003180-Head Start Compensation Spotlights

Glenna Davis: Hello. Hi, everyone, and welcome to the Head Start Compensation Spotlights webcast. It is now my pleasure to turn the floor over to our Office of Head Start (OHS) director, Khari Garvin. Director Garvin, the floor is yours.

Khari Garvin: Well, thank you so much. Good afternoon, everyone. Good morning to others and thank you for joining us today. We are here today to celebrate the success of some of our own Head Start programs that are doing some exciting things to support their children and families by strengthening their workforce.

We all know that staff are the backbone of Head Start programs and that, for years, Head Start programs have thrived on the selfless work of staff. That is why I am so pleased to see that so many of you have joined us today to learn from these outstanding programs and to hear more about ways our programs can support the workforce who provide such critical services to so many children and families.

I am particularly excited to showcase four Head Start programs today that are excelling in their commitment to our workforce by implementing strong compensation packages that align with the value and commitment of Head Start staff as well as their qualifications and experience. For years, Head Start has relied on the generosity of individuals, primarily women, many of whom women of color, who have selflessly accepted lower wages to advance our mission. While this speaks volumes about their dedication, it is neither acceptable nor sustainable.

The programs that we are showcasing today have made huge strides to change this. We hope their stories help you envision what this might look like in your program. I know together we can make Head Start a better place to work. Next, I have a poll question or two for you all to answer.

Glenna, if you would help us out with this, a couple poll questions, here is the first one: Are you familiar with the wage and benefits requirements in the Head Start Program Performance Standards? You see your answers there. You have a choice of three answers, we would like to invite you to respond.

I hope that is enough time to respond to that first question here. Let's see. Do we have results for that one available? If not, we can move on to the ... OK, looks like we do. It looks like that the majority, almost 60%, have responded by saying, "Yes, I am familiar with the wage and benefits requirements." That is good. We're getting off to a great start already. I got one more for you, if you can indulge. Again, I have a second poll question for you: How much of a lift will it be for your program to meet the wage and benefits standards? You have four options there. We'll give you a moment to respond.

Checking in to see how we're looking and how folks are responding, I don't know if had a chance to kind of think through it yet, but let's see if we have any results on the second poll question. Let's see, looking pretty good. We're looking at like almost half have said that programs have improved wages and benefits, but there's a contingency there. But very good, very good. This is looking good. Well-done to everyone. Thank you for indulging us with that. Thanks for completing those polls for us.

I am super excited for you to hear from Office of Head Start Deputy Director Captain Tala Hooban, who will give an overview of the wage and benefits requirements in our Performance Standards. Then you will hear from Jess Bialecki, the director of our Office of Head Start Division of Policy and Planning. Jess will moderate a panel with the four outstanding Head Start programs that I've mentioned at the top, who are here with us today. With that, I turn things over to Tala. Tala, all yours.

Tala Hooban: Thank you. Thank you, sir. Good afternoon. Good morning and thank you all for joining us today. The Head Start workforce is an essential part of what makes the Head Start program the gold standard early childhood program. As you all know, our workforce, including many of you that joined us for this webinar today, which, I see a good amount, thank you for joining, dedicate themselves to delivering these high-quality services to children and families.

Our education staff support early learning and relationships that help children grow. Our family services staff play the critical role of engaging and supporting economic stability of our families. Our bus drivers, our custodians and kitchen staff are critical to providing safe transportation, clean learning environments and nutritious foods for children and families in our programs. Of course, none of this is possible without capable, consistent leadership that help build an engaging and positive work environment for all staff.

Today, we are focusing on ways we can make progress towards improving the compensation of our amazing workforce. We're excited to showcase these four programs that have made major strides in this area. Before we turn to our showcase programs, we will review the specifics of the compensation standards programs are required to meet and when they're required to meet them. We'll begin with these wage requirements.

We think of our wage standards as four interrelated requirements. For all of these requirements that I'm about to walk through, programs must be compliant by August 1, 2031, again, August 1st, 2031. First, programs are required to establish or update a pay structure for all staff positions. We assume most programs already have a pay structure or wage ladder or salary scale or of some type in place for their employees.

This standard requires that programs take a look at this pay structure and make sure that it considers the responsibilities, qualifications, experience and schedule of hours worked. We also want programs to consider whether this existing pay structure promotes competitive wages. The intent of this standard is to really make sure competitive pay across all staff positions in the program. Programs must take a look at their pay structure at least once every 5 years to make sure that it is continuing to promote competitive pay.

Second, programs are required to make significant, measurable progress to pay parity for Head Start education staff with kindergarten - through - third - grade teachers. We know from data and research that, on average, Head Start teachers are paid far less than their public preschool or kindergarten counterparts. Therefore, to make sure to achieve progress to parity, we require that by August 1, 2031, there's that date again, programs must ensure each of their education staff members is paid an annual salary that is at least comparable to the annual salary paid to public school preschool teachers in their local school district.

By "Education staff," we mean those Head Start staff who work directly with children in classrooms or homes as part of their daily job responsibilities including our Head Start teachers, preschool assistant teachers, home visitors and family childcare providers. When determining salaries for these staff, we expect programs to consider and make adjustments based on staff roles, responsibilities, qualifications, experience and schedule of hours worked.

Programs can also benchmark wages for their education staff to a neighboring school district if salaries are higher there or to 90% of kindergarten teacher salaries instead of public school preschool teachers if they choose to do so. Third, the minimum pay for all staff must be at least sufficient to cover basic cost of living in the program's local geographic area. Those basic costs of living include things like food, housing, utilities, medical costs, transportation and taxes. Finally, programs must make sure that wages are comparable across Head Start, preschool and Early Head Start for those in similar staff roles with similar qualifications and experience. Programs have a long time to fully implement all of these requirements.

As I mentioned previously, these requirements must be fully implemented by about 7 years from now, August of 2031. However, it's always a good idea to start making progress on increasing pay for your employees now or in the near future rather than try to do it all at once. Thank you.

Next, I want to dive a little deeper on a few of the wage standards. I want to take a closer look at what we mean by progress to parity for Head Start education staff and how programs can adjust staff wages to achieve this goal. If you joined our webinar in September, this may sound familiar.

Programs can look at their target for pay parity in their local or neighboring school district and adjust that target salary to be appropriate for their own education staff. When we say, "Adjust the target salary," what we mean is that programs can adjust salary targets up or down based on the characteristics of their own education staff including roles and responsibilities, qualifications, experience and schedule or hours worked.

For instance, if a Head Start teacher has the same degree, similar schedule and more experience than the comparison public preschool teacher, the program can pay the Head Start teacher more than the public preschool teacher. Another example is, let's say the Head Start teacher has the same degree but less experience than the comparison public preschool teacher, and in this instance, the Head Start teacher's pay can be adjusted down to account for the less experience.

Programs also have the option to use a few other methods to establish their salary target for pay parity. They can use public school salaries in a neighboring school district if those salaries are higher than their local school districts. This is important for a program to consider if a neighboring school district is a competing employer where your program's qualified education staff might consider taking a job due to a higher salary.

Programs can also use 90% of kindergarten salaries as a benchmark for pay parity if that's preferred. This might be helpful if a program's local school district does not have public preschool or if data on preschool teacher salaries is more challenging to access than kindergarten teacher salaries. My favorite graphics, OK.

I know these standards can be a little confusing, so we've created some visuals to help. Right now, things in many places look like the picture on the left: two teachers, same experience, same degree, same schedule are earning different amounts just because one teacher teaches in public-school-based preschool, and one teaches in Head Start.

In order for the Head Start teacher to be at pay parity with the preschool teacher, they need to be earning the same amount because they both have 12 years of experience, they both have a bachelor's degree in early education, and they both work full day, full year. This is what you see in the figure on the right. We know this example is not always reflective of the scenarios or program space. There are often real differences between Head Start educators and public school educators in terms of qualifications, experiences or other factors.

Programs can adjust their salaries to account for those differences. Let's look at a next one. OK. In the examples on this slide, there are differences in schedules and hours worked. On the left, the public preschool teacher has the same responsibilities, experience, education and hours worked as a Head Start teacher. But the public preschool teacher only works for a traditional school year, while the Head Start teacher works year-round including through the summer. In that example, a program can adjust the Head Start teacher's salary up to reflect the longer schedule.

The Head Start teacher in this example should earn more than the public preschool teacher in order to achieve pay parity. In the example on the right, we see the opposite situation where the Head Start teacher and public preschool teacher, again, have the same experience and qualifications, but the preschool teacher works a full-school-day schedule, where the Head Start teacher works a part-day schedule.

In this example, the program is going to adjust the Head Start teacher's salary down to account for fewer hours worked relative to the public preschool teacher. Then this would still be considered paid parity for a Head Start teacher with the preschool teacher. I know it takes a minute for visuals, hoping people are looking through.

Programs can also adjust wages based on qualifications and need to make sure that Early Head Start and Head Start preschool teachers are paid comparably when they have similar qualifications and experience. Now, we know that wages are only one piece of the compensation package. The Performance Standards also require programs to provide Head Start staff with comprehensive benefits.

For full-time staff, those that work 30 hours or more per week when the program is in session, programs must provide access to health insurance either through an employer-sponsored plan or by connecting staff to other health insurance options, access to short-term behavioral health services at no or minimal cost to the employee, and paid leave.

For part-time staff, programs must connect these staff with health insurance options. Finally, for any staff that may be eligible, programs must facilitate connections to childcare resources including childcare subsidy programs and facilitate connections to public service loan forgiveness. Now, I'm sure you are sick of listening to me. I'm going to pass it over to our director of the Division of Policy and Planning in the Office of Head Start, Jess Bialecki, to moderate our program panel, which we're all looking forward to.

Jessica Bialecki: Thanks so much, Tala. I also just want to acknowledge that we see there's questions coming in and really appreciate the questions that we're seeing on the wage and benefit policies coming in through Q&A and the chat, and we'll try our best to get to those in writing. But definitely don't want to delay from the feature part of this event, which is our fantastic program panel that we have.

I am so excited to be here today with members of ... representatives from four Head Start programs from across the country, who will be telling us about their compensation packages. Let's start with Kate Barrand. Kate Barrand is from Horizons for Homeless Children in Boston. Welcome, Kate. Kate, we'd like for you ... There we are. We know your program has been able to make significant increases in compensation for staff by strategically layering funding from multiple sources. Can you tell us a little about your program and your experience working to improve compensation for your workforce?

Kate Barrand: Yes, I'd be happy to. I want to thank you all, first of all, for inviting us, but second of all, for calling us ... whatever you call this as extraordinary for participants. I think I can speak for myself in saying that we continue to be a work in progress, but I'm the CEO of Horizons for Homeless Children, and we're an early education program in the city of Boston which exclusively serves children experiencing homelessness from both from 2 months to 4.9 years.

I'm sort of hoping they're at the first slide now with the four boxes. What we do, we are a two-generation program, and we serve both parent and child, and we have extensive wraparound services for the children particularly including early relational health and mental health support along with many others. That's because our children, as many of you know, are in need of a lot of wraparound services, given their experience with homelessness. There are two other programs that have very little to do with what we're talking about today, but I thought I would mention them, and one is that we put playrooms in family shelters across the state so that children have the opportunity to play and learn. Finally, we advocate for children.

Most specifically, I want to talk about, if you go to the next slide, it was really coming out of the pandemic where we initiated what we call our focus on employee well-being with the use of an annual survey of both our employees' engagement as well as their financial well-being. It's a series of questions that ask them whether they can afford to pay their bills, whether they're skipping payments on credit cards and other things.

When we learned how they were actually doing, we began to restructure our compensation structures. In 2021, we initiated a salary increase for our teachers of 20% and established that they would get COLA each year, which, prior to that, we sort of had a 3% across-the-board increase that was a little bit about your performance and a little bit about COLA. It wasn't a highly effective tool.

At the same time, we increased the base pay across the entire organization to $50,000, which we felt was more reflective of a living wage. We also began to pay our employees bonuses of 5 to 8% based on their specific performance that year. In 2023, we began to increase our focus on this, and we created an emergency relief fund for unforeseen and critical financial hardships.

We additionally added extra days of paid time off and closing between Christmas and New Year, and we also have a 4-day weekend in the summertime, which we think is helpful to rejuvenate people. Then the final piece of our plan, which I still say is a work in progress, is that we converted ... In 2024 this year, we converted our retirement contribution to a grant, and it had been a match.

We feel like we're beginning to put all the tools in a toolkit that will help us have a more stable workforce that feels really better about how they are doing in their life because we all know that happy teachers make happy children. If you go to slide three, this is really the layered funding model that we talk about.

We are a Head Start site, and we obviously work to all the Head Start standards. But over the past 4 years, we've had to build a very complex layered funding model to cover the cost to serve of our children. Obviously, we partner very actively with the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, which is our state's CCDF administrator. That is to access childcare funding through homeless contracts and income-eligible vouchers. That's the big green piece of the pie.

On top of that, we add Head Start and Early Head Start dollars to all of our classrooms. Then we partner actively with the City of Boston, who has a universal preschool program, where they've reached out to community-based providers who will provide them with seats for their early ... for their universal pre-K program. We get additional funding from them for those classrooms.

Sorry. That's my timer telling me I'm talking too much. Then finally, Massachusetts has really done an extraordinary thing, which is that we sustained our ARPA ERA stabilization funds. It's something we call the Commonwealth Cares for Children, or C3, grant program. Those are vital also to narrowing the gap in the cost to serve.

If you go to the final slide, I share briefly our salary ranges, with lead teachers making between $62,000 and $80,000 and our teachers between $54,000 and $67,000. If you look at the next slide, and I'll leave you with this because I know I'm well over time, the pieces of this that are quite unique are, I think, that we have chosen to take on most of the cost of health care for our employees by paying the majority of their deductibles and the majority of the premium.

In the well-being column, you'll also see that we have significant professional development dollars dedicated to each employee. We have begun to introduce a financial wellness program, which is an online program that allows people to do a lot of budgeting and planning because we have found that sometimes our employees really get themselves into difficult situations. I'm sorry. I went a little bit over time, but hopefully that was an overview of what we're doing at Horizons.

Jessica: Wow. I hope you are seeing all of the reactions from attendees with lots of congratulations and clearly impressive reactions, impressed reactions. Kate, thank you so much.

Kate: Thank you, Jess.

Jessica: We'll be back. Next, I'd love to bring up Debbie Schuster from Ohio Heartland. Debbie, you all have made some big changes in your program structure and budget to achieve pay parity for your Head Start educators with local public preschool teachers. Can you tell us about what led you to make these changes and the process that you went through to achieve these large improvements in wages?

Debbie Schuster: Yes. In August of 2023, we were determined to be under-enrolled, and we entered into the under-enrollment process. We did have a lot of T and TA from the Office of Head Start, and we weren't an early entrant into this change-of-scope process. We had heard about difficulties that a lot of our colleagues have had, and we were concerned, and we were a little bit skeptical when we first wrote the grant in October of 2023.

To our surprise, we did have a lot of awesome Head Start projects that we had the privilege to work with, both our program specialist and a grantee specialist. They came, and they were very helpful with helping us piece together exactly what we needed for an enrollment reduction package.

Originally, we were trying to, of course, cut as few children as possible because what our agency has always done was try to expand. We have historically had a large waiting list, and we always have wanted to serve as many children as possible. At one point, we were serving 910 children. Then we had a shift from serving 910 children to 582 when we converted to Early Head Start.

Then last year, we submitted this enrollment reduction to reduce 200 children in our Head Start program. We went from having 20 children in a classroom to having 17 children in the classroom, and we really didn't hurry the process. There were numerous changes to the grant that we originally submitted. We had input from our Head Start Policy Council, from the wonderful staff that I have working with me, from our Board of Directors and from my Executive Director, who has worked with the Head Start agency for over 4 years.

Early on, we really wanted to make sure that we got it right the first time because the idea of being an enrollment reduction situation again after we submitted our first grant wasn't something we wanted to do. We wanted to make sure that we got it right the first time. We realized that the issue needed to be completely resolved by August of this year so that we didn't have funds taken away or slots reduced from our agency.

The only way we could compete was to raise salaries, and the only way we could raise salaries was to reduce the number of children that we were serving. We used a number of measures to determine what salaries were being paid to the school districts. We actually have a governing board member who is a member of the local school district, and she was able to share the salary scale that they have. We had that as a starting point. We also called around to all of the local school districts.

We have 26 in our local area, we called around to those school districts, local communities, and found out exactly where we needed to go. Then once we figured out where we needed to go, that's where we started from. We decided that we knew we couldn't compete with the most affluent districts, but we wanted to make sure that we at least got a standard for the majority of the districts in our area because with 26 school districts, it was impossible to make sure that we were even with everyone.

One of the things we decided to do early on was to eliminate our double sessions where we needed bus drivers anywhere ... anyway, and the bus drivers were very, very few and far between. The majority of our parents have always preferred having full-day programming. We looked at saving money in that format and moving ... saving the teachers that we could and having them serve less children per day. We looked at other ... We looked at every single way to save money in our four-county program. Can you go to the next slide, Jess?

Since our need was so high for teaching staff, we had five classrooms that were not open because we didn't have teachers. We proposed to increase the teacher salary at a considerably higher rate than the non-teaching staff in our Head Start program. The plan was very controversial with staff, but we also knew that if we didn't have classrooms open, we weren't going to have a program for anybody to work at. What we did was we tried to raise the teaching and ... the teaching staff, the education managers, and the assistant teaching staff to the highest level possible to give us an opportunity to really compete with those school districts in our area.

Using the COLA, our final proposed staff increases were 12.5% for the non-teaching staff and 21.5% for all teaching staff, and that included the education managers that were supervising them. We also ... We had a lot of back-and-forth with Chicago. We're in Region 5. We also had some back-and-forth with the Office of Head Start. But our base plan was approved in less than 60 days once it was approved by our program specialist. We also began using Jazz HR, which is our recruitment tool to fill vacant positions. In June of 2024, we first gave those salary increases to the staff.

Then we planned for August of 2024 to open with full enrollment. We were determined and excited by August 1st. We thought we would be fully staffed. As our history had shown, we were always at full enrollment up until the time where we didn't have any teachers to open the classrooms. We have now been at full enrollment, and August does not count. We've been in full enrollment for September, October, November and December in both Head Start and in Early Head Start with 112 children enrolled in Early Head Start, and those are all full-day slots. They go from 8:30 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon, 5 days a week. Then in Head Start, we have 272 children enrolled.

Those children are enrolled in full-day Head Start programs that operate seven hours a day, 8:30 to 3:30, the same as Early Head Start children. We currently have 90 children on the wait list for Head Start and 63 on the wait list for Early Head Start. Can you go to the next slide, please? Thanks. These are the benefits that we have currently in our agency. We do have health insurance, which includes a PPO plan and an HSA plan.

Our agency pays somewhere between 70 and 80% of the premiums for those plans. We also have dental insurance and vision insurance that is at the employee's cost. We do provide life insurance that's paid for by the agency and that is one time, that is what their yearly salary would be, and its basic life and that's provided at no cost to the employee.

We also have an Employee Assistance Program which is the basic program, and that's available to all staff, whether they take our health insurance or not, and that includes part-time employees. We do have annual leave after 2 weeks. The annual leave is equal to 2 weeks after their first year and then they're on an accrual schedule.

Sick leave begins the day that you are employed, and it accrues at the rate of 2.08 hours every pay period or 8 days annually. We have 2 personal days after your 90-day introductory period and you can take those on one-hour increments if you need to, and we also have 15 paid holidays.

We contribute 3% to their 403(b)-retirement plan after 90 days, and that's above what their hourly salary is. We also pay bereavement days and jury duty days. We have tuition prepaid for their 2-year, 4-year and CDA programs including books. And we've started to work with Arizona Global, and we also work with the University of Cincinnati, a lot of those classes are online.

In fact, all of them are online, and we also work with the National Head Start Association to get staff their CDAs. We are a Community Action Agency, we have a lot of Community Action resources available for our qualifying families. We do have staff employed as associate teachers in the past, and we train them to drive the bus while they're still working for us as an associate teacher. Hundreds of Head Start families have left our employ after receiving training for higher-paying positions in 26 local school districts.

We are basically a seeding ground for the school districts at times. The turnover rate is what is really impressive because we never had high turnover rates until the situation occurred with COVID. After COVID, we realized that we needed to do something different because we were not at full enrollment.

Our agency has always been at full enrollment, and we always maintained a huge wait list. After COVID, so many of our teachers left that it was almost impossible. You can see that the turnover rate for the last 2 years is higher than ever before in our history. We had a turnover rate of 55% for lead teachers. We lost 24 teachers in that period, and we also lost 70% of our associate teachers. That's part of the reason why we were underenrolled because we had all these classrooms that were closed. Our Early Head Start teacher turnover rate was 26.7%, and the Early Head Start associate teacher turnover rate was 18 floaters within that last 2 years. It was almost ... It was over 100% of our turnover rate.

Since we began these salary increases on July 1st, actually June 1st of 2024, our current turnover rate is 13.84%. We're very proud of that, not only because it allows us to do continuity of services for the children, but it is more stabilizing for the staff, and children and families are benefiting from the pay increases that we gave.

You can see that our team is listed there. Joe Devany has been our Executive Director for 42 years. My name is Debbie Schuster. Melissa Conley is the Child Health & Education director, and she's been with us for over 30 years. Shelly Mabrey is the Family Engagement director. It was a real team effort to put together that grant that we put together, and we couldn't have done it without the help of the consultants that we had at the Region 5 office, either.

Jessica Bialecki: Wow. Thank you so much, Debbie, and lots of love coming to you in the reactions. I hope you're seeing that. I also want to note what Sandra said in the chat. "Where there is a will, there is a way," I love that. I'm going to keep us moving, since we have two more programs I want to get to, more open questions on the panel and bring up Sabrina Dong who is from the program Kai Ming, has also made significant investments in staff compensation including providing a robust benefits package with high quality and affordable health insurance and other benefits that were really tailored to the preferences of your employees. Sabrina, can you tell us about your program's compensation efforts and especially the health insurance offerings you've been able to provide?

Sabrina Dong: Definitely. Thank you, Jess. Hi, everyone. My name is Sabrina Dong, the director of HR at Kai Ming Head Start. Next slide, please. Before I answer the question, I would like to just give a very quick overview about our organization. Kai Ming stands for inspiration and enlightenment. We are from San Francisco, part of the Region 9.

Our vision is, "Potential has no limit," and we are guided by the value that we care for each child as our own. Next slide, please. Next slide. Our retention data actually across the years have been at about 95%. Next slide, please. Compensation-wise, I want to share how we have done in San Francisco. Currently, San Francisco teachers are making $28 per hour, minimum wage, regardless of the qualification and experience. Anyone working in the classroom are earning that wage thanks to the Prop C funding that was passed a few years ago locally, this is kind of the before and after illustration. Next slide, please.

I do want to spend a little time talking about our benefits and wellness support, start from the top. In terms of benefit, we have 100% medical coverage for employee and dependents, including dental and vision with zero premium and zero deductible cost. Then we also have a stand-alone chiropractor and acupuncture plan for employees to be very culturally sensitive to the people we serve.

Locally, we also contribute up to about $1,500 a year to an MRA account, which employee can use it for fitness, self-care, wellness-related items, out-of-pocket copay, et cetera. Retirement plan, we have 15% contribution rate with no matching required. In addition to the generous contribution, we also offer financial advising and planning, really helping them to invest and save for the future. We also have a commute stipend that's depending on the commute distance of employee to offset a little bit on cost for them in terms of transportation.

PTO, we have 18 to 24 days, depends on years of service, plus 12 days of paid holiday a year. We also, in terms of professional development, we have a dedicated department for that, and we have many different forms of professional development. Just for benefit, we offer up to $4,000 a year for tuition and textbook reimbursement.

Then we also offer weekly paid release time for staff to go to attend classes or during their final time. Wellness support, we have a self-care benefit up to $600 a year reimbursement format. They can use for gym membership, wellness, fitness, et cetera. Then we also have a standalone platform, allowing employees to book unlimited number of sessions for mental health, wellness, parenting, marriage counseling, financial, nutrition, et cetera.

We have an internal staff recognition platform. We really recognize so people can recognize their peers and supervisors in a meaningful way and hashtag our core values. We also all have a budget for team building and annual staff appreciation to really create connections among the staff. For infant/toddler teachers, because of the physical requirements, we offer on-site chair massage for our infant/toddler teachers. Just to conclude a little bit here, ongoing we have annual wellness survey just to kind of gauge where people are, what are their needs, what else that we need to do in order to help them, support them further so they can be 100% at work.

Next slide, please. Some visuals for visual learners out there. As I think someone earlier said, happy teacher, happy children. We really treat our staff as our treasures because we take care of them so that they can really shine, and they can take care of the most vulnerable populations. Next slide, please.

There's this workforce-development program, and I'm kind of short in time. I'm going to talk about it quickly. This program model I want to share here that really help us actually sustain the workforce and create a continued workforce for us. It's our STEP program. We run internally and also externally now.

Basically, it's a sub-teacher program that bridge that has our parents and also general public who are interested in working with young children. With our local EC providers, not just Kai Ming, but also other early childhood education centers. We invest a lot in their PD, professional development, so training, mentoring, coaching in the classroom, career development, career mapping, permit, degree attainment, all kind of support.

Many of them become a permanent teacher for ourselves and also for our partners. Throughout that process, we develop an internal booking and scheduling application for sub/teacher management, and it is available for all. It's called SUBSTAR. You can click it and learn more about that. Lastly, that's it about this. Next slide, please. I just want some visuals for the training of the STEP program. Next slide, please. Some more training pictures. Next slide, and this is my contact. I'm happy to chat more if anyone want to talk more. Thank you so much.

Jessica: Wow. Thank you so much, Sabrina. Hope you're feeling the love. I just want to say, on-site therapeutic massage for infant toddler teachers, what a brilliant idea and meeting such a need as someone who has worked in those classrooms myself. Going to bring up our last organization before we open it up to all four of our panelists.

We have Amber Lease from Southern Oregon Head Start. Amber, your organization has also made some big changes to your compensation package, including increasing staff benefits to recruit and retain staff. Can you tell us a bit about your experience making these changes, the benefits you offer staff and how you've seen these efforts in particular support recruitment and retention?

Amber Lease: Yeah. Thanks, Jess. As Jess said, my name is Amber Lease. I'm the human resources director at Southern Oregon Head Start. We are located in southern Oregon in Jackson and Josephine County. We have about 25 centers that span over 73 miles. So far, we've served 998 families and children this program year, and we are still counting.

Southern Oregon Head Start, as I said, we span over two different counties in southern Oregon. We first started providing services in Jackson County in 1967 and then expanded into Josephine County in 1989. We have been around in our southern Oregon communities for a long time, and we continue to hope to keep building that within southern Oregon. Next slide, please, Jess.

Today, as we are looking at the benefits that Southern Oregon Head Start has put into place to support our staff, I just first want to share with you a little bit on how we got there. I'm sure as most of you have been affected as well, COVID-19 really hit our agency hard, and we had a large shift in turnover following COVID-19. And as you can see here in the 2021 - 2022 program year, we had 221 center employees with 98 vacancies. I'm sure as you guys were thinking about those numbers, that makes a drastic effect on the services that we're able to provide, and our turnover rate was up to 45% during that period.

Then we look at 2022 to the 2023 program year, where we have 209 center employees and with 103 vacancies which, as you can see, we increased in our vacancies from the program year before. As a director and a management team, we started to ask ourselves, "Why is this happening? What can we do to fix this?"

We had recently just done a cost analysis on hiring an employee with time and labor and then the different department needs to bring them on. On average it cost us, as an agency, $4,000 per employee from the day of an offer goes out to the day that they are ready to enter into the center. As you can think about that, you're having 45% turnover.

That is a lot of money that we are losing out on as an agency. As we looked at the program year for 2023 to 2024, we were able to increase our employee numbers to 305 at the centers and only nine vacancies which dropped our turnover rate from the year before all the way down to 6.5% and put us at 98% staff at the center level. Now the golden question is, "How did we do this, and what resources were we able to use to get that done?"

Well, the answer is a little bit simpler than you may think, but we focused primarily just on our staff. Go ahead and go to the next slide. Monthly, myself and a couple other members of our management team meet with our Labor Management Committee. The Labor Management Committee is made up of our union representative, our union president, our union vice president, our union secretary and our union stewards.

At these meetings, the union has the opportunity to suggest different ideas and supports for our staff that have came up during these meetings. During their union meetings, excuse me. We also problem solved a lot of different center-level problems and safety concerns for our staff, that's one of the ways that we started right away listening to what our staff had to say. Then as an agency, we started to launch three different pulse surveys to our staff every year.

This helps our director team and our management team keep a pulse on the morale throughout the year, and we tailor the survey with specific questions depending on if we launched a pilot program at the beginning of the year or based on different improvements that we've tried to make to see if they're being successful or if we need to pivot and move to something else in the middle of the year.

Now, in the past 2 years, we've also implemented an employee-driven work group called the Input Work Group. This was designed to provide ideas and buy-in for our staff on different initiatives we may want to launch throughout the program year. They also keep us informed on different processes and policies that they feel need to be implemented or updated.

An example of something the input group has suggested, and we have implemented is allowing staff the flexibility with our wellness days, which I'll get into in a couple more slides about what those are. Then I feel like the big one and possibly the most important process we have implemented in the last few years is we provide exit, stay and save interviews to our employees. Just some context on what those are: An exit interview is when an employee has put in their notice, and they are set on leaving the agency.

A stay interview is when an employee does not want to leave the agency but is having a really difficult time in their work environment and may need some additional support or is not really seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. And then a save interview is when there is a rumor that an employee is leaving the agency and possibly is already job hunting.

In these interviews, I meet, or a member of our HR department meets with our employees, and we ask them a set of questions to find out a little bit more information about why they're leaving our agency and if there's something different, we could have done to improve their experience. And a lot of times in the exit, save and/or stay interview, we are able to save that employee from leaving because a lot of the times these employees want to hear that, their concerns and what they're experiencing are valid, and that there are people listening to them.

I feel like this has been a great benefit for us because not only have we been able to take the data that we've been able to perform in these interviews and then myself and our executive director are able to make suggestions and important decisions on the data we receive, but we're also able to put a face out there into our centers because we are such a large organization and show them that we do care and that their opinion matters to us.

Now, from the different surveys and the groups that we listened to from our staff, we found two major concerns. The first was the impact of the current child behaviors that were affecting staff in the classroom and the child-to-staff ratio, and then the second was our staff feeling underappreciated. We can move to the next slide, please. As an agency, we worked extremely hard on expanding our marketing to fill those hundred vacancies in the 2022 to 2023 program year.

I attended multiple career fairs at universities in Oregon. We pushed our jobs on Indeed really hard, and we also partnered with a couple of different digital-marketing campaigns to really get the word out about Southern Oregon Head Start. And in our community, we are in consistent competition with the local school districts, and we do a yearly wage analysis for our community so that we can see if we are being competitive in the market and if we are able to increasing wages for our staff because without them, we would not be able to provide the services that we do.

I can proudly say that we've been able to offer our staff wages that are equal to or higher than the competition with a starting teacher wage with a bachelor's degree at $32.42 an hour and for a duration teacher, or for a duration teacher, excuse me, and then for a part-day teacher at $30.26 an hour.

Now, from increasing our marketing efforts and increasing wages to make us competitive against school districts, we have been able to decrease our staff-to-child ratio down from five children to three children over the last 3 years which has made a huge impact in our retention of staff. Another one of the big focuses was, "How do we make our staff feel appreciated?" At the beginning of the 2023 program year, we implemented a platform called AWARDCO.

AWARDCO is an employee-recognition-based system where employees and managers can recognize and celebrate their teams and each other for the awesome impact they are making in the classrooms and centers. Within 6 months, we had over 2,500 recognitions, and AWARDCO actually gave us a really big shout-out for this because we had the highest engagement their platform has ever seen as an organization, and this was a huge morale and team-building platform for our staff.

It's very similar to a Facebook feed where you make a post and then people are able to comment and like on it, and there was a lot of positivity going on through that platform. Now we can go ahead and go to the next slide. As an agency, we are very proud of the benefits that we offer our staff, and most of these benefits we have just continued to build on over the years and continue to add based on our employees' needs and wants.

We currently offer 31 paid days off to our employees. We do offer a paid winter break, paid spring break, a couple days around Thanksgiving, and then we do offer all of the paid holidays off as well. Now the AWARDCO incentives, which is a part of that employee-recognition basis platform, where our staff are able to earn what's called points, which they are able to use those points to redeem different types of items on the AWARDCO store.

We do provide a life insurance policy for all of our staff free of cost to them, starting at $20,000. If they would like to increase that amount, they are able to at a very small cost. We also offer tuition assistance to our employees. Excuse me. We have a community college and a university local to our community where they're able to complete their CDA, their bachelor's degree, and so we do offer Tuition Assistance Program there.

We do offer medical, dental and vision benefits. We offer PTO and sick leave. As I said, we do have a union, so that is part of what we negotiate when we bargain. And then we offer a 401(k) plan, where we do a 5% match of their yearly wage at the end of the year, and then we offer an Employee Assistance Program. Now, the Employee Assistance Program covers a lot of mental health benefits, such as counseling, grief counseling, marriage counseling, that is free to our employees that they're able to use.

We do a massage reimbursement. We have 2 wellness days a year that they are able to use at any point in time throughout the year, and then we reimburse up to $1,000 per year on gym memberships and fitness equipment throughout the program here. But as a whole, those are all of the staff benefits that we offer here at Southern Oregon Head Start, and I would say that it has definitely improved our retention with staff.

Jessica: Thank you so much, Amber. Really appreciate hearing about some of the innovative retention strategies in particular I had not heard. We've all heard of exit interviews, but a stay and a save interview is so innovative, and I absolutely love seeing lots of positive affirmation from participants as well.

Now that we've heard from all four, thank you so much for sharing about your truly phenomenal programs, we're excited to dive a bit deeper into your compensation strategies. And we'll have all four of you share on different questions, but we really want to help other programs learn from your experiences. First, we'd love to talk about the impact of these workforce investments that your programs have made. How have your investments in compensation impacted either recruitment or retention of staff or just the general quality in your programs? And maybe we'll start with Southern Oregon. Let's, Amber, let's start with you.

Amber: Yeah, thanks, Jess. I think the biggest part for us is following COVID-19 with there was a lot of people leaving and I felt like our community was not sure of what was Southern Oregon Head Start still. Really pushing that marketing out there for the recruitment of staff and children and families I think has not only improved big awareness of our organization, but it's improved the internal referrals as well.

I feel like the internal referrals for us has been a huge part of us being able to increase our numbers internally, so just making sure that we're being honest with our employees and giving them the benefits that they need and want so that they are able to feel comfortable giving that referral to people external.

Jessica: Absolutely, that word of mouth. Thank you so much for sharing your experience with staff recruitment, Amber. Next, I'd like to hear ... Let's hear from Horizons for Homeless Children. Kate, if you would be willing to share.

Kate: Sorry. I was having a little trouble activating my little button there. We've seen a lot of positive come from our ongoing effort to not only compensate our folks but really do a lot of the thing’s others have mentioned which is setting up a listening program where you're actually actively listening to your teachers, they're bringing you issues, you're resolving those issues.

But what we've seen essentially from a recruitment perspective is that our initiatives across the board have reduced, reduced our time to hire by about a third. We have a very high level of employee engagement which we do measure each year, and ours us well above the national norms. And then at Horizons, we've also seen our staff turnover declining, so it's declined by about 5.3%, and our retention has increased by about 5%.

Our average length of tenure for teachers has increased by many months and now is up to about 6 years on average. And then this year we had a lot of excitement over the fact that we had three teachers return who actually left the sector for better paying jobs which I know we've all experienced post-pandemic, and they came back because they said, "Well, we miss the kids. We love the work, and now the compensation makes more sense." For us that's all ... Those are the positive signs we hope to see.

Jessica: Exactly. We want to let people know we are always welcome to bring them back and want to want to retain and then bring back, so love that, Kate. Thank you. And finally, Debbie, I'm wondering for this question, from Ohio Heartland, could you tell us a little more about specifically the change in scope application and how that has this improved employee retention for your program?

Debbie: Well, whenever we first did the high hourly wage increase, one of the reasons why we did that was because we really are in a college desert. We have, we don't have a college that offers a 2-year degree program within 50 miles of our agency. And because we have been trying to expand our teacher pool, we really worked with outside agencies, and we've really tried to recruit. We are using a new program called JazzHR which has helped us pass a larger net for our participants and the staff that we can recruit. And with these investments that we've made into compensation, like Kate was saying, we have had staff that want to come back that originally, they may have wanted to work from home or there was the issue with immunizations.

Now they're coming back to work with our agency because we are offering higher wages. We've had a good ability to retain that staff. Also, I think some of the issues that we had before, like Amber was saying, we have really focused on staff wellness and providing a culture of wellness and a culture of safety.

We really want to make sure that staff have the ability to communicate with us if they're having issues in the classroom. We have a really robust III program, which is individual intervention program. We work with the parents, and we work with the staff to put in supports for those children. I think that during the whole COVID mess, coming back from that, we had to accept this culture shift and really think about what we needed to be able to do to compete. We weren't ... Staff wellness wasn't an issue before because we had lots of staff, and we didn't think about what we needed to do to make sure that they felt healthy and safe. That's one of the things that we've really been focusing on at our agency as well.

Jessica: Thank you so much, Debbie. Many of you talked about how your program used employee feedback and input to develop, design or redesign your benefits packages specifically, so can you talk a little bit more about how you incorporated staff and others in the design and development of your compensation policies? Then how did that actually change the package of wages and benefits that you were providing? Amber, maybe start us off again with a little bit about Southern Oregon's model of regular employee surveys.

Amber: Yeah, in our surveys, we ask a variety of questions. We found that the more questions you ask, though, the less responses you tend to get. Sometimes less is more and really targeting what those may be. For example, when we kind of decide what our benefits are going to be because they run January to December, so we make a strong decision in September.

We try to get kind of those insurance questions like what our staff are struggling with, what they are looking for in insurance. We send that survey out prior to summer break so that we can have that information as management and then make a decision on what we think, what we can afford, what is best for our agency in that time and what we can offer our staff.

I honestly think that the more buy-in that you get, and the more information that you're able to use and do something with those surveys, the more trust and buy-in you're going to get from your employees to continue to participate in those and to feel heard. That's one thing that we try to really do a good job of is making sure that we're acknowledging the survey results and acknowledging the requests that they send in so that they feel like their voice is heard. That they continue to do that to us.

Jessica: Thank you, Amber. Sabrina, we know that Kai Ming also has this really robust model of kind of open conversations and ongoing feedback with staff. Can you share a little bit more about that strategy?

Sabrina: Yes. We also do annual benefit survey or when we feel like it's time to do another round to see if our current benefit package makes sense for adjustment, modifications. Another thing I feel like, in addition to survey, one thing we do regularly is our HR site visit. We have weekly HR visit to the centers.

Our HR team go once a week to our centers, classrooms and talk to our teacher directly, asking them, "What do you need? What are bothering you? What are your struggles?" They get the firsthand information instead of just doing a survey because oftentimes our group, they tend not to say much in the survey, or they feel a lot more comfortable talk to us in person. For example, recently we implemented ... we added the infertility rider to our medical plan. That's something we identified through our regular check-ins, and now we have that.

Jessica: Thank you, Sabrina, and I think I'm going to come back to you, because I want to talk a little bit more about one of the benefits that's newly required in the performance standards, which is paid leave and offering robust paid leave policies means having the ability to cover for staff who are on leave, such as through floater models or substitute pools.

For those of you who are offering robust paid leave, I'm kind of interested to hear more about what strategies you're using to make that work and to cover staff who are on leave. Sabrina, I have to say, I am so interested in the STEP program and the innovative substitute pool that Kai Ming participates in. Can you tell us more about that?

Sabrina: Yes. I kind of mentioned a little bit briefly earlier. Our STEP program is basically our inventory of teachers. When we have people on leave, vacation or maternity leave, we have this ... We go to the STEP website. We log in, and we book a sub teacher based on the qualification, and they fill the gap. For long-term leave, actually create a good opportunity for the sub teacher to build, to bond with the center team.

It's for better integration and also for them to fully understand what Head Start is about. It's win-win. Of course, our sub-teacher model, I think we really emphasize professional development, because we can't just hire a bunch of people without any support. The support actually is super important. We have ongoing mentor following with each sub teacher, making sure they are hitting their milestones. They're getting the hour while earning the wages but also going to school, going to class, get the experience while having the income and having the wraparound support.

Jessica: That is so innovative. I think so often we don't hear substitute and professional development in the same sentence, I absolutely love that. Debbie, I'm wondering if you can elaborate more on Ohio Heartland's floater model and how you've been using that.

Debbie: Well, whenever we were working on our enrollment reduction, one of the things that our program specialists had asked about was how many staff that we have are that are of childbearing years. I never really had looked at that before, so that's one of the data points that we were looking for.

We found out that we have a high percentage of staff that are childbearing years. One of the suggestions that she had was that we reinstate a process that we had had before COVID, which was we have rotating lead teachers. There are teachers that qualify for a lead-teacher classroom, but they go where they're needed on a daily basis.

They could be assigned to one particular room where a teacher might be out for maternity leave, or someone might be out for a surgery. They're paid 52 weeks a year, full-time hours, and they might not be assigned to a particular classroom for a long-term period. They might just be rotating.

That's why we call them rotating lead teachers. We also have a plan in place where we use our assistant teachers. If they have a CDA, we do offer them additional education to become teachers. As they get that additional education, we do give them pay increases so that, that will encourage them to go on with college and get a 2-year degree or a bachelor's degree. We do use the assistant teachers to sub in the classrooms for the teachers that might be absent for whatever reason.

Jessica: Thank you, Debbie. Finally, we know context matters, and we have participants joining from many different communities. Some of you operate programs in higher-cost-of-living areas, some in rural, some in urban, some in places with significant state or local investment in early childhood, and some in areas that are more childcare deserts. Curious about how your local context or other factors influence your compensation efforts and, Kate, would love to start with you and hear more about the unique needs of staff who are serving children and families primarily experiencing homelessness and how you've utilized various funding streams to support your workforce.

Kate: Yes, thank you. We are in what I call a perfect storm for both poverty and family homelessness in the city of Boston. That's our context in the sense. We have a very high child poverty rate in the neighborhood in which we sit, which is a 40% child poverty rate in Roxbury. We're also among the highest rental cost markets in the country, which staggers me every time I think about it.

We have what we like to call a wage gap, which is the difference between the minimum wage for most things and a living wage in our city. Prepandemic I can assure you that the sector was in Massachusetts a complicated mixed-delivery system, was on its back, essentially. We were all still being paid by when children attended, and when you're serving children experiencing homelessness, they have even worse attendance than many others.

Every day it was really hard to figure out how we were going to cover our costs, but the other beautiful context that I can say is that Massachusetts really stepped up in the past few years when it comes to early education funding. Not only did Massachusetts choose to sustain that ARPA-era stabilization funding, which we now call the C3 grants, but Massachusetts has made historic investments in early education. In the past several years, on top of sustaining that ARPA funding, we've been getting significant rate increases. Obviously, we all know that we're no longer paid for children attending but more for children enrolled.

The combination has really changed the dynamic, and I think the part I want to point out is that those C3 grant funding, that is really the acknowledgment that we are all running a business that supports childcare. None of us used to get reimbursed for the actual business of childcare, the marketing and the support staff and all those people that support those classroom experiences. That is something that our state took really seriously and addressed. I think that the financial outcome is phenomenal, and for us as providers in the state of Massachusetts it is a great deal easier for us to start making these commitments to our workforce that are long overdue as a result of the state really stepping up.

Jessica: Thank you so much, Kate. Amber, how has Southern Oregon dealt with operating in a more rural area with limited childcare options? I'm curious to hear more about that.

Amber: Thanks, Jess. Our program director was able to get pretty creative. We have 10% of our slots are able to go to over-income-eligible families, and we have allocated a portion of the 10% to our staff. Our staff are able to apply for those slots. They are taken up very quickly. They are first-come, first-served, those are a hot commodity here at Southern Oregon Head Start.

I also think a big thing that we do is, we partner with what's called the Southern Oregon Early Learning Division. They have created a partnership with WorkSource, which is a ... excuse me ...

an internship-based program. We're able to give some hands-on experience to individuals who are trying to get back into the workforce and to be able to kind of see, are they interested in being in childcare? Are they interested in starting their own childcare program? Just so that we can help continue to increase the availability of those resources in our community and for our staff as well.

Jessica: Awesome. Thank you, Amber. It's so great to hear from different communities, like we said: urban Boston, rural and Oregon but so many excellent insights shared today. I just want to say thank you, thank you so much. I also know this is a busy, busy time of year in mid-December. To all educators out there working, we are close to a break. But truly to all four of you and to your entire organizations, so appreciate you sharing with all of your learnings and insights with our broader Head Start community so we can learn from and truly be inspired by your efforts. Thank you. I will now turn it back to Tala to share some resources and closing remarks.

Tala: Thank you, Jess, and thank you, Kate, Debbie, Sabrina, and Amber, for sharing about your programs. You definitely had a lot of engagement in the chat and Q&A, so hopefully others found this helpful. We have a lot of content up on the ECLKC right now, our Head Start website as of now.

Some of the highlights are listed on the slide that you see here. First, we have our webinar from September, which provided a deeper dive into the wage and benefits standards. The recording of that webinar is also available on the ECLKC. Next, in case you missed it, we have a wages and pay parity tip sheet that includes more of the helpful graphics and visualizations that we went through earlier about what is and isn't pay parity.

We also have an early care and education salary scale playbook that can help you as you start to update your program's pay structure to promote higher wages. Finally, we also have more exciting resources coming including tip sheets and resources on providing benefits for staff. We're continuing to develop more resources to support your work in this space. As a reminder, a recording of this webinar will be available using the same link you use to register later today. If you scan this QR code, it will take you to our Performance Standards Information Center, which provides helpful resources and information as you work towards implementation for the Performance Standards.

We have also created a dedicated email address for inquiries and clarifications related to the standards. You can send your questions to OHS_policy@acf.hhs.gov. Please note that while we may be able to directly answer some inquiries that come into this inbox, others will be used to guide future communications, training and technical assistance products.

To close out our webinar, we have a final poll for you to respond to. Before we pull up that poll, I want to reiterate Jess' thanks to our panelists. We are so grateful for this amazing group of leaders for joining us today and taking time out in a super-busy season and sharing your successes.

We hope the stories shared today provide some inspiration as programs work to revise their own compensation structures in their programs. Thank you again for joining us today, and we're now going to launch our closing poll. The closing poll ... "After today's webinar" ... Is it up? There it is. "After today's webinar, what do you see as your program's next likely step regarding compensation and benefits improvements?" Thank you, thank you again. Thank you, Jess. Thank you, Khari. Thanks to everyone who put this webinar together. Please don't forget to fill out the poll.