The Importance of a Strong Community Assessment

Working on a number of Head Start Recompetition and Early Head Start Child Care Partnership proposals over the past few years, Heartland has had the opportunity to review many Community Assessments (CAs). We have seen some outstanding CAs, but also some that are not meeting the Office of Head Start Requirements. Because the CA is the cornerstone of annual Head Start operations, it should be both high quality and comprehensive.

The Power of a Good Community Assessment in Strengthening Your Program

- The CA should both guide and justify strategic decisions made by the grantee.
- The CA should also provide the needed data and information to use in the Statement of Need section of a recompetition grant, a state preschool program proposal, a foundation proposal, or any other funding request so that the document can be developed quickly and thoroughly.
- The CA should also provide meaningful data and analysis of the target population for use in local, regional, and state discussions regarding allocation of services and resources.
- The CA should include both quantitative and qualitative analysis using valid statistical data and reputable data sources.

Common Community Assessment Pitfalls Observed by Heartland Staff

- Community Assessments that do not follow the Office of Head Start guidelines to include data on all aspects of the community, do not specifically define the high need areas and/or do not calculate the number of eligible children in the service area.
- CAs with data that is not recent enough to be valid. Some data, such as Census data, will be several years old, but most data sets should be updated annually to provide a more precise picture of changes to the needs and composition of the community.
- CAs that fail to analyze the community issues most impactful of children and families in poverty, as well as those that do not draw any conclusions or suggest any strategies based on the unique needs of the individual service area.

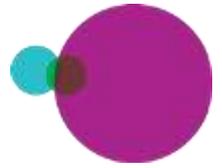### *What are the Roadblocks to a Strong CA?*

- Many states and communities do not house the needed data in a readily accessible manner, so the avenues to gather the most relevant data are not always obvious.
- Some consultants hired to execute CAs are not familiar enough with the Head Start, Program Performance Standards, or the needs of children and families in poverty to be able to develop a robust assessment.
- Often, CAs are updated in terms of data in some sections but not reconsidered in terms of changes to Office of Head Start guidelines and/or new needs in the community i.e. the assessment is not used as a living document as it is intended.

What Can My Organization Do?

- Review the Community Assessment Performance Standards and Guidelines from OHS.
- Take the Heartland CA Evaluation quiz?
- Contact Heartland! We will review your most recent CA for *free* and we will provide feedback on its alignment with OHS guidelines and areas for improvement!

Community Assessment Evaluation Quiz

☐ Provides data about the required elements, as defined in the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

☐ Data is timely and relevant to your population and provides a snapshot of the wellbeing of children and families in each part of your service area and the community, social, and economic context in which you are providing services.

☐ Provides an inventory of the local supply and demand for prek and child care services for **each** city or zip code in your service area and specifies the number of slots offered to low-income children and families in state prek, child care programs, and other child development and early education programs serving young children and *data is disaggregated by age.*

☐ Provides an analysis and calculations of slot gaps or over-served populations in regard to early care and education services and specifies the number of children that need full-day/full-year child care by age for each part of your service area.

☐ Provides a full description of the methodology used to conduct your community assessment and description of primary and secondary data sources, with appropriate citations that enable the reader to fact-check your data.

☐ Includes a description of services and the number of people served by other agencies in your community offering intervention, crisis, and family strengthening services. This includes minimally:
  ☐ Domestic violence shelters
  ☐ Food Bank
  ☐ Homeless shelter and low-income housing voucher programs
  ☐ TANF/Cash Aid Programs/SNAP Enrollment
  ☐ Parenting Programs
  ☐ Mental Health Services
  ☐ Transportation Resources

☐ Includes data about the needs of children in the child welfare system which includes the number of abuse and neglect cases, number of substantiated cases, number of children in foster care (by age).

☐ Includes data about the needs of families in your area, as defined by those families using interviews and quantitative survey data.

☐ The Community Assessment is a living document and all areas are updated as necessary.

☐ Includes a full discussion of issues, conclusions, and recommendations.

☐ Includes a comparative summary of key trends and changes occurring in the service area and how they impact the program, in addition to a discussion of what trends are concerning to Head Start.

☐ Includes copies of interview guides and surveys used to collect data in the in the document's Appendix.

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