Enrollment Forward: Clarifying Expectations for Expanding Reach in Uncertain Times

Glenna Davis: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Clarifying Expectations for Expanding Reach in Uncertain Times. It is now my pleasure to turn the floor over to Shawna Pinckney. Shawna, the floor is yours.

Shawna Pinckney: Thank you so much, Glenna. Good afternoon, Head Start. It's lovely to be with you this afternoon on behalf of our director, Dr. Futrell. I welcome you to this afternoon's webinar, and we truly thank you for your commitment to providing comprehensive services to our children and families during this ongoing pandemic. We know that it is especially challenging at this time for our Head Start programs as you balance both serving children and families, while also grappling with the dynamics of this ever-changing pandemic. And it's even more poignant as we know that our children and families really depend on the availability of in-person services. It's during this time that we believe programs should continue making decisions about your service delivery based on what we know is best for children and families, and also work to ensure that the decisions that you're making are informed by always the latest CDC guidance and the guidance from your local health department guidelines.

Earlier this month, I know that you all are aware that our director, Dr. Futrell, shared a letter with the Head Start community acknowledging the Office of Head Start's commitment to supporting programs with this very challenging balance. How do you return to fully in-person services while grappling with the ever-changing pandemic? Dr. Futrell has listened closely to your open and honest feedback during ongoing listening sessions that she's holding with the community, as well as the other opportunities to hear from you directly and every message that you share with our office, either with us individually or collectively. We truly take to heart and are really working towards finding opportunities to better support you as our grant recipients.

An example of this commitment is that we at the Office of Head Start are continuing to pause on the evaluation of which programs enter our full enrollment initiative. We heard a lot of feedback from Head Start programs around our proposed restart of the full enrollment initiative in January. That continues to be on pause, and that announcement was made in December. That said, this doesn't set aside the ongoing challenges that we know all of our grantees are facing with enrollment. With that, today we are launching a really important Enrollment Forward Webinar Series starting with today's session, which is Clarifying Expectations to Expanding Reach in Uncertain Times.

We know that a huge part of successfully navigating this pandemic has been uniting as a Head Start community, a whole community to co-create new, innovative path forward. And we really look forward to sharing more information with you today and in the months to come on, again, this very important topic. With that, I will turn over our conversation to my friend and colleague Heather Wanderski. Heather?

Desmond Clayton: I think you're muted there, Heather. Anyway.

Heather Wanderski: Yes, yeah. Desmond is going to help facilitate the conversation, so we'll turn it over to him. Thank you.

Desmond: No problem. Thank you for those wonderful comments, Shawna, that you shared with everyone. These thoughts are very appreciated. For today's webinar, you're going to have three prestigious presenters with you. You will have Shawna Pinckney, acting deputy director for the Office of Head Start. You're going to have Heather Wanderski, director of the program operations vision. And there will be myself, Desmond Clayton, manager within the program operations division to help us navigate through some things here.

Going into the overview of today's session. Of course, one of the one of the main things that we are going to do is introduce you all to the enrollment forward campaign. We're also going to do some review of the PI release last year regarding the OHS expectations for program year 21-22. And then that will lead us into the Q&A portion, which if you're familiar with this format of webinar, I will navigate us through a number of items that our esteemed colleagues here will go ahead and address for everyone. We're hopeful that everyone's questions are answered along the way, but please utilize that Q&A feature as it gives us a chance to review things that can possibly be clarified and future webinars. And then finally closing out, we'll have some resources for everyone to consider. And with that, I'll turn it over to Heather to introduce enrollment for.

Heather: Thank you, Desmond, and thank you very much, Shawna. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk today and frame Enrollment Forward. As Shawna mentioned, this campaign and this series is really geared toward providing support, strategies, and resources to the Head Start community in the areas of recruitment, enrollment, and workforce planning. What I what I really want to say is that we view this not as a new campaign per se, but really as an extension of the Head Start Forward that is focused, but that this piece would be focused specifically on enrollment and issues that have had a direct impact on enrollment. That's why you'll see here that we've got all of the tags to the Head Start Forward because we do consider this to be an extension of that.

And let me be clear, this series is not a restart of the full enrollment initiative, but a continued effort to move toward full enrollment across all program options. And in addition to the webinar series, there's going to be additional information shared through our ongoing communication and through social media outlets.

And as I already mentioned, Enrollment Forward is intended to provide ongoing support through various outlets targeting areas such as program structure. For example, are your current options offered meeting the needs of the community and the families that you're trying to serve? When you think about recruitment, identifying and implementing workable recruitment strategies. Taking a look at enrollment, our families facing barriers that are impacting your enrollment? If so, what are they? Could you provide support to reduce and eliminate those barriers? What we really want to do is have programs be as responsive as possible and help address issues where possible.

Also thinking about workforce: rethinking marketing strategies and recruitment of staff. Retaining existing staff – what are the options and possibilities? Thinking about health and

safety considerations. Being responsive to changing community conditions. And finally, community need. Community need is often the driving factor in decision making. It's very important that programs are gathering and using the most up to date data from community assessments to make critical program decisions.

Now that we've set the stage for our intentions with these webinars, we want to start with a recap of the program instruction last year that helped us kick off the Head Start Forward campaign. The instruction provided the framework for the Office of Head Start expectations for Head Start programs for the current year, and it contains three primary focuses that will plan to review. The first is operating status and enrollment. The second is virtual and remote services. And the third is recruitment and selection.

The first message in the instruction was on operating status and enrollment. What we said in the instruction is that the Office of Head Start expects programs to work toward full enrollment and full comprehensive services contingent upon CDC guidelines and state and local health department guidance and in consideration of local school district decisions. We also said that the Office of Head Start expects programs to provide those comprehensive services in your approved program options to the extent possible as local health conditions allow. Nothing in our messaging has changed regarding these expectations. We understand that the pandemic and workforce challenges have had a significant impact on programs and the ability to meet these expectations. And we want to make sure that we're providing you with ideas, resources, and supports to be able to work through these challenges where possible.

We know that there are thousands of eligible children and families currently going without desperately needed Head Start and Early Head Start services, and that every vacancy in a program is a missed opportunity to provide those necessary services. Therefore, we want you all to be able to do everything you can. And we want to be able to continue to raise up these expectations so that we can reach these eligible children and families.

Starting in September 2021, the Office of Head Start started reviewing monthly enrollment in the Head Start Enterprise System. This was not for the purposes of evaluating and making determinations on whether programs would enter the full enrollment initiative, but rather for Regional Office staff to be able to provide more intentional outreach and engagement with programs on their efforts to reach full enrollment if programs were not already there. It is still an expectation that programs be in communication with their Regional Office to articulate why you're not able to be fully enrolled or serve children in-person in your approved options. This communication really gives us and allows us to have a better sense of what the issues are and also to provide targeted training and technical assistance on the presenting challenges.

And the last thing I want to reinforce from the program instruction on operating status and enrollment is that programs are expected to have a plan in place that will allow for the adaptation to changing guidance and to changing community conditions should the need arise. This plan is going to look different for every organization and will depend on things like the program options that you offer, whether you're providing direct services or partnering with another organization for service delivery. It will take into consideration things like the size and the location of the program, as well as other critical factors. But what we want to drive home is that every organization must have a plan. And given what we're seeing with the latest COVID

variant, I would imagine that many programs really need those plans and that they need to rely on those plans in order to make critical decisions.

There was one change that I do want to highlight to the instruction that was made at the end of December of 2021, which was related to tracking and monitoring enrollment. And as Shawna referenced, Dr. Futrell sent out a letter about the full enrollment initiative. And in that letter, it stated that while the Office of Head Start will continue to track and monitor enrollment, it will not be evaluating those enrollment reports for the purposes of determining which programs enter into the full enrollment initiative. We are continuing to pause on that process. Now, I want to turn it over to Shawna to talk about the second section of the instruction around virtual and remote services. Shawna?

Shawna: Thank you, Heather. Again, we just want to reiterate what was included in the PI issued in May. And at that time, we offered some guidance around virtual and remote services, and these still hold true today. We just want to walk you through these. The virtual and remote services for children are considered an interim short-term strategy in the presence of an emergency or disaster and will not be approved as a locally designed program option. In this program year – 2021 to 2022 – it is unallowable to have a program option run entirely by technology or delivery of educational materials. Let me repeat that. As a program option – as a formally approved program option, it is unallowable to have your program run entirely by technology or delivery of educational material. That said, the Office of Head Start may still support some portion of services to continue remotely or in the remote virtual environment. An example of this might be food delivery.

The Office of Head Start recognizes that programs have discovered new virtual strategies for engaging families and reinforcing early learning and development at home. These innovations and virtual practices should be used as enhancements rather than substitutes for previously approved program options and service delivery. An example of this might be parent conferences. Heather?

Heather: Thanks, Shawna. That leads us now to the last section of the program instruction focused on recruitment and selection. Specifically, the Office of Head Start expects programs to prioritize recruitment of eligible children and families. As previously stated, community need is often the driving factor in decision making and that having updated community assessment information is critical for program decisions. This information should be used to assist in your recruitment efforts. Programs should be focused on reaching families in need of services. Also, if a program determines that its pre-pandemic approved program options will no longer meet the needs of the community, they must seek approval for a change in scope. The request should be supported by the latest community assessment data that's available.

And based on the latest community assessment, data programs should also be revisiting selection criteria to make sure it aligns with community need, and that assigned weight is given to prioritize families most in need of services. Selection criteria should be sure to include weight based on family income, whether the child is homeless or in foster care, whether the child is eligible for special education or early intervention services, as well as other relevant family or child risk factors. At this point, grant recipients have received substantial COVID funds, including CARES Act, CRRSA and ARP funds. These funds can and should be used to support

recruitment efforts. This includes using funds to purchase services and materials to intensify your recruitment efforts.

Now that we've had a chance to clarify expectations from the program instruction, we expect that there are lingering questions that programs may have. At this point, I'm going to turn it over to Desmond, who can help facilitate some of the questions that we anticipate. You may have.

Desmond: Thank you so much Heather. Much appreciated. Again, I know folks are familiar with this kind of portion of the webinar. We'll try and hopefully navigate us through a number of things that will impart a lot of beneficial information for everyone. And although Heather so thoughtfully turned it over to me, I am going to shoot this first question right back her way. Absolutely. Heather, how does all this information impact the program instruction that was issued last spring?

Heather: Good question. The only change – and I'll highlight again – the only change to the program instruction that was issued last spring was related to tracking and monitoring enrollment, specifically the letter from the director about the full enrollment initiative that was sent out to the grant recipient community on December 21, 2021 was the only real change. In that letter, it explains that while the Office of Head Start will continue to monitor and review monthly enrollment reports, in the Head Start Enterprise System, we will not resume the evaluation of those reports for the purposes of determining which programs enter into the full enrollment initiative, and that programs should continue to reference the program instruction that we highlighted here as they work toward full enrollment and in-person comprehensive services inclusive of all program options.

Desmond: Thank you, Heather. That actually leads me into the next question. Does this change any of the expectations for full enrollment?

Heather: No, the letter from the director at the end of December does not change the expectation regarding full enrollment. In fact, the letter states that the Office of Head Start is going to continue to track enrollment in the Head Start Enterprise System and will continue to expect full, in-person comprehensive services contingent upon CDC guidelines, state and local health department guidance, and in consideration of local school district decisions.

And we do want to say that acknowledging that programs are in different stages of reaching full enrollment, there are still opportunities for planning and preparation that should be taking place. These can include, as we've discussed, things like reviewing community assessment data for update, adjusting recruitment strategies to change in response to community statuses, reviewing your selection criteria, and thinking about staffing considerations such as scheduling, understanding need, and providing support. And as always, it is important that you are engaging with your Regional Office staff in discussions regarding enrollment.

Desmond: Thank you so much, Heather. I agree, I think that it's extremely important to engage with the Regional Office to ensure that they are always aware and continue to support programs as we strive towards enrollment. Shawna, will OHS consider approving program options such as hybrid or remote services?

Shawna: Thank you for this question. It's a really important one, and I know that we hear this question frequently from our Head Start programs. I think it's first important to highlight that what we are talking about here are formal approved program options, as identified in our Head Start Performance Standards. In response to that question, the answer is clearly no, that virtual and remote services for children are considered again an interim or short-term strategy in the presence of an emergency or disaster and will not be approved as a locally designed program option.

Again, that remains the same as what we indicated in the PI released last spring. That said, while the Office of Head Start supports the use of virtual and remote services, it is not an acceptable replacement for in-person comprehensive services. We do recognize that programs have discovered new virtual strategies for engaging families and reinforcing learning and development at home. And those innovations in virtual practice, we do encourage you to use those as enhancements rather than substitutes for approved formal program options and service delivery.

Desmond: Thank you, Shawna. I think that was crystal clear that the remote and virtual services should be strictly seen as temporary and that they can enhance the in-person comprehensive services, which is what the Office of Head Start is the best at. In that same vein, if a service area is experiencing a surge or high transmission of COVID-19, can the Head Start program opt to temporarily use virtual or remote services?

Shawna: Again, another really important question. Want to carefully walk through the answer. We just talked about the formal program option that every Head Start program is approved by in their application to the Office of Head Start. We view this question slightly differently. The question here is, if you are experiencing a surge or high transmission of COVID-19 in your communities, can you temporarily use virtual or remote for your service delivery? First and always most important, especially at this time, we always emphasize the importance of regularly consulting the CDC guidelines, your state and local health department guidance, and your local school district decisions as you continue to work towards returning to full, in-person, comprehensive services. Always a great first place to start. We also recognize that the large surge in COVID-19 cases, primarily due to the Omicron variant, has impacted your approach to the return to in-person Head Start services in some, but not all, communities.

To that question specifically, the answer is clearly yes. In cases where a program is experiencing high COVID-19 transmission in your service area – and a service area could be your full approved service area, it could be a part of the service area. It could be one county, one community, a portion of a neighborhood – in your service area, your program can temporarily, for a very short amount of time, use virtual or remote services to reach the children and families that are enrolled in your program. All programs are already expected to have plans in place to allow for changes in your community conditions. Those conditions could be the high transmission rate of COVID-19, and those conditions may result in a temporary short-term use of virtual and remote services again for a short term-based basis.

These plans must be established within your program's policies and procedures – should already be established in what your program has written as your policies and procedures. All that being said, we know that virtual and remote services can also create significant instability

and stress for children and largely parents. And we know that it can disrupt opportunities for children's learning, socialization, nutrition, continuity, and their routine. As such, programs must – you must communicate with your Regional Office about any proposed changes in remote services or virtual services in response to a surge or high transmission rate of COVID-19 cases. And then finally, we're asking programs to reassess again in partnership with your federal program specialists should your need to deliver services virtually or remotely extend beyond a two-week period. We hope that clarification was really helpful.

Desmond: Thank you so much, Shawna. I think the emphasis on having these emergency plans in place because the unexpected does happen is extremely important and always have to emphasize the communication with the Regional Office. With that being said, I know safety is of utmost importance and still a concern. Heather, what resources and supports can OHS offer to support recipients with families hesitant to return due to safety issues?

Heather: Thanks, Desmond. What I want to emphasize here is that a cornerstone of Head Start is engaging families through relationship building and open communication. Families and communities have concerns about returning to enrollment and in-person services. And it is for that reason that ongoing communication has become even more vital than ever. Families depend on their Head Start programs for reliable information and aid them in making decisions for their families. Programs should be encouraging their staff to share the mitigation strategies that they have in place, explore vaccine outreach opportunities, and participate in community activities.

Programs should also be providing accurate resources for information, such as resources from the CDC, state and local health departments, and linking families to vaccine sites, or maybe even becoming one. We've had a number of Head Start programs that have provided this opportunity in their community. The last thing I want to say is that the next webinar that we have planned in the Enrollment Forward Series is going to discuss support and resources for programs, including family education and community outreach as it relates to family hesitancy. We're going to be able to provide a lot more resources support to the next webinar planned for Enrollment Forward.

Desmond: Thank you, Heather. Staying within that same vein in regards to supports, what resources or supports can OHS offer to support recipients with workforce issues?

Heather: Yeah, many programs are continuing to face challenges associated with workforce development, including retention and recruitment of staff. Some strategies programs may consider include the creation of an apprenticeship program or parent training program, thinking about and working with interested individuals and parents to really obtain a required credential or degree. Many programs that have experienced success with full enrollment have well-established training programs, and while it's not an immediate solution, programs need to start somewhere. It might be an option for some of our programs out there to consider.

You may also want to consider staffing schedules and any flexibility that you can offer to support staff. Getting an understanding of the why staff stay, thinking about program culture. Staff morale. Other areas that you may not have a handle on. Not just focusing on the staff that are leaving the program, but the ones that you've got, who have stayed around through all of

this. Also thinking about developing and refining collaborative efforts with other early childhood programs. What other programs are in your community? Could now be the time to rethink existing resources, or think about some things that you've never considered before? And fostering staff and family well-being. It really wasn't that long ago that the Office of Head Start release an information memorandum on supporting the wellness of all staff in the Head Start workforce. And in that memorandum, it included a number of strategies for programs to consider in promoting wellness.

I also want to say and point out that the third webinar in the Enrollment Forward Series is going to be focused on planning and implementation of workforce strategies. But in particular, I think the questions that you raised today in the Q&A, I have seen some come in on workforce, some in other areas, but they will help for us to be able to build out and take into consideration some of what you may be seeing as challenges. If you do have questions or things certainly continue to add them to the chat because they will only better be able for us to support you all in the next iterations of the webinar series coming forward. Thanks.

Desmond: Thank you, Heather. Thank you for re-emphasizing. And one of the takeaways from that that I have to bring up is the focusing on why [Inaudible] it's very important because it's so positive in nature. Shawna, I have not let you off the hook yet as we move on throughout this. This one may take a little while, but how long will the flexibilities last?

Shawna: The current flexibilities, we're going to leave them in place until further notice. Continue to move forward based on all of the guidance that we've talked through in today's conversation, consulting regularly the P.I. that we issued in May, the recent letter issued by Dr. Futrell in December. Again, the content of this webinar, and if there are any changes to these flexibilities, we will be certain to notify the entire Head Start community as soon as those go into effect, but they will currently remain in place until further notice.

Desmond: Thank you so much. Well, how soon will recipients be notified of the restart of the full enrollment initiative. I'm going to throw that one to you again, Shawna.

Shawna: What's most important here is when and if we do decide to restart the full enrollment initiative, we will be mindful to make sure that ample notice is provided to programs. That we won't just restart the initiative without proper notice. We want to make sure that programs have all of the time that you need to prepare and plan before resuming your pre-pandemic practices for tracking and monitoring enrollment. We want to be clear. We know that your practices to support enrollment are ongoing, and this is particularly focused on your practices for tracking and monitoring the enrollment. For the Office of Head Start, for our part, the evaluation of the monthly enrollment reports to determine which programs enter the full enrollment again would resume with ample notice being provided to programs before we restart the full enrollment initiative.

Desmond: Thank you. And that actually concludes our question-and-answer portion of the webinar. As stated in the very beginning, we definitely did want to touch on some of the many resources that are out there for programs to be able to utilize. One such thing is the OHS COVID-19 updates. That section of ECLKC is kept up to date with the most recent comings and goings in regards to COVID-19. There's still, of course, the Head Start Forward campaign, which

this is adjacent to and running alongside. And all of the webinars they're in and resources that were developed there as well, that programs can also take advantage of. Heather, did you want to say anything about the disaster recovery flexibilities?

Heather: Yeah, I do want to specifically raise up the information memorandum that was issued in 2019, the general disaster recovery flexibilities. With all the disasters that we're seeing across the nation, I wanted to make sure that we particularly highlighted this information memorandum. This is an often overlooked but a critical resource that removes barriers to make it easier for programs to meet the needs of children and families. The information memorandum addresses things like safe work environments for children, families and staff. It addresses things like eligibility, recruitment, selection, and enrollments. Things like program options and hours of program operation, space considerations, class sizes and ratios, as well as health and mental health services.

Programs are encouraged to work with local agencies and partner to assure needed services are received as quickly as possible. All of the flexibilities are in place to allow programs to act quickly in response to a large scale and widespread emergency situation in order to ensure children's safety and well-being. If you're not familiar with this resource, we encourage you to review that. Thanks, Desmond.

Desmond: No problem, thank you, Heather. I appreciate that. It was very important for me that you highlighted. Continue on with the resources. We also have a section dedicated to vaccination for Head Start families to help aid and having some of those conversations around vaccinations. There's also resources to build and retain strong education workforce. Very important, and I think when we dove into the third webinar, people will be very receptive to receiving that information. And additionally, there's also MyPeers. Even if you don't know about MyPeers, it's essentially a social networking, a community of practice forum for programs staff partners to exchange ideas and brainstorm and share resources. And within ECLKC, there's ongoing orientations available to get yourself familiar with the system if you aren't thus far.

And in addition to that, with each of these Enrollment Forward webinars, will be additional resources that will also be shared with programs. Which brings me into our save the dates for the Enrollment Forward webinar series. Please definitely take note of the dates. They all occur on Tuesdays. They're all from 1 to 2:30 p.m. Our next webinar will be Recruitment and Strategic Approaches to Enrollment, which will be on Tuesday, February 1st from 1 to 2:30 p.m eastern time. And then the next webinar in the series will be Workforce: Intentional Planning, which will be Tuesday, February 22nd from 1 to 2:30 p.m. eastern time as well. Then we will also have the final webinar in the series, which will be a recipient panel on success stories. I know everyone likes to hear from their colleagues and programs about the successes that they're having during such a difficult time, and that will be a good time to showcase that for everyone as well.

And then finally, is the ERSEA Institute, which is in April. That is being hosted by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement with the Office of Head Start and in collaboration with the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations. It's a three-day institute for all of our Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, TA providers, board policy counsel, etc., where it includes some of the most important information about the

work being performed by Head Start programs in regards to ERSEA. And this institute will continue to support ERSEA priorities while reflecting on Head Start's resilience in such a changing landscape. Again, registration for that opens up in February. With that said, I will turn this over to Shawna to close us out this webinar.

Shawna: Before we close out, Heather, I wanted to check in with you to see if you had any closing remarks.

Heather: Actually, I do, because I think what we're seeing is lots and lots of questions that programs have about the flexibilities for specific options, like the home-based program option. Lots of questions around virtual visits for that option, as well as thinking about families who are concerned about canceling visits or they're concerned about having someone enter in their home, like, how long can we continue to allow a family to stay enrolled if they are experiencing that hesitancy or continuing to cancel visits as a result? I think just acknowledging those questions and making sure that we certainly address those in our next, I don't want to answer on the spot, but certainly want to be mindful of those questions. Acknowledge where we are seeing a lot of interest, and making sure that we do work to address some of those questions and really highlight them in the next webinar series.

Just thank you guys for, again, using the Q&A section of the chat. That really helps us to be able to really get our arms around where you have concerns in some policy and needing some policy clarification from the Office of Head Start so that we can get the right messaging out to you all on these ones. Again, just thank you so much for your time today, continuing to raise those up before we close out the webinar. Thanks, Shawna.

Shawna: Thanks so much, Heather. I think that's right. These webinars, we hope there is helpful information that we're able to impart to you, but also for us to be able to hear directly from you and to receive your questions is extremely valuable to us. And again, as Heather indicated, we look forward to providing more responses and clarification on your questions in the upcoming webinars. Desmond, I thank you for holding on this save the date slide. I am personally excited about these upcoming opportunities to learn more about how we can together get through this incredible time of working through the pandemic. And I hope that folks have carefully captured these dates and topics for the upcoming opportunities to engage again on behalf of our director, Dr. Bernadine Futrell. I thank you for joining us this afternoon, and I look forward to seeing you in the weeks ahead. Have a wonderful afternoon, everyone.