

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Dona Ditrio. I am the Director of a Head Start Program sponsored by Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now, Inc. (NEON) a community action agency. Thank you for the invitation to speak with you regarding Early Head Start Challenges.

NEON Head Start is a 280 child program providing comprehensive services to Norwalk, Connecticut families. Based upon our community assessment, 220 children are enrolled in a 6 hour per day, 12 month program. The remaining 60 children are enrolled in a 10 hour per day, 12 month program for working parents. NEON Head Start is able to provide this service because of the support from the City of Norwalk, Connecticut Department of Education and the Administration for Children and Families.

As you are aware, Head Start was launched in 1965 as a 6-week summer program. Subsequently, it was expanded to a full year, part day program for low-income children and families.

The poverty experienced in the 60s is unlike the poverty of the 90s. Families are different. Communities are different. Technology brings us across the world in seconds. Environments, both neighborhood and in the home, are fluid and often chaotic.

Family characteristics now reflect more single parents, exposure to community and/or family violence, a lack sufficient education, a lack job skills and substance abuse exposure or use.

These characteristics coupled with the welfare to work effort result in families being pulled in many directions. Balancing family demands with working full time is a skill in itself even for those adults with years of experience and support systems.

Head Start and Early Start meet the challenges of the 1990s by maintaining the comprehensive holistic family development model

that has been successful throughout the years. The child and the family are viewed together in respect to nutrition, health issues, dental care, child development, mental health and parent education. Each member of the family has an integral role in the ability of the family to live healthy, successful lives and contribute to the community.

The essence of the Head Start and Early Start model is family development capitalizing on family strengths. These strengths are the foundation for building the family. The foundation to enhance the families' skills and knowledge is laid. Parent education in the areas of health, child development, literacy and nutrition begin to fill the family's "tool box" for use immediately or in the future.

Activities planned by parents provide opportunities to support and enhance their parental role as the principal influence in their child's education and development. Parents are given an opportunity to learn such things as various approaches to child rearing, ways to stimulate and enhance their children's total development, ways to turn their child's everyday experiences into constructive learning experiences and specific information about community resources. The parents are given the necessary support (such as role modeling and materials) to maintain a positive learning environment for their child in their home.

Head Start and Early Start include family literacy supporting the parent as the first teacher. Family literacy activities are provided in environments that encourage skill development between the two generations. Studies show that being functionally illiterate reduces job opportunities which then continue a cycle of poverty and unemployment. The inability to read can effect how parents navigate public school and community systems.

Parents who experienced failure in school are less apt to participate in literacy activities and are skilled in hiding their inabilities and

insecurities. National initiatives such as the extensive training provided by the Children's Literacy Initiative heightened awareness and enhanced staff skills. Having participated in the literacy training our classroom environments are print rich. We have established a bi-weekly take home library and implemented a read a long parent education series. Literacy skills become integral to the family "tool box".

Also, in the family tool box is information and supported practice in negotiating health management organizations, public school systems and social service agencies systems which often are frustrating and exhausting to families. Without skills and patience, it is easy just to "give up". Learning to advocate for one's self is critical. Case management enables the parent to have a primary role in assessing family strengths, planning for the future and maintaining self-sufficiency. Head Start and Early Start link the family to community services, reduce duplication and advocate for the family. Head Start becomes a partner in already existing family service plans. Families can become confused when accessing several types of services with each agency desirous of being the primary service provider. Head Start and Early Start advocate for a manageable community service plan thus enabling the family to measure its success in meeting goals.

Head Start and Early Start build families when it respects family values and culture and recognizes that information and/or skills acquired at Head Start and Early Start may not be fully utilized until a later date.

Families are unique. So are communities. Head Start and Early Start must respond accordingly. In order for Programs to be clear regarding expectations and requirements, Performance Standards are issued by the Federal Government. As detailed in the Report of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion, Performance Standards promote our fundamental concepts and

goals and serve as a model for other early childhood programs. Performance Standards reflect best practice in early childhood as well as family support. Programs strive to provide quality services.

Various bodies of research suggest that Head Start has been successful. The program has immediate positive effects on cognitive and socioemotional development; persistent effects on preparing children to succeed in school; significant influence on improving children's physical health, motor coordination and development, and nutrition; positive effects on parents; and strong influences on community institutions to meet the needs of low-income families and their children.

Head Start has strong immediate effects on the cognitive and socioemotional development of young children. These effects are both statistically and educationally meaningful. Over time it appears that test score differences between Head Start and non-Head Start children fade.

It is critical to keep in mind Head Start and Early Start's goal is to serve the "poorest of the poor," the most economically and cognitively disadvantaged children. There is no evidence of "creaming" during enrollment. Head Start works diligently to provide opportunities for children to become school ready. The National Goal of School Readiness and the National Task Force on School Readiness provides focus for the country. State school readiness initiatives (such as Connecticut's) heighten awareness on the key indicators of a child's readiness to learn physical development, social development language development and general knowledge (Connecticut School Readiness Summit, p.2 & 3).

Sharon Lynn Kagan's research (1991) identifies differences in the pedagogy, philosophy, and structure of public schools versus Head

Start. Public schools are required to serve all children regardless of income and, in kindergarten through Grade 3, prepare children for reading and academic success. Support services and parent involvement are a strong element of the focus.

Head Start serves a specific income group and provides the full range of comprehensive services (health, dental, social services, nutrition, child development and social services). Parent involvement is a key element in Head Start and now Early Start.

Reasons for fade out might include:

- Different missions of the public school versus Head Start,
- Availability of funding to provide quality, equitable educational opportunities,
- Low income children are often in schools (based upon resident address) where poverty is concentrated and the educational environment is poor in quality (Lee and Loeb, 1995).
- Not all public schools offer developmentally appropriate and culturally reflective curriculum.
- Family support is needed at the public school level for families who may have health issues, be homeless, have children with disabilities, or not have English as a primary language.

NEON has had a unique experience in adapting the Head Start model to support families with children between birth to 3 and pregnant women.

In 1990 the Connecticut Department of Correction awarded NEON a planning contract to research and develop a halfway house model

for inmate mothers who were pregnant and/or had children between the ages of birth and 5. Women agreed to live in the halfway house for 12 months. Developed in consultation with a community advisory committee, the halfway house model:

- recognizes that during early, formative beginnings of a child's life, the performance of his/her mother must be consistent and free of interruptions as much as possible to provide the child with a consistent sense of being loved and cared for and nourished as a basis for the child's future ability to form meaningful life relationships and patterns of behavior.

- ensures the continuity of care of the child by the mother to the best extent possible given the reality of mothers' legal incarceration.

- enables the mother to become a more skilled parent and to utilize the growth in her caring ability and her relationship with her child as a motivating factor in her rehabilitation as she is the child's first teacher.

The model is developed to offer services through a strength based case management system. All individual services to women and children are provided through local community service agencies. The goal of maximizing the mother's independence through education and assistance with accessing to community supports, is felt to be vital to her sense of connection to the community following once discharge from the structured setting.

The residential model provides 24 hour alert staff for supervision. Custodial issues required by the Connecticut Department of Corrections is handled discreetly so as not to have a major impact on young children.

In order to defray some of the children's expenses and to promote the women's responsibility for their own incarceration, some mothers are eligible for public cash assistance awards while residing in the program; other mothers are employed in the private sector. Forty percent of their monthly income is designated for paying Room and Board. Thirty percent is allocated to savings, which is often used at graduation for a security deposit on housing or other expenses.

The plan was to secure a special permit from the City of Norwalk for a 20-bed halfway house. The request for the special permit was denied. Litigation followed. Fortunately, NEON was afforded the opportunity to identify another location. Within 6 months, the halfway house opened in Waterbury. Two years later the original site opened. Both sites are nationally accredited by the American Correction Association. Since the first site opened, 250 women and their children were in residence only. Twenty-five (10%) have been re-incarcerated. Each milestone reached by a family is a celebration. By focusing on the mother's role as the primary influence and teacher of the child or children, the cycle of crime and poverty begins to break.

The halfway house model is successful because it implemented the best practices demonstrated in Head Start and adapted the comprehensive family development services to a specific population. The outcomes that have a major impact on families are:

- understanding and accessing a medical home
- accessing prenatal care
- making and keeping medical appointments

- early identification of children with special needs
- increased understanding of the effects of secondary smoke and successful attempts to stop smoking
- consistent behavior to address substance abuse issues
- active participation in parenting classes and demonstrated practice in their relationships with their children
- an ability to utilize community resources and agencies and advocate for their family
- demonstrate positive behavior when parenting.

The Connecticut Department of Correction, together with Head Start, builds families.

In the last Early Start Funding Wave, NEON, in conjunction with the Norwalk Public Schools, funds were requested to support 24 families with infants and toddlers at Briggs High School.

The site was selected because of the estimated 160 students enrolled approximately 75 are teen mothers or fathers. Early Head Start meets the numerous challenges presented with teen parents. First, it is critical that the teen parents complete their high school education. Secondly, the teen parents need education and guidance regarding their roles and responsibilities. Thirdly, comprehensive, holistic case management services will create systems and support for the family unit.

Briggs High School has a successful model for young male teen fathers. Their experience indicates young men often do not understand their roles and rights as parents. Subsequently, young



males do not take an active parenting role because of a lack of information. Levine's (1993) research regarding constraints for male involvement found fathers' fears of exposing inadequacies, ambivalence of program staff members about father involvement, gate keeping by mothers and inappropriate program design and delivery as causes for non-involvement. Research supports that male involvement, (specially the style of interaction), has positive effects regarding the child's social adjustment. Research supports how men relate to children is influenced by how they feel about their role, how others perceive them and whether or not they have a support system. By developing a father or male friendly environment, children will grow up feeling comfortable with what society has determined as appropriate behavior for men and women (sex role development, easy social adjustment and increased cognitive development). Teen mothers will benefit from male involvement because there will be opportunity for dialogue to reduce tensions and develop mutual understanding. The burden for child(ren) rearing will be shared.

Existing support services for teen parents are fragmented and limited due to funding availability. Infant and toddler care necessary for the teen parent to complete high school is almost non-existent.

There is one (1) public assistance child and 11 non-public assistance children competing for one licensed infant/toddler slot. Transportation cost and time available are even more limiting.

This initiative with teen parents embraced the current thinking regarding the stages of child development and brain research. Birth to 3 is the time for optimum physical growth and socioemotional development.

Our research demonstrates that the national effort to address long term development and support for children from Birth to 3 as well

as their families will be welcomed in many communities across the nation.