

Partnering with IDEA Providers to Support Inclusion: Part 1

Jen Fung: Hi, everybody. Welcome and thank you so much for joining us this afternoon for our second webinar in a three-part series about IDEA services, teaming and collaboration with IDEA service providers, and really creating strong partnerships to support inclusion.

As you can see on the screen today, we'll be focusing on the foundation, what should these relationships look like, who are these relationships with. And then a really important part of relationships, that foundation of paving the way for those strong relationships. Creating a memorandum of understanding or MOU that really pave the way for effective partnerships.

We're thrilled to have you. Thank you again for joining us. Before we jump in and introduce ourselves and do a little bit of housekeeping, the first thing that we wanted to remind folks is that we have a Viewer's Guide that was created especially for this webinar. That's available in your resource widget or resource list widget which should actually be open right now on your screen. If you haven't already, definitely download, open up that Viewer's Guide, and follow along with us. We'll be referring to the Viewer's Guide for more information about some of the strategies and some of the requirements that we talk about today. And there is also a helpful, we think, a helpful resource list at the end of that Viewer's Guide. Definitely check that out.

Now, let's get started. I'm Jen Fung and I am the inclusion lead from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, or DTL as we call it. And I am your host for the inclusion webinar series and I'm coming to you live today from our webinar studio in Seattle, Washington. And I could not be more thrilled to be joined by my friend and colleague Jani Kozlowski. Jani, do you want to say hi and introduce yourself?

Jani Kozlowski: Yeah, hi, Jen. Hi, everyone. I'm Jani Kozlowski. It's so nice to be with you all today. I'm a TA specialist with the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center at the University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. And I have a special place in my heart for Head Start. I used to work as a disability services coordinator many years ago and more recently provided technical assistance and support through DTL before Jen joined. It's so nice to be with you all again.

Jen: Perfect. Thank you, Jani. And again, it's a thrill to have you here and it really is an honor because of your passion and your knowledge of Head Start but also with the expertise of the IDEA systems that you bring to this relationship. We are really excited to be able to have representation from both Head Start and IDEA services to really talk about, like we said, the importance of these partnerships and really some specific strategies about building and maintaining strong partnerships.

Just a quick review of our objectives for today's webinar. Like we said, this webinar is all about relationships and all about partnerships which we know are the foundation of coordinated, effective services for young children with disabilities and their families. Today, we're going to talk a little bit about the importance, why we build partnerships across systems, and then we'll talk specifically about some strategies to build strong, collaborative relationships between Head Start and IDEA partners. And then we'll spend the last part of our webinar really talking about

partnership agreements, about those MOUs and how we write those in partnership with our partners, and how we use them to really provide those effective coordinated disability services.

Jani: Yeah, it's going to be great, a great discussion. And it's been so fun to work with you, Jen, and as the new adventure we've had together of bringing together the office of Head Start and IDEA programs. And thinking about MOUs, I'm wondering from the audience what brings you here today, how long have you been in your position, and what's your level of understanding around partnership agreements and MOUs? I've got three choices there if you would let us know which one most reflects how you feel or where you are in your learning around partnerships and MOUs. All right.

Wow. We have, gosh, 49 and a half percent of you are new to your position and so you're looking to get help with understanding partnership agreements and MOUs. Then we got 38% that are not new but understanding that they're difficult. We hear you. And great to see that some of you are also here looking to expand your expertise around partnerships and share your knowledge with others. Great. What an excellent group we have.

Jen: Yeah, perfect. Thanks, Jani. And thanks, everybody, for responding to the poll and, of course, for being here with us today. Let's get started today by talking about why partnerships are so important.

For many different aspects of the reasoning and the rationale, the why between these partnerships. We know that Head Start and Early Head Start programs are required to collaborate and to establish an MOU with partner agencies in the community, and that includes local agencies that provide IDEA services. And for those who may be less familiar, IDEA is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and that's the federal legislation that guarantees a free and appropriate public education for young children with disabilities or delays and their families. We'll refer to that as IDEA from now on. But I just wanted folks who are less familiar to understand and recognize that acronym.

Like I said, we know that partnerships are required. And establishing an MOU which is a document that really guides how disability services will be provided to children and families within a Head Start program. Like we said, that that's a required component of that collaborative relationship. But MOUs, they're not only a requirement, they can really be a helpful tool and a resource that can really help within the context of these partnerships between IDEA providers and Head Start programs work together to define areas of collaboration that really will improve and maximize coordination and, of course, services for children and families.

Like I said, today we're going to talk about the why, the how, and the what of partnerships and those partnership agreements, those MOU. We wanted to just take a second to start by looking at the big picture of why these strong collaborative partnerships are so critical to our inclusion work in Head Start.

One of the reasons, as I mentioned, is that collaboration is required, both for IDEA agencies and service providers and for Head Start programs. We know that the IDEA legislation and our Head Start program performance standards have specific requirements that are related to collaboration, really for the purpose of identifying and providing services in inclusive

environments. Identifying young children with disabilities or suspected delays. And like I said, providing those inclusive, highly individualized services within inclusive environments.

Your Viewer's Guide has more information around the specific program performance standards that are related to collaboration so definitely check those out if you're less familiar with the performance standards and what the performance standards say about disability services and specifically around collaboration between agencies to support those services. We also know that in addition to being a requirement, that there is some new guidance from our federal agencies that really emphasizes the importance of ongoing collaboration between local education agencies, or LEAs, and their Head Start program partners really to effectively meet the requirements of IDEA around service provision in inclusive environments, in least restrictive environments.

As I mentioned earlier when we were talking about the resource list widget, there are some brand new guidance and some brand new resources that have been collaboratively developed and are being collaboratively shared with our field, both the IDEA service providers and Head Start programs around, specifically around collaboration and creating a memorandum of understanding.

Those two documents, as I mentioned, are available in your resource list widget. The first one that we wanted to point out is – it's called the Dear Colleague Letter. And this is the Dear Colleague Letter on partnerships between IDEA agencies and Head Start agencies. That's in your resource list widget. And then the second resource that we wanted to point out and that we'll really refer to a lot today is a companion resource to that Dear Colleague Letter. And this companion resource has specific guidance on creating and implementing effective MOUs that really support high-quality inclusion. These documents, they are hot off the press, right, Jani? This is pretty exciting.

Jani: Yeah, right. Hot off the press. A great resource, isn't there?

Jen: Yeah, great resources. And they were collaboratively developed by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Program, which is OSEP, and the Office of Head Start. Like I said, OHS and OSEP worked for about a year on creating this guidance and resources to support the implementation of the guidance in these resources. We're really, really excited to see this as just another resource and more emphasis on the importance of these collaborations really to result in inclusion and high-quality inclusion for young children and their families.

Jani: Jen, there's a question about what MOU stands for. We want to just clarify it's Memorandum of Understanding. There were a couple of people that were wondering.

Jen: Perfect. Yes. Thanks for asking and thanks for pointing that out, Jani. We know in addition to being a requirement, strong collaboration, ongoing relationships, and ongoing partnerships are the best practice in our field of early learning and early intervention, and early childhood special education. We know that this strong collaboration, intentional and ongoing partnership activities really set the tone for partnerships that are productive and really, again, result in high-quality inclusion for young children with disabilities. Intentional ongoing teaming and collaboration is a practice that's reflected in our division for early childhood recommended practices.

The division for early childhood is our leading professional organization for early intervention and early childhood special education services in our field and they have a set of recommended practices to really support inclusion and high-quality service delivery for young children with disabilities and their families.

As I said, intentional ongoing teaming and collaboration is strongly reflected in the DEC recommended practices. And we also know that formal agreements, these partnership agreements, these memorandum of understanding between different partner agencies are an indicator of high-quality inclusion and are critical to support effective inclusion. And those are identified in the indicators of high-quality inclusion, they are actually written and disseminated by ECTA, our federal partners.

And then, of course, we know our last why, but certainly not the least, but when it comes to this rationale and really discussing and exploring the importance of strong collaborations is that strong collaboration, strong partnerships really result in positive outcomes for children and families. When we don't have productive partnerships, when that intentional collaboration is missing, we know that inconsistencies in service provision or delays in the identification and evaluation process, delays or inconsistency in support for providing highly individualized services or supporting transitions, whatever it might be in that continuum of identifying children who are eligible for IDEA services and then providing the services in their IFSP or their IEP, that this can cause stress and frustration for families.

And we know that when services and supports are seamless and when they're coordinated between agencies and between programs that families are better able to access those supports and services resulting in more positive outcomes for children and families. Jani is now going to talk a little bit about relationships and the basis and what strong, positive relationships look like.

Jani: Yeah, thanks, Jen. And thanks for that great background of why we're really here. And MOUs. And I'm seeing some really good questions in the Q&A. And I think we'll get back to those a little bit later. Jen is going to talk through some of the guidance around MOUs to get to some of these questions. But it all starts with relationships.

I mean, when you want to create those memorandums of understanding, it starts with building relationships between Head Start programs and the LEAs or early intervention providers. And we've evolved to be social creatures. Everything happens within the context of relationships. And we might look to the evolution of our species to understand why that is. I mean, if you think about early humans, they depended on each other for food and shelter, warmth, and social connections. As infants, we come into this world as very dependent beings. Through evolution, the infants that survived were the ones that bonded really closely with adults, and the adults that had the most success with raising offspring were the ones that kept their infants close and connected.

And even as adults, the humans that survived were the ones that were most connected with the group of other humans. You can't hunt down a wildebeest all by yourself, Jen. It takes the team approach. While some of us are out hunting, others are staying home and keeping the literal home fires burning. Our survival was dependent on one another, right from the very

beginning. And that continues to this day. Our ability to support children and families with and without disabilities really we have to depend on one another.

If we think about that, if we think about those relationships and how they figure into the work that we do every day on behalf of children and children with disabilities or suspected delays, the child is in the center. I think that's clear in a lot of the way we think about this work. This visual draws out the fact that the child in the center has a lot of relationships in their lives. There's family, extended family, friends of the family, people that child might know in the neighborhood or the spiritual community. There's also educators and caregivers.

But for a child with a disability, there might also be relationships with medical staff, service coordinators, therapists, mental health consultants, OT/PT speech, all of those different relationships. And there is a lot, it's a lot to keep track of. But if you think about it, how successful those partnerships can be if we leverage those relationships and think about how together, working alongside one another we can really make a difference in the lives of children. Figuring out how to tap into those strengths of relationships in these roles that we play all focused on a child.

I like to think of this concept, Jen, as a circle of support. The relationships we make to improve our systems of support across agencies also build the possibilities for relationships between adults working directly with children. For you all out there as disability services coordinators, those relationships that you're making with early intervention and LEAs, early childhood special education, those are going to create the possibility for those relationships between a child and all those adults that we spoke about, as well as the educators in the classroom and those therapists and special services providers.

The circle of support is this idea that the important adults in the child's life have developed and nurtured relationships with each other so that the child can be supported in all the different environments. It's a really powerful strategy. It's a way to leverage all those relationships in the child's life and create a strong network of support for the child but also for the family too. It sounds easy, but relationship building can be hard, can't it, Jen?

Jen: Absolutely. Yeah. When we're thinking about the why, you summed that up beautifully, Jani. We talked about the legislation, we talked about the requirements, we talked about that this is best practice, and that it's rooted, the need to form those relationships is human nature. But like you said, it can be difficult. And we know that, especially when we're talking about building relationships across systems where there are different requirements, where funding is different, where there are different expectations set up for the different partners that that can add an element of complexity. But, when we're thinking again about this why and how important this is, we know in an effective coordinated approach that Head Start disability services are not separate from LEAs services or early intervention services.

And I think that this new guidance and the ongoing collaboration to support those relationships and to support providers and leaders from different agencies, from different systems that is, again, emphasizing the importance of that and I hope as we share TA, share resources and get this new guidance out into the field that we'll continue to see movement across some of those

different complexities and some of those intricacies and specificities around creating and maintaining those relationships and working through some of those differences.

–And the MOU, as we know can really lay that foundation and help define some of these questions and some of these areas where there might be differences. We'll talk more about the specific components of the MOUs and what this new guidance says about MOUs. But before we do that, let's talk about the how and some specific strategies about building relationships with partners, especially thinking about when there might be those differences within those cross-system partnerships. What can you tell us about some of those specific strategies, Jani?

Jani: Well, it's a really good question. And I think the first and foremost thing to think about is these relationships that we build are very similar to the way that we build relationships with friends, obviously they're professional relationships, they aren't friendships, but some of the strategies that we use can be very similar. If you think about the friends in your own lives, what are some of the things that you do to make that friendship successful? If you could type into the Q&A some things you do to make that friendship successful.

As you think about those things, I'm going to have a little clip here and it's from a classic friendship, Forrest Gump and Jenny, you'll remember they were best friends in the movie. As you watch the video, reflect and share what do you notice about this friendship, what's each friend giving and receiving, and how might you apply those principles of friendship to our professional relationship. Let's watch together.

[Video begins]

Forrest Gump: I do remember the first time I heard the sweetest voice in the wide world.

Jenny Curran: You can sit here if you want.

Forrest: I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life. She was like an angel.

Jenny: Well, are you going to sit down, or aren't you? What's wrong with your legs?

Forrest: Nothing at all, thank you. My legs are just fine and dandy. I just sat next to her on that bus and had a conversation all the way to school. My back's crooked like a question mark. Next to Mama, no one ever talked to me or asked me questions.

Jenny: Are you stupid or something?

Forrest: Mama says, "Stupid is as a stupid does."

Jenny: I'm Jenny.

Forrest: I'm Forrest, Forrest Gump. From that day on, we was always together. Jenny and me was like peas and carrots. She taught me how to climb.

Jenny: Come on, Forrest, you can do it.

Forrest: I showed her how to dangle. She helped me learn how to read. And I showed her how to swing. Sometimes we just sit up and wait for the stars. Mama is going to worry about me.

Jenny: Just stay a little longer.

Forrest: For some reason Jenny didn't ever want to go home. Okay, Jenny, I'll stay. She was my most special friend.

[Video ends]

Jani: Now, I hope you realize I was being a little bit cheeky at my annotations during the video, Jen. Not all of Jenny's questions were super supportive, to say the least, and I don't advocate for the way she said that to Forrest on the bus. But isn't that interesting that even though the question was not using the nicest words, Forrest still understood that Jenny was sincerely trying to connect with him and to learn about him. And, sometimes we worry that we're going to say the wrong thing and offend someone we just met so we clam up. But the thing is we're all works in progress, we're social creatures, as I said, from the very earliest days.

When it comes to sincere efforts to connect, that comes loud and clear, comes through loud and clear. And I'm seeing some really great suggestions in the chat or ideas about how you all do things to foster friendships using empathy, respect, caring, kindness, asking questions, encouragement, support, open-minded, acceptance, honesty, these are excellent. I see a lot about communication and wanting to feel heard.

And I'm wondering if you can also put in the chat what makes you feel heard. Because these relationships are based in communication. And communicating with empathy in particular is what we really hope to see. It's something that we think about as must do when we're communicating with families in particular and our colleagues. But communicating with empathy is also an important skill to use when you're working with partners as well. Because how we communicate as professionals mirrors those same communication principles we use with families or coworkers or even our own friends, it's all interconnected.

And I have a story to share with this notion of empathetic communication. When I was a disability services coordinator, I was working with a special ed director in a rural community and I remember back that it was quite some time ago, but I really learned a lot. At the time, we served 13 different counties and so, I was building relationships with 13 different special ed directors at each LEA, and I know some of you support even more counties than that, a lot more.

And the families that we served were served during the summer months. Schools were closed during the summer. It's the migrant Head Start program. But as we know, the window to provide services in early childhood is really small and we need to take advantage of those early years so we can provide services that will lead to improved child outcomes. That was certainly one thing I always shared with partners was just about the fact the early childhood development is the period of the greatest brain, biological, and psychological development, and all the neural connections that are formed every second in the earliest years, and how domains of development are so integrated. All of those things that we know about how early childhood development affects lifelong health and learning and behavior.

As you can tell, I was really appealing to the special ed director about summertime services for children, and he was really adamant that the schools were closed, no go. "We can provide services in September," he said. And I thought, well, that family will almost be ready to move down to another state to work on the crops in another state. And I remember he said, "Well,

can't the other state provide the services?" And I said, "You know, we can't count on it. There are children that are falling through the cracks. And the families are really eager to get help for their child right now."

I shared what I could about how hard-working the families were just in general and how much they value family and value their children, and there's the learning that children are doing, how love for their children overflows and how desperate they were to get support for their children. I shared a lot about that but then, you know what, I listened. And I think that's really at the heart of a lot of what we need to do is to use these skills, these empathetic listening skills to find out what the real issues are, not just listening with your heart, or not just listening with your ears but with your eyes and your heart, and your whole body.

I listened and learned about concerns about funding, concerns about finding staff that would work during the summer, concerns about the staff that didn't speak the same language as the family spoke, concerns about space where would the services be provided, so he had a lot of reasonable concerns. And it turned out all of the concerns were things that we could figure out together, Head Start could help with the funding but ultimately, that really wasn't a problem because when he learned that he didn't have to fund a classroom, a brick, and mortar classroom that the services would be provided in the Head Start setting, that took away some of the funding concerns. Head Start could help with translation services and it turned out that those service providers were really eager to help even during the summer months.

Now I know that's not always going to be the resolution but you won't even find out what the issues are if you don't start with that empathetic communication. Listening to the fear behind the concerns. That's listening with your heart and stepping into their shoes, naming what you hear, it's really validating. When someone else names the concern that you're raising and approaching every situation as a partnership. These are barriers and they're true barriers but there are barriers together, they are not your barriers or my barriers, they're ours together. Those are some of the things that I found to be really helpful. Oh, I'm sorry, go ahead, Jen.

Jen: I was going to say, what you're sharing and some of those lessons you learned and some of those specific empathetic listening skills are some of the same things that we're seeing come across from our participants, active listening, like you said. I'm not dismissing somebody else's concern or not dismissing when there's a barrier, but recognizing it, being open to hearing the other person's perspective, being genuine in your intent while you're listening and engaging in that conversation. I'm seeing lots of mirrors, lots of similarities between the story that you shared and what our participants are using and identifying to help them feel heard as well.

Jani: Cool. Wonderful. Yeah, I think there's so much that we can learn from one another if we take the time to talk and communicate, listen to one another, finding out what our strengths are, what the partnership strengths are, and how we can build on that. And thinking about the ways that we're different as well. We all come with our own unique perspective, we have different racial, cultural, linguistic, and other diverse perspectives. And that's a reality and we need to work to build a bridge across those differences.

And I also find that storytelling is really helpful to share stories about the families in your program, in aggregate, not necessarily about a specific family but share the cool things that you

know that families are doing and how much they desperately need these services for their child. It's about reframing and power sharing as well. Our next video clip is one where another disability services coordinator shares a little bit about communication and how that was central to the work that she does. Maybe we can play that now.

Jen: Sounds good.

[Video begins]

Coordinator: I think communication, as we continue this collaboration, is so key. We have to set ways that people can communicate. We need to make sure they get time to communicate and plan together. That they really see themselves as a team and working together. That's been really, really helpful for us to just break down and make time to talk about everything, even when you think like, oh, we've already discussed this or we've already gone through this. Let's go back and revisit it, let's give it a little bit more thought and let's go a little deeper now and take the next steps. Really making time to communicate together as you go through this process so that you stay together on the same team.

[Video ends]

Jani: Yeah, I love that. And I think for those of you that are managers or leaders and are working with the coordinated systems, teams within your programs to think about how you can build in educators and staff can have time for those critical conversations, whether it's at the planning MOU level or the classroom level in figuring out solutions for children. I think about, Jen, the fact that relationships impact everything we do and that when we design programs and practices and policies, to fix a problem we can shift the perspective a little bit and think about the work that we're doing that really helps to put those relationship-building approaches front and center.

This is true for our relationships with children and families, and how we apply these same values can be really helpful to the collaborative relationships we share as professionals. Always asking ourselves how do these programs or practices or policies empower and enrich those relationships with families. We want to hear about how we can put that in writing with partnership agreements.

Jen: Absolutely. And before we move on to talk about partnership agreements and MOUs, I wanted to first acknowledge, build on what you're saying and acknowledge a comment that we just saw come through the Q&A, when we're talking about our communication, our strategies that we use to build relationships with our partners, mirroring the same strategies we use to build relationships with families, to build relationships with children. Honoring and recognizing as part of the relationship-building process different communication styles from different individuals and folks from different cultures and recognizing that while active listening and empathetic communication are important, that individual characteristics, the use of eye contact, for example, look different from person to person. And being able to recognize those differences, acknowledge those differences, and honor those differences in communication as we're building relationships with our partners.

Thank you to everybody who's continuing to share their perspectives, share their questions, definitely keep it up. Before we talk about MOUs, there's one more resource that I want to make sure folks are aware of. We saw in our poll early on that we've got folks who are brand new to their positions and folks who are feeling a little less familiar. We know, just as you mentioned, Jani, that building these relationships that Head Start program staff whether it's the disability services coordinators or somebody else who's supporting disability services in the coordinated approach, they're working with many different partners. And the strategies we use to build those partnerships, to maintain those partnerships are so critical.

In our Viewer's Guide, we've linked a checklist called the Partnership Development Checklist which is part of the foundations for Fostering Partnerships series, and this checklist has key roles and responsibilities that can be addressed regarding partnerships, not just within disability services but any partnerships that a Head Start program has. But we thought that maybe for some folks who are still working on building those partnerships, maybe there's been some turnover within the IDEA agencies and they are faced with building new partnerships with new folks that maybe this checklist might be helpful when either partnership is forming. And others might find this checklist helpful in refining partnership that they already have.

While I said, like I said, not every question applies to disability services and not every question applies to a partnership with an IDEA agency, we think that this checklist might be helpful in building awareness around some of those key elements of partnerships and maybe supporting discussion between partners to help really build that solid understanding and an agreement on what the important aspects of the partnership is to the various partners.

OK, let's talk about MOUs. Specifically, how do we build an MOU, what should go in an MOU? What are those really specific components that support the development and the implementation of MOUs, that support effective disability services? And again, I want to remind folks of these new resources, specifically the companion document, the guidance on creating effective MOUs. A lot of what we'll be talking about is echoed here in this guidance.

And just to note about this resource that while the resource and the guidance around creating cross-system partnerships and MOUs is focused on state-level MOUs, the sections that are in here and some of the considerations and the activities and really the resources to support the development of MOUs is also really applicable to the local level as well.

Thinking about MOUs, again, we know they're required, we know they're required for those partnerships. But really beyond meeting that requirement and getting an MOU in place, thinking about different ways that an MOU can guide your work, can guide the provision of those inclusive, coordinated disability services. Definitely share in the Q&A with us or share in the chat with us, how you use an MOU to guide your work.

But when we're thinking about MOUs, you see here on the screen there's a quote from a disability services coordinator who's really thinking about how they use an MOU to guide their work. And this is really about establishing those partnerships and establishing those relationships.

This person is describing that high level of turnover that they've experienced in their role while forming those relationships and developing MOUs with partners. They're thinking, OK, if we've

got a strong MOU in place if there's turnover in that role, when I have to establish a partnership with a new partner, we've got some foundation here, we've got some information and some description of what we want our partnership to look like, what we want those outcomes to be from this partnership.

When we're thinking about the purpose of an MOU and how it can be used, we know that we can really specifically build MOUs to define what's needed to result in effective coordinated services and also specifically describe what the processes are to support the implementation of best practices that really support effective inclusion. Different partners within the context of different partnerships, we know from area to area, those partnerships and what the specific requirements look like and what those specific processes look like will look different.

But thinking about how partners might use MOUs and how might they use that process and the document to support their partnerships definitely establishing shared goals, working together to talk about what's the purpose of this partnership, what do we want the outcomes to look like. To define areas and really describe areas of collaboration, to work together to say, OK, if these are our outcomes, if this is what we want this partnership to result in, and this is how we want to collaborate to do that, what are the different roles and responsibilities of each agency, of each partner to make sure that happens.

The MOU can also be used to document and describe coordination and communication protocols so how will we communicate, how often will we communicate, what does that look like. And also to set deadlines.

Jani: I think, Jen, it's pulling it back to our discussion about relationships when you build relationships and you figure out what the issues are and you air those concerns, there was a really good comment about how airing concerns can really take some of the tension out of it, putting it out in the open. When you have those discussions and do some shared decision-making, putting it in writing is the basis for the MOU, all of those things that you talked about are linked to that problem-solving that you do together.

Jen: Absolutely. And have those discussions and having it in writing gives you something to come back to when there are questions or differences or disagreements, having that described in the MOU. Now we're going to talk, specifically about the MOU document and the process of developing an MOU, and we're going to frame this in the who, the why, the what, and the when of the MOU.

Thinking about the who. We know all of that, the purpose of the MOU is really to collaboratively describe and define a shared understanding, a plan to help achieve our shared goals and outcomes. And again, what those specific responsibilities are between the different partners that are related to those common goals? We know that there's no standard format, there's no standard process for what an MOU should look like, who should be there, who should sign it, but this guidance document provides some really nice suggestions and considerations for partners as they're working through this process and building MOUs.

When we think about the who, the first step in developing an MOU or revisiting and revising an existing MOU is to really identify who are the members, that leadership team, both from the IDEA agency and from the Head Start agency, who's leading and who's coordinating that, the

coordinated approach to disability services from the Head Start side and from the IDEA side, who's leading and responsible for making decisions around those IDEA services and implementing the services that are described in a child's IFSP or IEP.

When we're thinking about creating MOUs and creating agreements that are well informed and that really can support successful implementation of those goals, we want to make sure that there is representation across agencies, that when we're thinking about the who that we're considering diverse experiences and diverse perspectives. And then, of course, making sure that people who have decision-making authority, decision-making power are part of that team that is developing and working together again to implement that MOU.

Again, from the Head Start perspective, we know that the people responsible or the person responsible for making sure that that MOU gets created for ultimately signing it will be different. But we also know that disability services coordinators or other folks who support the design and the implementation of a program's coordinated approach really should have an important role in that MOU development and implementation process because those are the people who are ensuring that the program's services meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families.

And again, with the MOU as the foundation that this document describes and lays out processes and collaborative activities that are really going to result in that effective, coordinated approach.

Jani: And I think we've talked a lot about the why already, just in this discussion because once your team is formed, it's critical to discuss why the team is gathered and the purpose of getting together, the purpose of the agreement, how the agreement is going to benefit both parties and think about how the team can use the MOU together for all of those shared goals that Jen talked about earlier around building a coordinated system and improving relationships, maximizing resources, and defining roles and shared responsibilities and sharing data, and meeting the requirements ultimately.

One of the things that I thought was really interesting is that a lot of times we get together and we're talking and we feel like we've hit a roadblock but then ultimately we find out that it's not really a roadblock, we're just not using the same terms to talk about the same thing. This was addressed more recently by a disability services coordinator and she puts it really nicely about how they navigated that. Let's watch.

[Video begins]

Coordinator: We got to know our Woonsocket public school coordinators and district leaders and teachers a little bit more than we had previously. And we all came to the realization that we had different languages that we use to describe the programs and what was going on in a day for our children, we just use different words for the same things. We had many meetings, and some of them were very uncomfortable. But we decided, we approached it that this was all about the child and that this child didn't become a public school child at the age when they're at kindergarten, but that child from the very time that child was born, this child was all of ours.

And we had that as a baseline and said we are going to move forward and take care of these children from the very beginning. We went through processes and meetings and deciding what our shared language was and how could we do this. It was a process, it was uncomfortable conversations that ended up becoming very comfortable and we all became closer because of it with our shared vision that it is about the child, whatever is best for the child.

[Video ends]

Jani: I love that story. It's being very real about the struggle but also real about the closeness that can come when you resolve those issues. Jen, I see in the Q&A that there's a question about the responsibility for the MOU and that LEAs aren't necessarily required to develop MOUs with grantees. Do you want to speak to that?

Jen: Yeah. I mean, again, when we think about – and I see some questions about who ultimately is responsible for creating the MOUs in Head Start. And again, that will vary from program to program. In some cases, it might be the disability services coordinator. And in some cases, it might be the director. That will be something that will need to be figured out at the local level, at the program level.

And thinking about while this is a requirement for Head Start programs that developing those MOUs isn't necessarily a requirement for IDEA providers but that's where this guidance comes in and that's why we feel like this guidance is so important that the Department of Education and that the Office of Special Education Programs are taking a strong stance in being really empathic to IDEA providers and saying that these partnerships are important in resulting in inclusion in the least restrictive environment in the Head Start Program.

Let's take a look in our last few minutes here at the what of the MOU. I've seen several questions come through about placement decisions and how do we work with our partners to ensure that placement decisions are collaborative. And questions about working together to make sure that service delivery for the child's IFSP or IEP happens in the least restrictive environment. And those are collaborative activities, those are things that would really be reflected, discussed, and described well in the MOU.

When we think about the what and what goes in an MOU, what processes, what activities we describe, again, we know that there's not a standard template or not a standard format necessarily for an MOU that each MOU really should be tailored to the specific features and needs of the program, of the Head Start program and to their partner agencies. But we've got some considerations here. And again, these are really nicely outlined and described in that guidance document.

But what partners want to think about is really what's needed to ensure the successful implementation and provision of IDEA services and the need for the IDEA partners, the Early Intervention Agency, or the LEA to meet the requirements of IDEA. Providing those services collaboratively in inclusive environments with their Head Start partners. And the way that they outlined it in this guidance document is thinking about each point within that continuum of IDEA service deliveries. Child Find and Referral, eligibility and evaluation, developing the IEP or the IFSP, and definitely implementing working together to implement the IEP services and those individualized services and supports.

This is really where the meat of the MOU and really where teams will want to spend time thinking about, not only what are the goals of our partnership but what do we need to do, how do we need to collaborate together across these different areas to make sure that the services we provide are effective and that they meet the requirements of IDEA. That documentation is really helpful. And again, this guidance is going out, not only to Head Start programs but this guidance is going out to IDEA partners as well. It's going out to early intervention agencies, it's going out to LEAs. OSEP and OHS are really committed to making sure that all partners have seen this and have the resources to be able to implement these collaborative activities.

When we think about common components, again, knowing really that there's not a standard template or a standard format, when we think about these different touch points and these different activities across the IDEA service delivery continuum that we've just talked about on the last slide and how we shape that into an MOU, the Disability Services Coordinator Orientation Guide has what I think is a really helpful appendix, it's appendix A in that DSC Orientation Guide which is linked too in the Viewer's Guide, and it has some description of common sections that you might want to include in an MOU, what goes in there and what's the purpose of these different sections from an overview and a description of the programs to make sure that both partners have an understanding of the services and the service delivery models that each provides.

Really clearly defining, again, those areas of collaboration and what is it that we want to do together to achieve these outcomes and how do we do that. Thinking about that agency roles and responsibilities and being really specific about that.

We are really close on time, so I want to remind folks that we have our connection session that's coming up on Thursday. We've presented a lot of information, this high-level rationale for partnerships as well as some specific information about MOUs, what that process looks like, what those documents can look like, and I definitely encourage folks again to download these new guidance documents and take a look at those.

But then also, join us at the disabilities and inclusion community on MyPeers. Join us and ask those questions that we might not have been able to address today when we're thinking about some of those specific local-level practices that might differ from area to area, bring those questions to MyPeers. I will be there to help address those but also your colleagues will be there to help address those and learn from one another's experiences. We can do that on MyPeers on the community but also again just a quick reminder about that connections session on Thursday, from 3 to 4 p.m. Eastern that the Zoom link for joining that connection session is on the disabilities and inclusion community on MyPeers and we can pop that into our Q&A here so that folks have the link to that calendar event within the MyPeers community.

We know that this takes both the high-level understanding and that intentional relationship building but also knowledge of and some problem-solving, and some collaborating around some of those specific challenges as well. Definitely follow up with us on MyPeers so we can make sure to get you the resources that you need to help with these processes.

And one more quick reminder to join us on February 28th for our next inclusion series webinar which is a continuation of our IDEA partnerships series and we will look at some of those

collaborative activities. Like I said, a lot of folks have asked about what should this look like, what should we be doing, what should our LEA partners be doing to ensure effective inclusion and effective inclusive services and we'll talk about that in our next webinar. What your colleagues are doing around the country in collaboration with their IDEA partners to ensure effective inclusive services? Jani, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Jani: This has been really fun. Thanks for having me, Jen. And it's so nice to see everyone. I appreciate it.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely. And thank you to everybody for joining us as always. But again, for all the work that you do on behalf of young children with disabilities and their families. It really makes a difference, it really matters. We know it's not always easy. But let us know how we can support you. Thank you and we'll see you soon.