After many months of planning, the staff of the Shared Waters Home Visiting Program opened their doors to families in August. The program serves the Crow Creek and Lower Brule Sioux tribal communities near Pierre, South Dakota. Shared Waters will help pregnant women and families of young children hone the skills they need to raise healthy children who are ready to learn.

“One of the things I learned about starting a new program is that you have to be open and constantly willing to change lenses,” said Audrey Fallis, the program’s director. “You can’t just have a big picture lens when you’re developing a program. You’ve got to have that vision, but you also need all the little steps in between. There is a lot of groundwork that went into it, and we definitely are feeling the payoff now.”

Fallis and the program’s three home visitors (called “parent educators”) are employed by the Crow Creek School District. The District received a grant from the Tribal Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

A major piece of the groundwork was finding the right people to work in the program. Shared Waters was able to recruit staff with substantial experience serving families. Beyond their resumes, they also brought a strong desire to help families thrive.

“My passion has always been in helping youth and families,” said Fallis. "I'm originally from the Pine Ridge Reservation, and one of the largest issues that we faced there was teenage suicide. As a social work undergrad, I developed a wellness promotion plan for suicide prevention with youth. When I moved here and heard about the Tribal Home Visiting Program, it was the perfect program for my passion, because it promotes wellness at very, very early ages and develops that foundation for children and families.”

“My passion for being around kids and helping families stemmed from the way I was raised,” said parent educator LaCosta McGhee. "When I was a child my mom and dad loved having kids around. If it wasn’t our friends, then we had our cousins. And it wasn’t for a just couple
of hours, but overnight or for the weekend or all summer long. They were also foster parents.”

McGhee also talked about the advantages of being from the community in which she works, noting that, “when you’re from here, there’s a little more trust. Families already know you and what you’re about. Your first impressions of each other are already taken care of. It’s more comfortable.”

Gail His Law had gained experience as a home visitor through an earlier pilot project. She had worked in both Head Start and Early Head Start until she resigned to care for her mother. After her mother died, she heard that BabyFACE was advertising for a home visitor, and she applied. “It was like the perfect job,” said His Law, “coming from a center-based program and going into a home-based with families, so the passion was already there.”

Other important groundwork activities included a community needs assessment based on demographic information about children and families and available resources. The staff supplemented the data with face-to-face surveys. They asked parents, youth and elders about what was needed in the community and what they wanted from a home visiting program.

The program also formed an advisory committee in order to get input and collaborate with other local agencies that serve families. They reached out to tribal leaders, school officials and others to build support for the program and encourage referrals.

The staff are hopeful that all the preparation will lead to positive results in the future. “If we are successful, I hope that we expand our number of parent educators and have more families enrolled in our program,” said Fallis. “I also hope we have more children entering school ready to learn and more confident about themselves as students, and the parents more confident about their abilities as parents.”

For more information about the Shared Waters Home Visiting Program, contact Audrey Fallis, Director via email, or at 605-852-2455 ext. 2106.

ACF’s Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program provides grants to tribal entities to develop, implement, and evaluate home visiting programs in American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities. The grants are intended to help develop and
strengthen tribal capacity to support and promote the health and well-being of AIAN families, expand the evidence base around home visiting in tribal communities, and support and strengthen cooperation and linkages between programs that serve tribal children and their families. Learn more about the Tribal Home Visiting program and grantees here.