Health Services Newsletter

Head Start Health Manager Networks: People Helping People Helping People

Have you ever left a conference or a meeting having loved the opportunities for networking and learning what your peers were doing? A health manager network or cluster might be something to consider. Formal and informal groups of Head Start health managers come together on a local level, or in states and regions, to support one another in their jobs. Around the country, health managers organize themselves into clusters, user groups, and/or networks. These networks include, but are not limited to, a group of three or more managers and staff who may work in health, nutrition, mental health, and oral health services (and possibly a number of other service areas in their programs). Because these networks are most often built and maintained by members according to member-specific needs and interests, each network is unique and well positioned to advance local agendas.

Across the organizational spectrum peer support and networking have proven to be effective professional development strategies. Teachers, mental health providers, even nursing students benefit when people provide knowledge, experience, emotional, social or practical help to each other. Peer support can include peer mentoring, listening, or counseling as well as a time or place for colleagues, members of self-help organizations and others to meet as equals to give each other support. The members of these groups share a common interest in the work they do and a desire to do it better.

Health manager networks promote improvement by building relationships among those in similar positions across Head Start and Early Head Start programs. A network affirms the expertise and recognizes the talents of its members. Ideally, these groups become communities of practice and an opportunity for knowledge and information sharing. The sharing of resources is the number one reason members give for organizing themselves into groups.

“We can’t do it by ourselves. There is strength in numbers.”
- CA Head Start Health Manager

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The National Center on Health and the Head Start Information and Communication Center established a Health Manager Networks Leaders workspace on ECLKC for the exchange of ideas and support. If you are a leader of a network, send your name and email address to nchinfo@aap.org with Network Leaders Workspace in the subject line. You will receive instructions on how to access the workspace.

Coming soon to ECLKC!
A directory of Virtual Meeting Tools
Getting Started: Health Manager Networks
Revised Health Manager Orientation Guide

BENEFITS OF HEALTH MANAGER NETWORKS

Members of the Connecticut Health Managers Network have said that they feel as if they are “in the know” when they meet and learn about what everyone else is doing. Health managers report many benefits from networking, such as sharing forms and policy manuals, delivering joint trainings, orienting new managers, and identifying local partners that provide free or low-cost sensory screenings. Networks also serve a variety of other purposes such as: policy development, professional development, peer mentoring, promotion of local health activities, support on specific health topics, and access to local and state experts on health and development.

Networks also have the potential to reduce staff turnover, ensure greater consistency in implementing Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) and completing the Program Information Report (PIR). Using clusters or networks gets the health messages out to more people.

The National Center on Health (NCH) has learned that successful and sustainable networks have buy-in from program directors. Directors who recognize the benefits of a network to their whole Head Start program—not just health staff—are a crucial support to network membership. Networks also require strong health manager leaders to thrive. One leader compared starting a cluster to when her daughter wanted to join Girl Scouts. At the informational meeting everyone wanted a troop for his or her daughter, but the first challenge was finding parents willing to be the leaders before there could be a troop. While some health manager networks have had a single leader for many years, most benefit from shared or collaborative leadership that does not rely only on a single individual. Networks also benefit from support provided by Head Start Associations, Head Start Collaboration Offices, and Head Start T/TA.
GETTING STARTED

The first task is to establish a list of Head Start health managers to invite to join the network. This elusive “list” does not usually exist in any official capacity and must be created by the network leaders or supporters. Directors can help networks create and maintain the list by informing leaders of turnover and encouraging new managers to join. South Carolina assigns a program director as an advisor to the health managers’ group. The advisor attends each quarterly meeting and ensures that other directors have a connection to the work of the health manager network. The Connecticut Head Start Collaboration Office director and the Pennsylvania Head Start Association both keep updated lists of health manager contacts. The California Head Start Association maintains a listserv specifically for health managers to facilitate communication. Some New York State Early Childhood Education Specialists facilitate connections between area programs.

Face-to-face meetings are preferred, so leaders need to identify a space. Some groups rotate between grantee agencies. Others are able to identify a conveniently located community organization (library, college, hospital, philanthropy) with an affordable meeting room.

While most prefer to meet in person, for some the challenges of time and travel are often daunting. In Iowa, the Head Start Association provides use of their videoconferencing tools. In some states, members may email questions to leaders or use a listserv. Technology permits a variety of effective and efficient ways to host meetings or work together virtually. Selecting from the range of virtual meeting tools may mean assessing budgets, hardware and software assets, or technical support. There are free and low-cost interactive tools such as screen sharing, video and audio conferencing, discussion boards, websites and document sharing that can supplement in-person meetings.
GETTING STARTED CONT.

While Head Start staff may have unique concerns and issues, there are other early childhood professionals who likely serve similar populations. These include Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) managers, State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) projects, child care health consultants, early childhood mental health consultants, school nurses, and oral health advocates. Head Start health manager organizers may consider collaborating or aligning with one or more of these groups.

References


CONTACT US!

The National Center on Health welcomes your feedback on this newsletter issue as well as your suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to nchinfo@aap.org or call (888) 227-5125.

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