

Workforce Roundtable with Head Start Staff and HHS Leadership

Shawna Pinckney: Good afternoon and thank you so much for joining us. We are thrilled that you are with us today and a special shout out to those who are joining us on Facebook Live. I'm Shawna Pinkney. I'm the Associate Deputy Director of the Office of Head Start. And I am here today with some very special friends. I am joined by my federal colleagues, Katie Hamm, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development in the Administration for Children and Families, and Khari Garvin, who is the Director of the Office of Head Start, also in the Administration for Children and Families. And most importantly, we are joined today with a panel by a panel of Head Start staff from across the country.

Katie Hamm: Thank you so much, Shawna. I am also excited to have a chance to sit down and talk about the essential role that Head Start staff play in delivering high-quality, comprehensive services to children and partnering with families. About a year ago, President Biden signed an executive order on increasing access to high-quality care and supporting caregivers.

This was an all-of-government call to action to address care across the lifespan, from infants and toddlers to seniors and people with disabilities. To celebrate a year of progress, the Department of Health and Human Services is recognizing this week as Care Week. And today we really want to honor and lift up our Head Start workforce that is so important to the mission that we have at the Department of Health and Human Services and the Administration for Children and Families.

One of the directives in that executive order was for HHS, the Department of Health and Human Services to identify opportunities to increase wages and benefits for the Head Start workforce. Last November, the Office of Head Start took the 1st step toward that goal and published proposed changes to the Head Start program performance standards for public comment.

We got a lot of comments we heard from a lot of staff. Programs, organizations who weighed in and now we're reviewing those comments. If finalized, these changes to the performance standards would require Head Start programs. To pay early educators salaries that are comparable to preschool teachers in public schools and to provide benefits like health insurance and regular breaks. The administration for children and families estimates that the salary increases would amount to on average an increase in 10,000 per year for Head Start early educators. It is a long overdue proposal, and it really reflects that quality early childhood education means that our early educators are well compensated.

We all know that the Head Start program reflects the gold standard when it comes to early care and education, and it's critical to sustain this quality in Head Start for children that are often furthest from opportunity. Improving wages and benefits are critical to sustaining quality, keeping children safe in Head Start, and reducing teacher turnover, which has unfortunately increased significantly in recent years.

The critical ingredient in the Head Start model is staff. Head Start relies on staff who have a gift for working with children and families, and who have the passion and commitment to serve communities in a program that is designed to give the best of what we have in early childhood education to our children and communities that can be furthest from opportunity. For too long, the Head Start model has relied on committed staff to accept lower wages, even as we ask more of them. The care workforce across the lifespan plays a crucial role in our communities, and it's a commitment to intense and skilled work, that unfortunately, includes people who are among the lowest paid in the country.

Care workers who are disproportionately women of color are the backbone of our economy, and the driving force in the delivery of comprehensive services to children, families, and communities across America at Head Start. So that is why I am excited to have the opportunity to recognize the early care and education workforce during this month and to hear from Head Start staff. They know best what it's like to work in Head Start and what we need to do to improve their working conditions and compensation. I will hand the mic over to Khari Garvin, the director of the Office of Head Start.

Director Khari Garvin: Katie, thank you so much for that. We're super excited to have our panelists with us today, as well as all of you who are joining us through our live stream. And as Katie just mentioned, the care economy is really an essential part of our communities. And today we're focusing on Head Start staff who make the Head Start program the gold standard Early childhood programs. I have the honor to introduce the wonderful Head Start tab that we have with us today and have a deeper conversation with them about their invaluable work and the challenges they continue to face.

And to also hear about their ideas for solutions. And today, we have with us, first of all, Rebecca Carlson. And Rebecca has worked in Early Head Start for three years. And is currently a co-teacher in a Central Minnesota program, Region 5. Also, we have, Dani McFarland. Dani is an Early Head Start Education and Inclusive Specialist in a program in Northwestern Oregon. That's Region 10. And she serves as a coach for over 22 early Head Start classroom teachers, as well as home visitors. We also have Dianne Hollstrom. Dianne is a lead teacher in a program in Western Washington State, that's Region 10. She got her start as a Head Start parent and has been a teacher since 1997.

We also have with us joining us today, Kaya Jackson. Kaya has been working as an educator for 15 years, and she is an assistant teacher at a Head Start program in Northeastern Illinois. That's region five. We also have Linda McPherson. Linda has 30 years of experience and Head Start. Working in a program in southeastern New York state. That's region two for us. And she is currently a family services coordinator. And last and certainly not least, we have Bridgett Vance. Bridgett is a home-based Head Start provider in a program in northeastern Illinois. Again, that's region five. She has been educating and caring for young Children and families for more than 25 years, including two years in Head Start.

As you can see, we have a panel with lots of talent and lots of experience. I want to thank all of you for being here, and I do look forward to talking with you. More about your work in just a bit here. I've got a few questions for you that I'm going to ask. And so right out of the gate as we consider these questions of Rebecca while poses to you. We want to hear from all of you. But Rebecca, you'll be first out of the gate.

Head Start, of course, is a critical program that operates in communities across the country. And that program, this program provides not only high-quality early education services to pregnant women and children birth to five, but also services that meets the child's holistic needs. I'm talking about medical and dental care, developmental screenings, supports for families so that they can access other benefits and resources in their community. What brought you to Head Start and why are you passionate about working in the Head Start program? Rebecca let's start with you.

Rebecca Carlson: I would say that the reason I'm here is because I am passionate for children. Sometimes I get a little emotional because I am so passionate, but I find my job very rewarding, incredibly rewarding. I can quickly see these kids growing and learning as I'm working with them. Thank you. And that's my main goal is to be here, be there, be their teacher. I mean, their parents are their first teacher, but I'm there to support them. I may only have these students for eight hours a day, and a lot of our students come from very tough situations in life. But I like to put my time and my energy into these children to allow them to explore and be curious about their life and the way they grow, to be confident in themselves. Those eight hours is my chance to be the brighter light in these kids' future.

Khari: Perfect. Thank you for that. Same question for you, Dani. Well, tell us what brought you to Head Start and why you're passionate about working in the program.

Dani McFarland: Fun story. What brought me to Head Start was I competed in the Miss America locals and a part of Miss America is having a platform and my platform was Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness. And through the Miss America program, I was introduced to a Head Start program. Where I was able to volunteer and through that I was able to learn about their holistic approach for caring for children and families and their connections with a community. In Head Start, I started out as a center support aide, and then I was a teacher for some years, and now I'm in the position that I'm in, coaching, as you said, 22, classroom, teachers, and home-based, home visitors.

What keeps me passionate about working for Head Start is just our entire community approach. I feel like through our partner connections, we're able to provide wraparound services to our children and families. And on a much larger level, it's not just about the families and children, it's about bringing those community services together and making those connections and really building a sense of community. And just making us bigger and more connected.

Khari: Thank you for that. Let's keep moving. Dianne, same question for you. What brought you to the program?

Dianne Hollstrom: Well, such a good story is I registered my child in Head Start. And once I walked in the door, it was like the tears program, the song everywhere — everyone knows your name and you walk in, and it was welcoming. Not only did they welcome me, they welcomed my family, my husband, and my siblings. And it's each day was your welcome here. And they saw. In meetings that I didn't see and the encouragement that they gave me throughout the time, so I was ready. They never gave up. You need to go to school, you need to get to where you can go so you can become a teacher, being scared and hesitant.

I put it off right — but they saw enough. The whole staff from the directors to the advocates to keep pushing in a gentle but firm way. And I recognized that it wasn't about what I had, but it was about what they saw in me because I didn't know it. And then I realized that it wasn't just me. It was every family in the program that they cared enough to make sure they had all of their needs met.

Making sure we were comfortable with getting medical and dentals and physicals and making sure our children were safe and healthy. If we were having difficulty with any resources, they made sure that we provided resources. In fact, then if we needed the ride, they'd give us a ride to where we needed to go. And it was like, this is, where I need to be. These people are making the difference and I want to be a part of this team and I want to give back to what they gave me and I'm still here.

Khari: That's great. We got a few more minutes on this segment. Kaya, how about you? What brought you to Head Start?

Kaya Jackson: Being a parent, I have a diverse learner, and I wasn't in a class or in a school, I had a home visitor that would come to my home, and I had a child that had speech delay, but once she encouraged me to get him in school and start school, I started going there. I wouldn't leave, I would just stay there. Then they asked me to volunteer, and I started looking for myself about development and where my child should be and it started matching up with what she was saying. I kept going like that and said, I seen that I was welcomed that my son was welcoming.

He was comfortable. I was comfortable. Then they asked that I like it — would I like a job, apply for it. I had the credits already. And what keeps me here is. What that home visitor did for me. She didn't just come in telling me this is what your child need. This is what we're gonna do. She encouraged me, and she showed me, and she walked me through it. That's My passion now. I know that it's possible. I know that the program work. I want to give it to someone else.

Khari: Thank you for that. Linda, how about you?

Linda McPherson: As an immigrant from Guyana, South America, I came here and I, I had my children in America, and I wanted to give them the best opportunities that is offered out there.

Two of my children went through Head Start. I started as a parent, of course, and moved into the role as a volunteer. Whenever the program needed a teacher — was out for a short time, I was surprised that they asked me, can you come and substitute in the classroom for a little bit? For over the week or so when I see I was being paid and I was, I became their permanent sub.

What Head Start did for me and my children, I felt that that was need for me to give back. For me to give back to this program that serviced my family. Bring us out of any kind of struggles that we were facing. Show my children that there's more for them, that they can do more in school and they can move on. Both of them are college students, college graduates. They're working in, programs now. I see the need to do this for other families and the families that came into Head Start. And when I look at parents that came in on public assistance and have no hope in what's going to happen for them next.

Some of them were immigrants who are not permanent in this country, and they all seek and was able from assistance, from myself and co workers get their permanent residency and their jobs that they're working on jobs where if they have a child, another child in Head Start today, they will not qualify for Head Start. They will be over the income guidelines. And this is what Head Start taught me to do for others. And this is what Head Start did for me. I think the give-back spirit is what I have that keeps me here. It's, it's definitely not the, the finances or the money. It is definitely what I can. Back to others of what I received. This is what keeps me here this long.

Khari: The give back spirit. We love that. Thank you for sharing that. Bridgett, how about you?

Bridgett Vance: What brought me into Head Start was the additional resources. Any childcare educator, we are very limited and being able to be a part of his start allowed us to be able to help the Children more. The resources that we received to help the Children go a great way. Being able to be involved in, early intervention is wonderful because we want to help Children before they get to the kindergarten level. We want to be able to make sure that they are ready for school and can go to school and be prepared and sit and learn at their level. What keeps me passionate about Head Start is the ability to be able to help the parents.

We here at Larissa Learning Lab believe in helping the whole child. That means helping the family as well. Head Start allows us to be able to help the parents. A lot of our parents need additional resources. They need help with jobs. They need help with housing. We have an excellent family specialist here that helps us with that. Head Start gives us the ability to help the child and their family. In turn it helps us as well because children can be more prepared for school.

Khari: Thank you so much for that. We're going to move to our next question and want you to think all of you to think about this. Well, I'll ask you to respond in the same order that you responded the first time, but we'll move a little more quickly through this next question.

There are many things, many wonderful things about the Head Start program. But we also know that people who work in Head Start programs sometimes do face challenges. This is rewarding work, but very difficult work to serve families and children and help meet their needs. The way that we think about Head Start work, there is a physical component to Head Start work, but there is emotional labor as well. And it is skilled work to have. Knowledge of child development and classroom management as well as family engagement. I want each of you please to tell us about a typical day working in a Head Start program for you. What are some of the best parts of your work and what are some of the challenges you face as a Head Start educator or a family support professional. Let's move through this one. Rebecca, get us started on this please.

Rebecca: I could start with the positive and like I said before, the positive is watching these children learn and grow and develop into their own little human being. Yeah. Some of, the cons would probably be the short staffing that we're facing right now. That puts a big strain on us. I mean, we only have these kids for eight hours. We're enriching their lives. And when you don't have the people to help engage these children that may need more attention, it would help to have more staff and also, a better pay would help me with myself and my family to live our lives because we all have struggles. I think that's what I would have to say, but I'm passionate about the people I serve, and the families, and I love what I do. I'm going to continue doing it.

Khari: Thank you for your openness. Dani, how about you?

Dani: I would say the positive that I see is, since I get to go into multiple classrooms, or go to play in learning groups, is just seeing the growth and development in the children, and watching them, especially since I serve prenatal to the three-year old's, just seeing that huge increase of growth and development. The challenges that we see that I constantly see in our program is staffing. We're still sitting in our program at about two-thirds of what we would be if we were fully staffed. And that leads to staff members continuing to come to work with illnesses because they don't want to have to close the classroom by calling out. We also have supports that are spread really thin because of staffing and the fact that we could definitely use more funding to fund those additional support so that we can get more people in the classroom, to help staff with the higher needs that we've been seeing with these children.

Khari: Thank you. I'm hearing challenges with staffing at times. I'm hearing of being under resourced or even having more paid might help a little bit, but also that just being engaged in the way you are and being able to pour into children and families the way that you do. Thank you for that. Dianne. How about you? What are some of the best parts of your work? And what are some of the challenges that you face as a Head Start program staff?

Dianne: Some of the positives are my team. They're like the best. We really get along well. And the other positive is when we get calls from parents early Saturday morning or from other states and say, hey, I just wanted to let you know. Because this is something that we worked on together. That one parent that called, I looked you up on Google and I had to call you. Those are the things that are positive. The struggle is like everybody else. The behavior supports when, of course we're post COVID, we have a lot of homeless families in our community and

giving those families the support that they need for those children — so the mental support they come in, not knowing how to regulate their emotions. To speak, and sometimes they can be traumatic and sometimes staff get hurt or other children. And so, finding the supportive staff to come in and give those babies what they need to work through those concerns that they don't understand. Those are my concerns.

Khari: We appreciate hearing that. And of course, the prioritizing families experiencing homelessness. That's one of our five national priorities for the Office of Head Start. We appreciate you flagging that. Kaya, how about you?

Kaya: The best part of my day in the classroom is first when I first get here, seeing the rest of the teachers. We're sticking it out, even though we're low staff. During the morning is the best time in the classroom because everybody come in, parents, guardians, administrators, they all come in and say good morning. All the kids just like, good morning, like, so that's the best part of my day. The hardest part in being in the classroom is maintaining what you need to maintaining, like classroom management, and you don't have enough staff. Giving the child that quality 101 that they need to be successful that day. That's the best part of my day. That's hard, because once you give it to one, you may have to give it to another one and you're just by yourself, or you have another staff, but it's the lack of staff that is the hardest part of getting through just one day, not saying a whole week, just one day without the proper staff.

Khari: Definitely hearing a theme there. For being so open. Linda, how about you?

Linda: Yes. In addition to, being a parent and coming into Head Start as a staff, my positives of Head Start is that Head Start staff becomes a family of their own, of themselves. So many times, when no one is leaving, when some of them don't want to leave, not that they care. They can't go elsewhere and make more money. Sometimes that comfort zone that you have with people who are like your own family that work together in unity with you is one of the positives that I have in Head Start. With everything else that's going on, we still maintain the programs. We still stay there, make sure we bring children in and we get them the services that they need.

One of the negatives. Is, in addition to the salaries not being there for you to be able to sustain your lives and your family's livelihood, the paperwork that's there, especially with the teachers in the classroom. When they have difficulties, everyone shares that there's difficulties with children who might have some special needs and the skills might not be there ultimately by those teachers. And, the support that's coming in is not coming in as it should into the programs. The teachers have to work there and continue the amount of paperwork that they do have. That's causing that time that they're supposed to be with the child and do the paperwork. They're doing paperwork on their lunch breaks, and they're doing paperwork at home.

This is one of the negative pieces of of Head Start because even in the offices, sometimes because we have to fill in in the classroom. If a teacher is on break or anything, and to maintain two people in the classroom at all times. The other paperwork is not done, and we are taking

paperwork home and doing things. After the work hours, and there's no compensation for that because we're doing it out of the goodness of our hearts.

Khari: Thank you for again for your candor and I know that I saw some sort of nodding as you were talking there. Bridget, you're bringing up the rear on this question so again we asked you the best parts of, of the work but also things challenges that you might face sometimes. And Bridget, we still, here we go. We got you off of mute.

Bridgett: I think the positive for me is just seeing the children every day, walking to my home. They're so excited and, just them coming in and being happy and giving hugs and being able to help them socially and emotionally, because that's so important. And that's wonderful for us. We love it. However, the negative is the paperwork, just as one of the ladies said, it's a lot of paperwork and not having a staff. Yes, you have to spend weekends and you have to spend nights and evenings doing paperwork. The other thing is, of course, staffing.

Also, early intervention, which I'm so strongly for that's so important. However, here with our school system. Sometimes it takes so long to get the children the resources that they need through the public school system. That's a really big problem for us because the children are — if they need the resources, they're not getting it when they need it. And we here are trying to do the best that we can. So, I think that that's definitely something that needs to be improved.

Khari: Really appreciate that for all of you. We thank you for your commitment and again, for being so open and candid with us about all of your experiences. I have one final question for you, but again, thanks to all of you for all the years of commitment and for sharing with us today. And this last question, I just want you all to sum up what I'm going to ask you, if you can, into one word, if you can, or one phrase or sentence, if you can. But the question is, what makes you hopeful? For the future. And what opportunities do you see to bolster and support the Head Start workforce? If you can sum that up in a phrase or a word, what might that be? Rebecca, coming back to you on that question.

Rebecca: I would have to say the kids and all of the potential that I see in these children. I hope all of you see it as well. I'm hopeful seeing that my work is being recognized for what it is, and being as essential as it is, and the fact that events like this are able to happen where my concerns can be addressed, and even my passions. I'm hopeful that maybe investment will follow to help build a Head Start program to be the bright light that these children need in their lives.

Khari: Appreciate that Dani, how about you? What makes you hopeful for the future, and what opportunities do you see to bolster and support the Head Start workforce?

Dani: Some of the things that make me hopeful for our future is it seems that there's an increased spotlight on early childhood education in the United States and here in Oregon, and so that gives me a lot of hope that there's a lot of changes coming, a lot of support coming, as

well as the staff, the staff that are hanging in there, through all of this, they keep me hopeful because it shows me that we still always have people that are going to care for these children. Some of the things that we really do need is the funding, competitive wages. And extra funds for those additional support staff in the classroom so that we don't have situations where teachers aren't able to leave the room to get their, their work done, or to even go take a break and use the restroom. We really need to ensure that we're, we're overstaffing our classroom staff better support.

Khari: That often gets overlooked, doesn't it? Thanks for sharing that, that perspective. Dianne, what makes you hopeful about the future of Head Start and support for the workforce?

Dianne: This last legislation, when we just got a little bit of a bump, for temporary, that made me hopeful to know that the word is still out there. People are still watching, and people are still talking. It's nothing that's on the back burner. And that it's still, an issue with many people and that it isn't something that just pecked under the rug. And that I'm just hopeful that we'll just be able to keep it going and that, eventually we'll be able to just have it every without having to worry about budget cuts.

Khari: Yeah, we don't want to say that. No, but they, no, thank you. We don't even want to think that, but I appreciate that so much. Kaya, how about you? Thank you.

Kaya: Well, what makes me hopeful is this right here, having an opportunity to share and finding out that we all have the same, issues. I think just being the focus and that the change is happening.

Khari: I appreciate that. Linda, I think.

Linda: I will go straight to the point. The White House who is in charge there to keep the funding flowing. I'm hopeful for that. And, and on a second part, my union who is here fighting and on the on the ground trying to get make sure that we get what is deserved and what is needed. Once the funds come, my union can negotiate and get the best that there is for the, the workers and the programs of itself. And this platform, this is like. Something that's never really happened in the past, and if we can have more things like this, get more staff being able to speak out of what their concerns are, I think we'll move in a greater direction.

Khari: Thank you. Thank you so much for that. Bridgett, last but not least, what makes you hopeful about the future of Head Start and bolstering the workforce?

Bridgett: What makes me hopeful is advocacy. I am definitely for advocacy, and as long as I can advocate and be a voice for children, be able to help, I will do that.

Also, my union as well, SEIU, I love them. They're definitely helping us keep things going and helping us get what we need. I also want to say that what keeps me hopeful is some of our Politicians and government and, the Office of Head Start. As long as we have round tables like

this and we can express what we need and you listen, that keeps me hopeful to know that we are all on one accord and we can all advocate for our children for the future.

Khari: We love that. I want to invite everyone out there and Facebook live land to give a virtual round of applause to all of our panelists for those great, great remarks there. Again, we are super, super excited, but also happy to hear from you all today, and we do look forward to continuing to support the Head Start workforce.
With that, I give way to my colleague, Shawn.

Shawna: What makes me hopeful is these voices are hearing from folks who are doing the incredible work of leading in our programs every single day, truly does make me hopeful. We so appreciate all of you and. All that you have shared with us. So honestly, this afternoon, we thank you for being here. Now we want to give you an opportunity to ask us the federal leadership a few questions. We'll start with Linda. What questions do you have for the ACF leadership?

Linda: Head Start staff work every day to ensure children have high quality early childhood education experiences and their families have the supports that they need to thrive. What are some of the most effective ways to support Head Start educators in doing that important work?

Katie: Thank you so much, Linda. I appreciate the question. I'm happy to kick it off and then we'll invite my colleagues to jump in as well. As I said in my opening, the Head Start workforce really is the most essential component to accomplishing Head Start's mission. And so, we really prioritize through technical assistance, through work with our grant recipients, helping them put strategies, policies, processes in place that are supporting staff. And there is just a wealth of information within the Office of Head Start. That's really designed to support programs in, cultivating those strong supports and relationships with staff.

As I said in the opening. We also put out this proposed rule last year and solicited public comment, which was really helpful. And we put out, here's what we think the workforce needs to be successful, and it was really helpful to hear from so many programs from so many staff, with their feedback to help us in informing a final rule. I think at the heart of it is we've had increased expect expectations for Head Start staff. Particularly the frontline staff, the staff that are working directly with children. But the wages have really been stagnant. The benefits have been inconsistent and we don't always across the board have adequate supports for health and wellness for staff.

And because compensation for the Head Start workforce has not kept pace with rising wages in other industries, we really have to adapt and evolve to a new landscape in order to continue to lead the early childhood sector and quality program for children and families. When we hear things about turnover, it was so inspiring to hear all the passion coming from this group about why you stay. But you probably — some of the things you spoke to about the challenges also helps explain why we're seeing so much turnover and Head Start as well. And as many of our

panelists said, the unfilled staff positions, and the inability to operate at full capacity, make the work even more challenging for the staff that remain, and limit Head Starts' ability to reach and fill slots.

Like I said, we really strive to support grant recipients in cultivating the best environment they can for staff. We in ACF have had a big focus on compensation and benefits, pathways for career advancement and addressing working conditions that are designed to really reflect the value of the early childhood workforce in our communities. Some specific strategies that we have seen, and we are really promoting in. And trying to facilitate some peer learning, obviously increasing staff compensation or providing financial incentives to staff. Providing benefits like paid leave, health insurance, childcare, retirement benefits.

Scholarships and time off for training or educational programs, including registered apprenticeships. Early childhood career and higher education pathways, and that includes through career and technical education, strengthening compensation and support for early educators who have a particular skill set. We heard a lot about the need for special education and early intervention. Linguistic diversity, that's all extremely important that we reflect the value in what people are paid.

I was thrilled that we have a family childcare provider able to join us because it's so important that we hear from you about what that model looks like and what that model needs. Expanding family childcare networks and shared services models and substitute pools are all strategies that I think are particularly important for family childcare. I could go on, but I will, I will stop there, and just say, I think appreciate that this is a two-way conversation. It's important to hear from you about what supports are needed as well. Khari, did you want to add to that?

Khari: This is just a few that I want to, I say, check, check, check everything you just said. And Linda, thank you for the question. I'll just add that, that in addition to addressing low wages and also low benefits, we also know that in Head Start, how important it is to actually build what we sometimes refer to as a pipeline of effective early educators.

And also, the importance of ensuring that there are opportunities to enter the field of early care and education in general and Head Start. Specifically, we know how important it is for there to be easier access and complete credentials and degrees in this field as well as, easier access to advanced degrees in this field as well. And so, one strategy to, to get that done, for Head Start and, and something that's Head Start's particularly known for and pretty good at is kind of, engaging with parents and, and even some of our panelists were former Head Start parents.

I think we see the fruit of that even here, but engaging with parents, and a way to actually intern to prepare them and equip them to enter the Head Start workforce. And that process usually begins with them kind of starting as volunteers in the program, but then moving on to becoming program employees. And again, we've heard some of our panelists even speak about that. As their own personal journeys into the Head Start, field, we know that many of our

programs have set up successful grow-your-own models or where they bring in and train parents and support them to earn those required credentials to become teachers or family service workers or bus drivers or and many, many other roles in Head Start.

And this larger issue of increasing the pool of qualified early educators in this area, where we, where we've also been working with interagency partners, and a space where our technical assistance networks offer support. But we know investment in this area is needed as well. And so that's just kind of how we think about it. But, Shawna, anything you want to add here?

Shawna: Well, just thank you both for sharing those comments and. Addressing wages and benefits and certainly building a larger pipeline and Head Start for our workforce to have opportunities for advancement. Khari, when you were talking about parents, I was thinking of Kaya, and wondering if she has some additional questions that she might want to ask you and Katie. Kaya?

Kaya: Yes, I was wondering what are — no, hold on for one second. Many of our communities are struggling to find and retain qualified educators to serve in our Head Start programs and ensure our most vulnerable children and families have the care they need to start school, ready for success. How is the Office of Head Start going to work to change that?

Khari: Well, thank you for that Kaya, get us started on that one. A couple of things. First of all, we know that recruitment and retention of qualified educators has been an issue in many communities for many years, but it became even worse and more challenging during and after the pandemic. And many of you even spoke to that while we were kind of discussing earlier when we were talking earlier when you were answering some of the earlier questions.

We've been working to support programs through technical assistance and program guidance, but we know that we need to get at the root cause of this issue. And like Katie said before, for far too long, Head Start educator pay has not reflected the value of the roles of Head Start staff. The pay hasn't often reflected the complexity of the work that you all do or the qualifications that we require all of you to have. For that reason, we have proposed important policy changes to our Head Start program performance standards to support and stabilize the Head Start workforce. And that includes new requirements for staff wages and benefits and wellness and mental health supports, along with policies that will strengthen mental health services for children and families and staff.

And improve the quality of the comprehensive services that we provide to children and families every day. The new wage, the new benefit, and the new wellness provisions would enhance recruitment and retention of qualified staff through competitive compensation and improve the quality of care for children and families. I'm sure that all of this sounds good to all of you. I hope so. And so, with that, as we think about that, I just want to invite Shawna and to just see if you have, if you want to take a moment to remind folks about the specific things that we included in those proposed wage and benefit policies.

Shawna: Yeah, I would love the opportunity to do that. The proposed, the proposed rule included components where we are asking programs to develop a salary structure that drives competitive wages for all staff, and that those wages over seven years, would reach what we call pay parity with preschool teachers in public schools with similar qualifications and experience.

And that in this proposed rule, we would ensure minimum pay for all staff that is enough to meet their basic needs. I think about what Becky was sharing with us as we opened earlier this afternoon. And also, that we ensure that pay is comparable for Head Start educators working with infants and toddlers as well. And those working with preschoolers with, again, similar qualifications and experience. Our, what we call our notice of proposed rulemaking also included, some, components to improve staff benefits. I just, take a moment to share a little bit. About that, particularly for our full-time staff, we are proposing that programs must provide or facilitate access to health insurance coverage.

That programs offer paid time off and provide access to free or low-cost mental health services, among other a variety of other proposed benefits. For staff, and just one last thing. In addition, this proposed rule included a provision that programs must support staff wellness. And you all shared with us a little bit about that, as well staff wellness by cultivating program-wide culture of wellness and empowerment for all staff. That really be the culture that is infused across the program. And that would also include regular breaks. For staff as well. Now, having shared just a little bit about that, Dani, I'm wondering if you still have a few questions.

Dani: I do have another question. We have been dealing with a rise in mental health concerns among both staff and our children and families nationwide. Head Start staff need support for our well-being to do our jobs well. And so that we can help children and families access the mental health support that they also need. How are you ensuring that we have access to these types of support?

Khari: And I appreciate that question to all of these are super important. This one that you hit on, I know, is a growing need for us and Head Start. First of all, let me just say that the work that all Head Start staff do every day. It's not easy. It's important, but not easy, and it's really hard work, and like I said, it's important work, and we know that the mental health of staff is directly related to children's mental health as well.

Happy, healthy staff who are less stressed or are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to stay in their jobs and to keep providing those high-quality interactions with children and families that you provide every day. But to be able to achieve we know that staff need more supports as they navigate a rise of behaviors in classrooms that are challenging just challenging to address. It is a priority for us to bolster programs in their efforts to support the mental health of children, families, and staff, and this shows up in our technical assistance, as well as in our program guidance that we've offered over the last few years.

Thank you very much. But in addition to that, to address this increasing rate of mental health concerns in children and adults, we propose new policies in that notice of proposed rulemaking

that we've been talking about, these proposed changes to the Head Start performance standards that would better integrate mental health into every aspect of program service, and that would also elevate the role of mental health consultation in programs.

To address mental health supports that notice of proposed rulemaking proposed several changes such as number one requiring that programs have what we call a multidisciplinary mental health team that would be responsible for coordinating program wide activities. We also propose to clarify expectations for program-wide wellness supports and provide mental health consultation at least monthly. We also propose to allow programs to work with mental health consultants who are not licensed, as long as they're working under the supervision of another licensed mental health professional. Pardon me. We also, propose to integrate mental health into the support services for families. We propose facilitating proactive screening and follow-up for children's mental health needs.

And then we also propose incorporating strengths-based language throughout the Head Start program performance standards. These are really all of the ways that we are thinking about and looking to address the mental health needs for children, families, and staff who are, somehow connected to Head Start programs. With that, I do want to just say thanks to everyone. Thanks so much for joining us today. I want to thank you for the incredible work that you're doing to continue to provide for children, the families in your communities we really do on behalf of the Office of Head Start. We appreciate you sharing your experience and expertise with us today.

And it's really conversations like this with Head Start staff such as all of you, that allow us to continue to support each person who works in Head Start programs. I need you to know we are committed to supporting the Head Start workforce and we commit to continuing to have conversations like this to make a meaningful impact. Conversations with educators and family support staff like you. Really led us to propose some important changes to the Head Start program performance standards that we believe are key to stabilizing our Head Start workforce and improving the overall quality of comprehensive services that Head Start families receive.

And you can learn more about this. On our website and of course our, I'm speaking about the E-C-L-K-C website, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, the Head Start website. And so, there's much more that you can learn about all of this there. But again, I want to thank, all of you, our panelists again, Rebecca and Dani and Dianne and, Kaya and Linda. And Bridget, thank you for carving out time to share your experiences and your perspectives with all of us today. It really is my great pleasure, though, in this moment to hand things back over to Katie Hamm, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development, who will close us out.

Katie: Thank you, Khari. I want to echo the thanks to our panelists. There's nothing like learning from the experts and you all are the experts on the Head Start workforce. We really appreciate you taking the time. I know it's not easy to get time away from your babies and your responsibilities, especially when programs are Our short staff; we appreciate you and your programs, making you all available, during the day to have this really important conversation. We thank you is not enough for all that you do for children and families in your communities.

It's been really inspiring to listen to you, and I want to thank you also for your candor, especially your public candor on the work we have ahead of us. In addition to all of the good things that are happening in Head Start right now.

I also wanted to let our audience know, as we continue to celebrate and recognize hair month, I wanted to invite you to a webinar tomorrow that ACF is co-hosting with the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. And this webinar is going to highlight a new resource developed to support programs, community, and state leaders in developing salary scales. It's called the there's a new resource called the early care and education workforce salary playbook. It's an implementation guide. The webinar is going to highlight the new tool and include a discussion with state and local leaders, who will share their experiences, developing wage and salary scales, including a Head Start administrator who has implemented a wage scale.

The goal is to address some of the chronic challenges with low compensation for the early care and education workforce. We're going to put a registration link that will be on the live event page following this. And it can also be found on our various social media pages. I want to, once again, a round of applause for Kaya, Dani, Dianne, Linda, Rebecca, and Bridgett. Thank you so much. And I hope everyone has a great rest of their day. Thank you. Thank you so much. We really appreciate it. That was fantastic. I can't thank you all enough. It was really just inspiring to hear how much you love your babies and your work. And we also have a lot of work to do together. But I, like Khari said, would love to be able to have more conversations like this.

Kimberly Burgess Simms: I just wanted to let you all know I saw it on the Facebook live, and you all looked and sounded wonderful, all of you. Thank you.

Kaya: Thank you.

Khari: Appreciate that, and just, on behalf of the Office of Head Start, I just want to echo that sentiment, guys, as you may be even prouder today to be the director of the Office Head Start. Thank you. And thank you for the hard work, guys. You were very clear about all of the things that you experienced good, bad or otherwise. Thank you for sharing that. And please know that we're working hard to address many of the things that you talked about today. Thank you.