

EIC Podcast - Episode 22 - EPIS and PCCD

[00:00:00] **Michael Donovan:** Welcome to the Evidence-to-Impact podcast, podcast that brings together academic researchers and government and practitioner partners to talk about research, insights, and real-world policy solutions in Pennsylvania and beyond.

[00:00:11] I'm Michael Donovan, the associate Director of the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative here at Penn State. In this episode, we'll be discussing a long-term partnership, connecting research policy, and real-world practice between university and government collaborators. My guests today include Janet Welsh, research professor at the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center here at Penn State, and also principal investigator of EPIS, or the Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support and SPEP, or the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol.

[00:00:44] We also have Geoff Kolchin, deputy Director of the Unit of Violence Prevention Initiatives in the Office of Justice Programs at PCCD, or the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

[00:00:56] So to get us kicked off, Janet, could you give us a little bit of an introduction yourself?

[00:01:00] **Janet Welsh:** Sure. Thanks Michael. Yeah, my name is Janet Welsh. I am a research professor in the College of Health and Human Development in the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Penn State. I have been here for 27 years as a prevention scientist.

[00:01:17] My original training was in special education and developmental psychology, and I got into prevention because early in my career, I worked a lot with kids with really severe problems kids with significant disabilities, kids with behavioral problems, severe family problems, things like that. And I found that many of those issues that these children and their families were facing were very hard to change. And that sometimes, despite all of our best efforts, there were kind of tragic outcomes for these kids and their families. I found myself wondering a lot what would've happened if we could have prevented this problem from ever happening.

[00:02:05] And when I had the opportunity to become involved more heavily involved in prevention when Mark Greenberg came to Penn State from the University of Washington and opened the Prevention Research Center some

doors opened for me as well in, in terms of being more on the prevention end of things, particularly involved with universal prevention initiatives, research projects that were at that time kind of about establishing the evidence base for certain interventions. And I found that that I really enjoyed that work.

[00:02:42] **Michael Donovan:** Wonderful. Thank you. Great context and kind of scene setting here on, on your trajectory. Jeff, could you give us a little bit of an introduction for us?

[00:02:50] **Geoff Kolchin:** Sure thing. I went to college for Government and Economics and then followed that up. I got my Master's in Public Policy Analysis from the University of Rochester back in the early nineties.

[00:03:00] And when I went through my course of studies, it was basically apply cost, benefit analysis. How do you measure the impact of programming and what are you getting out of for the the dollars that are invested? I kind of became fascinated with getting involved with government work to help advance best practices, how to find the best use of scarce resources to help the greatest number of people.

[00:03:24] So I started working for the state of Pennsylvania in 1997. I started out at the state legislature for a number of years moved into the Healthcare Cost Containment Council for several years, and in 2005 I moved over to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, PCCD, talk about serendipity.

[00:03:42] I applied blindly through civil service, had the opportunity to interview with our now executive director Mike Pennington. And was granted the opportunity to come work for for his office at the time as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. I started out as a grant manager, basically overseeing the grants that were awarded through PCCD on a variety of different topics throughout the Commonwealth.

[00:04:07] And as the years went by, I developed a very strong interest in prevention. How do we invest in preventing problems from occurring in the first place rather than the more expensive course of dealing with the impacts on youth, on families, on communities after the problems occur? So since the mid two thousands, that's kind of been my role.

[00:04:29] I've had the privilege to grow in my position taking on more responsibility and really now am overseeing a lot of the the prevention work, especially the early what we call upstream prevention, uh, that PCCD funds.

And again it's the idea of supporting communities in using their local data to drive decision making.

[00:04:48] We refer to it as data-driven decision making. What are your local needs identified by local data and how do you make investments to help your kids, your family, your community? So that's kind of how I got to where I am now.

[00:05:02] **Michael Donovan:** Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you both for being here today. There's so many wonderful parallels to discuss and different trajectories to get at some of the same challenges and broad big picture, wicked problems that we encounter in society.

[00:05:14] I wondered if Janet, could you give us a rundown on EPIS in general, and then I wonder as well for our listeners, could you describe kind of day in the life of a prevention scientist, right? What does prevention science mean? We talk about prevention.

[00:05:28] We have it colloquially understood, but let's talk about really what it means in a rigorous environment.

[00:05:33] **Janet Welsh:** Okay. I'll start with that. The first point EPIS is an opportunity, I guess I would say to translate what we've learned from research into the real world, right? Research is great, but if it doesn't ever get out of the ivory tower, then what good has it done right?

[00:05:55] And the idea behind is to collaborate with government who can dictate policies and provide resources for communities around using those funds and guiding those policies with science. And then also recognizing that just telling communities to use certain evidence-based programs or practices or policies isn't really enough to get the outcomes that they're looking for.

[00:06:30] That a lot of times communities that are implementing these interventions need some assistance in doing them. In ways that are gonna maximize their effectiveness. And so EPIS also provides technical assistance and evaluation support to communities that are implementing prevention programs.

[00:06:52] You know, when I say implementation, it's like how are you doing with the program? Are you getting all the sessions done? Do you have people trained? Are you able to understand the manual? Are you running into some obstacle that you didn't anticipate? Cuz that's very common in, in the real world, right?

[00:07:11] Things are messy in a way that they aren't always in, in research. And can we help you to collect data and organize it and understand it in ways that meet your goals as a community or as a provider? So that's what EPIS does. It's a resource around those. Those things with prevention, science behind it in terms of what a day in the life of a prevention scientist is like. It's a lot of face time with lots of different stakeholders with people in different sectors, whether they be the juvenile justice system, the mental health system, the education system helping community members figure out what it is they're trying to accomplish and the best ways to do that.

[00:07:59] Most of the time it's great, right? It's given me the opportunity to meet and work together with people from all different types of communities. I've had the opportunity to work. With communities all throughout Pennsylvania but also I've collaborated with people in other states, so lots of communities in Iowa, we had the PROSPER project.

[00:08:23] I've had the opportunity to to work with the US military quite a bit around there, programs for families and service members. I've had the opportunity to engage with tribal communities around their goals for early childhood and things like that. And those have all been amazing experiences.

[00:08:41] Occasionally it's not so great, right? Like sometimes you have to tell somebody you really shouldn't be using this program because it could cause more harm than good and people aren't always receptive to that message, right? And on those days, it can be kind of a bummer to be a prevention scientist.

[00:09:01] **Michael Donovan:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, showcases the complexity of a dynamic role that kind of really is at the intersection of many sectors and communities all with the goal of trying to prevent something from happening that has a deleterious outcome.

[00:09:14] I'd love to hear from Jeff a little bit we talked a little bit about your role at PCCD as it developed over time. But I'd love to hear a little bit more about the broader portfolio of programs that PCCD operates as well. And then I'd love to tie it all together and have the discussion of how these two lines of work really intersect. Could you talk about some of the portfolio of PCCD?

[00:09:34] **Geoff Kolchin:** Absolutely. PCCD is an independent commission under the governor's executive offices. We are overseen by a commissioner. We have approximately 30, 35 commissioners. Our current chairman is the now Lieutenant Governor, Lieutenant Governor Davis who was nominated by Governor Shapiro to lead the commission.

[00:09:53] And we work in a variety of areas. We are tasked with the coordination of the Commonwealth's juvenile and criminal justice systems, helping to figure out best practices, ways to evaluate what's going well, what can be done better and what approaches if we do want to make improvements would we recommend.

[00:10:10] And that's both through policy to other stakeholders at the legislature, the governor's office, and other state agencies, as well as looking to put funding out and on a variety of different initiatives which are for the most part competitively released. We go through a very regimented process to ensure that the funding announcements that we review are asking the questions we need to know to ensure that the money we award which comes from the taxpayers is going to achieve the goals of that funding announcement.

[00:10:41] More recently, over the last five or six years we formed our school Safety and Security Committee. This was a legislative initiative to improve the safety and security of our schools. This came out of a number of the the tragic events throughout the nation where there were fatalities in schools. So the legislature wanted us to kind of spearhead the approach of getting money out into the field to help our schools meet the needs. One of the most interesting things that came from that is the fact that our schools not only were looking for funds to deal with physical security, but also emotional and mental supports for their students.

[00:11:14] We saw in our analyses that there was a large amount of mental health concerns that our schools were dealing with, some of which unfortunately led to these tragic events. We heard from our schools that there was issues with bullying, with suicidal ideation, depression and anxiety all these things which impacted the school climate.

[00:11:32] So through our School Safety and Security Committee and our other partners with Department of Education, Department of Drug and Alcohol Program. Department of Human Services, the Attorney General's office, just a wide range of state level decision makers. We've been able to really ramp up our support for the field in both the physical and the the mental health areas for schools.

[00:11:52] PCCD also is tasked with heading up a gun violence prevention initiative, looking to take funds, legislature, appropriates to target a variety of gun violence issues. Obviously the most concerning areas are those of interpersonal violence. We saw the huge spike over the course of the pandemic with shootings increasing, but also looking at suicide. One of the most surprising things I think I found with this work was more people die from self-inflicted gun wounds than from interpersonal violence. So the interpersonal

violence is absolutely important because it has a kind of carryover effect into the communities, making it less safe victimization of the families of gun victims, as well as other bystanders and things like that.

[00:12:36] But there also is that need to address how do we, again, go back to that mental health issue? How do we identify people that may be struggling in life. How do we help them so that they do not become a victim themselves or perpetrate victimization upon others.

[00:12:52] The final major area that we have is our victim services and victim's compensation. PCCD is tasked with providing services to the victims of crime, and that's both adult crime and juvenile crime. So our our victims staff are diligent and hardworking individuals that really take time to empathize with the communities that are impacted by crime and help try to make them whole again.

[00:13:20] The work that I do is in the area of juvenile justice and delinquency prevention. And I always like to stress that's kind of an important dynamic. We help to support our local juvenile probation offices. There's one in every county. As well as working with the Juvenile Court Judges Commission supporting the judges that hear the cases by juvenile perpetrators.

[00:13:38] But we also have really done a lot of work over the years. Typically what's known as balanced and restorative justice BARJ. And the idea is that there is a kind of a three-legged stool that on which the juvenile justice system rest in Pennsylvania, it's not just punishing youth.

[00:13:54] It's recognizing that youth by the fact that their age may not be fully cognizant of the ramifications of their actions. So, there are three components to that. There is public protection making sure that the public is safe from juvenile offenders and their crimes victim restoration trying to help make victims whole again when they do suffer the impact of crime.

[00:14:13] But the important third leg of that stool is what we refer to as competency development. How do we help these youth that may have committed an offense? Learn from their actions and prevent what's known as recidivism, committing a crime again in the future. And that's everything from helping them with mental health issues to helping them complete their degree or find employment to dealing with with family dynamics that maybe may be problematic.

[00:14:37] They may not have a support system in their communities to dealing with things such as drug and alcohol abuse. So it's a very comprehensive approach that we're very glad to be part of. The other side of it, which we'll talk

about a little more in this conversation, is that delinquency prevention it's important to help the system deal with issues of crime perpetrated by juveniles.

[00:14:56] But how do we get ahead of that curve? How do we get upstream and stop that behavior from occur from in occurring in the first place? And that's kind of the role that I've taken. The Office of Justice Programs, which which Michael referred to, has three units. We have the unit of criminal justice system improvement.

[00:15:14] We have the unit of juvenile justice, and then my unit, which is the unit of Violence Prevention initiatives. And all three of those work together to in the best interests of the Commonwealth bringing together stakeholders from across the spectrum, which is how I've had the privilege to work with Janet and EPIS over the years in the area of prevention.

[00:15:32] But PCCD really feels a niche in terms of being that that the hub of coordinating these efforts As I mentioned, we do have an independent commission, which oversees our work. So it helps us to really be an area where best ideas can be funded and advanced to help the citizens of Pennsylvania at large.

[00:15:58] **Michael Donovan:** Thank you, Jeff. Wow. What a comprehensive overview of a really unbelievable amount of effort and and operations in different domains too, I think you put it really well where you mentioned it was kind of a hub for coordination because wow. You're talking about education; you're talking about mental and emotional health you're talking about the intersection with criminal justice and juvenile justice systems. It's remarkable what you all do and how much is is under your purview. Thank you for that.

[00:16:25] I do want to talk a little bit about, and you kind of teed up well there, Jeff, about the intersection with EPIS and PCCD and that historical relationship that is now many years in.

[00:16:36] I don't know if Jeff, you wanna tee us up on the history here in this relationship and where it really all began.

[00:16:43] **Geoff Kolchin:** Sure. Our history of prevention goes back to the mid nineties where PCCD was awarded some federal dollars to do community prevention initiatives, looking to strengthen our communities to work locally in order to improve the welfare of their citizens.

[00:16:58] We chose what was known as the communities, the care model or CTC to use those funds over the course of about a decade, we funded about 135

different communities across the state to implement that. Janet had mentioned before about Dr. Mark Greenberg who was really instrumental in bringing that model to Pennsylvania.

[00:17:16] And it's kind of an organizing system. It's not a program per se, but it really serves to, to help a community. Use data to identify their local needs, determine who needs to be at the table to address those needs, determine what resources are available and what are missing and what the problems are.

[00:17:32] Janet discussed the idea about not every program is appropriate for every community. What communities of care really helps you do is identify what the needs of your community are, however you define that. It could be a neighborhood, it could be a town, it could be a county, it could be a larger entity than that.

[00:17:52] But it's using that local data rather than just going with kind of the the issue dujour we've said in the past, what is the issue that, that gets the most national headlines, and let's address that. It may be that you wanna address opioid addiction among your middle school students.

[00:18:06] Or the data might say that you're not, that's not the biggest thing facing them. It may be bullying them, may be early onset of substance use. So helping our communities organize and identify that really was the beginning of the partnership between PCCD and EPIS. Out of that partnership, PCCD used to have kind of a wide range of availability of funds, pretty much if you came in for funding and it made sense in the application, we would award you funding.

[00:18:30] What we found is that we really were not qualified to judge the impact or the quality of those programs we were funding. Over the course of the mid two thousands we formed what was known the resource center for prevention, where we had key stakeholders from across state agencies come together to try to better focus our efforts.

[00:18:50] We, we cut the list of programs that were eligible to a more limited list that we were better able to support. And in 2008, we released a competitive funding announcement seeking an entity to serve as the Technical Assistance hub for the Commonwealth and Penn State applied and formed at the time EPIS Center, now EPIS to provide that support.

[00:19:11] They support the communities of care effort that we continue to to fund throughout Pennsylvania. They support a set list of programs and they also do a lot of work in kind of the intervention juvenile justice field which Janet can get into. You mentioned the SPEP before, which is really the main focus of our

efforts around that. But that's kind of where we got, we wanted to really bring best practices of prevention that Penn State and the Prevention Research Center was able to help educate us on again, so that when we're spending dollars, we have a high level of confidence that the dollars will achieve their intended effect.

[00:19:43] And that is really the role that EPIS has filled for us and really taught us a lot over the years.

[00:19:47] **Michael Donovan:** That's wonderful. I love to hear focus on, accountability for those dollars and ensuring that they're being directed to effective programming. Janet, do you wanna give us kind of your perspective on the longer term partnership?

[00:19:59] **Janet Welsh:** I think Jeff summarized it very well. He gave very good brief history of the collaboration. And the only thing I would add is that it has evolved over time. It, it started with a group of programs, but as any dynamic system needs changed and in what communities were saying, the data that we were getting back from different communities was suggesting, okay, we're gonna have to broaden our scope a little bit.

[00:20:26] PCCD expressed an interest in broadening the reach because they have the. They have the mandate to, to serve the whole state, right? And not just a few people who are good at writing grants and make resources broadly available. In, in the time that I've been with EPIS, which has been about five years there's been some really interesting things that happened.

[00:20:51] PCCD has created, for example, an initiative that was designed to bring underserved communities who often weren't able to write grant applications as well as others were into the fold, so to speak, and to come under the the technical assistance provi provision of EPIS to get some coalition support, to get initiatives moving in those communities, places that we hadn't historically worked with.

[00:21:22] And that has gone very well. That, that's called the Community Capacity Building Initiative. So yes, the Community Coalition Capacity Building Grants for underserved communities that's been really very interesting.

[00:21:40] And I think very productive work that's been going on. We've recently tried to COVID taught us a lot about what you can do remotely, right? And so a lot of our work now is in creating this very broad reach online through courses and webinars and all kinds of things in.

[00:22:03] The fields of prevention and implementation science that can reach different, broadly reach people from different sectors at different levels, right? So not everybody needs a three day training and a particular E B P. Some people just need a very light touch orientation as to what is prevention science and why it's important, and then they can maybe mobilize whoever it is that they supervise to get a little deeper in with, we need to find out more about this.

[00:22:34] We need to be sure that what we're doing is evidence-based. We need to be sure we're paying attention to implementation quality. We need to be sure we're evaluating what we do, those kinds of things. So we've kind of gone in that direction recently too. So the work has been ever evolving, I would say based on community needs.

[00:22:53] Jeff talked a lot about the data on gun violence, also on mental health. At one point we all sat down and said, yeah, the schools are telling us that kids are reporting high levels of distress, anxiety, depression. What are we gonna do about that? And so we went and identified a number of prevention programs that are, have those types of outcomes as their focus, right?

[00:23:16] So that, that's just an example of how how we've evolved and what I've tried to do with folks at EPIS is to convey the importance of that type of flexibility that we need to be responsive to, to change and that we need to be willing to adapt and meet whatever the latest challenge is.

[00:23:36] **Michael Donovan:** I really appreciate the systems level approach to identify, where funding is going, as you mentioned to great grant writers and you can recognize every year as the money is flowing to some of the usual suspects. And trying to expand that reach to communities that may not have that kind of competency is really valuable.

[00:23:53] And then that requirement to be agile as we scale up is also such a challenge as well. Especially as we each live within bureaucracies that resist adaptation. So that has a kind of a living mantra in both organizations is really vital. I can see. We've talked about a few success stories. Are there any other that you wanna highlight before we bring out barriers and how we overcome them? Anything else?

[00:24:16] **Geoff Kolchin:** I think Janet really hit it on the head about the flexibility. The more widespread support kind of came out of as we started to get these additional funding streams in and being tasked with expanding the reach of PCCD.

[00:24:30] We recognize that not everyone is as well versed in prevention science or the use of data or the importance of implementing programs with fidelity as they were evaluated. Over the course of the remainder of 2023, we'll be rolling out a a wonderful initiative in partnership with EPIS around a variety of prevention learning modules.

[00:24:50] And that's what Janet kind of touched on it around what is prevention science and why is data I. And how do I set goals so I know if I'm achieving what I want, I set out to achieve how do I engage youth in what I'm doing? How do I ensure that what I'm doing fits in with other work in my community?

[00:25:07] How do I partner with other stakeholders? How do I look for to sustain programming? How do I, collect outcomes that show not just how many people I serve, but what was the impact on those clients, on those people that the program was targeting to assist? How do I know that there actually was an improvement in their lives?

[00:25:25] So I think that is a success. It's ongoing, we can say. But that's something that, that we're very proud of the work we've done to date and we look forward to rolling that out. The only other thing I would say is the partnership across agencies. The fact that we've been able to fund EPIS for going on for, geez, 15 years now.

[00:25:43] I can't believe that! The Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families has provided consistent funding going back to 2008 to support this initiative because they also value it. We manage it, we work directly with EPIS but it has that flexibility.

[00:25:58] The EPIS staff is very much of a can-do team. If we get a request from the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs for assistance around improving the use of county drug and alcohol agencies when they want help deciding where their funds should go, what sorts of programs EPIS has been there when the Department of Education has wanted modules to help their teachers learn more about prevention.

[00:26:19] EPIS produces a series for PCCD as well Department of Human Services. We look forward to partnering with them on the rollout of the Family's First Initiative later this year. Family's First aims to keep keep kids out of dependency. How do we build family supports to keep kids in their homes rather than taking them outta their homes for placement?

[00:26:36] So it just the success I would say is just this ongoing willingness to adapt to what the needs of Pennsylvanians are. And the willingness of everyone to come together and, work towards that goal kind of row in the same direction. That's one of the successes I've seen I in my time with PCCD.

[00:26:53] Janet, anything to add there?

[00:26:56] **Janet Welsh:** Yes, I, I think there's been tremendous successes and I think our ability to sort of look at, okay, here's the current situation, here's the current challenge. I think Covid really upended the way we do business and prevention, right?

[00:27:11] Like we were in communities, we were so focused on face-to-face program delivery working with families and kids, and community members schools, right? And then all of a sudden none of that was possible. Covid shut that all down. And I remember sitting there, for the first month or so after March 2020, in April 2020, thinking, doing a lot of twiddling my thumbs.

[00:27:39] And I think I built a few jigsaw puzzles. And then I'm like no. We gotta do something. We can't just sit here, do nothing. And so, with the traditional ways blocked, we found other ways, right? And we started thinking about, all right, let's, but would it take to deliver this program online?

[00:27:55] Would people come; would they like it? And how do we hold learning community meetings in Zoom and not in person all the time? We had to figure all that out and we did. And now not only, having gotten through that. We have those resources that we created during that, that are now gonna be available forever.

[00:28:15] And we know that yes, if we want to go back to face-to-face, sometimes we can do that. We don't need to. There's times where we can do these other things. I think we've learned a lot through these experiences and being able to try new things and engage new partners.

[00:28:30] As Jeff said, we work with the justice system. We work with the mental health system, we work with the PDE, we work with drug and alcohol and we're willing to have a part, a conversation with anybody who comes along and try and figure out, we're not always the best person to help.

[00:28:46] There are people who know a lot more about gun violence initiatives than we do at EPIS, right? And so, we'll say and talk to these people at the University of Chicago they know a lot in New Haven, Yale, right? They know a lot about this. But not too long ago, Jeff, you and I had that conversation with

the guy from the federal Department of Justice and he was trying to understand the landscape of prevention and intervention programming around drug and alcohol in Pennsylvania.

[00:29:14] And so he called us, right? And we sat down and talked to him about, okay, here's what we know, here's what we do. And send him on his way, even though, he wasn't anybody who would've been on our radar ordinarily,

[00:29:27] **Michael Donovan:** That's great. It's important to remain open to new collaborations and opportunities. Yeah. So, we talked a little bit about, know, the necessity to remain agile and flexible both individually and also organizationally. We talked about the necessity for changing modalities for program delivery with fidelity and face of major challenges such as covid and other challenges, but supplemented by new technologies, which is a wonderful thing that we've been able to do.

[00:29:51] Another big challenge that we always encounter in this space is around communicating the value of prevention. This can sometimes be characterized by the wrong pockets problem where some of the resources that are accrued as a result of preventing future problems actually go into the pockets of a different public system than the one doing it.

[00:30:14] And that can be really challenging to address and as two stalwart evangelists for prevention. I wonder what you've learned over the years on how to communicate the value of prevention from a fiscal perspective and also from, the more down to earth rubber meets the road perspective as well.

[00:30:30] **Geoff Kolchin:** I think you really hit it on the head is trying to help explain the importance of prevention and why the investment is so valuable is difficult. We refer to it as you're trying to prove it negative. You're trying to say if you hadn't had these programs, X, y, and Z would've occurred, and you can get the question how do you know they would've occurred?

[00:30:52] They might not have. So why should we invest upfront? I always like to use the old Benjamin Franklin phrase an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. You can invest a little bit now, or if you choose not to, you can spend a lot later.

[00:31:05] Prevention impacts a whole variety of stakeholders. If you don't prevent problem behaviors, you end up spending more money in treatment for drug and alcohol, you'll spend more money in juvenile justice, probation placement court time. The same with adult justice. If you don't help get these kids back on the right track, they can grow up to be adult offenders.

[00:31:27] In all the Department Corrections costs they come along with that. If you have kids that aren't engaged with their schools and drop out, that's a loss of a contributing member of society and people not getting to the point where they're successful in their own lives.

[00:31:42] If you don't help families understand that using harsh discipline really is not the best approach, you can increase dependency cost. So all these sorts of things we try to do by showing that if you invest now in this early prevention, it has cost savings to all these different expenses, the counties and the state at large have to pay for at some point if the if the behaviors are not prevented.

[00:32:08] **Janet Welsh:** Jeff hit it. I feel like it's a fundamental conundrum that we have in prevention because you're basically talking about things that haven't happened yet.

[00:32:19] And when we do our job well in prevention, then nothing happens. And that is not headline material. And I often use the metaphor from my personal life where I volunteer as a firefighter and whenever there's a fire.

[00:32:37] It's right on the front page of the paper, right? They show the house in flames. There was smoke coming out, but you never see on the front page of the paper, all the houses that didn't burn down because they had good fire prevention systems, right? You never see that.

[00:32:54] You never see a headline that says Fire prevented in this house by sprinkler system. And that's kind of what we're up against in prevention. That when things go well because of our interventions working, people don't really see it. All they see is healthy kids and families and communities.

[00:33:13] They don't see the counterfactual. What would've happened if we hadn't done these things, right? And so, I think that is one thing that makes prevention inherently challenging. Even though people intuitively know it's worth something, right? And people all know the phrase, pay me now or pay me later, right? Which is basically what you're saying in prevention, pay a little bit an hour, pay a lot later in, in some cases. So, I, I don't know really what to do about that.

[00:33:40] I think that's a fundamental conundrum. I think our relationships with economists in the past, 20 years or so, 25 years, that prevention economics has become a thing, has been very important. And I think that's what you're talking about, Jeff, with results first is being able to quantify what you know exactly your savings.

[00:34:03] In terms of societal cost, let alone human cost, right? When you implement effective prevention programs on a large scale and occasionally, people who primarily deal in dollars, will pay attention to that, right? That happened in Washington with the original WSIPP study, right?

[00:34:23] The idea of if we tried this juvenile prevention program, we might only have to build one new prison, right? But lo and behold, they didn't have to build any, and that's the kind of thing that I think can really advance our cause. I think that's been a good way to go in the field or one, one good way to go.

[00:34:44] **Geoff Kolchin:** Yeah, Janet, I think you hit it right in the head. The results first study was a nation, a nationwide initiative from the Pew Foundation. And Janet referred to the WSIPP study, which is the Washington State Institute of Public Policy where they basically did a lot of research and analysis to determine the in absence of a program, what would occur, what cost would occur to to the state at large or to the county, whoever's was the the unit of analysis.

[00:35:11] And that's what that study tried to do. The WSIPP study was basically saying, if you implement program X, you will save this amount of money. And going back to, to, to my history I fell in love with this initiative because it's cost benefit analysis. It's how much do you need to invest and if you invest that, what will you save?

[00:35:30] And how will those savings accrue to society at large? So we participated EPIS and PCCD kind of spearheaded that. We had a lot of help from Juvenile Court Judges Commission Department of Sentencing, Department of Corrections and the Legislature as well. Basically trying to look at the programs we funded and we saw just the dramatic return on investment.

[00:35:51] The amount of benefits accrued to Pennsylvania far outweigh the amount of money we invested in those programs. And so, we were able to kind of show that, that idea that if you're looking at it from a dollar perspective, if you're making budgetary decisions, prevention makes sense.

[00:36:09] We're looking to kind of, get back into that work again. And, the other thing that, that we have a very strong network of coalitions throughout Pennsylvania local communities that are not taking their marching orders from the state.

[00:36:21] It's not PCCD saying you must do this program. It's again, using that communities of care model coming together with their own local stakeholders, using their own local data to determine what the needs of their kids and families

really are. So what our coalitions have really started honing in on is not just saying prevention should be invested in but trying to come up with a hard ask for their local legislators.

[00:36:43] So that there is something concrete to ask and what the message that they've landed on is what we've referred to as the 1% solution. And it's as simple as the legislature should appropriate the equivalent of 1% of the annual Department of Corrections budget towards early upstream prevention, investing in these programs that can stop people from being incarcerated down the road.

[00:37:08] The Department of Correction budget was just over 2.6 billion this past year. That's 26 million that would go directly into these early prevention efforts to offset the problems to help our kids and help their families succeed and, become productive members of society.

[00:37:23] It's much better to have someone as a tax paying upstanding citizen who's part of their community raising healthy kids rather than being involved with the system for whatever system that may be, whatever their problems and their issues are.

[00:37:36] So that's something that we're very proud of our local communities for embracing that message and doing that outreach to their local legislators.

[00:37:43] **Michael Donovan:** I really appreciate the effort you all do to bring in coalitions from communities recognizing that context matters, and implementation is going to be looking different in different communities. And yes as our listeners know we're deeply involved in the results first work here at the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative as well.

[00:38:00] So looking forward to continued conversations with Jeff and PCCD as we go forward. Very exciting opportunities on the horizon. I do think with the transition in the government here in Pennsylvania I do wanna think about, what do we expect on the horizon for this partnership?

[00:38:16] And maybe this type of work in particular this cross-sectoral government and academic kind of partnership. I don't know if Jeff, you had thoughts on that as the dust settles on the inauguration of Governor Shapiro.

[00:38:28] **Geoff Kolchin:** Yeah, absolutely. We welcome the opportunity to work with the new administration in terms of a past history. Now Governor Shapiro was the chairman of the Commission on Crime and Delinquency. So, he is well versed in the work that we do and the impact that we can have and the well thought out objective way we go about funding.

[00:38:46] So I'm looking forward to that opportunity. From my perspective to get prevention on the administration's radar. Hopefully being able to gain their support for some of our initiatives and help them again understand how this can benefit the work they're trying to do.

[00:38:59] I think we're making the connections with the new secretaries at the various agencies the deputy secretaries who we tend to work with on a much more direct basis be it children, youth and families at Department of Human Services, or the Office of Safe Schools at Department of Education.

[00:39:13] Looking for those partners that we can really continue to build on what we've done and keep the governor and his team informed about successes we have and where we can really use their support in a variety of initiatives, not just in prevention but juvenile justice reform, criminal justice reform the support for mental health and school safety and addressing gun violence.

[00:39:32] All these areas that PCCD has been tasked with overseeing. We've joked over the last five or six years that we've become victims of our own success. PCCD has been seen as a fair arbitrator of dollars. We have a great monitoring process in place to assure that the people we fund are doing what they were awarded funds to do with the dollars that PCCD gives out in grants.

[00:39:54] So when the legislature and the prior administration, Governor Wolf's administration had new initiatives, they came to PCCD and we're very proud of that. We're very proud that our work is viewed in such high esteem. And I do wanna give major credit and props to our executive director, Mike Pennington has worked his way from victim services at PCCD all the way up to being our leader and really has taken all the lessons he'd learned along the way to advocate for the work we do. And to wave the flag for the successes PCCD has had over the years.

[00:40:29] **Michael Donovan:** Janet, what do you see on the horizon?

[00:40:31] **Janet Welsh:** I'm not nearly as knowledgeable about politics as Jeff but it does seem because Governor Shapiro came from the ags office he is very familiar with PCCD'S work and by extension as well. I think that's really bodes well for us.

[00:40:51] I feel like at EPIS we try to be very deliverable focused. When somebody asks us at PCCD or DDAP or wherever to do something, we try to be very clear about, okay, what is it that we need to do? And we're gonna do it right. Let's be very deliverable oriented.

[00:41:10] I feel like that people appreciate that, right? It helps them to feel like you're worth their money, right? This is taxpayer money that we're using, and we need to be very aware of that and use it responsibly and do what we are supposed to do with it. And I also think that the Shapiro administration seems very open to the things that we care about at the university, like data, right?

[00:41:38] And scientific impact and all of those things that I think are very important to make progress, to move the needle on big problems. But not everybody is like that. And so I think we're lucky to have an administration right now that seems to be focused on those kinds of things.

[00:41:56] **Michael Donovan:** Janet, you took the words right outta my mouth because I was really thinking about data, right? I'm thinking about how are we getting the decisions, the information that informs our decisions. And I know that Pennsylvania has a really unique system here from the PAYS, Pennsylvania Youth Survey report.

[00:42:14] So I wondered if you guys could just discuss a little bit about how that informs prevention how it informs decision making at the state level and how it's really being used today.

[00:42:23] **Geoff Kolchin:** Yeah, sure thing, Michael.

[00:42:25] The Pennsylvania Youth Survey and I'll put my my project leader hat on. I've had the honor of serving as the project leader for PAYS since 2009. It's a biannual survey given in the the fall of the odd years to students in the sixth, eighth, 10th, and 12th grades.

[00:42:40] We do it that way because it allows us to track the same cohort of kids as they go through their academic careers. A kid that takes in sixth grade, we're take in eighth, we're take in 10th, we're take in 12th. That really lot of fee kind of changes over time. The impact of prevention programs and helps to really provide just an invaluable source of data PAYS, provides information about attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge, what our kids think, what they know and what they believe about substance use and other problem behaviors.

[00:43:09] It also provides information around the risk our kids are facing. Not just what behaviors they're engaging in, but the why they engage in behaves why they engage in those behaviors as well as the protections that are available in their communities and their schools in their families. So it really allows local decision makers to have data directly from their youth to identify programs that can address the risk before the problems occur.

[00:43:34] Again, getting ahead of the curve, getting upstream, all those things we've talked about earlier around prevention. And it provides local data. It's not state data, it's not national data. It's the, your kids speaking directly to your policy makers at the school, at the community levels to help them figure out how they could best support them by reducing risk and building protections.

[00:43:58] That's the the yin and yang of it is you want kids to face less risk through positive prevention programming, but you also want more supports. You want more opportunities for pro-social involvement. So they don't feel the need to get engaged in these kind of negative approaches to life.

[00:44:13] They can get engaged in more positive opportunities, whatever that may be. It could be sports programs or drama or music or boys scouts and girl scouts or engagement with their church or choirs or whatever the case may be. Those sorts of things where they can really find interests that are more positive in their adolescent development rather than engaging in substance abuse or violence, delinquency, all the things that, that we are, we're trying to offset.

[00:44:39] Things have been done since 1989 in Pennsylvania since 2013. It's been offered at no charge to any school district. Or we refer to 'em as other schools private, parochial, charter cyber that wishes to take part and do so at no charge to them. This is done through a partnership of PCCD, Department of Education, Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs.

[00:45:02] And we've been providing this funding because we believe that using data to determine the needs can help more kids, but also have those dollars stretched further. You're not putting a program in place that's not meeting the needs of your kids. So PAYS is essential to that point.

[00:45:18] From a statewide planning area, I talked earlier about how we've identified mental health as a priority for the funding of PCCD and some of our partner agencies as well. A lot of that came out of the pay data. We've seen increasing rates of students reporting being sad and depressed most days over the last year in 10th and 12th grades, that number is now over 40% of our students are saying that they're depressed every single day. For the last year, we're also seeing suicidal ideation creep over 20%. And this is staggering information that we were able to get from the PAYS data and use it to guide our funding priorities and put funding out to help our schools, help our communities, help their kids.

[00:46:00] We had 385 of our 500 school districts took part. This past administration we're gearing up for the administration again this fall. And just to put a little plug in www.PAYS.Pa.gov is the website the form, the register, your school or your school district will be up online later this spring.

[00:46:20] But we're looking forward to partnering with our schools to administer the survey. The survey is a holistic view of the kids' life it's given in the schools, because that's where the kids are. It's not a reflection on the schools. It's not saying the schools have to fix everything.

[00:46:35] We know that it takes everyone in a kiddo's life to really make a positive impact. And that's that holistic approach is the community domain. What's going on in the town that, or the neighborhood they live in, what's going on in their families? How can we support those families to help their youth take positive role models, give them support, give them rewards for engaging in those positive behaviors?

[00:46:58] How do we help our schools? And then how do we help our kids recognize what they want to do to succeed? And engage with positive peers and strengthen the things they like about themselves to better achieve their goals in life.

[00:47:10] **Michael Donovan:** So really an invaluable decision-making tool to inform variety of stakeholders at different levels. It's really vital. Janet, do you have anything you wanted to note on PAYS and the intersection in the, the research community as well?

[00:47:24] **Janet Welsh:** Yeah, I think, PAYS is a really nice example of just a tremendously productive collaboration between PCCD and EPIS.

[00:47:35] I feel like there's a lot behind the scenes that has been done to help people use PAYS in the best way possible. To start with, PAYS is built on. Everything the scientific community could want in prevention, right? It's all built around risk and protective factors.

[00:47:54] It identifies, things that are a threat to development and things that are enhancers of positive outcomes for youth. Almost everything on the PAYS is malleable, potentially, right? That is, if you focused on it whether it's bullying, whether it's kids' mental health, whether it's substance use, these are all things that can be impacted by interventions, right?

[00:48:21] And And so it's useful in that way because you're rarely gonna find any variable on the PAYS where a school or a community person would say, there's nothing we can do about that. The PAYS is designed for action. And there has been a tremendous amount of work put into figuring out how to scaffold communities use of it.

[00:48:41] So what would make it the most useful to those school districts, to those communities? As Jeff said, the value of it is two things. One is that it is local, fully local. It's your kids in your schools that are telling you these things. It's not, the whole state of Pennsylvania, although there, there are aggregated results as well.

[00:49:02] If you're interested in comparing yourself to other districts and things like that. In the past couple of years, we've developed tools so that people can manipulate the variables somewhat and look at relationships that they might want to, in their own data, make the data set more usable.

[00:49:18] And back to what we were saying earlier about flexibility. Every few years, the this group pay sag, which is the PAYS advisory group, looks at the questions and says, are we still asking the right things? Because as we've already said, issues change. Who'd ever heard of vaping 20 years ago, right?

[00:49:36] There was no such thing. And now it's a big deal, right? And so the PAYS has evolved over time based on issues. But given the diversity of Pennsylvania, we have rural areas, the urban areas, the suburbs, different community norms and sensibilities around what kinds of questions is it even appropriate to ask of kids at certain ages.

[00:49:58] There, there's just been so much effort put into PAYS in terms of making it valuable. The fact that we have such widespread uptake of it is I think entirely attributable to the FaceTime that our staff has put in with communities and school leadership to to engage them in this process cuz it's voluntary, right?

[00:50:24] Schools only do it if they want to and feel that it's valuable. And so the fact that the overwhelming majority of school districts feel that way, I think is reflective of a lot of hard work that's been done on the ground, to convey this information to them. So, I think that the pace is just a really shining success for us.

[00:50:46] And, it just keeps getting better, I think.

[00:50:48] **Michael Donovan:** I do have a question which I tend to ask all of our guests on the show. We've discussed a lot of ways the intersection, the Venn diagram of government practitioners and the academic community. But what are some ways, big picture that you all could see these sectors, these communities working together more effectively and more efficiently in the future?

[00:51:12] You all are great examples of exactly how to do it.

[00:51:16] **Geoff Kolchin:** I think continuing to adapt and grow and not be locked into this is the way we've always done it. And therefore, we're gonna continue to do it that way. So, when you're talking, academia is on the cutting edge of the latest research that can help inform policy makers. And we at PCCD kind of see our role as helping translate that research into policy.

[00:51:41] How do we make recommendations? How do we prioritize funding? How do we help those people with the purse strings? Understand the importance of the work that's being done to help their communities and the, their constituents, the people they're elected to serve.

[00:51:57] So I think in Pennsylvania we're very blessed to have this partnership. We're very blessed to have the long history. I would encourage anyone from other states to look for these sorts of partnerships and have those discussions. We meet three, four times a year and kind of say, okay, where are we?

[00:52:12] Where do we wanna change our priorities? Our focus this year won't be on, like Janet mentioned, direct support for a set list of programs. Maybe we need to go less in depth and more breadth with our support. So it's having that flexibility to adapt.

[00:52:25] On both ends, on the academic side as well as the the political and policy side. So, I would encourage you if you do not have that kind of connection in your state to look for it a lot of the land grant universities are a great great opportunity to start these partnerships.

[00:52:39] And then if you do have that partnership continually evaluate what you're doing what's the priorities that your state wants to address, we do that in Pennsylvania. What does our legislature, what does our new administration set as their goals, as their priorities under their leadership? And then how do we work with our partners at Penn State to make that happen?

[00:52:58] **Janet Welsh:** I would agree with everything Jeff just said. I think that finding the right partners in terms of moving ahead, right? We're always trying new things and we're always running into new challenges.

[00:53:09] And the idea of bringing people from different systems together because there's so much overlap in the families that they encounter in different systems and the goals, the things that they're trying to attain, implementation, science principles of do things the way they're supposed to be done that transcends all disciplines and all levels of intervention and yet, we realized when we brought these folks together, we're like, wow, one of the challenges is

nobody even quite thinks about prevention in the same way, right? And so, what are we gonna do about that? When the justice system talks about prevention, they're talking about something very different than when the drug and alcohol world and the schools, right?

[00:53:55] Everybody is thinking about that in a different way. And because all systems have their own languages and their own priorities this is a challenge. And I would like to see as we move forward, greater integration of these things. The other thing that I think we've done really well; Geoff is that we've identified research projects that make sense.

[00:54:18] To integrate with our work at EPIS, right? So for example, the coalition checkup project, that's been a really good thing for the research community. And that's been a really good thing for practitioner and translation community as well. And not every research project would work for that kind of thing but keeping an eye out for those collaborations that do fit together really well, I think would be something we wanna keep doing moving forward.

[00:54:49] And then always listening to communities. I think that's the other piece that we have to constantly be doing. And when people are telling us things that don't necessarily fit our paradigms When people say we don't wanna use evidence-based programs. For whatever reason that we might not like that, but I think we have to listen to that and say, okay how do we meet these folks where they are to assure that what they're doing is as best it can be? And that doesn't mean we have to sell out our principles, right? As prevention scientists, there's still gonna be times when we say to folks, we really don't think this is a good idea.

[00:55:29] And there's gonna be times when we say to state agencies like PCCD, we really don't think this is a good idea and we would recommend not supporting this. And that's where having these relationships where we can really trust each other. And Jeff might come back and say to me what do you mean, you know, what are you talking about?

[00:55:47] And then we can have a conversation about it. And I think that's the value of these long-lasting partnerships because if there's instability in those relationships, then you never maybe get to that point where you can have those kinds of conversations.

[00:55:59] **Michael Donovan:** Realizing that trust is core to any relationship, breaking down silos that exist within various disciplines as well, I think is a really important contribution and discussion point.

[00:56:12] There's just so many good opportunities on the horizon. I do want to give each of you just an opportunity for any closing thoughts, anything that's on your mind that we did not give Attention to today or missed completely. And that's okay if nothing comes to mind as well, but I just wanted to give you that opportunity.

[00:56:30] Anything?

[00:56:30] **Geoff Kolchin:** I'd just like to thank uh, Michael, you for this opportunity and the Evidence-to-Impact folks that are preparing this podcast to really sing the praises of this partnership. It's advanced the work of prevention in the Commonwealth dramatically over the last 15 years or so.

[00:56:47] As Janet said, we've engaged with people at every level. It's not just the state policy makers making decisions. We've engaged with our county folks that often are the ones that have to fund a lot of these programs. And we've engaged with their local communities that are saying we need guidance; we need technical assistance. We need to know how to succeed with what we're trying to do, which is help our kids. So, I think that the opportunity to share our work is very I'm very grateful for and I look forward to a long-continued partnership with Penn State and EPIS to continue this work.

[00:57:19] **Janet Welsh:** I feel the same way. I feel very privileged to be in this position of working with PCCD and other state organizations around prevention and being able to try and rise to the challenge of new things. I think that's what I like the most about this job. Some people don't like that.

[00:57:41] Some people they're just sailing along on flat seas and when Jeff and his team come to us and say guess what's happening now, right? And I'm like, yes, let's go. , let's see what we can do about this. And we don't always have the answer.

[00:57:54] And no one group or person ever will that. That's the power of collaboration. That's where you need to bring your stakeholders together and. And all the way from, the people at the top, like Mike Pennington, who runs, the agency all the way down to people completely on the ground who are working in the schools and the communities and, having the opportunity to interface with them and say, what's happening?

[00:58:16] Help us understand what's going on here and what needs to happen in order to, to address this. I think being able to interact with people at all those different levels is a real honor and and I really value this work. And yeah, Michael, the more you can cheerlead for prevention...

[00:58:34] **Michael Donovan:** I love it.

[00:58:35] I love it.

[00:58:36] **Janet Welsh:** Cause like I said, we're never gonna be on the front page of the paper. We need people to find out about us a different way.

[00:58:41] **Michael Donovan:** It's a fundamental challenge. Absolutely. But storytelling and highlighting opportunities like this is really a valuable piece of it.

[00:58:49] And Jeff, I know that you know that, Janet's not too touchy feel that's about the most touchy feel you're gonna get from her. That's lot of good feelings flowing there.

[00:58:58] **Geoff Kolchin:** Yeah, I'm the more emotional one, I think. I really get a lot of enjoyment outta my work.

[00:59:02] I like being the impact that I can help manifest. That, that has a positive effect on our kids, helps our families succeed, helps our school succeed and really, Kind of waves the flag around. We have the knowledge. If you want us to help you, we'd love to do so I think that's one of the joys I get outta my job. I'm still doing it all these years later.

[00:59:25] **Janet Welsh:** Me too.

[00:59:25] **Michael Donovan:** With that I think we'll bring this episode to a close. Many thanks to my guests for their time today, but also for the really fundamentally important work that they do every day and all of the other folks in their broader network that do such important work for the commonwealth and for our kids, and for our families.

[00:59:45] We are all very grateful for your contributions. I do wanna specifically thank Janet Welsh a research professor at the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center here at Penn State, as well as the Principal investigator of EPIS, the Evidence-Based Prevention and Intervention Support and SPEP, the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol.

[01:00:07] And Geoff Kolchin, the Deputy Director of the Unit of Violence Prevention Initiatives in the Office of Justice Programs at PCCD, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. Will have links to their bios and also links to more information that we've discussed throughout the episode in our show notes. And lastly, I'm your host, Michael Donovan. Thank

you all for listening. I'm the associate director of the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative here at Penn State. This has been another episode of the Evidence-to-Impact podcast. If you enjoyed our conversation, please subscribe and share.

[01:00:38] Thank you all for listening.