

# Open Doors

## Season 1 Episode 1: Beyond Public Health

**Shannon Fagan:** 0:05

Welcome to Open Doors, a podcast from the Allegheny Intermediate Unit that explores the people, programs, and partnerships making a difference in students' lives. I'm your host, Shannon Fagan. Together, we're opening doors to learning, support, and connection so every student can thrive. The Allegheny County Health Department is going beyond traditional public health, helping shape the future of our schools and communities. In 2023, the Health Department partnered with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit to launch Project Seeks SES, supporting expansion and enhancement of K-12 school-based social emotional supports. From addressing trauma and mental health challenges to preparing the next generation of educators, this initiative is changing the way schools support their students. Today we're joined by Kim Joyce to explore this impact of this powerful partnership and the variety of services the health department has to offer schools, families, and children across Allegheny County. Welcome, Kim. Thanks so much. I'm so glad you're here today with us to talk about the Allegheny County Health Department. Yes, we're super excited to. Oh, you've been such partners to us at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit and helping to really offer some different aspects to our schools around social emotional wellness. So I wanted to ask you a few questions today about the program and what you are doing, what schools need to know, how our families and communities can work with you. So I'm just going to leave it open and just let you introduce what you do at the health department. Perfect.

**Kim Joyce:** 1:38

My name is Kim Joyce. I am the Chief Operating Officer at Allegheny County Health Department. I've been with the department for about 15 years now. And so I've got to learn an immense amount of information about all of our programming. And I'm excited to be here today. Awesome. So what do you do at the health department?

**Shannon Fagan:** 1:56

Oh, well, um, it's so broad. And I think people think that you guys go into restaurants and that you're offering vaccines and different things like that, but you do so much more.

**Kim Joyce:** 2:08

We do do so much more. And so um I think in general, you know, you know, the health department's been around for 60 years. And while we do have the required things that we must do for the health and safety of the community, so you know, restaurant inspections, those types of um regulatory information that people typically tie us to, we're so much more than that. Um, you know, our programs are trying to be innovative and fill in gaps for different areas that, you know, when we think about chronic disease, how do we get into the vulnerable communities? Um, you know, just trying to make sure that um we're helping the programs design and promote safer and healthier community um actions. Um just in general, um that's the overview. Um I'll get into some program specifics here in a bit.

**Shannon Fagan: 3:00**

Okay. Well, I know with um the Allegheny Intermediate Unit and the funding that you provided for our SEACS SES program, it has been tremendous to our districts in bringing behavioral health, bringing in wellness, um, connecting students at universities and trying to build the pipeline to future educators, mental health clinicians, even drug and alcohol specialists. So can you tell us a little bit about that aspect too and what you're trying to do as far as building the capacity?

**Kim Joyce: 3:27**

For sure. So I mean, I think a lot of our programs do some things that you know run in the background uh for just typical wellness. So, you know, dental visits and clinics, we'll try and get out in the schools and do um dental sealant type programs, um, making sure that immunizations are available to uh school-aged children. Um, and so those are the basic sets of needs that uh families need to feel cared for. And so a step beyond that, I think, um, and you know, the previous director that is is now the Secretary of Health, as well as uh the previous chief operating officer who's moved on to be the head of um ECS, um, they were really the brainchildren behind this Seeks program to try and not only do uh the essential services that we are doing, but help to provide um help in COVID and the after effects of COVID. You know, we we saw what was happening in the schools, we were on calls continuously and um just trying to bring all of the services that the health department provides and then add in a social emotional wellness. Uh, and so, you know, I think people that come to the health department to work have that passion for public health. Similarly, the people that are uh working out in these schools, they have the passion behind wanting to see the children succeed and the well-being. And so incorporating those two worlds has been incredible to watch because it's like all of the passion behind um just trying to give these students the best start that they can to life is just really impactful.

**Shannon Fagan: 5:03**

Yeah. And I think something we learned together through the discovery with Seeks was how much the educators needed supported as well. Yes. And coming back from COVID and learning about their just sense of burnout. And here are kids that have been out of school for a year and need some support, and it was overwhelming. So again, bringing in those pieces, building in support from our university partners has been tremendous in building capacity. Yes, for sure. Yeah. So watching all those changes and transitions has been amazing over the last three years.

**unknown:** 5:36

Yeah.

**Kim Joyce:** 5:36

And I mean, I think uh, you know, just having that connection piece with all of the schools and the AIU and just knowing that um, you know, you guys have at the AIU have done an incredible job with the implementation portion and the schools, and um, wanting the schools to know that we're here to support them um for these activities. And you know, I think um in in the current climate where we are um unsure and uncertain of funding, uh it becomes challenging. But the thing that I would love to see us continue is just the the foundational partnerships and collaboration points that we've built because um, you know, public health funding in general is just like a boomerang. And so having to have that continuous um partnership is uh super helpful because when the the funding does boomerang back to us, you know, we're able to know already what you guys need and how we can contribute and what we can do to make that process better. Yeah.

**Shannon Fagan:** 6:38

And our schools are definitely still looking for the services and supports. So can you tell us a little bit about what you do in a community and how um it kind of flows from the school to the community to the families? So, how would we access services from the health department?

**Kim Joyce:** 6:54

For sure. So, I mean, I think again, you know, our obligation is to provide services to all the residents, but our focus is on the more vulnerable populations. And so um we've got a great team at our Live Well Allegheny program that identifies where chronic disease is more prevalent, um, trying to make sure that we are uh utilizing partners like Breathe PA to have asthma resources within the schools, um, making sure that our STI program is trying to uh develop an educational process that they would love for schools to you know be able to share that information and have our educators out to provide resources because um you

know, we see patients between over the age of 13 um or allow for at-home STI testing and things to that effect. Trevor Burrus, Jr. What is STI? Sorry, so uh acronyms, um sexually transmitted infections. Okay, thank you. And so, you know, having those uncomfortable conversations in the schools, but that way the students walk away with, oh, I know that I have this resource if I ever need it, because um, you know, untreated um things like that can happen. Um our um overdose prevention team, as you're aware, um, is working on uh doing some school-based um presentations and things to that effect. And so um just working in the community and understanding uh the needs of the community and and where we can be there to assist. Um currently our epidemiology team is partnering with the University of Pittsburgh uh to administer uh a survey, um healthy Allegheny Teen Survey, uh HATS, uh the acronym. Um so uh it would be very helpful for the school districts that are participating to encourage student participation because um you know that information comes back to us, and that's how we love to drive decision making is through data. And so um knowing that uh these school districts have a high prevalence of whatever it is that that they're um having is helpful for us to do programming. So if we get a report back that this school district has more sexually active teenagers, then we would want to encourage that school district to have that STI talk. If we're getting information that the school district has a high prevalence of substance use disorder uh in in a home environment, we would want to have that programming out in the schools just so the students and the teachers feel more supported.

**Shannon Fagan:** 9:22

Yeah. The data has really helped us drive services too for our school districts or at least offer a menu of ideas based on those things you just mentioned. So um our students are facing so many things right now. Um when I look at the data myself, I'm seeing they're seeing their parents go to jail because of drug use or whatever. They're seeing lots of death in their community, they're seeing friends who have had concerns, pregnancies, things like that, or themselves. So the services that you're offering are so helpful and needed. And how do they find out about it though? How would a student know to check in with the health department or maybe the family?

**Kim Joyce:** 9:59

Um so a lot of our normal day-to-day resources are coordinated through the school nurse or the school counselor, and so we are trying to make sure that we are um reaching out to those individuals. Um they can go to um l our LiveWell Allegheny site. It's live well livewellallegheny.com or the county's website at alleghenychounty.us is also another great resource. Um, if there's something that I've talked about today or that um might be of interest, they can always reach out to me directly at kim.joyce at alleghenychounty.us. And

we are always happy to have extra conversations to see where we can step in and be a resource.

**Shannon Fagan:** 10:40

One of my questions is how did you guys kind of venture into that social emotional wellness? What were some of those key elements that made you think, wow, we could do some things here?

**Kim Joyce:** 10:52

So we were very fortunate and had um a significant amount of funding given to us um for COVID support. Uh and our former director comes from the pediatrics arena, and so she is very in tune with how all of these things impact uh children and how um mental wellness is so important. And so, you know, she and and the previous COO sat together with um some educational professionals and really um came up with this great idea of how to get resources to children and help build pipelines within the schools of um those wanting to go into that profession and um just a collaboration between um local universities, local school districts, the AIU, and just creating just a a great partnership.

**unknown:** 11:41

Yeah.

**Shannon Fagan:** 11:42

Yeah. What would you say would be one thing that you're most proud of from this work so far? Or maybe two.

**Kim Joyce:** 11:51

I mean, uh really it's the the I I have not seen such a strong collaboration of all of those folks getting together and in the same room and having the same goal. Um and I I think like it it was a universal understanding that these things impacted all school districts, all populations. And so it was just really um that that was really a great collaboration.

**Shannon Fagan:** 12:18

Yeah, thinking about that work and bringing the community partners partners together, sustainability has always been one of our goals, right? And so I think by pulling in all those people to the table, we were able to brainstorm a bit more. And those partnerships continue today, post-grant funding. So I'm really happy that that keeps going. And I'm happy that you're still available to provide so much, even though in this crazy funding time, there's still services and supports that you have to offer. Correct. So that's really amazing. What

kind of changes have you seen as a result of this work? So but beyond the community partnership, are you seeing any changes to the student population based on you know, we're five how many years out now since COVID? So are you seeing any difference?

**Kim Joyce:** 13:05

I think we're seeing um less prevalence along the lines of truancy and things to that effect that are are rooted in um the emotional aspect um of the after effects of COVID. Um you're still gonna expect that in in in the same volume that was there before, probably. Um, but I think um just in general, uh understanding that um we are not met with the same challenges now that we were back then, and I would like to think that you know this resource has played a little bit, little part in that.

**Shannon Fagan:** 13:39

Yeah. Yeah. So let me ask what challenges you might be facing now at the health department when it comes to integrating and working with schools.

**Kim Joyce:** 13:48

Uh I mean, I think again, it's it's the it's always that challenge of um funding and wanting to be able to provide additional dollars uh so that the schools have the resources. Um so again, while we can't necessarily fund all of the things that we want to fund, um ensuring that we keep that communication piece open and um develop that collaboration so that when the funding is available and we are able to contribute meaningfully in whether that be services or dollars, that we already have that connection piece established.

**Shannon Fagan:** 14:24

Got it. Yeah. How can educators, parents, or community members get involved or support the work of the health department?

**Kim Joyce:** 14:31

I mean, I think if as long as they know that the the work is happening or the services are available, um advocacy is is great. Um as you're aware, working with the school districts, um, they are so busy, they have so much on their plate. And so any way that we can help to step in and assist with these services or um, you know, work closely with them uh, you know, as an example, so if we've got a school district with a lower than average uh percent of immunization, um, in order to try and help that school district get to uh assuming that it's uh an access-to-service issue, our team is willing to bring the service to the school. And so just um knowing that access avail is available and um you know trying to to work closely with our community to get those services there.

**Shannon Fagan:** 15:23

Wonderful. And I know you do a lot, or the health department does a lot around just wellness in general. And so your five-year plan had a lot to do with the parks and getting people out and walking and moving. And so how is that going? And how, again, can we get that information out to families that there are opportunities to use these places?

**Kim Joyce:** 15:45

Aaron Powell Absolutely. So I think uh, you know, the plan for a healthier Allegheny um is a resource and it is exactly what it sounds. It's a plan for a healthier Allegheny County, and so it is not a plan that's just owned by the department. And so uh anybody can contribute to the well-being and the improvement of these processes or access to parks. And um so if there's ever feedback that you guys have or that any you're hearing or that you think that will be impactful, um, I think that we could collaborate and try to understand how um the health department plays a role in that, how uh the community plays a role in that, and how we meet in the middle in those processes. Um again, our Live Well Allegheny team is striving to make sure that they are creating better habits and more access and things like that in in communities that truly need it.

**Shannon Fagan:** 16:38

Yeah. I think that's one of the fascinating pieces that as I learn more, and I've been in the mental health field for 30-some years, but I'm doing a lot more work on how nutrition, how exercise affects mental wellness too. And so having those opportunities and being able to promote like healthy eating, making sure you have enough water, getting enough sleep, our kids need that.

**Kim Joyce:** 17:01

For sure. And so I think that's uh, you know, when I think about the programming that the health department offers, the WIC program starts from um the mother's pregnancy until the age of five, just to try and make sure that we're instilling those healthy habits and getting um children and families fed on the earlier side with healthy foods and starting that foundation on the front end. Yeah.

**Shannon Fagan:** 17:23

So needed. So again, I really appreciate you coming in, Kim. Are there any other pieces or aspects that you want to share with us?

**Kim Joyce:** 17:31

Um I think I've hit all of the talking points that I had prepared. Um, but if anybody has any additional questions, they should not hesitate to reach out.

**Shannon Fagan:** 17:40

Yep. The health department is there for you. It is a resource, and our schools are participating and getting that information. The school nurses are there for you. They connect with the health department too, so please, you know, ask your school nurse as well. But definitely reach out to the health department if you have any questions about what we talked about today. Oh, Kim, it's so wonderful to have you here today. I just really enjoy working with you guys and learning so much about the activities and things that the health department can do.

**Kim Joyce:** 18:07

Well, thanks so much to you and all of your teams, and uh, it's been great. Yes, thanks. Have a great day.

**Shannon Fagan:** 18:21

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