

Preventing Child Maltreatment Vlog

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hey, Head Start community. This is an out-of-scheduled vlog. I'm sending this message out sort of spontaneously. As you can see, I am in my car. I'm not even in the office. But I've had a couple of experiences this week that I think have inspired me to reach out to you personally.

First of all, I was all day yesterday in Jacksonville, Florida looking at a beautiful Head Start program that is going to be highlighted in a big way, and very proud of what I do, and happy to be there to support that effort. Got in a plane. Got home late last night. Got in my car, and drove into DC today to attend a meeting that relates to pulling together cross resources to really support children. And this is in a very broad sense.

This is not just about Head Start. It's about child welfare, particularly today we were talking about reducing incidences of child abuse. And the entire conversation revolved around parents and parent support, and the kinds of things that you can put in place that put parents in a situation where those things don't happen because they have the wherewithal to handle stress, I think would be at the end of the day. And you could be talking about everything from substance abuse to job security, to what is your housing like, that kind of thing. You guys know this. This is what we do. Right?

And all I could think about is the fact that right now we have an incident -- that may or may not make the big news, but it's made my news -- in one of our Head Start centers where -- where one of our own people maltreated a child. And I'm sitting in that meeting thinking, "How can I be at the table with people talking about how to support parents if my own program isn't protecting children 100 percent of the time?"

I mean, that's -- that's, at the end of the day, what this is about. And so, I'm sending this message to you. It's really just a message of concern. It is not in any way a finger-pointing message. But just to raise awareness and to say this. You know, I'm -- I'm -- been working a lot on leadership. And I think one of the things that I want to see improved within the structure of Head Start is making sure there is leadership in every single building -- somebody who owns everything that happens in that building. Whether the milk is still good to, you know, building culture and instruction.

That has to happen. You have to have somebody present every day who is aware and has the responsibility of the entire workings of that program. Now, I intend to fold this out over time, not just to lay it on you in a vlog. But in my opinion, it is -- it is having that strong leadership that will help support a program that doesn't result in incidences of maltreatment because of the awareness and the presence of that leader, and the message that he or she sends to the staff, and the support that he or she gives the staff to make sure they have the ability to deal with stress.

And so, I am compelled to send this message out, and for you to ask yourself. Do you have the pieces in place and at the local level to support a program that ensures that your children are safe from harm from the very people who are delivering these services? And I'll tell you. I understand being responsible for a lot of people over which you don't have, like, remote control. Right? You can't control everything they do every single day. You put as much in place as you can: the training; the onboarding; all of the things that you think are going to get them ready for success. And then, you maybe have a situation.

I never want that to happen, but I do understand that that does happen. But if it happens twice -- with the same person, same kind of incident -- that's systemic. So, that's really what I'm talking about. Do you

have systems in place that support your people so that they have what they need to take care of children? And more importantly, do you have systems in place that if something happens, that gets reported so that it doesn't happen more than once? Because when we see something happen repeatedly, that's a systemic problem.

And I am just compelled to pull my car over after my meeting on child abuse, and to reach out to the people I have the ability to reach, and to say to you please do some reflection in this area. Look at your programming. Look what's happening at the local level. Do you have the leadership in place who is setting the tone of how we treat children, but also what we do in the event that something happens that we think might not be between the lines? Mandated reporting isn't about deciding whether something is abuse or not. It's about reporting when you think something might be. And all of your people should feel empowered to do that with no fear of any kind of recourse because the children come first. So, that is my very spontaneous blog -- vlog to you. And I hope you receive this message and take some action.

Have a great day.