

Strategic Use of Consultants: An Interactive Guide for Head Start and Early Head Start Leaders



Impacting Change Across Program Areas

Using Consultants to Impact Change in the Area of Program Management and Fiscal Operations

Head Start and Early Head Start leaders seeking to strengthen their program management and fiscal operations should consider recruiting and hiring consultants who have the following knowledge, competencies, and experience:

- An understanding of the Head Start governance structure and how to involve people at all levels of the organizational structure in program change and improvement
- An understanding of systems thinking
- An understanding of Head Start data systems and the use of data at the program level to drive continuous improvement
- An understanding of research as it relates to Head Start management systems and fiscal operations
- Knowledge of how to access and interpret relevant sections of the Head Start Act, Head Start Program Performance Standards, fiscal regulations, and Information Memorandums and Program Instructions and how to use this information to guide the work
- An appreciation of all aspects of systems change, including systems development, documentation, training, and ongoing monitoring

Sample Program Goals and Consultant Roles

1. **Program Goal:** To consolidate multiple data tracking systems (databases) into one comprehensive data management system.

Consultant Role: The consultant works with the program's administration and each program area manager to review all current data tracking systems, identify the information that needs to be tracked, clarify the optimal frequency of reports, and determine how to consolidate the information into a comprehensive data

tracking system. The consultant also supports program managers as they select a new data system or build a system of their own.

- 2. Program Goal:** To build an active Policy Council that regularly participates in meaningful decision making.

Consultant Role: The consultant builds the capacity of the program director by modeling the initial Policy Council training and working with the director and Policy Council chairperson during the first quarter to provide ongoing support around roles, responsibilities, and relationship building. After the first quarter, the consultant may facilitate additional Policy Council meetings to ensure best practices, particularly if the meeting agenda presents especially difficult or sensitive issues.

- 3. Program Goal:** To increase governing body members' skills and knowledge related to the financial management system, its processes, and its internal controls, and to increase governing body members' effectiveness in their role as stewards of federal funds.

Consultant Role: The consultant develops a series of orientation sessions around financial management for the governing body. Topics for the initial session include the following:

- Key components of the Head Start financial management system
- Data and budget reports that meet the needs of the governing body and Policy Council
- The use of data to inform the decisions of the governing body

The consultant may lead a follow-up session that focuses on the annual audit and addresses the following issues: (a) how to hire an accounting firm to conduct the audit; (b) how to create and present key reports and other benchmarks that should be available at the audit; and (c) how to recognize and address potential red flags regarding improper practices or ineffective approaches in completing the audit.

- 4. Program Goal:** To increase the amount of funding accessed through E-Rate/USAC funding.

Consultant Role: The consultant oversees the application process and related requirements to access E-Rate funding for telecommunications, Internet access/connections, and maintenance of internal connections. The consultant

ensures that all applications are complete and submitted on time, the program's technology plan is developed, and agreements with service providers are accurate and approved. The consultant also ensures that the funds garnered through E-Rate are accurately reflected in the budget and cost allocation plan. The consultant works in partnership with the Head Start director and finance manager to build their capacity to lead this process in the future.

- 5. Program Goal:** To increase the use of fiscal data in program planning and improvement.

Consultant Role: The consultant reviews the current data system and sources of fiscal data and recommends strategies to integrate relevant fiscal data into the data system or performance management system. The consultant conducts three to four meetings with relevant program managers and staff to identify specific opportunities and strategies for using fiscal data for decision making related to program improvement. The consultant, in collaboration with the Head Start director and finance manager, develops materials for staff that include tools, strategies, and worksheets to ensure practical application of fiscal data in the future. The consultant works with the program managers to revise the systems that describe program planning, ongoing monitoring, self-assessment, record keeping and reporting, and communication to reflect the integration of fiscal data.

- 6. Program Goal:** To improve the program's ongoing monitoring systems.

Consultant Role: The consultant works hand in hand with the management team to review the Head Start Act and its regulations to determine the characteristics the team members want in their ongoing monitoring systems. The consultant then works with team members familiar with each of the program's monitoring systems to answer the following questions:

- Who is responsible for monitoring this area of the program?
- What needs to be monitored? (This information should be drawn from regulations, best practice, and the program's written plan.)
- How are the ongoing monitoring data collected and aggregated? Who does it? How often? In what format?
- What is the plan for analyzing the data? Who analyzes? How often?
- What is the plan for responding to findings and taking corrective action? What are the timeframes? What are the action plans?
- Who receives this information? Director, management team, Policy Council, governing body, partners, delegates?



Using the answers to these questions, the consultant works with staff members to develop a comprehensive written plan for all program monitoring systems. The consultant works with the data systems managers to develop a plan for collecting, reporting, and analyzing data. The consultant also works with the managers to develop ongoing training and support so that all staff understand their role in implementing the new monitoring systems.