

Unique Communities Demand Innovative Service Delivery

An Example from Head Start

by Yasmina Vinci

Every child is unique. Anyone who works with children recognizes that no two are alike, that each child has individual strengths and needs and personality. In the same way, every community has its own constellation of resource needs. Many examples of specially-designed service delivery models come from Head Start.

Head Start programs operate in all 50 states and several United States territories, from frontier counties to the most densely populated cities to Native American reservations — wherever children are living in poverty. As those who direct and teach in early childhood programs of all types appreciate, each community poses its own challenges for families and for programs working to meet their needs.

While Head Start and Early Head Start programs share common standards and



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for all children, services that include the empowerment of families and support the development of the whole child.



a unified mission of providing comprehensive services to children and families living in poverty, if you have the opportunity to visit different programs, you will quickly see that no two are quite the same. These differences arise from the commitment Head Start and Early Head Start make to meeting children, as well as communities, where they are:

- In rural areas, transportation poses a major challenge to parents.
- In places with high teen birth rates, parents balance the need to support their children with the need to complete their education.
- In migrant worker communities, parents work from early in the morning until late at night during harvests.

Based on community needs, each Head Start or Early Head Start program designs a service delivery model to help children access critical educational, medical, and family supports at a center, in a family child care home, in their own home, or through

another service delivery model designed by the community. This is at the heart of early childhood educators' commitment to responsive practice: we base our work on best practices and the needs presented by the children and families we serve in the communities where we operate our programs. There are many examples of how programs of all kinds across the country are doing this in extraordinary ways. Here are just a few examples from Head Start.

Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County Inc., California

Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County Inc. (CAPSLO) is

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one of six programs in California, and many more across the country, that provide Migrant/Seasonal Head Start services to children ages six weeks to five years whose families earn at least 51% of their income from agricultural work and migrate to farm various crops. Each year CAPSLO alone serves more than 4,000 families, many of whom remain below the poverty line even with both parents working long days in the fields. CEO Elizabeth Steinberg explains that the program's Policy Council, made up in part by parents from the nine counties CAPSLO serves, makes decisions about locations, hours, and program operations. Some programs open as early as 4:00 in the morning before parents head out to the fields; program hours vary with the harvest of different crops.

CAPSLO uses multiple service delivery models, including family child care homes where individual caregivers work with small numbers of children and center-based classrooms that provide older children with environments more like the schools they'll be entering at age five. Decisions about which model will best serve a family take into account family preferences, the child's

age, and other factors. In addition, all program models serve children in their first language and gradually introduce them to English as a second language when developmentally appropriate.

Albina Early Head Start, Oregon

Albina Head Start and Early Head Start in Portland, Oregon serves a mostly urban population of children through centers — not unlike the centers run by Migrant/Seasonal programs, though they often follow more typical school hours — and home-based services, where home visitors make weekly visits to support families in their homes. In 2007, Albina Early Head Start developed a new service delivery model for their area that targets the needs of teen parents enrolled in local high schools.

At two Portland high schools, Early Head Start centers now reach 28 infants and toddlers each year, and ensure that teen parents receive the parenting education, child care, and emotional support they need to be successful in their academic and extracurricular activities. In addition, Policy Council participation extends leadership opportunities to teens as they take on adult responsibilities. Early Head Start Director Elaine Harrison describes proudly that since the program began, 100% of participating teen parents have graduated from high school. Many of their young children

have transitioned to Albina's other Early Head Start and Head Start settings, in preparation for successful academic careers of their own.

Southern Kennebec Child Development Corporation, Maine

Southern Kennebec Child Development Corporation (SKCDC) is funded to serve 244 Head Start children across 23 towns in 11 school districts. Many of their families live with the challenges of rural poverty and the social isolation it can bring, especially for those unable to afford transportation. For the last 12 years, SKCDC has worked in partnership with local public schools to offer Head Start services in public pre-K classrooms. Partnerships like this help families engage with local schools and allow the Head Start staff in the combined classrooms to extend the benefits of Head Start to even more children: mental health services, nutrition, health education, and more mandated by the Head Start Performance Standards. Ultimately, says Michele Pino, Executive Director at SKCDC, the advantage to partnering is reaching children and families wherever they are in their communities.

If you work with low-income families, you may find it helpful to visit your local Head Start program. Years ago, as a young inner-city child care center director, I did.

This visit changed my life. In that visit I found a helpful mentor, and my center was able to adapt some of the valuable elements of Head Start to serve our families better. If you'd like an introduction to the Head Start director in your community, contact me or my staff at the National Head Start Association at (703) 739-0875.

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