

Head Start Forward: Head Start of Lane County

Tabitha: We are excited to introduce to you some of the key leaders with Head Start of Lane County. We have with us today, Tim, who is the human resource director, Valerie Haynes. She is the health and safety consultant, but the Head Start community called her the Head Start nurse. Now, we also have Marci Gaston, who is the Head Start and Early Head Start director. Thank you so much for joining us today. We're excited to hear about your program's approach to environmental health and safety. Marcy, I'm going to ask you to kick off the conversation and talk to us a little bit about how your program promote vaccination.

Marci Gaston: All right. Well, it's been a journey. We are at the point now – pardon me – where we have about 95 to 96% of our staff vaccinated. We really wanted to promote the mandatory vaccine policy for everybody who works in the agency, but we knew that it would have to be a process. [Laughter] I have wanted to have Tim and Val join me today to talk about what that looked like from the very beginning, when we first recognized how serious this pandemic was and how overwhelming it was going to be. We knew that we had to craft something a framework, if you will, for all of us to be able to follow so we could keep our staff and our families safe.

Tabitha: Marcy 95% vaccination rate is incredible. Tim, we're sitting on the edge of our city. We want to know about how your program was able to achieve it.

Tim Rochholz: Well, Tabitha it's really a group process. It certainly took a lot of people to make happen, working together, Val and I are a good team. We're very different. We have different skills, so we made it happen. Once I understood the importance of the seriousness of this by doing some personal and work travel in the airports, I could see how dangerous this was and went to work right away with Val – in the March of 2020 ... actually February of 2020 ... early March – to begin this process of a long process of keeping people safe. It started with "How do we work remotely?" because there was no vaccine back then. How do we have people work remotely? What's it looked like? What's the classroom supposed to look like? Being an HR director for about almost 40 years, I've written a lot of policies, but never ones that had to deal with something that was life-threatening, so we took it really seriously because we want all of our employees and children to be safe.

We develop policies. I've written out 20, some of them, many, many drafts of it over the last year and a half. When we knew last winter in – that'd be a winter of 2021 – vaccines were coming. That's when we really ramped up our work with our union and with the health community to develop something that we could all agree with to keep people safe. We developed that we had our executive board or powerless policy council, our union leaders, we all came together. We said, "We want everyone to be safe." So, we agreed that everyone needed to be vaccinated. We go on science here. It had started Lane County, and some of our employees, of course, have different views of that. Val can talk about with many things she did to educate our staff so that we have this high vaccination rate.

Val Haynes: Is it my turn? My turn? [Crosstalk]

Tabitha: We want to hear from you. Yeah.

Val: All right. Well, it's hard to keep me contained with my excitement about the fact that we are 95% vaccinated. I'm an old public health nurse. I've been in this fight since 19 ... Oh, I don't even want to go back that far back before AIDS, HIV/AIDS was known to be a disease, I became a public health nurse, and I was in Atlanta, Georgia back then. This is not my first pandemic. This is my third pandemic. I am a public health nurse at my core. I love working for Head Start of Lane County. I've been with the organization for 20 years, and though I could make more money other places, this is where I want to be. I absolutely love the work we do. I love working with these two that are on the call with me today.

We got to 95% vaccination through the work of everybody in our organization, from the parents to the, our executive director, Annie Soto, who I work for all those times. She recruited me. I love working with her, and her heart is in this. She wants to keep people safe. Our employees are the families we serve and the children that we serve. Right, as soon as we knew vaccines were available, I worked for Lane County Public Health as a volunteer, and I'm wearing my community with immunity T-shirt. I was working on this pandemic while working for Head Start from the very, very beginning. I'm known as vaccinator Val. Actually, my other ... My alter ego is vaccinator Val. I learned how to vaccinate long before the vaccines were even released because I was doing that with this part of the health care workforce in my community and my state. I started working with all of our agency about how we were going to do vaccine education. Our union was very involved, and our safety committee was very involved. Our parents were very involved. I work with parents that have medically fragile children and they were coming to me very early on going, "How can I put my child in classrooms and be safe?"

We've been operational with in-person classrooms since June of 2020, throughout the pandemic, and so we knew we could do that safe, but I knew it could be a lot safer with vaccination. We started vaccine education programs on February 1st. We first reached out to our full-day staff. We had vaccines coming available for educators and our workforce. Around that time, they had been made eligible by our state. Then, I did these vaccine education sessions. It always required six of us on the vaccine education sessions. We did them in this format, like with the Zoom. We did it in Microsoft Teams. and we invited any staff that were hesitant to please come and to get all of their questions and concerns answered, so that they could give informed consent, which is extremely important for something like this, before they would get a vaccination.

At the first session there, on February 1st, we had 14 staff. We have many more employees than that. Some just wanted to know when they can schedule their appointment, but 14 came, had a lot of questions. We did a session for about an hour and a half. Those were primarily our full day employees. Of those, all of them became vaccinated. They got their questions answered and they went on.

On February 4th, we had 32 people, because we broadened it out to the entire workforce. 32 came and ultimately, only one chose not to be vaccinated. That person is likely to stay unvaccinated, and we will work with that person in the way that we need to, and had very valid concerns. There's always some reasons for people not to be vaccinated, and that's important for agencies to understand. Then, on February 5th, we had 15 show up, and every single one of those took the vaccination ultimately.

We have a handful of employees left that still have concerns. We continue to work with them in a collaborative manner, and we will continue to work with them. I know that Marci is committed to that as well, as much as we possibly can, with the understanding that it is our responsibility to keep the children, fellow coworkers, and the families that we serve as safe as we can, and that we need to lead by example.

That's our process. I'm thrilled to share. I know Tim's thrilled to share. We would love to see Head Start programs at least try to learn from what we've done and be successful because all of us need to learn how to ... not convince ... bring people to the realization that vaccination is the right choice for them and their family.

Tabitha: It's interesting because you and Tim both talked about using information from different sources. What did your program do when there was conflicting information out there from maybe the government, local, federal? What was your approach?

Val: Well, that's why I'm so excited ... [Crosstalk] OK. This why I'm so excited about the process where ... I won't do the sessions without six people. It's myself included, and I will not stack it heavy with public health people because I got a big voice, and I'm going to give all that talk. Then, I actually recruited, amongst our employees, for my former employees that had been resistant to flu shot and Pertussis vaccinations in previous incarnations. I knew them, I'd worked here for 20 years. I am always able to reach people with the message of the fact that we work with medically fragile children and medically vulnerable people, and we need to keep them safe ... because everybody working for Head Start really has a social justice side to them. I wanted to make sure that those voices were there.

We don't have a very vaccine friendly community in Lane County, Oregon. If you could find us on a map, you'd find that there was vaccine resistance 10 years ago in this community. I was already familiar with that and that you reach people who are hesitant by finding other people who can relate to them to reach them. I have a star on my team named Bella, who I'd love to teach nationally, and she's very different than me. She is exactly what people need to hear. She is more passionate about this than I am, and so she and I team up. If she veers in a place where I'm like, "I'm not sure the science is right on that. Let's get this cleared up," we have a great time. I think our sessions are interesting. and that's what you need if you're going to reach people.

Tabitha: Oh, my goodness. I've heard so many pearls of wisdom. I loved when Tim talked about we rely on science. We pay attention to the science. I liked that you talked about leveraging the expertise and the influence of staff, but at the same time providing oversight, just to make sure the right information is getting out there. That is so key. I just want to transition to talk about the environment. What is your program doing to keep your environment safe?

Val: On top of vaccination? Is that what you mean? For in-person ...

Tabitha: Yes.

Val: For in-person services, yes. Yes. Actually, I just prepared a training based on the new guidance from OSHA on mitigating risk in the workplace related to COVID-19. We of course are going to use the layered approach that is recommended by CDC and OSHA in the workplace realm, and then CDC in the classroom realm. Vaccination, the first and most important key strategy, and then all of those other layered approaches. In Oregon, we just had a mask mandate come in as a state, back again. We didn't have a mask mandate for a while. I know that that's a political issue in some places. In a communicable disease nurse realm, that's not very political.

We need to go with what the science is saying as far as how to protect both vaccinated and unvaccinated. We really focus on the fact that the classroom environment has a set of unvaccinated

little humans. We have got to do all of the things that you must do to protect those unvaccinated little humans. Until we have better mechanisms to protect them, that is our highest priority. Then, we have unvaccinated big humans that can make choices about that, but we have to always be clear in our communication about who's at risk, when they're at risk. That's our approach is to educate, educate, educate ... make sure that mitigation strategies are in place in every place we operate – our classrooms, first and foremost, and then our office spaces.

Marci: And communicate, and communicate, and communicate. We do it in all sorts of ways. We do it from our portal. We do it with our posters. We do it on site. We talk about it in every single meeting that we have. There's always something about keeping each other safe and taking care of each other.

Tabitha: Marci, we have to end the discussion on that note because that really boils down everything that you and your team share with us today. 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.

Marci: Thank you, Tabitha. We appreciate it. [Crosstalk]