

Head Start REACH

ERSEA Lead Staff Focus Group Protocol

In fall 2024, the Head Start REACH team will use this guide to conduct a 90-minute virtual focus group with Head Start staff who are most knowledgeable about their program’s recruitment, selection, and enrollment practices. We will conduct a total of four focus groups with up to six staff participating in each group. We will seek staff permission to record all focus groups. Participating staff will receive \$50 as a token of appreciation.

NOTE: This is a guide, not a script. Moderators will need to add probes to further explore the experiences recounted by focus group members.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Moderator and co-facilitator introductions

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We are from Mathematica, an independent policy research firm, and we are here today to learn about your programs’ recruitment, selection, and enrollment practices. My name is [NAME] and this is my colleague [NAME].

B. Explanation of Project and Purpose of Group Discussion

As you know, we are conducting the Head Start REACH study for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The goal of the study is to improve our understanding of how Head Start programs recruit, select, and enroll families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services – for example, those experiencing poverty and homelessness, involved in foster care or child welfare, or affected by substance use. During our discussion today, we are interested in hearing about the recruitment, selection, and enrollment practices that you believe are the most effective with these families and good candidates for use in other programs. We’d also like to hear from you about the challenges that programs may face and supports they may need to carry out these practices. We will use the information you share with us to write a summary of what we have learned, but we will not use any of your names in our final report, so please feel free to talk openly about your opinions.

C. Privacy and Taping

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. There are no risks associated with participating in the study. Your answers will be private to the extent permitted by law and will not be shared with parents, other staff in your program, or anybody else not working on this study. Although we will be recording the session and taking notes, we will not use any names; if we use quotes, we won’t link them to anyone by name. We will ensure all information is only reported in summary form and will not use your name, your program’s name, or other identifying information. Survey data will be transmitted to the Child & Family Data Archive or a similar data archive at the end of the study so it can be used by other researchers. We will remove any information that could identify you, your program and its staff or parents, or the community partners Head Start works with from the data before sharing it with the data archive.

Head Start REACH has obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health and been given Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval by Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. The OMB number and expiration date for this collection are OMB #: 0970-XXXX, Exp: XX/XX/XXXX.

I just need to go around the group and get your consent to participant and for us to record our discussion. [TURN ON RECORDING SO WE HAVE A RECORD OF IT. ASK EACH MEMBER AND PROCEED. IF THERE IS ANYONE NOT OKAY WITH RECORDING TURN OFF THE RECORDING AND ASK THEM TO LEAVE THE GROUP EXPLAINING IT IS NEEDED FOR OUR ANALYSIS. THEN TURN ON RECORDING AGAIN.]

D. Ground Rules for Discussion

Before we start, we want to provide guidance about how our time together will go:

- This will be an informal discussion.
- The discussion will last about 1 hour and 30 minutes. There will be no formal breaks. If needed, please feel free to stretch or go to the bathroom.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we will ask. We are interested in learning each of your opinions. We very much appreciate your input.
- We would like only one person to talk at a time so the recording software can pick up everyone. But we hope that each of you will speak up and tell us your thoughts and feelings.
- Everyone's circumstances are different and what is shared here should not be discussed outside of this gathering.
- To keep us on schedule, I may change the subject or move ahead from time to time.
- Each person here today will receive a \$50 gift card to show our appreciation for your feedback.

II. QUESTIONS

A. Introductions

I'm going to start by asking each of you to introduce yourself by sharing your first name, your job title, how long you've been working at the program, and your responsibilities related to recruitment, selection, and enrollment.

1. First, please share your first name only, your job title, your responsibilities related to recruitment, selection, and enrollment, and how long you've been working at your program.

Great! Now we'd like each of you to tell us how you are involved in recruitment, selection, and enrollment at your program.

Recruitment

We'll begin our discussion today with recruitment. By recruitment, we mean how Head Start programs identify and reach out to families to recruit them (for example, by holding recruitment events in the community or collaborating with partners to recruit families) and how they monitor their recruitment efforts. We'd like to learn about effective strategies that programs can use to recruit families who can most benefit from their services.

1. Head Start programs are designed to provide supports to families who can most benefit from their services - for example, those experiencing poverty and homelessness, involved in foster care or child welfare, or affected by substance use. In an ideal world, what practices or strategies should programs use to identify the families in their community who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services?

2. Which families do you find more challenging to recruit than others?
 - For example, are any of the families we just talked about benefiting the most from Head Start (IF EXAMPLES NEED REPEATING: families experiencing poverty, families experiencing homelessness, families involved in foster care or child welfare, or those affected by substance use) particularly challenging to recruit? What makes them challenging to recruit?
 - How can programs make sure that they successfully recruit these families?
3. In your experience, are there some strategies that are more successful than others for recruiting these families?
 - In prior project activities, some staff shared it could be challenging to recruit families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services because it may be more difficult to communicate and build trust with these families. What are some strategies program staff can use to build trust and communicate with these families?
 - Can you provide examples of other strategies that you think are the most effective or successful in recruiting such families? Can you tell us about a particularly challenging population that your program has focused on and how you have been able to recruit them?
 - [IF NEEDED] Some examples of successful strategies include [FILL STRATEGIES BASED ON PRELIMINARY SURVEY FINDINGS]. How can these strategies help recruit families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services?
4. Why do you believe the strategies we just discussed are effective or successful?
 - For which types of families do you think these strategies are most effective?
5. Based on your experience, what are some barriers in implementing these strategies?
(Can also use, What is standing in your way in terms of implementing these strategies?)
6. What supports do you think programs would need to implement these strategies?
 - *Probe: Supports could include more staff, better trained staff, partnerships with community organizations, materials*
7. In an ideal world, what would you like to do to improve recruitment that you're not already doing at your program?
 - What resources or support do you think you need to do this?

Selection

Now we'd like to shift gears to selection. Selection refers to how programs develop and carry out their selection criteria including verifying eligibility, reviewing application information to assign points, and placing families on the waitlist, if needed. We'd like to learn more about the ways in which programs can improve their selection procedures to help select families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services into the program.

1. How should programs ensure that their selection processes prioritize the selection of the families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services?
 - How can programs ensure that their selection processes are being used effectively - that is, that their selection processes reflect their selection criteria?
 - [IF NEEDED] Some examples of successful strategies include [FILL STRATEGIES BASED ON PRELIMINARY SURVEY FINDINGS]. How can these strategies help select families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services?

- What supports do you think programs would need to implement these strategies? Supports could include more staff or better trained staff.
2. Why do you believe the strategies we just discussed are effective or successful?
 - For which types of families do you think these strategies are most effective?
 3. Based on your experience, what are some barriers that make it hard for programs to select families who can most benefit from comprehensive Head Start services?
 - What are the challenges associated with verifying eligibility for some families? How can programs work through those?
 - What are some challenges associated with assigning points? How can programs work through those?
 4. Most recently, SNAP has been added to the ways in which families are considered categorically eligible for Head Start. How have the ERSEA practices in your program been affected by this change?
 - How has this change affected your recruitment strategies?
 - How have eligibility verification procedures changed because of this change?
 - o For example, does your program prioritize SNAP receipt over income and homelessness for determining eligibility?
 - How has this change affected procedures for assigning points to families?
 5. In prior project activities, some parents shared that they were on the waitlist for a long time before they were selected into the program.
 - Has this been an issue for your program?
 - Based on your experience, what can programs do to shorten the time between families’ being placed on the waitlist and getting selected into the program?
 - Some parents shared that they would have appreciated more frequent communication or updates from Head Start staff while they were on the waitlist. What are some strategies that programs can use to communicate with parents on the waitlist?
 - o How frequent should these communications be?
 - o What modes are likely to be most effective for these communications?
 - o What are some challenges related to communicating with parents on the waitlist?
 6. In an ideal world, what would you like to do to improve selection procedures that you are not already doing at your program?
 - What resources or supports do you think you need to do this?

Enrollment

Finally, we’d like to discuss how programs can use strategies to streamline the enrollment process for families. Enrollment refers to how program enroll selected families.

1. Enrollment usually involves a significant amount of paperwork, forms, and other requirements. How can programs make enrollment processes simpler and more straightforward for families?
 - The enrollment process is potentially even more challenging for families who can most benefit from receiving comprehensive Head Start services. Are there specific strategies programs can use to make enrollment processes simpler and more straightforward for these families?

- What supports would program staff need to implement effective enrollment processes? Some examples may include more staff, better trained staff, providing support to families in the early months of enrollment, connecting newly enrolled families with families who are already enrolled, or relying on partner organizations for help.
2. Why do you believe the strategies we just discussed are effective or successful?
 - For which types of families do you think these strategies are most effective?
 3. What are some barriers that programs face in achieving and maintaining full enrollment?
 - What strategies are the most effective in achieving and maintaining full enrollment?
 - [IF NEEDED] Some examples of successful strategies include [FILL STRATEGIES BASED ON PRELIMINARY SURVEY FINDINGS]. How can these strategies help enroll families?
 4. Head Start programs must make decisions to fill all their funded slots while also ensuring that families who can most benefit from services are prioritized for enrollment.
 - How do you balance these competing demands?
 - What are some strategies programs can use to work around this issue?
 5. In an ideal world, what would you like to do to improve enrollment that you're not already doing at your program?
 - What resources or support do you think you need to do this?

Closing

1. Finally, based on your experience, can you tell us which recruitment, selection, and enrollment procedures your program uses that are the most successful for families who most need comprehensive Head Start services?
 - Do you think these approaches would also work in other programs?
 - If provided with support, would you be interested in working to try out new approaches to see how well they work in your program?

This concludes our questions for today. Thank you again for taking time to answer our questions. Does anyone have a question or comment they'd like to share before we end?