

# Supporting the Wellness of All Staff in the Head Start Workforce

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## Supporting the Wellness of All Staff in the Head Start Workforce ACF-IM-HS-21-05

U.S. (United States) Department  
of Health and Human Services

ACF  
Administration for Children and Families

- 1. Log Number:** ACF-IM-HS-21-05
- 2. Issuance Date:** 09/27/2021
- 3. Originating Office:** Office of Head Start
- 4. Key Words:** Head Start Workforce; Staff Supports; Staff Wellness; Staff Well-being; Mental Health; Physical Health; Head Start Program Performance Standards; HSPPS

### Information Memorandum

**To:** All Head Start and Early Head Start Grant Recipients

**Subject:** Supporting the Wellness of All Staff in the Head Start Workforce

**Information:**

The Office of Head Start (OHS) recognizes the importance of every individual in the birth to 5 Head Start workforce and the essential role of program staff in the delivery of high-quality, comprehensive services to enrolled infants, toddlers, preschool-aged children, and their families. Each staff person across the Head Start workforce has the immense responsibility of performing a job that supports young children's early learning, health, mental health, and family well-being. Staff wellness is vital to child well-being. It is also a critical component in the ability to address the diverse and individualized needs of Head Start children and families.

OHS is committed to promoting and prioritizing needed supports for staff. Successfully supporting staff starts with staff wellness. As programs continue to move toward fully in-person services and address challenges brought on or worsened by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, prioritizing staff well-being is essential for all Head Start programs. This Information Memorandum (IM) describes the importance of, and requirements and recommendations for, building a culture of wellness across all Head Start programs.

The last year has brought significant challenges to the Head Start workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disparate impact on under-resourced communities, including many of those served by Head Start programs. There has also been heightened attention to racial injustice in our country, which has led to calls for major reforms to address long-standing societal inequities. These are particularly important concerns for OHS and the Head Start workforce. All staff have been impacted by COVID-19. Further, 60% of Head Start teaching staff are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, and 30% have a primary language other than English. As such, OHS is committed to a culture of wellness that includes holistic support for the entire Head Start workforce.

### **Prioritizing Staff Wellness in Head Start Programs**

*Staff wellness*, also referred to as well-being, refers to staff's mental and physical health and how it shapes their engagement, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life. We know from research — and from staff themselves — that Head Start staff love their work and are committed to the infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children and the families they serve, despite the work-related stresses and challenges the staff face. OHS recognizes the importance of promoting wellness so that all staff in the Head Start workforce can be successful in achieving their goals and fostering positive outcomes for children and families.

Staff who are happier, healthier, less stressed, and experience less depression are able to engage in higher quality interactions with children. Research indicates Head Start staff who experience frequent stress or symptoms of depression are more likely to perceive children in their care in a less positive light. This could, in turn, relate to lower quality interactions and care. Higher rates of depression among adults have also been linked with poorer child outcomes and less positive family-teacher relationships. Some Head Start staff have the added challenge of working with children who have experienced trauma while also managing their own history of trauma. Often, the Head Start workforce reports their own trauma-like symptoms or emotional duress due to consistently hearing about the traumatic experiences of the children and families they serve.

It is important that Head Start programs serving children from birth to 5 and their families consider ways to support the physical health, safety, and wellness of their staff. Staff experience many unique demands in their work with young children. Frequent bending, lifting and carrying children, and moving equipment places particular physical strains on staff. The

furniture in classrooms may not be adult-sized, limiting staff to the floor or child-sized chairs and tables. A large percentage of staff experience at least one area of work-related ergonomic pain.

Head Start programs are strongly encouraged to create a working environment for staff that transmits a culture of wellness. This starts with program leaders modeling and promoting staff well-being and infusing this culture throughout all program services and interactions on a regular basis.

Programs can use Head Start base grant funding to support staff wellness efforts. These efforts are also allowable costs for funding received through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Acts. It is important that a program support their decisions to use base, CRRSA, ARP, or other funding for staff wellness activities with written policies and adequate documentation.

### **Strategies to Promote Wellness of Head Start Staff**

In determining which strategies to use to promote staff wellness, programs should leverage their data to identify staff strengths and needs. For example, position turnover rates can help the program recognize where challenges exist in staff retention and focus resources on understanding and addressing staff concerns in those positions. The remainder of this IM shares actionable requirements and recommendations for programs.

**1. Programs must support a program-wide culture that promotes children’s mental health, social and emotional well-being, and overall health ([45 CFR §1302.45\(a\)](#)).** To achieve this, programs can:

- Develop a clear mission and goals for staff wellness with actionable steps and strategies.
- Periodically assess strengths and needs of staff by gathering data directly from both current and prospective staff.
- Implement identified policies, procedures, and strategies to support staff wellness that are informed by program data. Gather feedback from staff on wellness strategies to determine if refinements or improvements are needed.

**2. Programs must ensure all staff and consultants follow appropriate practices to keep children safe during all activities, including, at a minimum, the requirements listed in [45 CFR §1302.47\(b\)\(5\)](#).** To achieve this, programs can also:

- Provide at least one regularly scheduled break for staff during their work day.

- Support staff to feel comfortable to request and receive a brief unscheduled ‘wellness break,’ in addition to a regularly scheduled break, to cool down or regroup if they are feeling overwhelmed. Programs can use floaters to cover these short breaks.
  - When possible, provide a dedicated space for staff breaks that offers comfortable seating, water, soft lighting, stress-reduction resources, etc.
- Provide adequate paid vacation and sick leave for staff.
- Offer employee assistance programs such as a check-in or consultation with a mental or physical health provider to address personal well-being concerns.
- Ensure all Head Start program staff are vaccinated, and that everyone age 2 and older wears a mask, to support a healthy and safe environment as children and staff return to full in-person services.

**3. Programs are encouraged to foster a working environment of mutual respect, trust, and teamwork where staff feel empowered to make decisions and know that program leadership are there to support them.** To achieve this, programs can:

- Empower education staff to feel true ownership of the learning and developmental progress of children in their care. For example:
  - Create frequent opportunities for education staff to take the lead on decisions about education practices and implement strategies that work for their classroom or home-based setting.
  - Support education staff to take risks, try innovative strategies, and treat mistakes as learning opportunities in their work with children.
- Use strategies such as reflective supervision, peer reflection groups, mentoring, coaching, and mental health consultation to build a work climate of respect and trust.
- Engage staff in team activities that foster a safe and fun work environment, such as:
  - Health and fitness challenges (e.g., staff exercising together or achieving a common health goal such as collectively walking 100 miles)
  - Celebrating staff’s personal and professional achievements
  - Noticing and rewarding staff for their work (e.g., personal thank-you notes, shout outs to staff who did something great in a certain week, etc.)

**4. Programs are encouraged to use one-time ARP and other sources of COVID-19 relief funding to provide incentives to staff to support retention.** To achieve this, programs can:

- Consider hiring bonuses, hazard pay, return-to-work incentives, child care stipends, retention bonuses, or temporary raises in pay, particularly for staff positions that are difficult to fill ([45 CFR §75.431](#)).
- Ensure staff have sufficient paid leave, including to receive the COVID-19 vaccine and recover from any side effects, as well as to quarantine or recover if they are exposed to or contract COVID-19.

- Any incentives for staff must be reasonable and subject to an established written policy of the grant recipient for allowability ([45 CFR §75.431](#)). Programs are reminded to update their written policies and procedures to reflect staff incentives.
- Programs should carefully communicate with staff that any incentives with one-time funding sources are not permanent. Programs may consider ways to link such incentives to a commitment from the employee to remain in their position for a certain period of time.

**5. Programs must make mental health and wellness information available to staff regarding health issues that may affect their job performance, and must provide staff with regularly scheduled opportunities to learn about mental health, wellness, and health education ([45 CFR §1302.93\(b\)](#)). To achieve this, programs can:**

- Connect with other Head Start leaders and staff to learn about strategies that have worked in their programs, such as through [MyPeers](#).
- Communicate with staff about the importance of their well-being in one-on-one and team meetings. Ensure leadership engages directly with teams to understand staff challenges.
- Engage a mental health consultant or employee assistance program to provide opportunities for staff to learn about mental health and wellness.
- Increase peer-to-peer learning related to well-being, such as listening circles to provide space for staff to check-in with each other, decompress, and discuss challenges.
- Ensure program policies and procedures comply with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) [requirements for employers](#).
- Support staff to attend trainings focused on well-being. Combine this with ongoing opportunities to implement newly acquired knowledge and skills (e.g., through coaching).
- Review available resources on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), including from the [Head Start Heals campaign](#).

**6. Programs are encouraged to consider ways to improve work spaces and incorporate more physical activity, safety practices, and healthy options into daily work routines. To achieve this, programs can:**

- Provide adult-sized furniture in classrooms and other spaces staff may need to use on-site. This includes chairs, tables, desks, changing tables, step stools, etc.
- Ensure staff have a dedicated space to take breaks and eat meals during the day.
- Provide on-site yoga or exercise classes for staff.
- Encourage staff to implement physically active learning activities with children, such as dancing, outdoor games, sports, etc. Programs are encouraged to review resources from the [I Am Moving, I Am Learning](#) initiative.
- Have healthy snack or meal options available for purchase on-site for staff.

**7. A critical part of promoting staff wellness is ensuring staff are aware of their rights as employees. Programs must establish written personnel policies and procedures that are approved by the governing body and Policy Council or policy committee and that are available to all staff ([45 CFR §1302.90\(a\)](#)). Programs are encouraged to regularly inform staff of these policies and procedures, including their rights under applicable federal and state laws. For example:**

- [Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex.
- [Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990](#) prohibits organizations from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment.
- [Whistleblower protection laws](#) protect employees from employer retaliation for reporting workplace violations such as injuries, safety concerns, and other protected activities.
- The Head Start Act states funds may not be used to assist, promote, or deter union organizing efforts ([Sec. 644\(e\)](#)). If a grantee uses non-Head Start resources for these purposes, costs must be carefully documented and allocated in a manner that ensures there is no misuse of federal Head Start funds. This prohibition on federal Head Start funds relates to the organizing and establishment of unions within the workplace. Grantees may incur normal and reasonable expenses once unions become established, such as expenses for negotiating labor agreements with established unions and allowing employees and managers time to resolve grievances during work hours.

If you have any questions regarding this IM, please contact your Regional Office. Thank you for the work you do on behalf of children and families.

/ Dr. Bernadine Futrell /

Dr. Bernadine Futrell  
Director  
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