Head Start A to Z

Communication

Background

The poet John Donne wrote, "No man is an island."[1] Individuals do not flourish isolated from one another. This is so true for Head Start and other early childhood programs. Each person involved in the organization, whether manager, teacher, parent, governing body member, and others, has something to contribute to the whole. Communication is integral to building the relationships we need to work together towards success. As a leader, it is your responsibility to foster these relationships by promoting and modeling strong, positive communication among all stakeholders.

The key message for *Head Start A to Z: Communication* is that *relationship building is at the heart of effective leadership*. An effective communication system connects not only stakeholders but also the 10 Head Start management systems. For example, a center director can use Ongoing Monitoring to measure program performance but must use communication skills to effectively explain any areas of concern to staff or to generate reports for the board of directors. You can collect all sorts of important data, but good communication skills are required to translate that data into useful reports to share with stakeholders. Program planning is essential to Head Start success, but a plan is nothing unless it is effectively communicated to the people you expect to follow the plan.

Whenever you express your ideas, thoughts, or feelings with words, sounds, signs, or behaviors, you are communicating something. There are techniques and strategies that can help you communicate more clearly and effectively. These include

➢ Knowing *who* you are trying to reach. You'll want an email to parents to have a different tone than that of a formal memo to your board of directors.

➢ Being clear on *what* you want to say. The ability to use plain language will help you to make your point.

➢ Knowing *when* to communicate. You will want to give your audience time to consider or act on the information you send.

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[1] John Donne. "Meditation XVII." *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. 1624.

➢ Carefully considering *how* to communicate. Your mode of communicating may be important and often carries its own meaning, whether in print, through a website, via email or text message, through social media, or in a face-to-face conversation.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards 1304.51(a)(2)-1304.51(g) framework for Head Start and Early Head Start (EHS) programs provides guidelines for establishing communication systems. These specify that "[g]rantee and delegate agencies must establish and implement systems to ensure that timely and accurate information is provided to parents, policy groups, staff, and the general community." There are also regulations that address the ways in which each of these groups must be kept informed, and there are requirements for the procedures and policies for meeting these obligations. In addition, you must consider how other federal and state laws and regulations may affect your internal and external communications.

Developing a communication system that takes into account all these requirements, while incorporating best communications practices, will go a long way toward ensuring success in every aspect of your program management. *Head Start A to Z: Communication* is a starting point for leaders to strengthen and foster effective communication systems so that all program stakeholders come together to create a learning organization.

Overarching Theme

Communications within a Head Start program represents a very large, multi-dimensional system with lots of moving pieces. And effective communication means many different things to different people. Yet communication is the thread that connects all stakeholders, helping them work together toward achieving a program's mission. For this session, we narrow our focus to the fundamentals of effective communication, the responsibility of a leader in fostering and modeling effective communication in the workplace, the important process of establishing a communication system, and the legal requirements that all leaders are obligated to enforce when it comes to communication. Finally, we provide a list of communication resources that will allow you to extend your learning in such diverse aspects of communication as marketing, effective listening, generational communication.

Outcomes

➢ Review the basic elements of communication and explore how they take shape in your program
➢ Recognize the central role of leaders in fostering the core values of effective communication
➢ Examine a process for assessing and planning for effective communication
➢ Understand the impact of regulations, standards, and federal and state law on your program's communication system

Materials

- PowerPoint presentation
- Handouts
    - *Nifty Notes*
    - *Head Start A to Z Communication Resources*
- *Take a Walk in Their Shoes* activity
    - Blank piece of paper for drawing (one for every pair of participants)
    - "Take a Walk in Their Shoes" pictures (one picture for every pair of participants)
- *Communication System* activity
    - Scenarios (one set per table or team)
    - Activity handout (one for each participant)
- *TA Tools for Grantee Specialists*
    - *Head Start and Communication Framework* (TA tool)
    - *Tip Sheet: Communication with the Office of Head Start* (TA tool)

Planning Ahead

- This is a 90-minute session.
- Review the PowerPoint presentation and estimate the time you will need to complete each part of the session based on the size of the group.
- Review both activities:
    - *Take a Walk in Their Shoes*
        - Copy the pictures in color (one picture for every pair of participants)
        - Have paper for drawing (one piece of paper for every pair of participants)
    - *Communication System Activity*
        - Copy one activity handout for every participant
- Make copies of the handouts:
    - *Three Steps: Developing a Communication System (one copy for every participant)*
    - *Nifty Notes (one copy for every participant)*
    - *Communication Resources (one copy for every participant or, at minimum, one copy per table)*

Let's Get Started

Welcome the participants and introduce yourself. If you have co-facilitators, they should introduce themselves, too.
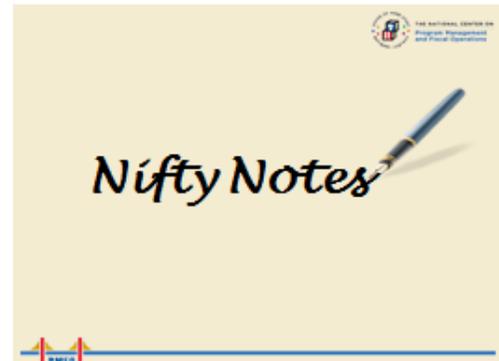

Say to participants, "*Head Start A to Z* sessions are designed to emulate the concept of the 'learning organization.' We recognize the key building blocks of learning organizations: a supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes, and leadership development; all of these things reinforce learning.

"Each one of us has an important role to play in the success of this session. Those with experience remind us where we've come from and what we must do to maintain our identity and uniqueness. New members bring a fresh perspective and remind us of what we must do to prepare for the future. All roles are essential for Head Start as a learning organization to continue to grow and flourish.

"*Head Start A to Z* sessions are successful when they help us share the best of what we have to offer with a strength-based focus. As you engage in this session, we hope that you will support one another in the learning process by generously sharing your knowledge, experience, and perspective."

1. Distribute the "Nifty Notes" handouts to participants and encourage them to use the handout as a place to document their thoughts and ideas throughout the presentation.

2. Guide participants to the "Key Messages" handout. Say to participants, "*Head Start A to Z* sessions are designed based on a set of key messages. For this session on communication, we will focus on the key message that 'relationship-building is at the heart of effective leadership.' The poet John Donne wrote, 'No man is an island.' Individuals do not flourish isolated from one another. This is so true for Head Start and other early childhood programs. Each person involved in the organization, whether manager, teacher, parent, or other, has something to contribute to the whole. Communication is integral to building the relationships needed for us to work together towards success. As a leader, it is your responsibility to foster these relationships by promoting and modeling strong, positive communication among all stakeholders."

John Donne (1572-1631). This line appears in *Devotions upon emergent occasions*. 1624.

3. Introduce and discuss the session outcomes.
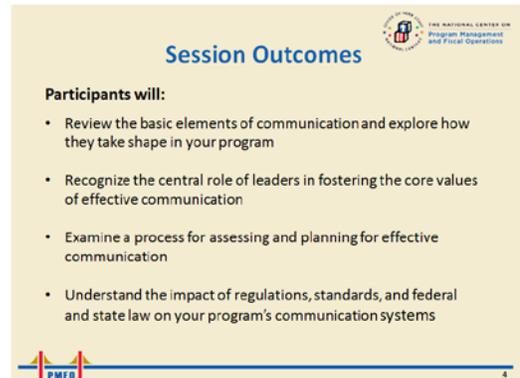
4. Say, "Before we begin to focus primarily on communication, we are going to take a step back and look at all of Head Start's management systems."

Remind the group that there are 10 management systems, and communication is one of them.

Explain that one of our favorite descriptions is depicted in this visual, which shows that Head Start and Early Head Start services are supported by systems that in turn support high-quality services; and high-quality services lead to positive outcomes for children and families.
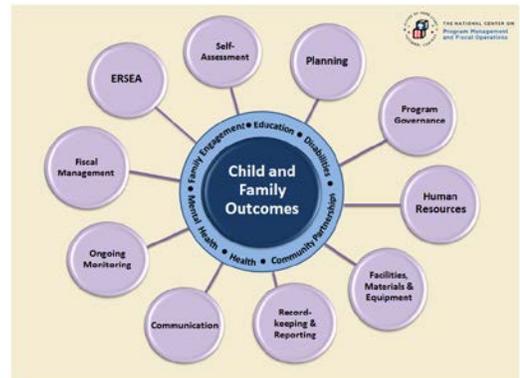
Say, "Though communication is only one of the 10, it has an impact on and is integral to the success of all the management systems."

5. State that all the management systems are linked. Click the slide to rotate the cogs. Outline the definition of a system: "A system is a set of interacting, interrelated parts that form a complex whole with a specific purpose." Also state, "When they all run smoothly, the whole program runs smoothly."

6. On the second click say, "When systems are not functioning properly, things go wrong [cogs/gears are stuck in the animation]. This breakdown of functions is likely to be evident within program services."

"For example, there may be pockets of quality due to the hard work of high-performing staff. But, as a whole, services are likely to be inconsistent. Children and families receiving services in one center may receive a totally different experience than children and families across town in a different center. The other thing that might happen is that when a high-performing leader leaves, the quality of the program plummets. Why? Because systems are not in place to help the program withstand the change."

7. Say, "According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, communication is 'the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else.'"

8. Say to participants, "In your program, communication can be internal; for example, the interactions between program stakeholders: governing body members, Policy Council members, Head Start director, staff, and parents and families. Communication also can be external; for example, the necessary exchanges that are part of collaborative relationships with local education agencies, community organizations, local businesses, and funders.

Types of Communication

- Internal, External
- Written, Verbal, Visual
- Formal, Informal

"Communication can be verbal; for example, your ongoing dialogue with managers and staff members on the day-to-day operations of the program; your presentations to community, government, and business leaders; your one-to-one exchanges with parents and families. Communication can be written; for example, your program policies and procedures, the personnel policies that support staff functions, tools and materials that make people aware of the program's offerings and achievements. Communication can be visual; for example, a newsletter with charts and photos.

"Communication can be formal, as it is in the annual report, memos, newsletters, and meeting notes you generate. Communication also can be informal, as it is in the conversations you have with stakeholders during day-to-day business.

"The grapevine is another form of informal communication. The grapevine can be seen as 'the real deal' for what is going on in a program, but it can also easily undermine a program. If formal communication is seen as ineffective or nonexistent, particularly when it comes to dealing with conflict or differences, members of an organization often start placing a greater reliance on the grapevine. This shift in reliance (and allegiances) can hurt teamwork and morale, because oftentimes the information shared through this source is one-sided, inaccurate, and only available to a select few."

9. Say, "In communication, information flows from the sender to the receiver. The receiver decodes and interprets the message. Keep in mind that both the receiver and the sender enter the interaction with ideas and feelings that will undoubtedly influence how the message is sent and how it is understood. The man with the bullhorn reminds us that, as the sender, we must be aware of how our tone, body language, and the type of language we use directly impacts our message and how it is received.
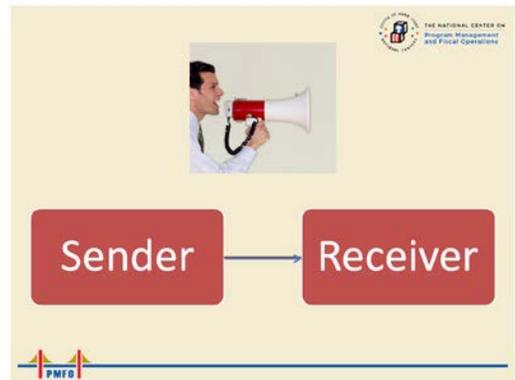
   "When our communication efforts work well or are effective, they help to form a relationship. And relationships are key for achieving program goals and meeting the needs of the children and families we serve."

10. This short activity is an opportunity to experience the sender-receiver interaction.

    Directions:
    - Inform the participants that they will be doing a short activity where one partner will provide directions and the other will follow.
    - Break up the larger group into pairs.
    - Explain that, for each pair or participants, one person will be the sender and the other will be the receiver.
    - Ask each pair to decide who will take which role.
    - Hand each sender a picture of a person, place, or thing. Tell the senders not to show or describe the picture to their partners, the receivers. They are also not to say what it is.
    - Hand each receiver a blank piece of paper and something to draw with (pencil, pen, marker, etc.)
    - Ask the sender to describe the picture. Remind the senders not to show the picture to their partners, the receivers, and not to say what it is.
    - Ask the receiver to draw the picture as it is being described. Receivers cannot ask any questions.
    - Ask the pairs to stop after 3 minutes.

    To ensure that this is a learning activity, ask participants as they go through the activity to note:
    - What communication strategies is your partner using (e.g., giving step-by-step directions, asking clarifying questions, etc.)? Are they helpful or not?

- What already-acquired knowledge or information are you using as a receiver to better understand? For example, "I drew what looked like an animal, and when I drew what looked like a trunk, I knew it was an elephant."
- How are you feeling at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the activity (anxious, excited, etc.)?

As you debrief:
- Ask participants to compare the original picture with the drawing.
- Ask them to take the next 2 minutes to discuss the experience from each of their points of view.

11. Bring everyone back together into the large group. Outline the information for Effective Communicators as follows:

   Effective Communicators
   - Focus on sharing information clearly
   - Provide information in a timely way
   - Understand how their message may affect group cohesion and morale
   - Honor responsibilities related to confidentiality and ethics
   - Are responsive to cultural and language differences
   - Demonstrate ability to prevent and/or resolve conflicts

- Click once. Have only the heading Effective Communicators on the screen.
- Ask participants to share their experiences during the "Take a Walk in Their Shoes" activity. Ask, "What it helpful?"
- Explain that some of the items that they mentioned are skills used by strong communicators. Leaders can use these skills to promote relationship building. The opposite of these values are the barriers to effective communication.
- Write down on chart paper the skills/behaviors they share.
- Click again to show our list of skills used by effective communicators. Compare what is on the chart paper with what is on the slide. Point out similarities and what our slide is missing from the participants' list.

Explain, "As a leader, you have an integral role in your program to promote the values of effective communication. One of the core elements of this role is modeling the behaviors that reflect the core values; this is the most direct means of demonstrating the commitment of your Head Start program to addressing the needs of your children and families.

"It is important to remember that an effective communicator is mindful of how to shape the message so that it is consistent with the experiences and perspectives of the receiver. For example, a Head Start director might outline activities for meeting the goal of increasing children's vocabulary differently for a staff member than for a parent. For the staff member, the director will discuss classroom strategies and activities. For the parent, the director will suggest home-based activities."

12. Introduce the slide by saying, "While it is important for directors to build their own communication skills, effective leaders also promote good communication practices throughout their program."

    Outline the key elements of the slide as follows:

    - Click and show only the heading: Tips for Promoting Effective Program-Wide Communication
    - Ask participants to share their ideas on how they can promote effective communication throughout their program
    - Click again and show our list. Point out again that they mentioned much of what is on our list. (If by chance, none of the items on the participant's lists match, validate their contribution and explain that you have some additional tips.) You might want to add comments to each of the listed elements:
        - Model strong communication skills.
        - Involve stakeholders in assessing the program's communication practices.
        - Invite stakeholders to help you develop a communication system and a process for conflict resolution.
        - Include expectations for job descriptions.
        - Provide staff with training, as needed.
        - Hold people accountable for good communication.
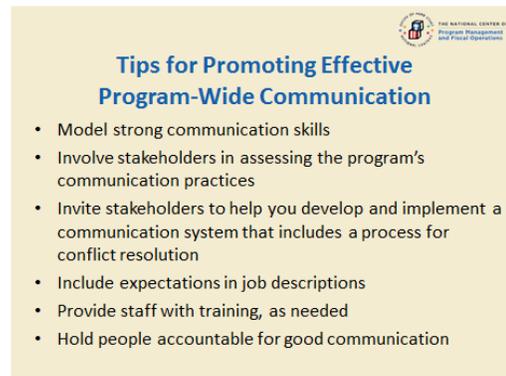
13. Say, "With today's technology we have even more media we can use to communicate. For example, many of us can see the importance of communicating with parents and families using text messaging; this was unheard of just a few years ago. You'll want to keep in mind the many methods we discuss here as you develop your communications system.
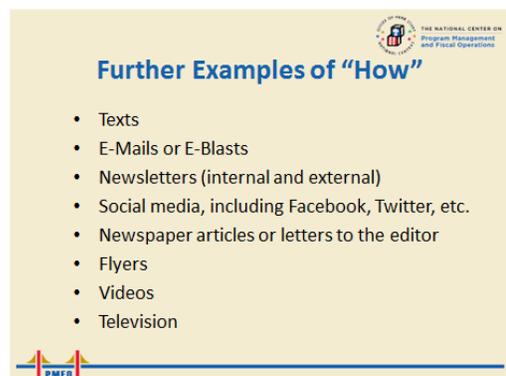
    "Individuals have easy access to social media through smartphones, tablets, and computers. If you haven't done so yet, you'll want to create a social media policy for your program to ensure that confidentiality is honored and a clear system of ethics is established and followed, because questions will arise. For example, can teachers take pictures of the children in a their classroom with their phones? The resource sheet we will be handing out later has a preliminary list of resources to help you begin to put together a social media

policy."

Say, "We will now explore your role in developing an effective communications system for your Head Start program."

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14. State the following, "Head Start's take on communication, as stated in performance standard 1304.51(b-f), is that you should establish and implement a system for how your program communicates with each of your stakeholders: parents, governing body members, Policy Council, staff, delegate agencies, and community partners."

Establish and Implement a Communication System

- Parents
- Governing bodies and Policy Councils
- Program staff
- Delegate agencies (if applicable)
- Community partners

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15. Remind participants of the importance of "developing and implementing a communication system." State that a strong communication system is based on having a concrete communication system.

Outline from the slide the reasons for having a communication system. Compare the list to the essential values for effective communication. State that a communication system is a channel for implementing most of the other essentials principles.


Benefits of a Communication System

- Clarifies expectations
- Provides transparency
- Prevents possible misunderstandings and conflict
- Provides a coordinated approach to promoting the program's key messages

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16. Outline the three major steps in establishing a communication system:
Conduct the communication audit
Develop or revise your system
Evaluate its effectiveness

State that the *first* step is auditing or assessing your current communication systems. Say, "A communication audit can address a specific issue or component of your system; for example, 'How is management communicating with the governing body?' You can also expand this kind of audit to assess your program's communication internally or externally, and it can be program-wide. The resource handout lists some options and supports for conducting an all-program audit.

Establishing a Communication System

1. Communication Audit
2. Develop or Revise your System
3. Evaluate
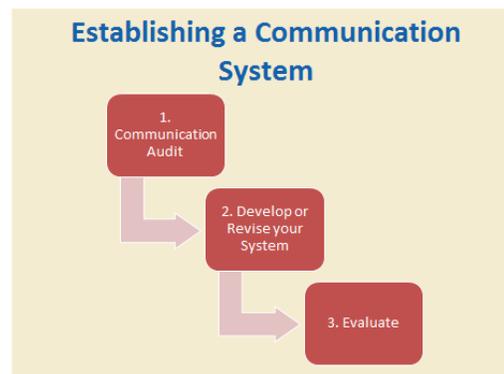
"The communication audit involves first identifying the current communication system for the focus of the audit. Is it partial, program-wide, internal, or external? Then it involves assessing the effectiveness of the system by identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps through surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus group, and so forth. You'll want to involve all stakeholders when possible and appropriate. Stakeholders also can take a leadership role and provide their views. For example, you could form a communication committee with representation for all stakeholders to conduct the activities of the audit. This committee could survey community partners to get their feedback on external communications or hold a focus group with parents to hear how they view communication from staff.

"The *second* step involves developing your system. Don't forget to consider how you will introduce the system to stakeholders. For example, will you need to make any changes to job descriptions? The goal is to be clear about, and have an understanding of, the expectations of individuals or the group as a whole.

"This leads us to the *third* step. After your system has been in place for a while, evaluate or conduct a status check of its effectiveness. It is important to identify whether your system is working. Key questions include, 'Are we reaching each of our stakeholders?' 'Are the policies and procedures being followed?' Make sure that someone is assigned the responsibility of the status check."

17. Say, "We have discussed some of the elements of a communication system. There are many ways that a program can develop or revise its communication system. Members of the management team can undertake the process on their own, or they can involve a group of stakeholders in the process. The team will want to make sure that it examines practices for communication with all groups. In established programs, the group will want to think about instances when communication (or lack of it) was a problem. By examining these problem areas more closely, they may discover gaps in their existing systems. We've provided some scenarios from a hypothetical program to help you think about communication gaps in your own program. "

Communication System Activity

Activity:
- Provide each table with the scenarios and enough activity handouts so that each person gets a copy. Assign one scenario per table.
- Introduce the activity with the following instructions:
    - "On your own, read the scenario and think about the communication issues that are present.
   - "As a group, take 5-10 minutes to assess the scenario.

o "Take 15 minutes to develop your processes and expectations and put it in writing by completing the 'Communication System' table.

o "Use the status check column to establish how the implementation of the system will be evaluated."

To get the most out of the activity:
- As you give directions, walk participants through the handout.
- IMPORTANT! Share that the purpose of this activity is to get a clear understanding of and practice in establishing and implementing a communication system. It is not to resolve the scenario.
- Integrate evaluation into ongoing monitoring. Say, "Through the ongoing monitoring process, pay attention to get a sense of the root issue when something is not working correctly or has fallen through the cracks. In many cases, the root cause may be centered around some sort of communication failure."

18. Bring the group back together and have the teams debrief. Participants should be ready to:
- Outline their scenario
- Outline their system, given the scenario Outline how they will evaluate the establishment and implementation of their system

Establishing a Communication System

1. Communication Audit

2. Develop or Revise your System

3. Evaluate
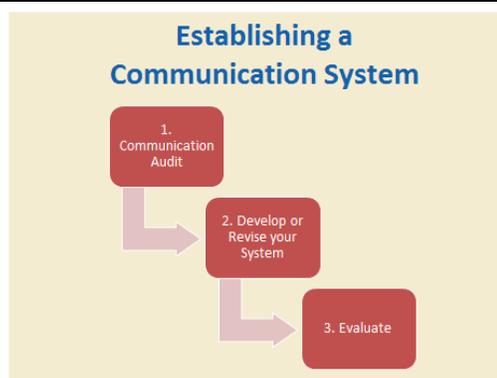
19. State, "As we noted in the 'Systems Are Linked' slide, it is important to define the communications links among all areas of the program. Directors sometimes overlook the communications requirements related to their human resources activities. In addition to taking the lead in establishing a culture that promotes your program's values, directors need to make sure that the program is in compliance with regulations, standards, and state and federal laws. These regulations are in place to insure a nonhostile environment that supports all employees, regardless of any of a number of factors, including age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.

Laws and Regulations

Key Starting Points

- **Specific to Head Start**
  - Performance Standard 45 CFR 1304.51 (b-f) Communications
- **Federal**
  - Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) – anti-discrimination
  - Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) – health and safety
- **State**
  - Wage and Hour Division (WHD) – US Department of Labor – has list of state labor offices

"Effective communication is needed to help programs enforce these regulations. This list provides a starting point to reference the applicable laws. As you see, it is also important to know your labor laws in respect to your state and/or local municipality. "We have compiled a resource document that will include some key websites to guide your efforts."

20. Distribute the resource handout.

Restate that communication is a really big topic. Discuss how the resource handout provides a listing of some of the terms or themes we addressed. State that the handout also includes some current "hot topics" in communication. Remind participants that this resource list provides a starting off point for further learning.

Say, "We know how busy you are, so the majority of the resources listed are short readings that can be found online."

Extend Your Learning

- Communication skills
  - active listening, conflict resolution
- Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness
- Marketing
- Plain Language
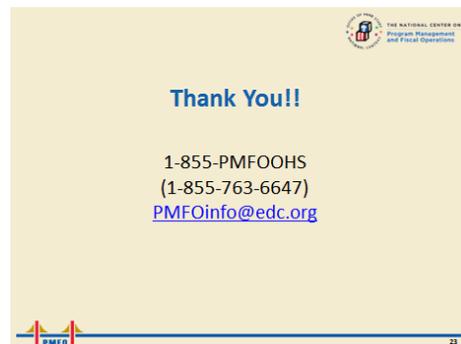- Establishing a social media policy
- Other resources

21. Ask for any final thoughts. Have participants weigh in through the following questions:
    a. How will your newly acquired knowledge impact your daily practices?
    b. What were your "A-ha!" moments?
    c. Do you have any final questions?

Final Thoughts

23. Thank participants.

Thank You!!

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