

EHS for Family Child Care Partnership Week 2012
Increasing Quality Through State Partnerships

This meeting is now being recorded.

Hello, I'm Dawn Ramsburg, the Child Care Program Specialist in the Office of Child Care. I want to thank you all for taking the time to join us today. We are very excited to share experiences from one of our 22 partnership teams from the Early Head Start for Family Child Care project on how they were working to increase quality through partnerships at the state level. I'm very pleased to introduce Jessica Sager and Janna Wagner from the All Our Kin partnership team. Jessica is the Executive Director of All Our Kin and Janna is the Chief Knowledge and Learner Officer. Janna would you like to tell us a little about All Our Kin?

Janna Wagner: Yes, thank you. All Our Kin works to create high-quality sustainable family child care programs in Connecticut. We're a strong privately-funded model that has created a quality highway to move providers from the beginning level to the expert level of teaching and learning. With the ARRA funding, that really allowed us -- with the support of the United Way of Greater New Haven -- to begin implementing the Early Head Start for Family Child Care model with a small cohort of our family child care providers in May 2010.

Dawn Ramsburg: Great! Thank you very much, Jana. Jessica, could you talk to us a little bit about the specific challenges that your team identified to work on through the Early Head Start for Family Child Care project?

Jessica Sager: Absolutely. You know as a very, very new Early Head Start for Family Child Care program, we were so excited about participating in this initiative for several reasons. The first is our model, as many Early Head Start for Family Child Care models do, relies on state child care subsidy dollars to pay for part of the cost of these full-day child care slots. And it quickly became clear to us that it was difficult to access those funds for several reasons. The first had to do with simply the difficulty of communications, paperwork, getting the applications process, making sure that once a family entered our Early Head Start program, they could then access the subsidy in a timely fashion. The second had to do with alignment of the funding streams. The child care subsidy dollars are really designed to enable families to enter the workforce, where as the early Head Start dollars are designed to provide our youngest children with continuous, secure, stable learning experiences, so the eligibility rules don't always match up and this was quite a challenge for us and we wanted to explore ways that perhaps we could make those funding streams fit together more smoothly with the result of more children having access to more high-quality full-day slots.

Next, we wanted to look at ways to leverage our participation in Early Head Start to get family child care providers access to more statewide training, professional development, and funding opportunities because our state does a very good job of supporting quality in child care centers and I think we're just beginning to catch up on how to enhance quality in family child care. So through this project, our hope was that we could begin discussion with state policymakers and state agencies around how using

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models similar to those employed by Early Head Start, we could really enhance and incentivize family child care quality while also holding providers accountable for quality standards. And finally, the truth is that many people don't know what family child care is. They don't know what it looks like and families in particular don't know to choose a good family child care setting for their infants and toddlers, so through this project, we really hope to raise awareness about family child care as a good option particularly, again, for those very young children.

Dawn Ramsburg: Thank you so much, Jessica. You've shared a lot of challenges that both in our office -- the Office of Child Care -- and in the Office of Head Start, we hear from states and communities across the country. And, I think the real key with what I'd like for you to share now is you've really-- you detailed out a good list of those challenges and what I'd like is if you could share a little bit about how your team took those challenges and turned it into some goals. And so if you could talk a little bit about the first two especially: the difficulty in accessing subsidies and aligning the subsidy funds with the Early Head Start funds.

Jessica Sager: Yep. Then, first let me say this is not a problem we have fixed. [Laughter] But it's a problem that we're working on and that we're having conversations about and I think that is progress. So, first, the process piece of this: moving children in our programs through the process of accessing the subsidy. I think one challenge family child care providers face is that unlike large centers, their communication with the state subsidy office is just not as high a level because they're not serving as many children, so one thing we were quickly able to do through this project that has made a big difference is to get a child care liaison who was specifically dedicated to our family child care program. And through working with this liaison, we're able to know at any point where any family is in the process, what's missing, and we're able to serve as intermediaries and facilitators to ensure that families who are eligible for the subsidy are able to access it in as rapid and efficient a way as possible, so I would definitely count that as a major success.

Aligning funding streams has been more of a challenge. We have certainly not managed to do that. What we have done, though, is begun the conversation and really begun to sort of dig down with D-- with our Department of Social Services (DSS) about the value of aligning these funding streams and thinking about ways to blend and braid them. So we've begun those conversations. We have provided some materials, some suggestions and the Department of Social Services has indicated that they are open to continuing to explore those options. So, I don't have a slam dunk for you now, but I'm hoping that at the end of another year or so, we really might be able to show some progress. I think an example of the Department of Social Services' commitment to making this subsidy work for Early Head Start in family child care and for making it work in family child care, generally, is evidenced by the fact that last year-- We hold every year a big annual family child care conference where 150 of our providers come together and it's on a Saturday. And the state child care administrator gave up his Saturday to come and hold a child care block grant hearing where he specifically shared information with and heard back from our family child care providers about how to make the subsidy program work more effectively so we're excited about next steps.

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Dawn Ramsburg: Those are some great examples, Jessica, of really how you're trying to work to make the subsidy program and the Early Head Start program work together for families. Those were fabulous examples. Janna, can you talk a little bit how your team worked on helping family child care providers access some of the training resources in Connecticut?

Janna Wagner: Of course, I'd love to. The first and foremost, I think, is our conversations with the State Department of Education. Because I think that there was not a good sense of the quality of family child care in our state and so those conversations with our Department of Education really laid a foundation for them understanding that family child care providers need to be included in the larger system and that FCCs can meet high standards of quality if they're invested in sufficiently. And so, that really gave us a foundation to help them start thinking about how they could include family child care in the larger professional development and training and technical assistance system. One great example of that is that DSS look to us to disseminate the Infant/Toddler Early Learning Guidelines -- which we're really excited about -- as well as our participation in the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems Committee's the Connecticut Race to the Top application, and we also sit on the Early Learning Standards Committee. And that's really important because we're there making sure that new initiatives and new opportunities for early care and education include family child care providers.

And I think, last but not least, our project with the Department of Social Services allowed us to build relationships with other organizations that care about and work with home-based child care providers. And that was a great opportunity for All Our Kin to provide training and technical assistance to those organizations through the Connecticut Early Learning Standards.

Dawn Ramsburg: Thank you so much, Janna. And again, I think, you know, you really hit on a key point about building those relationships with the different-- different partner agencies that exist within your state. And so, Jessica, you talked a little bit earlier about this, but I wanted to know if you could expand a little bit more and just tell us how you worked to help the broader community better understand the role and the benefits of family child care providers and of why it's important to make sure that they are included in these larger system discussions.

Jessica Sager: Absolutely. And before I do, I just want to say a few more words about this Early Learning Guidelines project because it was so exciting. And while it wasn't a direct result of our participation in Early Head Start for Family Child Care, I think it very much aligned with and supported the work that we were doing through this project. So the Department of Social Services, which had created this wonderful document of Early Learning Guidelines for children age zero to three -- what they need to know, how to scaffold their learning; important milestones -- gave us funding to train our own family child care providers in these guidelines, but also to support agencies all over our state in delivering this to family child care programs as well. So, we provided the training and technical assistance to 21 other agencies across Connecticut and we really saw huge changes in the quality of the participating family child care programs, but also in the degree of engagement between these family child care programs and their local professional development agencies so very, very, exciting project.

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In terms of public awareness, we-- we had what I would describe as three sort of main successes. The first is that with the funding from this project, we were able to create a really beautiful, user-friendly, brochure called *What is Family Child Care* that collects in one place very simply, language about what family child care is, how to know whether a program is high quality, how to know whether it's a good fit for your family and your child, and local resources that you can access to help you find that family child care. The response to this brochure has just been overwhelmingly positive and there's just no way we would've had the capacity or the funding to create it without this project so that's just wonderful. Another thing is that we were able to work with the local media to raise awareness around family child care. So, for example, WNPR -- our local NPR affiliate -- did a piece on All Our Kin and family child care where they interviewed staff of All Our Kin, as well as one of our family child care providers. And the piece was so successful that NPR ended up doing a follow-up interview just with this provider about the work she does every day and about her commitment to children and families which lots of people heard and it got a little of people thinking about family child care.

And the final thing I would add, again, this one is not a direct result of the grant, but very much aligns with this work -- and you know that we think holistically here so all the things we are doing are very much interconnected -- the University of Connecticut conducted an economic analysis of our work's affect on providers, on parents, and on the community. And the University of Connecticut found that for every dollar invested in All Our Kin's work, 15 to 20 dollars is returned to society just in terms of the increased earnings by family child care providers, parents increased earnings as they enter the workforce, and then the benefits to society from everything from additional purchasing to families and providers that no longer need to access state benefits and in fact, are paying taxes to the state. So that gave us a wonderful new way to talk and think about the work and raise awareness from a workforce perspective as well as, of course, that incredibly important child development perspective.

Dawn Ramsburg: Jessica that-- that is fabulous and it's not often that we take the time to look at our work that way. We're all very invested in making sure that we're making improvements for children and families, but I also do think it's important to think about the community investments that are being made and so having that information -- I'm sure -- was a powerful tool for all of you, so thank you for sharing that.

I would like to thank Jessica and Janna from All Our Kin in Connecticut for sharing their experiences with us today. Their experiences that they've highlighted show the importance of not only identifying the challenges which they started out with as their team -- you know -- what were they trying to improve, then setting goals to address those issues, building relationships, and then maintaining communications with key stakeholders to be able to address and overcome those challenges that they identified. This is a model that we heard from many of our partnerships teams so again, I want to thank Jessica and Janna for sharing their experiences and then join us tomorrow please, and you will hear about achievements from another team who was working to improve quality at their local level. And then, don't forget to join us on Friday for a live teleconference where you can ask us questions and get more ideas to bring back to your community. Thank you.