

Head Start Forward: Friends of Children and Families

Tabitha: We are so excited to introduce you to Lisa Burke, who is the Executive Director of Friends of Children and Families Inc. Head Start program. Lisa, thank you for joining me today.

Lisa Burke: Thank you, Tabitha. It's great to be here.

Tabitha: Lisa, we invited you to this webcast today to share your program's approach to recruiting and enrolling eligible children and families to receive Early Head Start and Head Start services. Lisa, we're wondering, is your program meeting its funded enrollment and how did you make that happen?

Lisa: Yeah, we definitely are meeting our funded enrollment. We have 385 Head Start slots and 76 Early Head Start slots. We have a wait list and we're continuing to add to that wait list. Our Early Head Start program started August 1st with full enrollment, and Head Start will start on August 30th.

Tabitha: Lisa, OK, so I'm curious. Your program started fully in-person services on August 1st. Let's take just a little detour for a moment and can you tell me what's your biggest lesson learned?

Lisa: Yeah, definitely. I think that one of the greatest lessons was that we really had to be creative and really respond to COVID in regards to recruitment because we had so many things changing in the past. We had been able to initially go out and do in-person and be in front of people and be with people. COVID changed a lot of that. We were unable to do that in-person face-to-face recruitment on the ground. We had to come up with different ways of getting the information about our program out and still maintain safety.

Tabitha: OK. That makes sense. Lisa, I know that last program year, you did not reach your funded enrollment. You knew early on that you would have to pivot and really think about a different way to recruit. Can you give us some of those strategies that you use? Because obviously they worked, so please share with us your approach.

Lisa: Yeah. Obviously, because of COVID we definitely had to have less enrollment for safety measures. We knew that we wouldn't have children that were returning as many as we had in the past. Some of the things that we did ... We start our recruitment really early. We started in January of 2024 our 2021 school year.

We had hired a specific ERSEA staff member whose sole focus was to be on recruitment. He contacted 250 various service agencies in our area, gave them information about our program, dropped off flyers or recruitment material. He also went to local free lunch programs, dropped off flyers, talked with the folks that were there. This really helped us ensure that we were getting information about our program into the community. We also partner with our local school districts. Because of COVID, there was a lot of food insecurity and a lot of the school programs were giving out additional food. We ensured that we were at each of those mobile summer food pantries, and were able to give out information, talk with families if they wanted to talk with us.

We also advertise on Facebook, which was new for us. It was nice because we were able to identify the participant audience. That was definitely something new. We partnered with local community agencies

that worked with the same families that we serve to provide additional information and specific enrollment dates just for their clients, which was very helpful. We also use some of the CARES Act funds to mail recruitment postcards to a mailing list provided by health and welfare. This list includes families that are receiving health and welfare services. We typically budget this two times a year, but with the CARES Act money, we were able to do this an additional time and reach an additional 5,600 families. The number of families who told us they heard about us through these postcards doubled than the previous year. That was a really great outcome.

We also identified a need for recruitment materials to be translated into Swahili and Arabic. We recently had these materials printed and they're in the process of being sent out to our partner agencies. We consistently look at our community needs assessment for internal data to look at language needs. Those change every year, so we have to look at that every year. Then lastly, we have two programs that are in the local schools. At these locations we run two inclusion preschool programs, one of our own location. The school district helps us recruit children for that program that are on an individual education plan. We always meet our recruitment around that 10%, which is another great strategy.

Tabitha: Oh my goodness. Many rich examples of partnering with community agencies. Lisa, I'm really interested in the seasonal, I guess you say a seasonal recruiter, that you hired to contact the 250 agencies, because I can imagine that you had staff really focused on a number of things. You hired this one person to really reach out. How did you pay for this staff person?

Lisa: Yeah. Great question. We were able to pay for that person through some of the COVID money, so the CARES Act, really because it was created out of that need ... like really needed to get on the ground and in there. In order to really get that word out and increase that enrollment, we utilize some of that money to help support that. The nice thing about it, it was already a staff person that we had that works through the typical school year. We have for our Head Start program, we do close in the summer. This was a current staff person already knew about the wonderful things that our program does. It was very easy for him to go in and talk about all the great things we do.

Tabitha: Wonderful. Lisa, I'm curious because, OK, so you got the word out, you told all the families, hey, we're open for business, we're providing in-person services. Did you have to do anything specific to help families feel comfortable with their child returning to in-person services?

Lisa: Yes. For last year, when obviously the heyday of COVID and everyone was kind of scrambling to figure out what they were doing, we really wanted to make sure that we let parents know all of the things that we were doing to keep their children safe. When we did the parents survey data from last year and the family survey data came back, one of the things that they said that made them feel comfortable was how much detail we had put in all of those safety measures that we were taking: wearing masks, hand washing, hand sanitizing, sanitizing of the toys, having different toys for each classroom, the social distancing and the limiting in the classroom in the bus. They had reported that those things were the things that really made them feel comfortable.

We also last year had done a hybrid program. We had two days in and then two days virtual. A lot of the families said, even though COVID was really scary, that they wanted to make sure that they still had that social interaction and their children had that. They were really happy with at least having that opportunity. When we looked at how are we going to help families feel supported going back in 100% in-person services? We made sure that everyone we were talking with, we let them know all of our health and safety protocols. We made sure that they knew that we implemented those and that those

would continue. We also talked to a lot of families about how they were feeling. How do you feel? What would make you feel better about coming into the program? A lot of them just said, I just want to know that my child's safe. We, again, talk to them about the safety measures. We also let them know that we're consistently analyzing our data to ensure that we are following local and state health procedures to ensure that their children are safe.

Tabitha: Wow. That's amazing. Lisa, how did you demonstrate those changes to parents? I know it's one thing to let parents know what you're doing to keep their child or children safe. How were they able to see some of those changes?

Angie: Yeah. Great question. Some of the things that we do is we have a couple of different ways that we communicate with parents. We have a platform, like an app that we communicate with them. We also have printed materials and email materials. We have access for them to look at kind of all of our different policies, procedures. We have a parent handbook that's available to them, both in electronic and also where they can get it printed. We definitely reiterate that. Like right now Head Start is not starting, but for our Early Head Start, one of the very first things that the education partners do is they will sit down with a parent and they will say, "How are you feeling? What comfortable level are you at? What would you like us to do in your home? Here are our expectations. This is our policies, but what would make you feel better?" It's really about a partnership of working together to ensure that everyone feels safe.

Tabitha: Wow. It sounds like there has to be a number of things in place. Just when you think about being fully enrolled, I hear partnership. I also hear being responsive. If their first language is Swahili, making sure you have information they can read about the program. They know about the program to even sign up for ... to receive services.

I'm wondering, Lisa, about the families that weren't served by your program last year. We know that COVID-19 created families with extreme need, so it could have been a child lost a parent or primary caregiver due to COVID-19, a family became homeless, a family was unemployed and was unable to tap into unemployment benefits. Were you in any way able to find those families?

Lisa: Definitely, for our community and every community obviously very different. Each program, we want to look at their community dynamic, but for us, a lot of the families in the community were experiencing food insecurity and experiencing homelessness. They weren't doing that before. We really targeted kind of those food box distribution areas, food programs, looked at our partners that work with helping families with food insecurity. We also worked with our local homelessness agencies and said to them, "What can we do? How can we get to these families?" We've done recruitments at the location, so coming to them to ensure that there is no barrier to them being in our program.

Tabitha: OK, great. What it sounds like is you created some new partnerships, but basically you revisited existing partnerships and you're saying, "Hey, we're still here. Please send some of the new families that you're working with, or this is what we're doing." Do you agree with that, that you really did revisit some of your current partnerships to make sure they knew that you were still receiving families?

Lisa: Definitely. The partnerships with the local agencies that we work with were pivotal in ensuring that we were enrolled but also pivotal to make sure that we were enrolling the families that needed us the most. All of those kinds of partners that I talked about earlier, like health and welfare, our local

homelessness agencies are ... We have a refugee resettlement agency. We have two of them here in the Treasure Valley. We have worked with all of them even more than we had in the past to ensure that we're really partnering – like you said earlier, that word partner, if I could say one word for this year, it would be partner, partner, partner – just making sure that we are working together to ensure that those families, their needs are met.

I think the beauty of it too, is that not only does that help support enrollment, but it also supports the program. When you're looking for community resources for families, currently enrolled families, because you have such strong partnerships, it's easy to get those – or easier, I should say – to get those services to those families when they need it.

Tabitha: Lisa, in all your efforts within your program to identify families, you mentioned there are two refugee resettlement agencies or initiatives. We both understand that as the families change within your program, you bring in different races, ethnicities, various families from different backgrounds, just how has your program continue to remain responsive to families based on who they are, where they come from?

Lisa: Yeah, that's a great question. Well, first and foremost, the very first thing that we do is we look at our community needs assessment, and we do a community needs assessment update every year. What goes into that assessment is not just kind of the demographics and the data and the things from the community. But we also look at our parent and community partners data. We look at our internal data and our current events, which COVID was a big current event and really try to take that information and then we put that information into our selection criteria.

When we're going out and recruiting families, we are meeting the needs right in that moment of those families that need us the most and ensuring that we're getting those families that need us the most. Being able to assess all of that data and then look at that data – and then incorporate that into who we are recruiting – is one of our most successful strategies in order to ensure that we're meeting the needs of the community at that moment.

Tabitha: Lisa wonderful examples of data informed decision-making and being responsive to the needs of your community. Lisa, you have this platform, this national platform, and other grantees – they're listening and they're doing some of the same things you're doing. But because you've started already providing fully in-person services, do you have a word of wisdom or anything that you say, “Oh, I wish when we started this, someone would have told me X, Y, and Z.” Any last words of wisdom?

Lisa: Yeah. Well, probably the biggest thing that we have learned as an organization, as a leadership team, as a community is to be flexible because things are changing so quickly, so fast that you really have to be able to pivot from one direction to the other and really not hold on to that need that you had before. You really have to be able to change and switch. I think because of the impact that COVID has had on our community, on our nation, on our world, I think a lot of us have really had to learn that pivot strategy.

Especially for those of us in the Head Start and Early Head Start community, we were so used to a certain way of doing things. Sometimes change is really difficult, but I think just understanding that the more we can change and the more we can pivot and the more that we can direct those services to those families that need us the better the program will be. It's OK if that program wasn't identical to what you

had in your mind, as long as it's meeting the need of the children and you're seeing great outcomes from those families.

Tabitha: Lisa, we have to end the discussion on that note. Certainly, very valuable words of wisdom. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us. We will now learn from our next grantee about the approaches they use to return to fully in-person services.

Lisa: Thank you.