

BENNINGTON COUNTY HEAD START 2010 COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT UPDATE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Bennington County Head Start is located in the southwestern corner of the State of Vermont, bordering the states of Massachusetts to the south and New York to the west. The area served by Bennington County Head Start starts in Pownal and extends north to Dorset.

Head Start has been serving families in Bennington County since 1965. It is one of the smallest Head Start Programs in the State of Vermont serving 123 preschoolers and their families, as well as ten preschoolers through the Early Education Initiative (EEI a Vermont State Program). We are affiliated with United Children's Services (UCH) of Bennington County and this organization serves as our grantee.

The administration offices and three of our classrooms are located in North Bennington across from the Park McCullough House. This site offers children and families a full-day/full-year program. The facility is open 8:00 am to 4:00 pm, Monday through Friday, and typically serves 45 children.

At our Red Brick facility in Shaftsbury we operate two classrooms with 15-17 students in each class. This program offers full-day/full year services and is open 8:00 am to 4:00pm, Monday through Friday. One classroom in this program is designated for our partnership with the Town of Shaftsbury, serving four-year-old children who reside in the town and will be going to kindergarten the following September.

In Pownal, we collaborate with Early Education Program (EEE/ EEP) of the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU). EEE/ EEP enrolls half of the fifteen to sixteen students placed in this classroom. However, these children must still meet Head Start eligibility standards. This facility operates full day/full year, during the hours of 8:15 am to 3:30 pm, Monday through Friday. The Pownal facility is a stand-alone building located on the grounds of Pownal Elementary School.

An additional nineteen children are placed with our Child Care Partners, one family childcare center is located at a rural location in Bennington and the other, a

licensed center, is located in Shaftsbury, next door to the Shaftsbury Head Start site. These partnership programs operate year round and their hours of operation vary depending on the needs of the families.

NORTHSHIRE COLLABORATION

The Northshire Head Start Program is a locally designed collaboration serving the townships of Northern Bennington County – Arlington, Sandgate, Sunderland, Manchester and Dorset. Head Start works in partnership with the Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union (BRSU); the Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union; Arlington Area Childcare, Inc. (AACI – also known as “Happy Days”); and Northshire Day School (NDS) to provide a comprehensive early education experience for area children and their families. There are twenty specific families that are served in three separate sites and many more families are impacted by the width and breadth of Head Start services that compliment the existing programs.

Among the thirty children who attend the Manchester Elementary Middle School Pre-K program, there are currently eleven students who receive additional Head Start services. This is collaboration between Head Start and one of the public schools in the BRSU.

In Arlington, a variety of program options can be accessed through Happy Days in collaboration with the Battenkill Valley Supervisory Union (BVSU). Happy Days is childcare center with a preschool component. There are currently four Head Start/AACI dually enrolled slots filled there.

Northshire Day School (NDS) is a new collaboration/partnership in Manchester. In 2009 Head Start received an Expansion Grant with federal stimulus money to expand in the Northshire. This grant allowed for seven new slots, five of which are at NDS. Along with the extra slots came the opportunity to hire one part-time staff person who is working with both childcare sites and has a caseload of nine children.

Head Start’s collaboration with two local supervisory unions and two early childcare programs provides a program rich with specialized services and family

involvement opportunities. Meeting the individual and varying needs of children and their families is strength of the Northshire Collaboration.

Update on previous areas of concern:

1. Open a site in down-town Bennington (CA 2005 – 2009)

The majority of Head Start families that we serve resides in downtown Bennington and has difficulty getting to our outlying sites. This concern seems to grow with each passing year as the economy and job security decrease, but costs of living, including price of gas and vehicle maintenance increases. Many families that have transportation, do not have reliable transportation, and could therefore really benefit from a center that they could walk to. Our Head Start Director has visited several locations around the downtown area, but with budget cuts, and financial prudence in the face of future budget uncertainties, combined with the high costs of renovation, nothing has been achievable to date. She will continue to work with the UCS Executive Director and Chief Financial Officer on this issue.

2. Increase Mental Health within the program for our children and families (CA 2008-9)

In 2009 several things were implemented with our Head Start Program. There was a social skills group that ran once a week for several weeks at the North Bennington Head Start, but did not continue this year in 2010.

Two Head Staff were trained in CSEFEL (Center for Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning) and another two Head Start staff were trained to be trainers of FEL (Foundations of Early Learning). Head Start teachers and staff have implemented the curriculum into their classrooms to improve mental health, social skills and problem solving.

ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009) Funds have allowed Bennington County Head Start to hire a Behavioral Specialist. The Behavioral

Specialist position's duties will be to support and enhance children's social skills in the classroom and working with staff to help and maintain Functional Behavioral Plans and IEPs. This person will assist children individually and in groups following an approved curriculum, FEL and Second Step, and best practices. This person will be available as directed and as required to all three Head Start centers in North Bennington, Shaftsbury and Pownal. Currently, Head Start is looking to fill the Behavioral Specialist position due to our former Behavior Specialist taking a full-time teaching position with our Head Start program.

A United Counseling Service Clinical Intern, Kim Miller was made available to our program. There were four Head Start children referred to Kim Miller and she saw the children weekly over the school year, providing on-site clinical counseling to those identified children.

CUPS (Children's Upstream Services), is part of a statewide effort to provide mental Health services and consultation to children, families and childcare providers. CUPS has recently restructured and partnered with the CIS (Children's Integrated Services) team. The CIS team includes the following agencies: WIC, FIT, Healthy Babies and Families, Sunrise Resource Center.

In reviewing the outcomes for children the program decided to form a "Good Start" committee in the 2008-9 school year, that looked at all aspects of transitions for children. The Good Start committee was comprised of Head Start staff, special education teachers and public school personnel. The Good Start committee continued in the 2009-10 school year. During monthly meetings the committee identified several new initiatives to help children transition into Head Start and into kindergarten, including a collaborative summer thirty-day kinder camp program in two of our public schools, Molly Stark and Pownal, to help children transition into kindergarten.

3. Continue to explore various transportation options for our families (CA 2005 – 2009)

Families continue to use the Head Start bus to get to and from the North Bennington Head Start site. The North Bennington Bus is able to transport 21 children to the program.

Green Mountain Express (GMX) is also able to transport several of our Head Start children in various Head Start sites. Green Mountain Express has a Deviated Fixed Route service, which complies with the American Disabilities Act (ADA). GMX vehicles will deviate up to ½ mile off their route to provide requested transportation services. Advanced notice of one day is required. Funding is required to transport children to and from Head Start by GMX. Reach-Up Workers or other community agencies approve these funding subsidies. Funding budgets to approve transportation are also a concern at this time of state budget cuts.

The public school system is also able to offer transportation service to eligible children both to and from school; this is only for children with IEPs that demonstrate a need for alternate transportation services.

Head Start is beginning to enter the children's transportation information into the Child Plus computer system. At Head Start, we are also coming to realize that we are unsure of how well known it is that GMX can be used as transportation for medical appointments. We frequently transport children and their families to medical appointments that GMX would likely transport. This may be a matter of planning and scheduling in advance for families.

4. Through Act 62 it will be paramount for the program to solidify and structure partnerships that meet the new state guidelines. Including addressing teacher qualifications and MOU's that incorporate Head Start Performance Standards (CA 2008-9)

Bennington County Head Start has partnered with the Town of Shaftsbury to provide pre-school services to four-year-old children in the town. Services are being provided in our Shaftsbury Center. Part of this partnership requires that the teacher in this room be licensed. For the past two years of this partnership we have been able to provide a licensed teacher and meet the requirements for this partnership. As we write this update, we are currently looking to fill a vacancy in this lead teacher position. This is proving difficult to find someone with the right degrees, philosophy, and experience at the pay scale we provide for compensation.

Additionally, Head Start has also partnered with the Molly Stark Elementary School and Pownal Elementary School so that the children enrolled in our summer program were able to attend our program (to receive a full day of childcare services) and also attend the kindergarten transition programs at the public schools.

This year, after completing a Community Needs Assessment, the North Bennington Graded School has determined that they will provide Pre-K services to their population, and collaborate with community partners. At the time of this report, we know that Head Start will be a partner, but it is still undetermined exactly what the program will look like. Head Start will continue to look at ways to strengthen our partnerships and make sure that we are meeting the state guidelines.

5. Work with Professional Development Committee of Building Bright Futures and the State wide committee to ensure the teachers meet the new licensing standards (CA 2008-9)

When teaching positions become available new hires are required to already meet the new licensing standards. Ensuring teachers are qualified to meet Head Start standards and being able to have licensed teachers continues to be a community

and program need. This year, teachers with Bachelor's Degrees in a related field were part of a VECCEL work group, led by Jeanne Davis and the SVSU to complete the peer review process and become licensed in Early Childhood Education through the Vermont Department of Education. As teachers can complete this at their own pace, their timelines are individualized, ranging from December 2010 through June 2011. Most Teacher Assistants currently have a CDA or are in process for applying for one. One TA holds a New York State Teaching Assistant Certificate and is being encouraged to go back to school in order to obtain a CDA.

6. Work more closely with the Department of Children and Families, Economic Services Division to help parents who have become unemployed seek training and new job opportunities (CA 2008-9)

Bennington County Head Start and Economic Services continue to build on their partnership that has been in place for the past few years. Head Start continues to allow families who are involved with Economic Services work on site to complete their work requirements. Head Start staff helps transport parents to and from job interviews, attend meetings with parents, assist in making phone calls if there is confusion as to what is expected from our parent in regards to their work requirement. We continue to help families build upon the skills they have to further their work options.

We are facing some difficulty with Economic Services to work together towards the family goal plan that they have in place when the parent comes to our program. Both agencies have busy schedules and time is difficult to find to schedule meetings, but we would like to have a more cohesive relationship with Economic Services and work as a team towards the goal plan that our parents have already set up with their worker. We would like to meet with the Economic Services workers at the beginning of our year to get a copy and overview of our parent's plan, so that we can be even more of a support to helping them achieve that goal.

The new centralized intake system is another barrier to overcome in working together with Economic Services. Because there are only two staff in the Bennington office, the rest are Reach-Up workers, having the meeting time to obtain goals and how we can support them is a challenge. Also, we are concerned that people that need assistance may not be able to access it due to limited literacy skills and/or limited computer, telephone, or internet access. We have set up one computer workstation at the North Bennington Center that can be accessed by families to apply for benefits.

7. Work with Department of Children and Families and Bennington Rural Opportunity Council to support parents that are facing high fuel & gas prices (CA 2008-9)

We continue to work with DCF and BROCC very closely. We help to get information out to our parents about local programs that can aid them if they have a fuel need. We are aware of deadlines for applications for these programs, aid in filling out the application with the family and contact the above named agencies if there are any other questions pertaining to the need of our families, including other resources that might be available through these programs.

We also look to our local churches and interfaith councils for assistance as a one time only or emergency service, which may have been given to us by the above named agencies as another resource to families that did not qualify for their programs.

8. Initiate a new “Green Start” for Head Start program that will address the needs of energy improvements for our facilities and staff (CA 2009)

Green Start has been a new initiative of not only our Head Start program but also our grantee agency, United Counseling Service. Children, Families and Staff have been learning how to recycle and conserve energy. HS teachers and staff have placed recycle bins for paper in each classroom. Head Start is committed to turning off lights and appliances that do not need to be in use, especially when

leaving the classrooms and also at the end of each day. Head Start staff has been saving paper by making double sided copies and using email when ever possible. Head Start has reduced the amount of paperwork that is entering each child's binder; the majority of the child's information is now entered into our Child Plus computer system and Creativecurriculum.net. Our Kitchen staff has been recycling and separating plastic, metal, glass and paper daily. Our grantee agency, United Counseling Service picks it up weekly. Head Start has greatly reduced the amount of garbage it produces weekly. Children have been working on a successful gardening project for the last two years. Last year, children at North Bennington contributed to the North Bennington Community Garden composting pile with their breakfast and lunch food scraps. At the Shaftsbury Center, Head Start has purchased a composting machine and will be looking into a Composting Plan for next year at Shaftsbury and in the future at North Bennington.

9. Head Start Expansion and Early Head Start Opportunities (CA 2009)

Bennington County Head Start applied for the Head Start Expansion grant and the Early Head Start grant. Recently we found out that we received part of expansion grant. Seven new Head Start slots will be added to our program. After looking at our service area, these slots will mostly be added to the Northshire area.

The Early Head Start grant is another area of possibility for our program. After assessing our currently enrolled families we realized that we have 52 siblings that are younger than 3 years old and 8 pregnant moms. Bennington County Head Start requested 75 EHS slots. However, this grant was not approved. Quick Facts from the US Census state that 5.1% of the population of Bennington County is younger than five-years old. And that 12.2% of the population is below the poverty level. Bright Futures information shows that there are only seven providers that are accepting infant and toddler childcare openings as we write this report; one is located in North Bennington, three are in Bennington, one is in Pownal, one is in Arlington, and one is in Readsboro. Infant Toddler childcare is

more expensive for families, and the provider to child ratios of 1:4 is economically crippling to programs. Bennington County is still demonstrating a need for quality, affordable Infant Toddler Childcare.

10. Half Day versus Full Day option (CA 2009)

Based on the need of the families over the past few years full day services made its way through all of Bennington County Head Start centers, except the Northshire, which offers only a combination option. Since the decline in the economy and changes in state funding for childcare, as of January 3, 2010, families are finding it more difficult to obtain a childcare subsidy or to pay for the co-pay that their certificate does not cover. Families are also finding it difficult to get a job in order to meet the requirements for having a subsidy. The July 2010 unemployment rate in Bennington County is 6.5%. However, different towns in Bennington County have different unemployment rates. Please see chart below. Even when families do obtain a four-week work search childcare certificate, it is nearly impossible to be hired for employment in such a short amount of time. Even the federal unemployment benefits timeframe has increased, but the work search time frame has not. Based on this, it may be necessary to consider part day slots again.

Bennington County Unemployment Rates- July 2010

Bennington town	7.8%
Dorset town	5.1%
Manchester town	5.5%
Pownal town	4.9%
Readsboro	6.2%
Sandgate town	8.7%
Shaftsbury town	4.3%
Woodford town	7.4%

New Areas of Concern:

1. Pownal Site Waitlist

More and more families are applying to our Pownal Center, which currently allows for fifteen to sixteen slots in one classroom. Additionally, this is a partnership program with EEP/EEE, so half of the slots are filled in conjunction between our LEA and Family and Community Partnership Manager. This year, at the time of writing this report, there are twenty-three applicants for five slots. Of these twenty-three, most of them are new applicants from this spring and summer, fourteen are income-eligible, four are over-income, nine are four-year-olds, and four have marked actual or suspected disability. The size of our waiting list demonstrates a need for increased Pownal slots. Problems that the program would need to address are:

- Space for a classroom as the current classroom operates out of a manufactured unit adjacent to the public school, on public school grounds
- If considering a partnership, locating a qualified home or center in Pownal
- Determining where the program could afford to lose slots that could be re-distributed to the Pownal site

2. Community Tobacco Usage

Rates of smoking are increased in communities with lower education attainment and lower socio-economic status. Smoking rates are higher in communities with increase rates of mental health. Smoking is also more prevalent with males than females. Head Start partners with the Tobacco Free Community Partners and Kiah Morris. Kiah is one of the two community representatives to our current Policy Council. Our Health Manager and Family Service Department will be meeting with Kiah during the 2010-2011 pre-service to discuss further ways she and Head Start will collaborate in the upcoming year to help more families quit. Currently, as part of the FPA, if a family member is interested in quitting, HS is prepared to refer to the appropriate agencies and assist as needed. If a family member is not interested in quitting, FSW's will encourage to smoke away from children and outdoors, and to educate on the hazards of secondhand smoke. Our

Health Manager also discusses these same topics at registration, which every HS family is required to complete before their child can attend. Last school year, children at Head start participated with a Smoking Cessation and keeping healthy workbook, completed at school and with families. This year, the tobacco awareness education by Head Start takes place mainly during registration, and at home visits and through the FPA with the FSW's. The Vermont Department of Health funds a Smoking Cessation coach in each hospital in Vermont. Gwen Hannon is our local contact at SVMC. Participants are eligible for quitting smoking classes or individual coaching along with some free nicotine replacement therapy.

3. Community Dental Concerns

Bennington County has a small number of dentists that accept Medicaid for payment, and an even smaller number of dentists that accept Medicaid and will see a child under the age of four. Dr. Michael Brady is located in the Molly Start Elementary School and has picked up much of this caseload, but every year the age at which he expects children will transition to an adult dentist goes down; he is currently only seeing children until they are between eleven and twelve-years-old. Dr. Brady will see younger children because he believes the earlier children see the dentist regularly, the better off they are in the long term. Adult and child dental homes are another point of the FPA. FSW's report that many adult family members are in need of dental care, but a majority of those are embarrassed or afraid when it comes to actually scheduling needed care and treatments. There seems to be a mindset that they will just get their teeth pulled and a set of dentures instead of corrective dental work. FSW's refer families that are willing and in need to Shaftsbury Dental (Dr. Moskowitz) for adults or Dr. Brady for children that need a dental home because those are the only providers in our area that currently accept new patients and Medicaid.

4. Medical Insurance and EPSDT Forms/ Lead Levels

This is an area of concern in Bennington County first identified by our Health Manager. The system of access to medical insurance is not always ideal for our families. Head Start does not find out about lapses in medical insurance until there is a health concern or an appointment that is postponed until insurance is once again secured. We are becoming aware that many families are applying for insurance, then were issued a missing items letter for follow-up. Often times they do not receive the letter due to moving, precarious housing, or old information in the systems; or they don't return the information by the deadline; or they don't know how or where to locate the information; or the work just feels like too much and they don't complete it, and then their insurance is not approved.

We are required to obtain and keep in our files, a current EPSDT form for our children for the state licensing regulations, but healthcare providers are experiencing difficulty in getting reimbursed through Medicaid for some of the items on the form. A vision exam is a good example- required by the state form, but not allowable for re-imburement from Medicaid. This contributes to the problem with two-year-olds lead levels. Most of our children receive their one-year-old lead level at a WIC appointment. The Department of Health consistently performs these. However, at two-years-old, DOH will not routinely perform these, and assumes that doctors' offices are. Most doctors offices are not completing them, they don't always note that one is still needed if children change primary physicians, or they issue parents a lab slip, and parents don't always follow through and go to the lab to get the blood drawn and the testing completed. There is a lead level registry for the state of Vermont where physicians can check to see if lead levels were completed for individuals, but it is unclear how much this is used. We are further finding a child who sees a General Practitioner is even less likely than a child who sees a Pediatrician in getting a two year old lead level completed. At Head Start, the dilemma we are experiencing, is how to follow up with these missing lead levels, when we do not enroll the children until they are three-year-olds.

5. **Subsidy System and Co-pays**

Many programs and families have struggled with the changeover in the state tuition assistance program on January 3, 2010. When the Reserved Spaces Contracts were cancelled, many families around Bennington County, whether enrolled in Head Start or not, became responsible for paying a child care co-pay. Many families could not afford this co-pay, resulting in some children losing their childcare slots and needed services. Our Head Start partners around the state report this same problem in their own communities as well. Our community is not looking forward to the possibility of centralized intake of subsidy services. At Head Start we have only had one parent ever complete the online subsidy form, and they could not do this without a Head Start staff person that walked them through the application piece by piece. Furthermore, the specialists at BCCCA receive over a hundred phone calls, emails, and office visits on a weekly basis from families and providers. They are essential in assuring the smoothest transition of this program between families and programs.