

**Executive Summary for the Pilot Projects  
Identifying, Recruiting, and Serving Families  
Who Are Hard to Reach**

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For the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development

July 29, 2013

11 pages follow

## **Executive Summary for the Pilot Projects Identifying, Recruiting, and Serving Families Who Are Hard to Reach.**

Six agencies in Illinois received ARRA funds in 2012 to develop effective and innovative strategies to find young children from families considered “hard to reach” and enroll them in quality early care and education programs. (See Appendix A for the characteristics of the six programs). Over the 16 months of funding, these agencies each participated in three evaluation interviews scheduled at the beginning, middle, and end of the funding as well as an optional monthly call to problem solve and share information. The interviews and calls form the basis for evaluating the six programs in nine priority areas identified by the funding agency (see Appendix B). These priority areas were aimed at identifying recruitment strategies that worked and to assess the impact of increasing enrollment in early childhood education (ECE) programs and other services to these traditionally underserved families.

Critical to success was the ability to provide families with some form of services shortly after recruitment and to be able to track child and family participation. Nearly all agencies reported that they had waiting lists and could not provide newly recruited families with immediate access to Head Start, PFA, or another community ECE program. Agencies that provided “interim services” such as “drop in” activities once a week or monthly home visits reported serving the largest number of families. As enrollment opportunities occurred, they offered enrollment to families on their waiting lists or assured families of enrollment in the next academic year.

Pilot funds were used to support staff and volunteers to reach out to families and create materials to advertise the importance of early education. Once new families were identified, it was critical for agencies that did not have space to enroll new children to be innovative in their approaches and activities for these families. To retain these newly identified families, agencies said it was essential to “go to” them to assist with paperwork and maintain contact until they could be enrolled in services. Another important factor, agencies said, was collaborating with other agencies that provide services to families living at or near the poverty level.

### **1. Identifying and recruiting families involved at least three actions.**

Reaching out to communities to increase awareness of early childhood services: All programs used some of their funding to advertise their services or create recruitment fliers, information packets, or resource books. The most innovative approach used to highlight the importance of early care and education was the production of videos. One program created a professional quality video of the preschool (in Spanish with English subtitles) to take to all community activities and add to its Web site. It also produced a video to share with the local business community. Their premier showing at their annual agency dinner raised \$16,000, which was used to sustain child enrollments when families temporarily lost child care assistance funds because of job loss.

Increase family awareness of the benefits of high quality early childhood programs:

Each agency had a designated staff member to coordinate recruitment, access to services, and collaborations. In some cases this required hiring a new staff member; in other cases it involved rearranging current staff responsibilities. Three agencies recruited and trained volunteers, usually parents who had received services and could serve as ambassadors for the program. The parent ambassadors attended community events and went door to door to talk with families about high-quality early care and education services and the importance of helping their children become ready for kindergarten. COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues) was an important ally and resource for training parents and volunteers at two Chicago-area agencies.

Using a tracking system to support continued contact with families as required by the funder:

All agencies used a data system to track and stay connected with families whose young children were unserved. The most effective tracking systems included the family name, children's names and birthdates, phone numbers, home address, and an alternative contact name and number. Many agencies had one or more staff maintain regular contact, such as weekly calls with families, until they could provide services or enroll their child in an ECE program. One agency had a policy to contact families within 72 hours of identification.

**2. Providing supports to families from the point of identification through enrollment.**

Bridging recruitment to enrollment:

All agencies provided support to families in completing forms and registration for program entry. The programs that *went to the families* to help them complete paperwork reported more successful enrollments. They identified many barriers that could stop parents from coming to their agency or the ECE program to complete paperwork, such as lack of transportation, need for childcare, irregular work hours, and fear of the unknown. Agencies that expected parents to come on site to enroll their child reported losing contact with parents between the point of recruitment and the point of enrollment. Two programs stressed the importance of going to the families to assist with enrollment, health visits, and the paperwork associated with eligibility for services.

Providing interim services to bridge the gap in ECE services:

A challenge for five agencies was providing immediate placements for eligible children, particularly those identified after the fall start for Head Start or Preschool for All programs. All programs had waiting lists and enrolled students as openings occurred. For programs with mobile families and frequent turnover, the wait was less than three months. For other programs, the wait could last the entire school year. To bridge the gap between recruitment and enrollment, two agencies used pilot funds to create interim services. They took services to the children and parents by offering preschool activities within the housing developments or at local community centers

every week at a regular time and day for at least an hour. This introduced both parents and children to school readiness activities, such as book reading, coloring, singing, and learning rhymes. In one neighborhood, these regular activities led to mothers creating their own ongoing network of support. In other cases, mothers used the preschool hour to meet other family needs (e.g., errands, chores). Two agencies designated staff to make weekly calls or monthly home visits with waitlisted families.

Sustaining new enrollments: Many agencies provided half-day programs through Head Start or PFA. However, families often needed eight to nine hours of child care while they worked or attended school. Programs that were savvy about funding options, such as the child care assistance program (CCAP), were in a better position to keep children enrolled. Understanding the eligibility requirements for families to receive CCAP funds and proactively assisting families to complete paperwork required to determine eligibility was essential to sustaining enrollment. Misinterpretation of CCAP policy led to the loss of “hard to reach” families and their children. Several agencies reported that they closely monitored child attendance, and if a child missed several days of school, they called the home and worked with the family to keep the child in the program by providing a wake-up morning call or helping the family apply for a bus pass.

### **3. Collaborating within and across agencies**

Collaborations with community businesses and services: All agencies reported that finding and serving traditionally underserved families depended on collaborations in the community and, for large agencies, within their own agency. Collaborations ranged from informal agreements to allow advertising and the recruitment of families in various locations (e.g, medical centers, shopping areas) to more formalized agreements, such as a memorandum of understanding. The less formal collaborations typically included sharing or leaving information throughout the local community at such places as WIC offices, public health offices, libraries, churches, and shopping areas. Several programs reported going directly to places where mothers might be enrolled, such as local beauty schools, technical schools, or community colleges. One agency, whose Head Start program had been underenrolled and lost funding, planned to open a new classroom in the local community college based on the number of eligible parents they had identified and were attending school there.

Collaboration with housing developments and local schools: One agency reported strong working relationships with its community’s housing authority, which supported their recruitment efforts and provided space for interim services. The local housing authority perceived the outcomes as beneficial to residents and for the first time requested a memorandum of understanding from the local education agency to deliver preschool services at one housing site for the 2013 school year. Another agency developed a strong collaboration with several housing developments. It was able to request the names and addresses of families with

young children and engage in targeted recruitment efforts. Two agencies used neighborhood schools to offer a monthly socialization group or weekly preschool activity hour. Two other agencies provided parents with information about different programs in their agency and within the community so families could make a choice about what best fit their needs and was available.

Within agency collaborations: Two large agencies reported better collaborations within their own agency as a result of the pilot funding. For example, one agency improved the connections between its Workforce Development program and its early care and education program so families identified as hard to reach were referred to both programs.

#### **4. Continuing the effort**

Several programs planned to continue their efforts for recruiting hard-to-reach families and maintain either a part-time or a full-time staff member for outreach work. Three programs planned to reassign the outreach, recruitment, and enrollment efforts to existing staff. One program did not plan to continue efforts beyond distributing remaining fliers. All sites addressed the need to start recruiting earlier than most had with the grant funds. As noted earlier, five programs began their outreach to hard-to-reach families after the 2012 school year had begun and PFA and Head Start classes were already fully enrolled. Because they had developed recruitment materials (fliers, posters, videos) with pilot funds, all planned to continue to use these materials in the future, reprinting them as needed.

Most noted that “now” (April and May) was the time to begin recruitment efforts for the fall. One urban program plans to open new Head Start classrooms at a community college, which would serve as many as 63 additional children. They identified a number of eligible families whose parents were enrolled in the college and were interested in taking their child with them to school. College administrators have been supportive about providing the required space. The pilot funding helped this program needed move from “underserving” its community (and losing Head Start funds) to more closely meeting the needs of the community. Another program, which used pilot funds to support an interim service (drop-in preschool), planned to continue to offer this arrangement at 12 community sites so parents could see typical preschool activities in their neighborhood. Children who attended the drop-in preschool during the 2012–2013 school year were being enrolled in the PFA program for fall 2013. They attributed their strategy of “going to the families” as responsible for identifying traditionally underserved families. The staff noted that their dream was to purchase a bus and remodel the interior like a preschool to go from neighborhood to neighborhood and deliver services.

#### **Addressing the Nine Priority Areas**

Agencies addressed seven of the nine priority areas through the four stages described above. It was difficult to measure whether two priority areas were

addressed. No agency was able to determine the cost effectiveness of the pilot. In some cases, agencies reported the number of families and children who participated in recruitment events as well as the number of families enrolled in services. Two agencies successfully enrolled more than 50 children in early childhood programs by April 30, 2013. Other agencies reported serving 20 children or less. All agencies relied on turnover for placing newly identified children.

Although each agency used a tracking system, staff discussed its usefulness in terms of checking attendance for children at centers or participation of families in home visits and some did not consistently distinguish between those currently served and those recently recruited. Agencies also were unable to report specific reasons for each family that left the ECE program. They attributed turnover to a number of issues, including family mobility, loss of wrap-around child care, inability to complete all required health forms, change in parent work schedules to evening or night shifts, and transportation problems.

## **Six Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

### **Transportation**

Reliable transportation to and from preschool is a basic component of serving young children who are at risk or are traditionally underserved. Lack of transportation often prevents families from either enrolling their child in preschool or sustaining their attendance once enrolled. To increase and support sustained enrollment, the state should either:

1. Require half-day programs (PFA is typically 2.5 hours) to include transportation to and from school as part of their application for funding or
2. Provide enough funding to extend half-day programs to full day.

### **Going to the Families for Enrollment**

The expectation that families travel to the program for the enrollment process provides additional hardships to those families with limited transportation options. The most successful pilot programs shifted their recruitment efforts and some service provision from program-centric to family-centric, taking the recruitment, enrollment, and some services to where the families live and spend their time. These programs recognized that enrollment is a complex process for many families, requiring multiple meetings, appointments, and forms. Additionally, these programs collaborated with medical and dental service providers to ensure priority access for families considered hard to reach. In fact, one program also provided transportation to and from these appointments.

Completion of all required forms can be confusing as well as require personal information that families may regard as an intrusion on their privacy. Vulnerable families needed to trust the agency representative, requiring the development of a relationship over time. For full-day enrollment, families needed to provide personal

information that made them vulnerable. For example, access to the child care assistance program (CCAP) requires families to provide evidence of employment or school attendance and personal financial information. This is in addition to providing birth certificates, evidence of vaccinations, and TB testing as well as completing health and dental screenings for the ECE program. Some families needed to be guided through this complicated process.

Early care and education programs should:

1. Allocate funding for the additional staff time that is often required to assist families through the enrollment process.
2. Provide this support either in the families' neighborhoods or provide transportation to the agency.
3. Include a plan in PFA funding applications for facilitating the enrollment process for vulnerable families.

### **Flexibility Regarding Enrollment Slots**

The pressure to be fully enrolled by a certain date is a disincentive for recruiting families throughout the year. Many families considered hard to reach are not likely to enroll their child during the typical recruitment period. Some families move into the neighborhood mid-year. Some may believe their 3- or 4-year-old child is too young, while others are isolated and unaware of available services. Programs should ensure that slots are available when very vulnerable families are identified and recruited. This can be accomplished by one or more of the following recommendations:

1. Requiring programs to prioritize enrollment for those families who meet multiple risk factors.
2. Allowing programs to hold enrollment slots open so the hardest-to-reach families can enter services whenever identified, without risking reduced funding because they are not fully enrolled.
3. Increasing funding for additional enrollment slots.
4. Permitting funds to be used for the provision of interim services until enrollment slots become available.

Most of the pilot programs relied on turnover of enrolled children to enroll those children from hard-to-reach families who were identified later in the school year. This approach left many children without services. To sustain relationships with these families, three programs used pilot funds to offer interim services. These once-a-week activities helped to build relationships and increased family willingness to enroll a child when slots became available. These families then had priority for vacated slots during the current year and were guaranteed enrollment for the next school year. Programs without interim services reported losing permanent contact with families who were placed on a waiting list. It is important to

note that while the interim services maintained relationships with the families, they were not sufficient to meet the school readiness goals of PFA or Head Start.

### **Integration of PFA services with community childcare services**

For many families, part-day programs do not meet their need for full-day care. Families enrolled in PFA and Head Start are, most likely, either low income (with incomes at or below 185% FPL) or live in poverty (with incomes at or below 100% FPL) and are eligible for CCAP if working or attending school. Agencies that fund half-day programs for these families must consider the need for wraparound child care. This will require either an extended school day or collaboration with child care providers. We recommend that:

1. Agencies providing partial-day services be required to collaborate with their local Child Care Resource & Referral Agency (CCR&R) to help families find child care.
2. As a requirement for receiving PFA funds, programs must develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or an interagency agreement with their local CCR&R.

The collaboration will provide needed support to families whose child requires full-day care. The MOU may diminish perceived competition between community ECE programs and PFA and/or Head Start. The MOU will help to clarify policy questions or misunderstandings, especially around eligibility for CCAP. This can be facilitated by trainings from the local CCR&R.

### **Flexibility of Enrollment Age**

The age of 3 is used as an administrative convenience for demarcating programs for very young children from preschool programs. As a result, children who turn 3 years of age after September 1 often are not able to access PFA or (preschool) Head Start. Likewise, children enrolled in the Prevention Initiative (PI) program are allowed only a 30-day grace period after turning 3. This is a disadvantage for many children with late summer/early fall birthdays, who are left without services once they turn 3. The enrollment model provided by early childhood special education (ECSE) allows children who turn 3 to enroll throughout the school year and may serve as an example for PFA and Head Start to enroll the hardest-to-reach children as they turn 3. Families with multiple risk factors should have priority for enrollment in PFA or Head Start or continue to receive services through the Prevention Initiative program. A child's third birthday is an arbitrary date for transitioning children from infant-toddler programs into preschool programs. Inconvenient birthdates jeopardize continuity of services for these high-risk families. State funding agencies should:

1. Grant flexibility to PI and PFA programs to move children from one program to another based on the child's developmental readiness to ensure uninterrupted enrollment in services. This may include keeping children longer in PI, moving children sooner to PFA, or ensuring that

PFA slots are available throughout the year for children already enrolled in PI.

2. Monitor whether PI programs are collaborating with PFA and Head Start programs to support families in the transition from PI to preschool services.
3. Require PI programs, which have established relationships with families, to help families initiate contact at least 90 days before their child's third birthday to provide adequate planning time for the family. As noted in a previous recommendation (Flexibility Regarding Enrollment Slots), families who are traditionally underserved are more likely to lose contact with the next provider unless they are supported throughout the transition process. The transition requirements of the Early Intervention (EI) system provide a model for assisting families in transitioning at age 3 from the EI system to ECSE system.

### **Strategies Worthy of Replication**

The Hard-to-Reach Pilot Program provided the state and the Early Learning Council with information on how pilot programs spent their fiscal resources (e.g., recruitment materials, dedicated staff, interim services). Programs recognized the short-term nature of the funding and developed short-term goals. Some programs planned to sustain one or more of their strategies. This required reassigning responsibilities to other staff or finding funds to support a designated staff member. Recruiting and enrolling hard-to-reach families is hard work and requires supportive policies that make these efforts an expectation—not an exception—in early care and education in Illinois.

The programs presented different strategies for identifying, recruiting, and enrolling traditionally underserved families. The three most successful and potentially sustainable include: (a) increased collaboration within larger agencies, (b) increased collaboration with other stakeholders within the community, and (c) the use of the drop-in preschool in local neighborhoods.

Aunt Martha's ECE program made stronger connections with its Workforce Development Department and with its medical and dental services. This internal collaboration facilitated meeting multiple needs of hard-to-reach families and expedited enrollment into available slots.

Casa Central used strong interagency collaboration with the business community to raise funds to temporarily support families whose eligibility for CCAP funds was interrupted because of employment issues. Centers for New Horizons increased its outreach by collaborating with COFI to train parent "ambassadors" to advocate for ECE services with other families in their neighborhood. Centers for New Horizons had closed a classroom because of under-enrollment. The parent ambassadors

identified a sufficient number of families to justify reopening Head Start classrooms at a city college.

Elgin U-46 and Gads Hill Center were successful in bridging the gap between identification and recruitment and eventual enrollment. Elgin's provision of a weekly one-hour program at 12 sites enabled it to identify 164 families who were not previously familiar with ECE services and who had multiple risk factors. Eventually, 57 of the children served in Preschool Here were enrolled in PFA classes as slots opened. The remaining 3- or 4-year-olds will be provided the opportunity to enroll in the district's PFA classes in the next school year. Gads Hill provided weekly socialization sessions to familiarize new families with the benefits of ECE services. As families became comfortable, they were provided with the choice of home visiting or center-based services if slots were available. All programs stressed the importance of continued contact with newly identified families. Elgin's Preschool Here and Gads Hill's socialization groups ensured contact with both family and child.

These three models—intra-agency collaboration, interagency collaboration, and interim services—are well worth replicating in other communities.

**APPENDIX A**  
**Early childhood services offered by the six programs**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Community Type</b>	<b>Services Offered</b>
Elgin U-46 <i>Elgin</i>	Large suburban	Pre-K
Casa Central <i>Chicago</i>	Urban	Head Start Pre-K Child care Home visiting
Aunt Martha's <i>Olympia Fields</i>	Large suburban	Head Start HIPPI (home visiting)
Harrisburg- Eldorado Early Learning Center <i>Harrisburg</i>	Rural	Child care Group family child care
Gads Hill <i>Chicago</i>	Urban	Head Start Pre-K Child care Family child care home Home visiting
Centers for New Horizons <i>Chicago</i>	Urban	Head Start Pre-K Child care Home visiting

**APPENDIX B**  
**Nine priority areas the programs were required  
to address by the funding agency**

As a part of the evaluation, the Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign looked how the different agencies addressed the following priority areas:

- (1) Specific activities and strategies employed to engage hard-to-reach children and families.
- (2) Number of children from the target group enrolled and served, and the consistency of attendance days for children.
- (3) Success of methods used for finding and collecting information on hard-to-reach children and families.
- (4) Average length of families' stay in the program.
- (5) Reasons as identified by families for leaving the program.
- (6) Cost effectiveness of chosen activities.
- (7) Collaborative relationships created among local agencies that improved services for hard-to-reach children.
- (8) Sustainability of the project beyond the funding phase; and
- (9) Lessons learned and modifications required for continued success (for example, staff attitudes and feelings about serving hard-to-reach families).