40%](#) of pediatric ED patients report at least one unmet social need. Despite growing [health system and regulatory requirements](#) for social care, implementation is inconsistent and often inequitably applied. Furthermore, there is a critical knowledge gap in how to seamlessly embed multi-step and community-partnered social interventions in the fast-paced and high-stakes ED environment.

In 2025, our team completed the [Socially Equitable Care by Understanding Resource Engagement \(SECURE\) Study](#), a multisite randomized controlled trial including nearly 4,000 caregivers of pediatric patients, to define and test the first evidence-based protocol for social care integration in the ED. Combining data from this large-scale study with the growing literature around social needs interventions, the SECURE social care protocol consists of three core components:

1. a caregiver-facing electronic tool for self-selection and prioritization of social needs,
2. a searchable electronic resource map automatically loaded on the caregiver's smartphone, and
3. an option for telephone-based resource navigation following clinical care.

Description

SECURE IT will use [implementation science](#) methods to rigorously evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the SECURE protocol at scale in partnership with three pediatric EDs across Pennsylvania.

First, we will engage ED providers and staff, community organizations, and caregivers of pediatric patients in interviews and focus groups to understand current social care practices at each study site. We will also explore these key informants' beliefs and feelings about the adoption of the SECURE protocol in their pediatric ED.

Guided by the [Health Equity Implementation Framework](#), we will then apply rapid qualitative analysis methods to identify barriers and facilitators to implementing the SECURE protocol at the population level.

We will use these findings to inform the process of implementation mapping, in which a multidisciplinary team of stakeholders in ED health informatics, social work, nursing, clinical care, and administration at each site will systematically prioritize the barriers and facilitators that are most likely to impact the implementation of the SECURE protocol.

The team will then collaboratively identify the aspects of ED care delivery and infrastructure that will need to be modified to support successful implementation as well as theory-based approaches to making needed changes. These strategies could include automated text message introductions to social care, clinical decision support tools and clinician-directed education. Taken together, this would make up an implementation strategy bundle.

Lastly, we will conduct a hybrid effectiveness-implementation trial to evaluate the impact of our implementation strategy bundle. All caregivers presenting to a study ED will be eligible to receive the SECURE protocol (social needs assessment + resource map + resource navigation) as the new standard of care. We will monitor receipt of protocol components across ED patients, and a random sample will complete a quality of life and resource use survey at the time of enrollment in the ED as well as 30 days later to understand the effect of the intervention on patient-family well-being.

Next Steps

In addition to establishing sustained, evidence-based social care delivery at the three study EDs, our goal is to develop and widely disseminate an implementation strategy bundle with broad relevance to EDs across the country. This will support the expansion of evidence-based social care that accounts for the unique complexities of the ED and enables health systems to better address the social needs of pediatric patients and their families.

This project page was last updated in September 2025.

Suggested Citation

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PolicyLab Leads

Danielle Cullen
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Faculty Member

Danielle Cullen (she/her) is a faculty member at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and assistant professor of pediatrics and pediatric emergency medicine at CHOP and the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a senior fellow of the University of Pennsylvania Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics and co-course director for Master Level Introduction to Implementation Science at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Cullen's research focuses on socio-economic health disparities, in particular childhood food insecurity. Her long-term goal is to improve health equity among socially disadvantaged children through the development of effective, acceptable, and feasible strategies to identify social risk and improve family engagement with resources. She is dedicated to community involvement in research and programmatic design, and leveraging methods from Community-Based Participatory Research and Implementation Science to enhance reach and sustainability of developed programs. Her current interdisciplinary research portfolio includes: mixed-methods evaluations of social determinant screening modalities, locations and referral processes; a hybrid implementation-effectiveness study of the USDA's summer food service program across five CHOP clinical settings; and a qualitative evaluation of low-income families' experiences with a clinically-based subsidized organic produce box program.

In addition to her research, Dr. Cullen is a member of the advisory board for the hunger pillar of CHOP's Healthier Together initiative and CHOP's social risk screening and resource map sponsorship board. She serves on multiple city-wide committees, including as co-chair of the food insecurity workgroup for the multi-institutional COACH (Collaborative Opportunities to Advance Community Health) initiative to address social determinants of health in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Dr. Cullen earned her Master of Public Health in Maternal and Child Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and her medical degree from Jefferson Medical College. She completed residency in General Pediatrics at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. There, with support from the American Academy of Pediatrics, she developed a screening and intervention protocol for food insecurity in the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Emergency Department. This protocol was integrated into the electronic medical record system as the standard of care and has now been expanded to the hospital's inpatient and outpatient settings. She completed Pediatric Emergency Medicine fellowship at CHOP while also serving as a T32 research scholar, earning her Master of Health Policy Research from the University of Pennsylvania.



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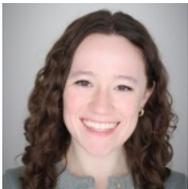
MPH

Clinical Research Program Manager

Rachel Brown (she/her) is a clinical research program manager at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Ms. Brown works with Dr. Danielle Cullen on a mixed-methods research portfolio aimed at reducing health disparities by addressing unmet social need among children and their families. She also supports the implementation and evaluation of several clinically based food programs.

Ms. Brown received her Master of Public Health in Community Health and Prevention from Drexel University. While completing her graduate degree, she was an Urban Health Collaborative fellow in the Policy & Community Engagement Core as well as a graduate intern at PolicyLab. She also worked with Drexel's Center for Public Health Readiness and Communication as a crisis communications associate, developing strategic outreach plans and content to support the university's pandemic response.

Prior to pursuing her master's degree, Ms. Brown held several communications and community engagement roles at organizations including the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and SteegeThomson Communications. She earned her bachelor's degree in media & communications from Ursinus College.



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Team

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Faculty Scholar

Lauren VonHoltz (she/her) is a faculty scholar at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). She completed her general pediatrics residency and fellowship in pediatric emergency medicine at CHOP and is currently a fellow in the Academic Pediatric Association's Health Policy Scholars Program. Additionally, she is an attending physician within the Division of Emergency Medicine at CHOP.

Dr. VonHoltz is passionate about developing programs and systems to address the negative effects of unmet health-related social needs among children and their families. Additionally, she is dedicated to educating the next generation of health care providers about the impact of these interventions through the development of unique educational experiences for students of diverse degree programs. She designed and currently directs the CHOP Family Connects program, a social needs assessment and resource navigation program that operates within the CHOP Emergency Department. Students meet directly with families who opt into navigation assistance during their ED visit and provide referrals at the point of care.

Dr. VonHoltz has additional research and implementation interests at the intersection of health and digital media technologies. She seeks new ways to disseminate health information to pediatric stakeholders and use technology to bridge the divide between patients and their care team through novel communication methods.

Dr. VonHoltz graduated summa cum laude with a degree in biology from Ithaca College and obtained her medical degree and master's in public health from the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.



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Related Tools & Publications

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[Considerations for Documenting and Sharing Health-related Social Needs Information in Pediatric Care Settings](#)

[Issue Briefs](#)

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Related Projects

Socially Equitable Care by Understanding Resource Engagement (SECURE): Leveraging Research to Ensure
Equity
Health Equity