

Improving Head Start Workforce Compensation, Wellness, and Career Advancement

Glenna Davis: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Improving Head Start Workforce Compensation, Wellness and Career Advancement. It is now my pleasure to turn the floor over to Shawna Pinckney. Shawna, the floor is yours.

Shawna Pinckney: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us today for this discussion on improving Head Start workforce compensation, wellness, and career advancement. My name is Shawna Pinckney. I am the associate deputy director of the Office of Head Start. Presenting with me today are my colleagues Katie Hamm, Colleen Rathgeb, and Amanda Bryans. We are excited to be with you today to discuss ways to support the Head Start workforce, truly the backbone of our program. To get us started, it is my pleasure to introduce Katie Hamm, the acting director of the Office of Head Start and the deputy assistant secretary of the Office of Early Childhood Development. Good afternoon, Katie.

Katie Hamm: Thank you so much, Shawna. It's great to be with all of you today, and I'm thrilled to be joined by our wonderful Office of Head Start staff who have been working really hard on the information we're going to share with you today, especially in response to all of the concerns that our Head Start community has been sharing about the workforce and efforts to recruit and retain a really strong workforce to deliver services.

As you all know, our mission at ACF is to ensure that children and families have access to high quality early care and education services, and one of the primary ways we accomplish that mission is through the Head Start program.

The early childhood workforce is a key ingredient to making this happen. It's true across Head Start. It's also true across child care programs, programs in schools, and community-based organizations, and in family child care homes. We need the early childhood workforce to support an early childhood system where people want to go to work. They're able to support their families and have the appropriate support to do that.

A big piece of having a qualified and supported early childhood workforce is supporting compensation and benefits. Without that, we know we're going to continue to struggle to recruit and retain staff. And in order to deliver on our promise of preparing our youngest learners for school and for life, we need to ensure that Head Start and other early childhood programs are competitive employers that can attract and retain a talented workforce.

The information we're going to share today really challenges and asks to partner with our Head Start grant recipients to look internally and make some of those tough decisions about where to target funds within already constrained budgets. And this is part of a larger effort that we're undertaking at ECF. We invest about \$20 billion in federal funds into the early childhood sector, and we want to make sure to the fullest extent possible that those funds are supporting an early childhood workforce that's well compensated that has benefits that frankly are very common in most other jobs.

We've also put out program guidance to our child care grant recipients and our preschool development birth to five grant recipients. We have also put out additional funding that can go to states and territories to help them with workforce initiatives. And importantly, we've put out, as of this week, a notice of funding opportunity for an early childhood workforce center that will focus on technical assistance and research specifically focused on the early childhood workforce and their needs. That center will partner very closely with all of our grantees, states, territories, tribes, local communities including Head Start grant recipients that will receive that technical assistance and be supported through that work.

If you want to go to the next slide. I think that it goes without saying, I know I'm preaching to the choir, but important that this be very clear, that Head Start staff are the backbone of the Head Start program. Head Start, the Office of Head Start, deeply values and appreciates the commitment of program staff across the country. This includes our janitors, our bus drivers, our teachers, our home visitors, family services staff, managers, program leadership. All are critical to the work we do serving young children.

During these very challenging times, especially over the last 2 1/2 years, Head Start staff has shown up to provide critical support, innovated on the fly sometimes to support children and families. Over the past decade, we've seen really significant growth in the qualifications of Head Start staff. When at the national level, we asked Head Start staff to get additional degrees and credentials, you all very much answered that call. But unfortunately, we still see the same persistently low wages and lack of comprehensive benefits. That's a major contributor to our current workforce shortage in Head Start and across the early childhood sector.

We know that programs are struggling to attract and retain staff. And in many cases, that is preventing programs from serving their full funded enrollment. And for too many years, Head Start services has been expanded and subsidized on the backs of low-paid workers in a way that just isn't sustainable. And while I understand and very much appreciate the dedication to children and families that has led programs to want to continue the same service level while that money stretches, it is harder and harder to stretch it. We need to make meaningful improvements and compensation to ensure the viability of the Head Start program.

We have always looked to Head Start as the gold standard when it comes to high quality in early childhood. And in order to maintain that role as the gold standard, we need to be sure that our staff are making fair wages and have those benefits. And really recognize and underscore and say out loud that higher compensation, the improving wages and benefits is a critical providing high quality in early childhood education. In the absence of more funding from Congress, we do have to find a way to stabilize the Head Start program within our existing workforce – or existing resources. Excuse me.

I know this is challenging. I don't want to suggest that it's easy, but I'm confident that Head Start programs are up to the task. I know when we've asked you to do hard things in the past, you have answered that call. The Office of Head Start is here to help you. And this information memorandum that we've released this week – and we're going to talk about more today – outlines guidance on how programs can stabilize their workforce over the long term, some of the choices that will entail, and the process for making some of those choices and seeing them through the implementation.

I'm going to turn it back to Shawna to share more about the new information memorandum. I want to thank everybody for all their support, all the work they've been doing over the last several years, the last several decades to support staff, children, and families. And we look forward to working with you on implementing this important next step. Shawna, back to you.

Shawna: Thank you, Katie. As Katie mentioned, the new IM, "Strategies to Stabilize the Head Start Workforce," was released earlier this week, and it's currently available on the ECLKC. If you haven't seen it, you should definitely visit to check out the new IM. In the IM, we are asking grant recipients to take sort of the big picture, long-term view of their programs and how you can provide services to children and families most in need while also maintaining a stable workforce.

The IM outlines a number of really excellent strategies that programs can use to support your workforce. For example, the IM encourages programs to consider ways to restructure in order to appropriately compensate staff and grow and maintain your workforce in a sustainable way. Now, we absolutely recognize this involves very difficult decisions and trade-offs that all of our programs must consider. We know that programs don't want to serve fewer children, especially in these difficult times. However, programs also cannot operate and certainly cannot continue to operate without a stable workforce. Without a well compensated, well supported workforce, classrooms can't open, home visits cannot be conducted, and programs cannot fully operate.

We're asking you, our Head Start programs, to take an honest and holistic look at what changes are necessary to ensure the long-term viability of your programs. Next slide. The IM specifically encourages you, our programs, to consider whether restructuring is necessary to ensure the long-term viability of your program within your existing funding level. As Katie offered, without additional funding from Congress, we're really asking you to look at your existing funding levels within your current program budgets. This could mean rethinking your program's organizational structure, requesting a reduction of your funded enrollment, or consolidating grants.

We understand that none of these are quick fixes, and we are also asking you to take the time that you need to do this in a thoughtful way. And also, while you're taking a thoughtful look at your program, your organizational structure, your funded budget, use data. Use the data that you have about your program to support that decision-making process. I also strongly encourage you to reach out to your Regional Offices, your program specialist, your fiscal specialist, your regional program managers. All are standing by to help you, to support you through these decisions, and to discuss with you the strategies for what makes the most sense for a long-term, sustainable, and viable program.

With that, I'm going to turn over to my colleague Colleen Rathgeb, who's going to go a little bit deeper into each of the specific strategies that we share with you in the IM on additional ways that your program can look to support your workforce. Good afternoon, Colleen.

Colleen Rathgeb: Hello. Thanks, Shawna and Katie. I'm really glad to be with everyone today to talk about this really important issue. As Katie and Shawna have said, I just want to go a little deeper on, the IM explicitly encourages programs to consider ways to permanently increase compensation to staff and particularly, to really think about those positions where current vacancies are preventing them from serving their full funded enrollment.

And as they've said, programs can request an enrollment reduction if it's needed in order to do this holistic look to address the issues in their program. We're also encouraging programs to consider equity issues in compensation when you're doing this because, like so many other fields, there continue to be racial and ethnic disparities in early childhood, and we don't want Head Start programs to be perpetuating this problem. We also really want when people are looking at their enrollment reductions to increase wages, we want to make sure this is part of a holistic approach to supporting the workforce and stabilizing programs.

We do not expect to approve programs simply requesting a reduction that aligns with their current enrollment levels. We really want requested enrollment reductions really to indicate how freed-up funds would be used to address underlying staff issues and, again, to look more holistically. As Shawna started to talk about, programs should use data to guide their decisions around these wage increases. Whether it's considering or incorporating their wage comparability study, looking at the wages and benefits offered by local elementary schools, the local cost of living, data around enrollment and current staffing. Looking at all of these areas is going to be really important in looking at this data to do this holistic look at how to better support the workforce. Next slide.

We want to talk about the policy guidance, but we also really want to hear from some real programs. Now we're going to share a few videos from programs across the country telling us how they have used some of these strategies to increase compensation for their workforce. First, we're going to share a video from Shasta Head Start in California.

[Video begins]

Gordon Chatham: Hi, my name is Gordon Chatham. I'm the executive director for Shasta Head Start in northern California. We serve 663 Head Start and Early Head Start slots. Coming out of COVID, our agency was facing some personnel crisis as far as finding qualified staff. In January during our planning process, our program looked at our community assessment, our current staffing levels, and we noticed that most of our families, most all of our families, wanted full-day services or longer service hours.

We looked at that, and we looked at our budget, and we ran the numbers as though we would be serving all of our center-based programs for full day. And we noticed that there was a budget savings when we did this. We used those budget savings and applied it to staff wages. We wanted to retain our current staff and to help us in this tight labor market recruit more qualified staff, and it really turned out to be a win-win situation. We started this process, as I said, in January. We submitted our grant application in June with the slot reduction, and then we implemented that slot reduction in September.

When we made our program adjustments from part-day classrooms to full-day classrooms, we were able to eliminate three sets of teaching staff because we took those part-day classes and extended them to full-day, and we had one set of teaching staff. With the savings from eliminating those three teaching teams, we increased wages. We didn't have to eliminate any positions because we were trying to fill positions. We didn't have staff. It worked really well for our staffing. It worked well for our parents. We were able to serve those parents on the full-day wait list.

It's very difficult for families in our area to only have part-day services. There are a lot of working families, so that worked out well. And our staff obviously appreciated the wage increase. I think they also realized that in our process of planning, we always look at families, but we definitely needed to look at staff. We have a great staff, and I think it increased morale considerably knowing that we weren't asking them to do more. We were just trying to compensate them in our current environment that we have.

After COVID ended, we had very low enrollment numbers. It was a good time to make big changes because we didn't impact families, the services to families, and we didn't impact employment or staff. It could be done with very low impact to our current families and staff. And in the end, I think it's a real win for our community and our staff. We serve longer hours. We had families that would wait on our waiting list the whole program year for full-day services. They weren't going to receive them. That wait list is smaller now. I think staff are less stressed. And as I said earlier, we include all of our staff in our planning process. I think they understood how we were coping with our current environment and the tools we were using that were available to us.

And at the time, our tools that we had obviously was looking at our data and our community assessment. But also when we did our budgeting, how are we going to get more resources to retain staff? And that's what it came down to. Because staff need a livable wage, and they all understand that, but our staff, they have a huge desire to serve our community. It was very ... We got a lot of questions from our staff because they're very dedicated, and they want to serve as many families as possible. I think when we went through our planning process, and we explained how we came up with the slot reduction, it was well received.

Well, I think the lesson we learned during this process was it's not the quantity of services that we provide. It's the importance of maintaining the high quality that is expected from a Head Start program and from our agency. And that not only includes services to family, but it also includes the wellness of staff that are delivering those services.

[Video ends]

Colleen: What a great video. I loved hearing about how to use data and really found a win-win solution that was what their community needed, worked better for their workforce, and what their families obviously, like he said, really needed.

Next up, we have a video from Head Start Inc. in Billings, Montana. All right. We'll look at how they looked at benefits in the workforce.

[Video begins]

Janice King: My name is Janice King, and I'm executive director of Head Start Inc. based out of Billings, Montana. We serve 360 children and their families in Yellowstone and Carbon Counties.

For many years, we've had a somewhat comprehensive benefits package that is pretty typical. We contribute monthly towards our employees' medical, dental, and vision benefits, and we also contribute a match up to 3% of contributions in a 401(k) retirement plan for our employees. But we really took the time to analyze our workforce and try to understand

employee turnover, what was retaining employees. We pulse surveyed our employees. We listened to their feedback and really tried to come up with an enhanced compensation plan that really met the needs of those that we were employing.

One of the things we discovered is we employ – about 95% of our employees are female, and many of them are young females who may be starting a family of their own or raising a family of their own. In working with our insurance provider, which is BlueCross BlueShield of Montana, we were able to use some quality improvement funds to invest in a plan that includes short-term disability benefits, long-term disability benefits, and resource services for our employees. In a nutshell, short-term disability benefits include up to 8 weeks paid leave at 60% for our employees who deliver a baby. We also ... It covers up to 12 weeks, 60% of wages for illness or injury, which has really been crucial in times of COVID. And some people have gotten significantly sick with that.

The services that come with that include face-to-face counseling. There's telephonic counseling for those that aren't as comfortable talking face-to-face, but there's also web-based services. Those web-based services cover everything from supporting you through divorce, debt relief, saving money, natural life transitions like college or getting ready for retirement. Those benefits coupled with, we use a local clinic here in Billings that provides face-to-face counseling that we call employee assistance programming as well. Those have been very cost effective and have really helped. Over the course of the last few years, we were looking at over 60% employee turnover, and mostly in our education department. And this last calendar year, we were able to reduce turnover to 17%. We're really proud of that.

I believe, or we believe as a program, that the employee benefits packages, health care, access to mental health services, payment if you're out of work due to illness or medical reasons, are just part of what makes us successful in retaining employees. The other piece is really tapping into that human side of the work we do. Our employees have become our most precious resource right along with children and families. Head Start has always had a great philosophy around supporting children and families, but we also have to support our employees. And sometimes, many times, many of our employees are Head Start families, and that's what Head Start is about. Treating our employees with the same dignity, respect, offering resources that we can, just like we do for children and families.

[Video ends]

Colleen: Wow, that's another great story. Really kind of just driving home the importance of meeting the needs of our workforce right along with the children and families that we serve.

We wanted to remind folks of another piece that the IM talks about, another important strategy we want people to think about. As you hopefully know, earlier this year, we released an IM encouraging programs to provide competitive financial incentives, retention and recruitment bonuses to staff. And we want to remind people that along with benefits and permanent increases and all the things we're talking about today, this is still an important strategy to think about, and particularly when many programs have unspent funds, either the American Rescue Plan, other COVID funds.

You may have unspent base grant funds because you have enrollment challenges you're working with or staff shortages. Again, these one-time incentives are an important piece to think about – bonuses – and you really, again, need to look at the data and look back at that IM from before to give you more information. But right now with everything, the challenges folks are facing in recruiting and retaining staff, you may be able to have reasonable necessary bonuses that are higher than you normally have been able to have in the past. We wanted people just to remember that. And then the next slide.

We also want people to remember, thinking about ways to ease financial instabilities that you may face throughout the year, knowing how challenging this is for our staff, and to remind folks about existing flexibilities. You have to provide compensation for up to 2 weeks of pay when programs can't operate due to an emergency and flexibilities around paying health insurance premiums for up to 90 days when staff are subject to a furlough, such as during summer break. Again, just another important thing to think about.

And then as we think a little bit about these bonuses and the retention and recruitment – if we could please go on to the next slide – I'd like to share one more program example from Inspire Centers, the Inspire Development Centers, which is a migrant and seasonal program in Washington State. And we're going to hear about how they use financial incentives.

[Video begins]

Julie Jones: Hi, I'm Julie Jones, and I'm the HR Director with Inspire Development Centers. I've been here for 13 years and have been doing human resources for the last 27. I run a team of 16 HR professionals that cover 1,000 employees across the organization.

Jorge Castillo: Hello, my name is Jorge Castillo. I'm the CEO for Inspire Development Centers. I've been here 29 years and have had the pleasure of working with many great people. The hiring incentive program was also, to date, very successful. We addressed lead preschool teachers, bus drivers, and family advocates, as well as Early Head Start home educators. We provided referrals in the amounts of \$2,000, \$1,000, and \$500. The parameters allowed for us to make that payment within the first 30 days of employment. And to date, 146 employees have been successful in receiving a hiring incentive.

Julie: The total dollars around those 146 employees that were hired is \$119,000. And many people have asked us, "Were you successful in that program?" And we do feel we've been successful. We have only lost five of those original 146 employees, and only one of those was to leave for a different employer for a higher paying position. We feel very, very successful in how we utilized those funds.

The next program that we talked about was, and our last program, is our retention program. As we implemented the hiring program, obviously our current workforce all said, "What about me?" We kept that in mind and were able to use the American Rescue Plan dollars to incentivize our current workforce.

Jorge: In that case, we also addressed the hard-to-fill positions by creating a base amount for the retention and then also recognizing the years of service for all our employees. And those

amounts range from \$500 to \$3,500. And in August, we made our first half of the payment in that retention bonus to employees, and we are scheduled to pay the second half late October.

Julie: And those dollar amounts actually totaled \$1.1 million. I think our workforce has been very pleased. And we were able to align all three programs with that same philosophy of which positions were hard to fill, aligning it with our turnover, and looking at historically at what had been difficult to fill in the organization, and we have been successful.

Jorge: I think the retention program has been the best to date in that it recognizes the efforts of all employees at all levels. I would only say that I think as a nonprofit organization, Inspire Development Centers' greatest responsibility obviously is to serve these children and families. But as an administration and administrators, equally it's important for us to take care of our staff to the maximum extent possible, and this has given us the opportunity to do that.

[Video ends]

Colleen: All right. Thank you to the folks at Inspire for sharing that with us.

The last thing that I want to talk about – before I turn you over to Amanda – is the issue that we know your programs are struggling to find qualified staff. We think compensation strategies are really important and ways to help, and we've been talking about them. But again, want to remind you of another tool and programs still have as part of what they can use in looking at their staff qualification issues. The Head Start Act does allow programs to request a waiver for preschool teachers, for Head Start preschool teachers. They can obtain that waiver for staff only if they meet certain requirements that are laid out in the law. We've got them detailed here in the slide. They're also detailed in the IM.

And when folks are requesting that waiver, either a reminder or for programs that have never done it before, you must demonstrate that you've attempted to recruit a qualified individual for the position and then demonstrate how the staff member that you do have meets the qualifications for the waiver. And then the Regional Office reviews and can approve these requests. Just again, another piece we wanted to make sure programs remembered that they have is that we do not have this flexibility for all positions, but we do have this waiver for preschool teachers that is open for programs to request.

And with that, I'm going to turn things over to Amanda who's going to share more from the IM and provide a few more program examples.

Amanda Bryans: Thank you so much, Colleen. I am thrilled to be here. I'm going to ...

Colleen: Amanda, I think you're on mute.

Amanda: This is so typical. I said something excellent, too, that can never be recreated, but ...

Colleen: You can go back and recreate it for us as a whole group.

Amanda: I'm going to do my best. The first thing I did is promise not to go over time and then immediately go off script. I'm really thrilled to be here today. I want you all to take a deep breath, the kind that pushes your tummy out. Hold it again for a second. Just do that. It makes me feel better. I hope it makes you feel OK. We're going to get through this. I wanted to tell you, too, I'm Amanda Bryans. I've been around a really long time, but including 10 years in a

local Head Start program in Albany, New York, and that was the most humbling, hardest, and best job I ever had. I just wanted to tell you that. Colleen also worked in a program.

As you all know, compensation has never been the only thing that brings people and keeps people to Head Start. The information memorandum that we published also had information about other things you should do in addition to improving compensation. It describes long-term strategies and supports that can help support our workforce that are not just financial.

And one of the most important things you can do for your staff is to foster a positive, empowering workplace environment. I always talk about agency. All staff at every level, whether it's the bus monitor, bus driver, kitchen aid, or teacher or teacher assistant, home visitors, family workers need to have ownership of their work and feel like they have an influence over what happens, feel like they are respected as professionals and contributors in the program.

It can also mean the basics of everyday life. Staff needs scheduled breaks. Unscheduled breaks can be ... There's got to be a system to call for help when you're at your – you've hit your limit on whatever it might be. It could just be you're tired of all the kids, babies pooping at the same time, or a child with a behavior that is challenging the adults. There's got to be a system to get somebody in to cover for our staff for a few minutes when things get tough.

You want to make sure there's two-way communication, a lot about having really good onboarding, really bringing people into the culture and the family of Head Start. We have great resources on the ECLKC, including the IPB, which lets people pursue CEUs and get really high quality training without necessarily being a big burden to your staff. Clear personnel policies are important. And again, it's important that staff are a part of developing those and making sure that we have clear staff roles and responsibilities. And I am already ready for the next slide.

OK. There we go. Head Start programs have a unique opportunity to support the development of staff. I'm going to tell you that some of the most talented teachers that I ever worked with came in in paraprofessional positions, Head Start parents. Sometimes back in those days, we even helped them get GEDs. Now they come in mostly with high school diplomas and GEDs, but we can invest in them. Head Start has the capacity to pay for people to get increasing credentials, enter a career path, a profession. This not only results in the most incredibly gifted staff, but also is offering career mobility and opportunity to families, to parents, and community members.

That's just really important thing to continue to do. We can pay tuition. We can support people as – pay them to be substitute teachers in our programs or floaters while they acquire increasing credentials. And not only in teaching, but in other positions as well. It's a chance for a lot of people from the community to figure out their interests and get the appropriate credentials and degrees. We have many, many, many parents who have gone as far as PhDs after starting on a career mobility path with Head Start programs.

Just think about that. That's incredible, and our staff are more representative of the children and families in our communities than is true for most educational settings. Very important. We can also work on building apprenticeship programs, partnering with local community colleges. And high schools increasingly may be able to offer a CDA program and help you develop a

career pool that way. There are apprenticeship opportunities through the Department of Labor, and I already said my last talking point. I'm good. We can go to the next slide.

All right. I'm very pleased to have another video to offer. Surprisingly, we didn't think just hearing feds talk would be the most effective thing we could do on the video, so please enjoy your colleagues from the Parents in Community Action, known as PICA, program.

[Video begins]

Monshari Chandler: My name is Monshari Chandler, and I'm the Head Start, Early Head Start director for Parents in Community Action. We're located in Hennepin County in Minnesota, providing services to 2,600 children and their families, prenatal to 5, throughout 14 centers which includes one child care partnership.

For the last 40 years, PICA has practiced a grow-your-own approach. We've used that approach to fill the central positions in our program. And with that approach, we've been able to recruit, train, and hire many teachers, drivers, nutrition staff, and records clerks receptionists to fill our essential positions throughout the years.

As a byproduct of our grow-your-own approach, our staff and our children – our staff are reflective of the children and families that we serve, culturally, racially, and linguistically. PICA has developed five parent training programs with tracks that include child development and Early Head Start and Head Start, commercial kitchen, clerical and transportation. All of these are essential positions in critical demand in our community as well as specifically in PICA.

Each training track includes 96 hours of hands-on experience working under the supervision of an experienced or credentialed qualified staff who models the skills needed to work in those positions, and they direct learning. Trainees learn basic skills in the component area that they're working in, and parents receive an evaluation at the end of their training track. In addition to receiving an evaluation on how well they did or some suggestions on skills that they need to continue to work on, parents receive a \$300 stipend, which is important for our families who are oftentimes on fixed incomes or with limited resources. Parents can complete all or one or two, however many tracks they are interested in in our parent training programs.

And parents, that as a result are interested in pursuing a career in teaching, they are able to apply for an internship in child development. And that internship includes 700 additional hours in a classroom. More of a hands-on experience with some in-depth training and learning opportunities for them. Those parent interns also complete or they pursue a CDA in our in-house CDA training program. And at the end of that 700 hours, whether they have obtained that CDA or they are well on the way to obtaining that CDA, we invite parents to apply for permanent positions in our Head Start program.

Another byproduct that comes from our grow-your-own approach is longevity. What we've found is that the staff who have been with Head Start a number of years, and I'm speaking 20 plus years, but those staff began as parents. Those parents came in the door looking for opportunities, looking for a seat at the table, and looking for development and growth. And they have continued to grow and been appreciative of that opportunity and have continued to

climb the career lattice and be a part of our PICA Head Start community for a number of years. We've found that our longest tenured staff are people who began as parents.

[Video ends]

Amanda: That was amazing description of what can be a transformative program opportunity. I think it is representative of investment in community, in Head Start families and in your own program. We know that sometimes staff will come and get a degree in early childhood or a CDL may leave and find a higher paying position even with our efforts to enhance salary and benefits in Head Start programs. But when you make the pathway an integral part of your program, you always have a kind of pool of people that you can draw from to fill positions. I just ... That was a wonderful representation of that.

And now we want to have you see one more example. This is the Child Care Resource Center that is – a Child Care Resource Center that is focused on trauma-informed care and diversity, equity and inclusion and their effort to empower their workforce.

[Video begins]

Krischa Esquivel: Hey, I'm Krischa Esquivel, and I'm the early learning manager at CCRC.

Betty Zamorano-Pedregon: My name is Betty Zamorano-Pedregon, and I am the early care and learning division director here at CCRC.

Krischa: CCRC have done a number of different things to really support the workforce to empower them, to help them feel more confident and competent overall. We took a lot of time in planning what we were going to do, the intentionality behind really looking at what has happened in the workforce? What has happened in the world and in the classrooms, to our family in regards to the pandemic? That's been our focus in terms of how do we bring people back to a new world essentially.

One of the big things that we've been looking at, even prior to the pandemic, is trauma-informed care. We know the needs of our family. We know the needs of our community. And in looking at the pandemic, we also took into account the needs of our staff. We all went through trauma with the pandemic. What does that look like? And how do you build empathy for – how do they build empathy for themselves, build empathy for their coworkers, and transfer that to what the children and families are going through, and what does it look like in the classroom? How do the behaviors play out, and how are they going to respond to those?

We've really taken a deep dive, if you will, into focusing on trauma-informed care in terms of the professional development provided. Along with that is our coaching model. We do coach to the specific needs of individual staff as well as offering coaching opportunities and professional development opportunities for the whole. One of the ways in which staff are able to participate on a larger scale are what's called read and reflects. Our coaching team, they will choose a book or an article, and staff will read it. And they can come together with their peers and really talk about what it means for them, what it means for their practice in the classroom, what it means for the children and families that we serve.

That's been really popular as well as ... Another dotted line to that is the work we do around diversity, equity, and inclusion. We really jumped into that, again, over the last maybe 2 or 3

years. We have recently also hired the agency director of diversity, equity, and inclusion. That has been something that has really brought awareness and education to all levels. And it has allowed staff to be seen as individuals because we do it a lot in the classroom already. We make sure that we are very representative of the children and families in the classroom.

And now the staff are able to feel more comfortable sharing that side of them as well because it's something that we embrace as an agency. Along with what we do as an agency is overall staff wellness. CCRC has really taken a look at – taken the pulse of staff. There were a number of different surveys sent out throughout the pandemic on how staff are feeling overall in their work conditions, in their personal life, like what do they need? And a lot of different resources have been afforded to staff around that. Betty, do you want to add anything to what I've said?

Betty: As we've come back to in-person services, we recognize that staff, like our families, were impacted. And I think that by leveraging both virtual and in-person services as we come back, that has really been helpful. I think that there is a new focus on the work-life balance, and I feel like all of the services that have been offered have really contributed to helping staff lower stress as much as possible as we make that transition back to in-person services.

Krischa: And thinking about the impacts that we see directly at the center level and in relation to what Betty was speaking about with the different supplies and really getting to know the families and the time of the families, the building of the partnerships, and how much the staff know the family has really led to them really asking for more specific and intentional supports at the center. Staff now are very much aware of what particular children need, particular family needs. We're no longer getting blanket requests for things. It's a lot more individualized for families.

Along with that and thinking about what we've done, the work we've done around trauma-informed care, we wanted to track the impacts in those ways. There's a survey that goes along with trauma-informed care. It's called the ARTIC Scale, which is really ... ARTIC stands for attitudes related to trauma-informed care. It allows us to see where staff started in terms of their knowledge of trauma-informed care and their confidence in being able to work with children and families.

And something that we've seen at the center level are the intentionality around the supplies that are being requested and that staff were ordering from the classroom. It's directly linked to the training they're getting in trauma-informed care in terms of asking for more of the adaptive materials and equipment for the children. But also in looking at what we've done around DEI, the types of books and toys that are more representative of the children in the classroom as well. It's really great to see the level of empowerment and knowledge being directly transferred into the classroom and to the experiences that children are having.

[Video ends]

Amanda: Well, again, a really powerful presentation. I loved hearing about it. It made me think a lot about empathy and the evident empathy that they have for their staff and for their children and trying to figure out what the significant challenges are, what it feels like to be a child or to be a staff coming through this pandemic and what kinds of supports they can put in place.

Another support that could potentially help Head Start staff is the public service loan forgiveness program. We hope by now that's familiar to you, but it's OK if it's not. There's still time. The vast majority of Head Start programs are considered qualifying employers, which means that staff with the federal student loans can get those loans or may be eligible to get those loans forgiven after 120 payments. And right now, there's an additional limited waiver that offers benefits, but you have to apply before October 31st. I encourage you to go to the website and to look at the webinar to learn more about the public loan service forgiveness, even if your staff think they're not eligible. It's worth looking now.

It counts prior periods of repayment, whether it was made in full or made at all toward forgiveness. Includes times that when there was a repayment pause may actually count as repayment. It's confusing. You've got to look it up, but I'm telling you more people will be eligible than may realize it. It will still continue after October, but there's a special waiver in place now that may make it more accessible for some people. Please share your information with – or this information with your staff. Like we need to tell you that. Next slide.

You all have these slides or will have them, but here is some additional resources that may be helpful, and there's one more piece we want to share with you before we sign off for today. Next slide.

We wanted to say a few words about background checks, the state of the field regarding background checks. We recognize that our programs are making very good sometimes herculean efforts to comply with the background check requirements and the performance standards. We know there are challenges often at the state level and sometimes locally. We have developed a task force to collect information to understand what is happening in the individual states and also with the tribal background processes. We're going to kind of aggregate all that information and use it to come up with an approach that will support you.

Next slide, please. We have an action plan, not just task force. In September and October, there will be a background check process survey to a subset of programs. We're going to provide multiple opportunities with you, as outlined here, to both provide information and to get information from us through things like frequently asked questions that we'll keep up to date. Please keep an eye out on this. I think we just want you to know that we are aware that you're struggling. We are working with our colleagues in the Office of Child Care to get to some reasonable resolution on this. Next slide.

I can imagine how many questions. Oh, thank you. I wonder if that's me. Well, I get to say my thank you, and then others can probably add. I want to tell you that we are so grateful for you. We see you. We know that it's incredibly frustrating. We always know that Head Start is leading the way in early childhood and that we think that we're an important intersection where we both can continue to serve the children and families in the greatest need in our communities and really recognize the professional work and responsibilities that Head Start and Early Head Start staff have.

And we hope that ... We look forward to continuing to work with you as you seize this opportunity and as we move forward as an amazing program. That would be my concluding remarks. I don't know if my fellow panelists want to add something.

Colleen: Amanda, I think you said it beautifully off mute for all of us. To everyone, thank you. See, you pulled it together right at the end for the beautiful pull-together for all of us. But we do. I think, just like she said, we're all in this together, and we appreciate working with this. For Shawna and myself and for Katie, again, thank you for spending some time of your afternoon or morning with us.