

Head Start Showcase: ERSEA

[upbeat music]

Dr. Blanca Enriquez: Welcome to this overview on ERSEA. I want to introduce Catherine Hildum and Elizabeth Borda Rivera as they discuss the requirements related to child and family eligibility and program requirements for the recruitment, selection and enrollment of eligible families.

Catherine Hildum: I'm happy to be here today to talk to you about ERSEA.

Elizabeth Borda Rivera: Me too. What does ERSEA mean?

Catherine: It means eligibility.

Elizabeth: Recruitment.

Catherine: Selection.

Elizabeth: Enrollment.

Catherine: And attendance. Really important parts of the regulations for grantees.

Elizabeth: That's sub-part A. This is where the program begins.

Catherine: It really is. It's the very beginning. Programs need to really determine what's in their community and who is eligible before they can do anything else. Much of this section is grounded in requirements in the Head Start Act, as well as research on best practices, innovations that we've heard from the field, including Head Start grantees, and requirements include, from the act, include removing barriers to serving children who are homeless.

Elizabeth: And this informs the program's structure and everything about the program, doesn't it?

Catherine: It really does. It all starts with a community wide strategic planning and needs assessment, which is in the first section. After a program determines its service area, it needs to assess the community. That section has now been aligned with a five year grant cycle.

Elizabeth: And now it must be reviewed annually, correct?

Catherine: It must be. Five years is a long time and we know that communities can change so programs are required to review every year the elements of their Community Needs Assessment.

Elizabeth: And moving on to eligibility. This section was codified in the final rule on eligibility in 2015, correct?

Catherine: Absolutely. This was all revised in 2015 and much of this is also required in the Head Start Act, so it would take an act of Congress to make any changes to this section and we'll have further information about this section in subsequent conversations. So, next we go into recruitment. In this section, it really includes efforts that programs must make to actively recruit the most vulnerable population, including children who are homeless, children in foster care and children with disabilities.

Elizabeth: Okay and this section provides us flexibility, does it not?

Catherine: It, that's right. That's absolutely right. It goes back to the Community Needs Assessment, so grantees have flexibility in doing what their community needs and what works best.

Elizabeth: Excellent. And can we talk now about the selection process?

Catherine: Absolutely.

Elizabeth: This clarifies a 10 percent total funded enrollment is for Head Start and Early Head Start program grantee, correct?

Catherine: Correct. So, 10 percent of a program's total funded enrollment, including all the models that they run, must be children with disabilities; so that's clarified in this final rule. This process, or this section, also talks about how programs must prioritize children for enrollment, again, going back to the most vulnerable children first, including homeless children, children in foster care, or children with disabilities.

Elizabeth: Okay, and to clarify, this is not required if it would disrupt partnerships with local education agencies.

Catherine: Right, and I think you're speaking about prioritizing younger children if high quality full day preschool or Pre-K is available for four-year old children who are Head Start eligible. That's absolutely right. It's not intended to disrupt the partnerships that grantees already have with local education agencies. It's intended to really serve more three-year olds if there are other options available for four-year olds.

Elizabeth: Okay, so let's talk about enrollment.

Catherine: Yeah, absolutely. This section has new provision, some new provisions, one of which allows programs to reserve slots for these vulnerable populations that I've mentioned, children who are homeless, children in foster care, and actually also pregnant women. Those slots can be reserved for up to 30 days.

Elizabeth: Well, this is great news, Catherine, but does this mean that we've gotten rid of the 60-day rule?

Catherine: This, it does. They must be filled within 30 days and even at the end of the program year. You're right, the 60-day rule is now gone. There are, the research is clear that the more high quality services a child gets, the better; so even if it's the very end of the program year, a child still should be enrolled and served. All vacancies, again, must be filled within 30 days.

Elizabeth: Wow, that's terrific. That means students will be enrolled, will be pre-enrolled, for the next year.

Catherine: Absolutely. That gives them a head start on their next year enrollment because we know they're eligible for the following program year.

Elizabeth: Great.

Catherine: And the attendance, in the next section, attendance, that has a new focus, actually. It's really on implementing strategies to promote regular attendance for each child. Currently, the attendance section focuses on developing a system if attendance, average attendance, falls below 85 percent, but the new focus is really paying attention to promoting regular attendance for every child, really to ensure that programs know the patterns and know what their children need.

Elizabeth: And that includes supporting attendance of homeless children.

Catherine: Absolutely. Absolutely. Making sure that they can get there as well as making sure that they can attend a program even if they don't have the required paperwork, they can attend for up to 90 days as long as they meet the state licensing requirements for the immunizations are met.

Elizabeth: That's excellent.

Catherine: Yeah, so it's a really good --as, you know, we've discussed earlier, there are a lot of provisions here, especially in ERSEA, that remove barriers for the attendance and enrollment of homeless children. Another provision that I think is really important to note, here, is that a focus on insuring that every child is safe. So, if a program knows attendance patterns and a child is not in attendance without explanation, program really needs to check and find out where that child is; so within an hour of the program start, if a child is not there and they haven't heard from the parent, they need to make efforts to reach the family to ensure that child's safe. Really, I mean, I call it the No Child Left On A Bus provision because it just ensures that children aren't unattended.

Elizabeth: Catherine, I love that. It's catchy, but more importantly, it gets to the heart of the matter which is safety first.

Catherine: Absolutely, that's really, you know, first and foremost for Head Start programs. We need to ensure that children are safe. That's why we, why we exist.

So, speaking of that. The next section is really important as well. It's a brand new section on suspension and expulsion and it codifies a long, longstanding practice that Head Start programs don't expel children.

Elizabeth: That's right.

Catherine: And we really, severely, limit suspension.

Elizabeth: You know, this is, to me, probably the most exciting new provision and I can't wait to hear more about this.

Catherine: Yeah, we'll hear more about it. Our colleague, Sing, you know, is gonna talk more about it in another conversation, but it's a really, really exciting.

Elizabeth: The final section is on fees and I think there's a new provision in this section.

Catherine: There is. Actually, this section is where, you know, I'd like to talk a little bit about focus on potentially serving mixed income groups. The research shows that all children benefit, both low income and higher income children, and their families benefit, if income groups are mixed; so this makes it clear that programs can consider accepting private pay from families who are not Head Start eligible. They still, as always, need to serve their Head Start funded enrollment, but there's some really great program innovations that programs are doing across the country and I think it's exciting that programs are gonna be able to learn from each other about how this might work and whether it makes sense for their communities.

Elizabeth: So programs should determine if it's appropriate and feasible to serve mixed income groups?

Catherine: Absolutely. Right. And that's, there's still longstanding requirement that families can't be charged for Head Start services within the Head Start day, but there is a possibility to accept fees for families who are not Head Start eligible and not part of that Head Start enrollment.

Elizabeth: Great.

Catherine: Really exciting. Again, there's a lot of exciting provisions. I think there'll be more conversations about Community Needs Assessment. People have some questions about that and about eligibility, could use a little more conversation, but really that's the, kinda, the overview of what's in here and we hope that people read it carefully.

Elizabeth: Yeah, yeah. Well, this has been an excellent conversation and I really appreciate your providing more clarity in this overview for me. Thank you, Catherine.

Catherine: Great. Thank you. I appreciate talking to you.

[upbeat music]