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## INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees and Delegate Agencies

**FROM:** Joint memorandum from the Office of Head Start and the Administration on Children, Youth & Families

**SUBJECT:** Head Start and Child Welfare Partnerships: Partnering with Families Involved in the Child Welfare System

### Background Information

This Information Memorandum (IM) is jointly issued by the Office of Head Start Director, Yvette Sanchez Fuentes and the Commissioner for the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Bryan Samuels, who oversees the management of the U.S Children's Bureau.

The purpose of this IM is to reinforce the Head Start commitment to serving abused and neglected children through its grantees and delegate agencies and to provide guidance regarding promising practices in recruiting and serving families involved in the public child welfare system.

The Office of Head Start (OHS) places a high value on outreach and services to families involved in the public child welfare system, a system which includes preventive, protective, foster care and adoption services [45 CFR 1340.41 (a)(vi-vii)]. Children whose families are served by the child welfare system often are developmentally vulnerable due to trauma stemming from early abuse and neglect, and from risk factors that commonly co-occur, such as prenatal drug exposure, prematurity, low birth weight, poverty, homelessness, parental depression and other mental health problems. The comprehensive services offered by Head Start programs support children by providing a safe and enriched learning environment while facilitating early identification of developmental delays and access to early intervention, health care, and mental health services. In addition, Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide a significant source of family support, parent education and adult development services for parents and other family members.

Foster children are categorically eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start even if the family income exceeds the income guidelines (45 CFR 1305.2(l)). OHS encourages Head Start/Early Head Start agencies to prioritize children in the public child welfare system when establishing selection criteria and selecting children and families for Head Start/Early Head Start services. While children whose custodial parents have an open case with the child welfare system but retain physical custody of their children are not categorically eligible for Head Start or Early Head Start, a program may prioritize these children for enrollment due to the level of risk and the needs of the family.

Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Enrollment Statistics from 2008-2009 show that 14,639 of the children who received Head Start and Early Head Start services during this time were eligible because of their status as foster children. This figure represents 9.2 percent of American children birth to five-years old who were in foster care on September 30, 2008 (AFCARS, 2008).

Head Start/Early Head Start agencies must take an active role in community planning to encourage strong communication, cooperation and the sharing of information with community partners [45 CFR1304.41(a)]. Further, agencies must take affirmative steps to establish ongoing collaborative relationships with community organizations, and this includes child welfare agencies and service organizations [45 CFR 1304.41(a)(2)(vi-vi)].

### **Actions and Strategies for Working with Child Welfare System Agencies**

The Office of Head Start encourages grantees to enter into a formalized agreement, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, with local child welfare offices. In order to improve coordination and collaboration on behalf of the children and families they serve, the following are examples of specific actions that may be incorporated into a formal agreement between Head Start/Early Head Start agencies and child welfare agencies:

- Commit that HS/EHS will a) review recruitment and selection and policies in order to prioritize enrollment of foster children and children with open child welfare cases and b) communicate this policy to the local child welfare agency.
- Jointly establish an agreed upon standardized referral process to HS/EHS programs by the local and/or State child welfare office(s) to be used when making referrals of foster children and other eligible children with an open child welfare case.
- Jointly establish an agreed upon screening protocol for Head Start/Early Head Start families who are involved in the child welfare system. For example, this may include creating a referral form that identifies a child's foster care status as the basis for his/her eligibility and includes contact information for the child's child welfare worker.
- Arrange cross-training opportunities with local child welfare agency staff to educate each other about Head Start/Early Head Start and child welfare services language, goals, objectives, policies and services offered.
- Arrange joint trainings on topics of mutual interest, such as working with high-need families (e.g., families with substance abuse issues, criminal histories, and mental health problems), administering child and family assessment instruments, and the responsibilities of mandated reporters.
- Designate a Head Start/Early Head Start liaison to the child welfare community and/or consider co-locating staff within your local child welfare agency. The liaison's duties might include:
  - attending court hearings for Head Start/Early Head Start families involved in the public child welfare system and educating attorneys and judges about the benefits of high quality care and education and the services available through Head Start and Early Head Start;
  - educating staff from the local public child welfare agency and other agencies that work with abused and neglected children (e.g., nonprofit foster family agencies, family preservation agencies, and children's mental health agencies) about the benefits of high quality care and education and the services available through Head Start and Early Head Start;
  - communicating regularly (in accordance with agency protocols) with the public child welfare agency and court staff about the developmental progress of, and services received by, child welfare system-supervised children enrolled in Head Start/Early Head Start; and
  - inviting child welfare representatives to become community representatives on the Policy Council, the Governing Body, the Health Services Advisory Committee or other Head Start/Early Head Start program advisory committees, such as self- assessment teams.
- Hold joint case planning and/or service planning meetings with child welfare services professionals (in accordance with agency protocols).

- Partner with the local public child welfare agency director to send a letter to foster family agencies and foster family social workers, foster parents and relative caregivers of age-eligible children:
  - encouraging them to enroll their children in high quality early care and education programs;
  - advising them that foster children are categorically eligible for services through Head Start and Early Head Start, while addressing appropriate expectations about waiting lists;
  - explaining the comprehensive services available through Head Start and Early Head Start;
  - alerting them that services are free;
  - providing them with instructions about how to apply for Head Start and Early Head Start; and
  - providing assistance to families in the completion of the enrollment application.

This list is not exhaustive and represents examples of child welfare outreach and service strategies that have facilitated positive partnerships between Head Start and public child welfare agencies. There are many other approaches that may be effective. Each grantee is encouraged to pursue an active partnership with its local public child welfare agency and to jointly develop the most appropriate strategy for its community's specific needs.

## Resources

Additional information about how to build effective, sustainable partnerships with child welfare agencies can be found in the *Early Head Start-Child Welfare Services Initiative Final Synthesis Reports (Volumes 1 and 2)* available at: <http://www.jbassoc.com/reports/summary.aspx>. These reports describe lessons learned from 23 Early Head Start grantees that participated in a Federally funded five-year initiative from 2002-2007 to promote partnerships with their local public child welfare agencies and better serve public child welfare system clients. Other resources on best practices in recruiting and serving families involved in the public child welfare system can be found in *Supporting Infants and Toddlers in the Child Welfare System: The Hope of Early Head Start* (Technical Assistance Paper No. 9), available for download at [http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/resources/ECLKC\\_Bookstore/PDFs/TA9%5B1%5D.pdf](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/resources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/TA9%5B1%5D.pdf).

Please direct any questions on this important matter to:

Angie Godfrey  
 Early Head Start Program Specialist  
 Office of Head Start  
 Administration for Children and Families  
 (202) 205-5811

Kiersten Beigel  
 Family and Community Partnerships Specialist  
 Office of Head Start  
 Administration for Children and Families  
 (202)-260-4869

/ Yvette Sanchez-Fuentes /

/ Bryan Samuels /

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes  
 Director  
 Office of Head Start

Bryan Samuels  
 Commissioner  
 Administration on Children, Youth and Families