

Voices from the Field: Linda Wilson



Q1: As a program director, what is your role in facilitating community collaboration and partnerships?

As a Director of an Early Head Start program, community collaboration and local partnerships are essential to our work. We serve children and families in their homes, at centers, and in community locations. Partnerships and collaborations can be formal or informal and with individuals, organizations, or agencies. Our agency has agreements with the local early intervention program, local health departments, Departments of Social Services, public schools, and others. We also have relationships with individual staff within each of these organizations.

My role as director is to help facilitate the collaboration and partnership process at all levels of the program. This means that I may be the one at the table talking to others about a written agency agreement or it might mean that other program staff are taking the lead. We serve a rural area with tight knit communities. Sometimes it is my job as a leader to get out of the way and provide opportunities for others to strengthen relationships. We identify the best person for the job within our program and provide supports and guidance as needed. If it is a goal-planning meeting for a child, the child's teacher needs to participate. As leaders, we make that happen by budgeting for a classroom substitute, so the teacher can attend. These opportunities can create conditions for a successful partnership and opportunities for new leaders to emerge.

Collaboration takes time, money and committed personnel. It is not always easy and at times, it might mean looking beyond the typical partnering agencies. It involves being open to new partnerships and considering a broader range of potential partners. It takes looking at your program mission and guiding principles, revisiting policies and procedures, prioritizing efforts and resources, and determining why we are in the business we are in. It really takes a systems approach.

Q2: What strategies have helped your program successfully create inclusive systems of supports and services?

Three strategies have helped us successfully collaborate and create inclusive systems of supports and services. The first strategy is to build relationships with others. Sharing interests and priorities, having frequent contact, participating in meetings, inviting partners to provide feedback, engaging in community events and activities, and following up with partners or potential partners are all part of the relationship-building process. Relationship building helps identify common ground, which is a good starting point for collaboration.

The second strategy is to be a solution-based. A solution-based mind set can help clear the way to layer funding and resources. It helps you look for and build on what is working. It helps you look for what it will take to accomplish a goal. Focusing on solutions instead of problem solving can help move the collaboration process forward.

The third strategy is to keep your “eye on the prize”. At times enrollment and eligibility requirements, budgets, attitudes and beliefs, and territorial concerns can have an impact on collaboration and services. However, when the focus is on the work of achieving optimal benefits for children and families, there is a higher chance of success. Keeping the focus on the work helps avoid taking it personally. This is a strategy that works internally within our program and externally with community partners.