

## Head Start Forward: LACOE Head Start

We are excited to introduce to you representatives from the Los Angeles County Office of Education Head Start program, otherwise known as LACOE. Joining us today, we have Dr. Sandra Williams, the Head Start Program Manager into disciplinary services. Debi Anderson is here, she's the Head Start Program Manager, Community Outreach. Cynthia Barboza, the Policy Council Chair is joining us, along with another Policy Council member, Joanna Perez. We're so excited to have our parent representatives here today.

LACOE will share their programs approach to recruiting and enrolling eligible families, along with strategies to promote vaccinations. Debi, I have a question for you. Tell us, what strategies did you use to reach funded enrollment?

Debi Anderson: On our strategic plan, we adopted a "We come to you," approach through the use of our mobile unit, which is designed to target and serve families, for children birth to five, in collaboration with our delegate agencies, our local education agencies, regional centers and community partners.

Now, we call our unit Hope The Bus, and hope isn't a central component of LACOE's outreach efforts. It primarily serves doing this pandemic and doing the Safer At Home Order, primarily serves as a mobile billboard. During our Safer At Home Order, our LACOE drivers schedule weekly routes throughout the LACOE service area, and it continues to be a feature attraction as we attend drive-through contactless events in our communities.

Just recently, in July and August, we conducted outreach with Hope the Bus and a series of lunch and learn events hosted by LA County Libraries. We also had specialized recruitment projects and during the Safer At Home Order, we implemented a campaign that included radio ads, door hangers, convenience store posters. We also had additional support for our delegates, and we distributed URL codes, QR codes that link the families to online Head Start applications, and the applications link directly to the ChildPlus system and created an interest list for recruitment for each one of our agencies.

Our QR codes, as I said before, was like a mobile billboard. One of the things we found out or we learned, we received a call from a parent who was actually at the DMV getting her business done. We were there getting our registration done, saw the Pre-K Kid referral line number on the back of the unit, and gave us a call and asked us for a referral to our Head Start program.

We also used QR codes in our Head Start materials that we used in the contactless and drive-through events. We also developed a no-contact eligibility enrollment process for parents. The digital file system established directions for delegates to create and store participant eligibility files electronically in the ChildPlus database.

We also revised our MOUs with regional centers and local education agencies to enhance Child Find and early screening. We also use digital and online outreach strategies that include campaigns with social media, music streaming platforms like SiriusXM and Pandora. We use geofencing and search engine optimization on Google.

We also developed some virtual presentations that we use doing virtual resource and community fairs. We also redesigned and redeveloped our standard operating procedures for parents who were calling us through our Pre-K Kid referral line. This resulted in a more warmer handoff for parents to our delegate agencies. That's just some of the things that we did.

Marco Beltran: I like the idea of "We come to you" approach, right? It's moving recruitment efforts in a whole different direction from having families come to watch, which is a strategy that many of us used for a long time. The notion of the, My Hope Bus, or The Hope Bus coming down the street, seems very comforting to me. I can just see if I was thinking about enrolling my child, and I saw this billboard and this bus coming down the street, it would be one of those things where I would say, "Oh, if they're doing this. What other stuff are they doing to help support children and families?" Thinking about that, my question is for Cynthia. Cynthia, what did the program do to make you and other families feel comfortable returning to in-person services?

Cynthia Barboza: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Yes. Well, let me say, at the beginning, it was very scary and did not want for our children to go to school. It was chaotic, it was frustrating, not knowing as parents, caregivers on what was going to happen to our children's education, let alone how the sites were going to work.

Because of a pandemic, this created insecurity and it created a domino effect on money. The income of the families, food, jobs, school, transportation, education. The list just goes on. Through the time, Early Head Start and Head Start agencies started to come up with the plan on how to give back to our communities and our families. Early Head Start and Head Start created a mobile bus, called Hope, that provided education to the communities, and it's pretty much a little sign, but with wheels on it. You get everything that you have on-site, just on wheels. That to me, was the main thing. Like you said, it's just, "What else are they doing? What else are they proving? How can they?" It took a while, I'll admit. It took a while for families to be confident, to enroll them in school and to take them on site.

Before you knew it, there were kids on site, and I was glad to know that the agencies had a plan to keep our kiddos safe. Not only going mobile, but on site as well. I'm glad to see that the Hope mobile bus was an event like the food drives that they were giving out in our communities, the giveaway backpacks events that were held around the community as well.

If they were all over the place, then why not on-site when it's for some families, a little bit convenient? It's a little bit better to get back to work. I'm happy to say that there are protocols on site, like checking the temperatures on the kiddos, asking COVID-related questions to the families, washing hands, doing the daily check-ins for the kiddos, teachers on-site, staff sanitize and clean everything that child touches in between of activities, the staff before entering the site ... They are to check for clearance of COVID tests they do.

For example, if the staff is positive for COVID, they will not be allowed to enter until clear, even though they're expected to work that day. This brings good that they're taking consideration and they're taking steps and protocols to just keep our kiddos safe. Staff is vaccinated and wearing masks, on both staff and site supervisors and kiddos, is a must.

My kids have backups of backups and masks in their backpacks, and the staff always are right there, right on hand with their masks if the child, for some reason, they lose it, they trash it, whatever it may

be the reason, they have masks and PPEs. They have a quarantine section just in case – better safe than be sorry – and the parents get contacted immediately.

It's just one of the many things that I know for sure, that's what they're doing. On the mobile, I'm pretty sure they're doing it as well. Through the Policy Council, parents were informed of all the activities happening with COVID-19. The Policy Council held speakers and events that we're talking about COVID-19, what is COVID-19, encourage parents to attend, get informed about prevention, had scheduled visits on different sites to get vaccinated free of charge, updated the prekkid.org website for families and community on guidelines relating to health and safety at schools, have community resources for families that were impacted by the pandemic, and just getting them help financially, whether it can be, if the child needs some type of services, the agency was there to help.

It took a while because there was periodic at the beginning, and it was very frustrating. Parents were just losing it, but you guys pulled through. It was amazing, and having all this said, if felt comfortable and safe to know that my child was going to be safer, and it just made a great impact on my family and on other families as well, because don't get me wrong ... My family was doubting that, "Oh, they're going to get sick and you're going to get sick, and then we're all going to get sick, and then a domino effect was going to play again."

But I stayed confident, I stayed positive, and thank you. Thank you for everything you have done and please continue. If you need anything, please let us know. At least let me know and just consider it done. That's one of the many things that happened. That's one of many things that made our families feel comfortable to go back on-site. Thank you again.

Tabitha: Cynthia, thank you so much. It's exciting to hear your confidence as a parent, and LACOE as a program providing services to your family. I'm interested to hear from Debi, and I'm really wanting to hear from Joanna as well, about how the program identified families to receive services?

Debi: Thank you. I'm going to just highlight one thing so we can give Joanna an opportunity to really share her experience. We continued the family partnership process through virtual platforms, and that included needs assessment goal-setting, referrals, resources, and reassessment. Then our delegates conducted regular check-ins with families through the virtual platform as well. Many of our agencies shared with us that they actually experienced more engagement with parents then, than prior to the pandemic.

What I'm going to do now is really turn it over to Joanna, and so she can have an opportunity to share her experience. Joanna?

Joanna Perez: Yes. Well, hi everyone. I am a proud LACOE representative and also St. Anne's representative. I am the Chairperson there, and in my experience was like over the last three years, actually, has been amazing. As Cynthia and everyone has mentioned, the pandemic was something that impacted us, it was a curveball, so nobody was prepared, but I will say, LACOE took it head on. With the participation of parents like Cynthia and myself, always took our feedback.

I will talk about my personal experience with transitional homelessness. When I came to LACOE, I actually was experiencing homelessness at this time, and I didn't even know it. I will say that it took

going through the questionnaire with St. Anne's. Them identifying my family as homeless, because I was pretty much couch surfing for almost five months with my kids, between family members.

It was such a boost of confidence for my family to know that we would have some type of priority on a point scale system because of the situation that we were experiencing. I will say that not only my initial child was taken into the program. I learned that there was an Early Head Start for the younger ones as well. I was able to get three kids in all at once, and that was amazing. That was a lifeline that my family was really needing without even knowing we needed it, because it gave my children stability of going somewhere Monday through Friday, seeing a teacher that was so caring and loving towards them. I don't know what I would have been through those five months, if I didn't have St. Anne's and LACOE to really embrace my family.

But speaking on the pandemic, resources were a big thing and I think that's something that as a Policy member, we all kind of came together and realized we need resources, but not just any resources. We need resources that are going to work for our community. I think that, that's where we all kind of played a part. Every community or every LACOE site has different areas with different needs.

I think that, individually, we all gave our feedback as to what our communities needed. We were heard. There was food resources that were a lifeline for a lot of our families. A lot of families, as Cynthia mentioned, lost jobs or had to leave their jobs because they had to stay home with the kids.

There was no options for childcare. The fact that we were able to have places, grantees provide food, food drives for our families on a weekly or semi-weekly basis was amazing. I know St. Anne's also had a meal program for their students and community, Monday through Friday. How they made that happen, I still don't know, but they did it, and it was open to not just the children of their programs. But the families in the neighboring area were more than welcome to come and grab meals. I know that, that was a lifeline that so many of us really needed.

I will say the enrollment process is always a challenge, is always a challenge because a lot of us don't know. We don't know what's really out there. We don't know too much about Early Head Start, and we don't know the benefits of it. We feel like they're too little too young. But on the contrary, I will say that it is a benefit to the families and to the children because early diagnosis for any type of disability or anything can be determined.

I will just say that I am thankful for LACOE. I am a proud representative, and I will do my part to support because I strongly believe that you guys were head on with this pandemic and just made it work, made it work for not just yourself, but for the families that you guys serve. I thank you guys for that.

Tabitha: These are some extremely powerful parent testimonials, I must say. Marco, I'm really interested in hearing about LACOE's approach to vaccinations. Can we go ahead and transition and talk about that?

Marco: Yes, you can. Dr. Williams, based on what Cynthia discussed, based on what Joanna discussed and how they talked about your mitigation strategies ... Obviously you implemented the mitigation strategies that align with a lot of the CDC guidance, and I'm assuming aligns with the guidance that are available to your local community.

The one mitigation strategy that I know we're really particularly interested in – and I know a lot of our programs are really interested in – is vaccinations. I know this is a series of questions or a slew of questions – but these are the type of questions that we're getting – is how are you engaging in your vaccine outreach? What percentage of your staff were vaccinated? Are you mandating vaccines? Which is a big question for a lot of our programs. Are there strategies that you've implemented to help to support vaccine confidence?

Dr. Sandra Williams: Hello, and thank you. Yes, we've done quite a lot. The mobile unit can again be used – as Debi and the parents have stated – as recruitment and enrollment tool. It can also be used to spread the word about vaccine promotion through the use of its electronic features – including TV screens and internet – that provide general COVID information as well as internet access when the unit is actually out in the field.

LACOE actually created a PowerPoint template that delegate agencies can use to support their efforts in educating staff and families, while the unit is out and about. But before we did all this, we had to make sure that we were engaging in consistent messaging information sharing, and were indeed a part of the overall county coordinated response to COVID.

We partnered with the Los Angeles County Department of Health to support the campaign on vaccinations. We partnered with NHSA and even Uber to promote families transportation to vaccination sites. LACOE itself was an actual megasite in Los Angeles County. We also participated on the NHSA COVID-19 vaccination and mitigation working group. LACOE was a strategic partner of many, many things. We also engaged with the early care and education COVID response team, which continued to host community calls to inform the early childhood education community on the changing guidance from CDC, from the State, etc. We had to mitigate those differences.

We also participated with the ECE COVID response team, or ECEE ... A lot of acronyms here. Early Childhood Education CRT was instrumental in developing a vaccination distribution plan for the entire ECE workforce here in Los Angeles County.

We also regularly repost information on our websites. That, again, is featured through our mobile units. We're also working with families to promote vaccinations and the importance of preventive health care. Before I get into that, I just want to say that services are actually delivered on the mobile unit. Promoting vaccines and ensuring preventive health care is a critical issue, particularly when you talk about health inequities.

We know that many of the families that we serve are marginalized groups. We can again use mobile services as a way to outreach and through early detection, and around health issues. In particular, the unit can be used to promote and actually implement, and conduct vision, hearing developmental screenings, as well as a PHQ-9 or mental health screenings for pregnant women.

On the unit, we share a lot of resources and again, it's to our coordinated approach and making sure that we're all consistent in the types of messages that are being provided, to guide us through Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and CDC.

Last, we really engaged in a number of activities around the guidance, but I did want to mention that consistencies were identified. We were getting guidance related to Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, and their guides around COVID for K to 12, and early education programs.

An example is they were promoting three-foot social distance guidance, where the CDC was promoting something else. We followed the most stringent guidelines of six-feet apart until we were formally notified. Just a little bit about vaccinations: We're about 86% of all of LACOE staff have been vaccinated, so that's our vaccination rate.

Right now, it's not mandatory that all employees actually are vaccinated, but we are doing weekly testing for those who opt not to. That's where we are. We've done a lot.

Tabitha: Thank you very much. Thank you so much LACOE, for sharing your experiences with us today. We will now learn from our next grantee about the approaches they use to return to fully in-person services.