

WEST VIRGINIA
**Early Childhood
Planning** TASK FORCE



**Stakeholder Survey
and Discussions
Summary of Findings**

Prepared by



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Stakeholder Survey and Discussions Summary of Findings

Introduction and Description of Stakeholder Engagement

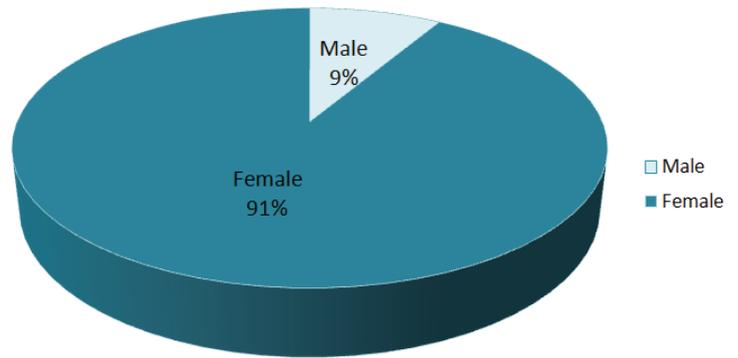
Opinions of key stakeholders about a wide range of issues affecting the early childhood services system in West Virginia were solicited through:

- (1) An on-line survey which could be accessed by anyone with Internet access, and
- (2) Discussions held in various locations throughout West Virginia.

Stakeholder engagement through the survey and discussions was designed to assess the views and opinions of people throughout the state about a range of issues relevant to improving early childhood services including their vision for the early childhood system, service availability, strengths and challenges within the current system, issues related to program quality, service utilization, and other issues of interest to the Early Childhood Planning Task Force.

Survey responses were collected over a three-month period from July 15th to October 15th, 2013. Females made up the vast majority of respondents (91.4%). The survey was administered as a “convenience survey” and is, therefore, reflective of the views and opinions of those persons who chose to respond. Although a survey of this type is not statistically representative of the general population, the survey responses provide useful information given the relatively high number of participants

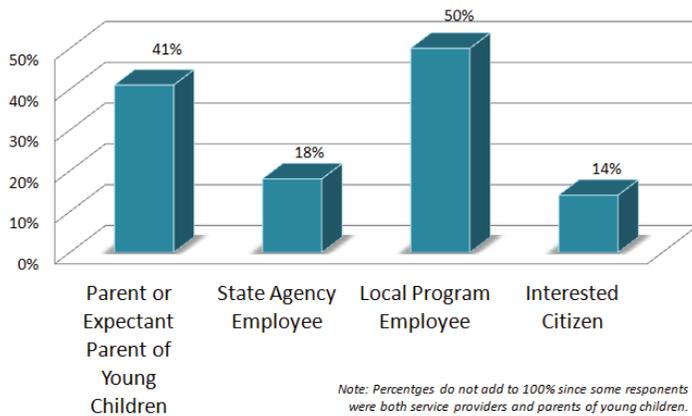
Respondents by Gender



and the general level of respondent knowledge about early childhood services and programs in West Virginia. Survey respondents were, for the most part, people familiar with early childhood services and programs available in the state - either users or providers of services supporting the development of young children prenatal to five years of age. A total of 747 completed surveys were collected from persons residing in all fifty-five counties of the state. 86% (642 of the respondents) were providers of early childhood programs or parents of young children who use services in the state and 14% of the survey respondents (105 people) identified themselves as “interested citizens who were neither users nor providers of services.

There were 747 people who completed on-line surveys and 290 people participated in facilitated discussions.

Percent Survey Respondents by Type



Survey respondents were representative of both rural and more populated areas of the state – 20% indicated they live in larger cities, 48% live in smaller towns, and 32% live in rural areas.

A total of nineteen facilitated discussions were held during the months of August and September. A list of discussions held may be found in the appendix. Discussions were designed to engage particular stakeholder groups in a dialogue about issues affecting the early childhood services system. Discussions were structured around eleven questions although due to time constraints, not all questions were discussed by all groups. Twelve of the stakeholder discussions were attended primarily by parents of young children; however, some service providers also participated in most of these sessions. Two of the discussions were limited to providers of early childhood programs and two discussions were held with health care providers. One session was held with mothers of young children who were incarcerated at the Lakin Correctional Center, one was held with business leaders, and one was held with the Legislative Action Committee. A total of 290 people participated in one of the stakeholder discussions held in varied locations throughout West Virginia.

This report summarizes the key findings and conclusions from the stakeholder engagement strategies designed to inform the Early Childhood Planning Task Force.

Findings

Stakeholder Support for Comprehensive Early Childhood Services

There appears to be a broad understanding of the importance of early childhood services among those persons who participated in both the survey and discussions.

- 98% of the survey respondents agreed with the statement: *The first few years (birth to 5 yrs of age) are extremely important to success in school and later life.* Participants in the discussions also expressed a strong belief that early childhood is a critical period of development. Common elements of the vision for the early childhood system expressed within all discussions included universal access to needed services and the need for high quality programs.

“One of the biggest obstacles to a stable workforce is the availability of quality childcare. Everyone in our communities is affected by this issue.”

- Survey Respondent

- A strong majority of the people who completed the survey expressed a belief that early childhood services should be supported with public funds. There was also support expressed for additional private investments. 65% of all survey respondents would support “a small increase in state taxes or fees” so long as the revenue was used to “provide high quality early childhood programs”.
- Survey responses also indicate strong support for increasing salaries and benefits of early childhood workers - 86% agree that salaries and benefits of workers within publicly funded programs need to be

increased in order to attract and retain a good workforce within early childhood programs.

Stakeholder discussion participants support additional public and private investments in child care programs and investments to improve salaries and benefits of the early childhood workforce. There was a consistent theme expressed at many discussion sessions that additional state investments were needed in services that promote early childhood development and some of the “innovative programs” cited by discussion group participants included corporate/public partnerships to promote quality child care programs.

- Survey respondents also tend to think that private employers should provide special types of support for their workers with young children. When presented with the statement: *Employers should not be providing special types of support for workers with young children*, 84% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Although the vast majority of survey responses reflect a strong consensus among those persons completing the stakeholder survey in support of additional public investments in the early childhood service system, a few respondents offered comments in opposition including one who said: “I believe that the best use of resources is to scale back and target services to specific targeted populations and allow the majority of families to support and guide their children through the early childhood years utilizing their own resources with public funds expended only to provide parent educational materials.”

Strengths and Challenges within the Early Childhood System

When stakeholder discussion participants were asked to reflect on *What is working well within early childhood services in West Virginia?*, those in attendance stated there were good

“It is impossible to run a child care facility and balance affordable fees with paying a living wage to employees. High child care fees drive parents away from the workforce.”

- Survey Respondent

programs currently serving young children in many parts of the state. Many comments offered by participants were particularly focused on the success of West Virginia’s Pre-K program and there appears to be a shared sense of pride in the national recognition and collaborative model that involves public school, child care centers and Head Start.

Other elements of the early childhood services system that were identified as working well included the general caring nature and commitment of early childhood program staff and the excellent working relationships among state level program administrators overseeing the different public programs serving young children and pregnant women. Stakeholder discussion participants also feel the current attention being paid to improving early childhood services through the Task Force process is working well and the broad recognition among policy makers and the general public of the importance of the early years of life to later success is important.

Some of the challenges identified at stakeholder discussions were related to availability, access and affordability for many families. Participants talked about areas of the state that do not have a full complement of programs available to support families with young children. Home visiting services in particular were identified as a type of program not available in many counties. The lack of public transportation in the state was also seen as limiting access to early childhood programs that some families would otherwise utilize and affordability of higher quality child

“Children’s medical homes do not know about early childhood resources. Medical staff are seen by parents as the experts yet they often do not have the information and don’t make the connections for families.”

- Discussion Participant

care programs was identified as a barrier for lower to middle income families.

A gap in services available to three year olds who “age out” of early childhood programs designed to serve children less than 3 yrs. of age but do not yet meet age requirements for public pre-K programs was acknowledged by several discussions as problematic.

A particular area of discussion within the groups made up of healthcare professionals was the need for improved communication and exchange of information between early childhood programs and the child’s medical home. Access to specialists in areas of speech, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral health who work with young children was also an area identified as challenging by healthcare professionals as well as other types of discussion participants.

Quality Issues within the Early Childhood System

Several survey questions were designed to gauge perceptions about quality within early childhood programs.

- Survey respondents generally agreed that: *Public funds should only be used to support programs for young children that have demonstrated a positive impact on health, development, and/or school readiness.* 71% of all survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Respondents also

tended to support high standards of quality even when higher costs were considered. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: *Programs for young children should not be required to meet high standards of quality since this increases the cost,* 89% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

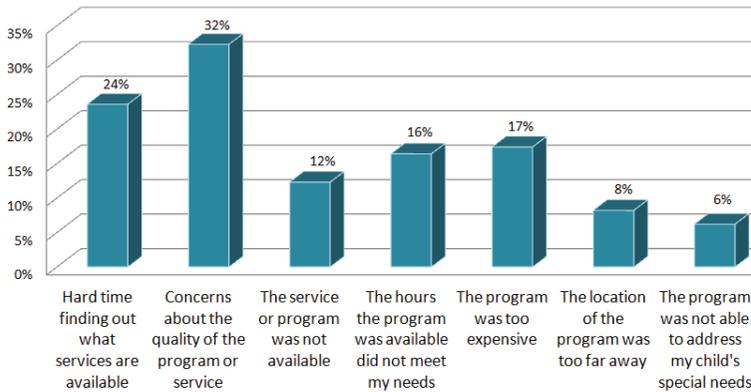
- When survey respondents weighed the importance of improved access for families needing services and improved quality of existing programs, a majority of those offering an opinion opted for improved quality. Survey respondents were asked to consider the statement: *Reaching more families and young children in need of services is more important than increasing the quality of existing programs.* Nearly half (49%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement while only 21% agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining 30% of respondents chose to neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

Quality issues were also a topic receiving attention at numerous facilitated stakeholder discussions. Participants in the nineteen discussions were asked to describe their vision for a high quality early childhood system. Common themes across the discussions included effective collaboration and a coordinated system of services, universal access to needed services, highly trained staff, early parent education, and increased levels of quality within child care programs. Many participants also recommended taking steps to implement the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) within the state’s child care programs.

Access to Early Childhood Services

Survey respondents who have used services within the past three years were asked to identify the types of problems they have encountered in trying to find programs and services for young children in the area where they live. Nearly one in three (31%) indicated they have not

Problems Encountered Accessing Services



encountered any problems; however, many of the respondents identified one or more issues in accessing needed services. 32% had concerns about the quality of available programs, 16% were not able to find programs that were available during hours of the day that met their needs, and 17% found that available programs were not affordable (“too expensive”).

Nearly one in four (24%) of the early childhood services consumers said they had a hard time finding out what services were available. Survey responses about access to services are summarized in the chart.

“When I moved to the area there was a waiting list of about three months before I could start my child in daycare. What if I had a job at the time?”

- Parent Respondent to Survey

Many of the comments offered by survey respondents about problems they have encountered focused on difficulty finding a child care program. Some parents have been unable to find any child care facilities in the area where they live; others have been placed on waiting lists, had concerns about quality, or found local child care programs to be unaffordable.

Stakeholder discussion participants also identified several issues related to access to services. Those issues that were most frequently mentioned during the discussions included:

- Transportation issues and availability of services in some areas of the state.
- Affordability of programs for many lower and middle income families.
- Limited availability of child care for infants.
- Gaps in services for three year olds not yet eligible for universal Pre-K.
- Lack of specialist services in many areas of the state including speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and behavioral health services.

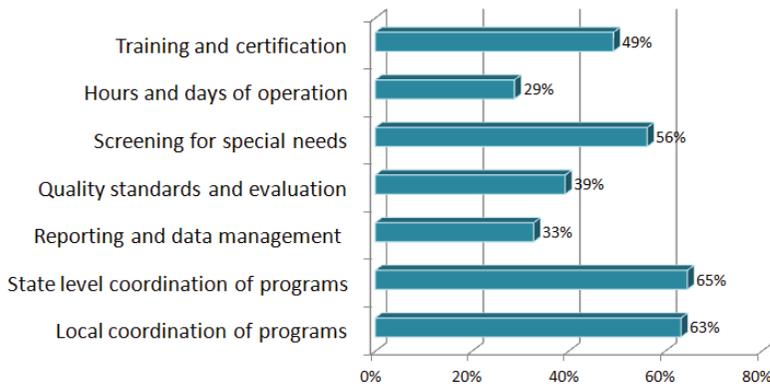
Systemic/Management Issues

Participants in local discussions were asked to complete a short exit survey before leaving the discussion venue. The survey asked them to identify practices that need to be improved in order to strengthen the early childhood service system in West Virginia. Responses for 229 participants were analyzed to identify systemic and management related issues that may need attention. More than half of the key informants participating in discussions indicated improvements were needed in areas related to:

- Local level coordination across programs,
- State level coordination across programs, and
- Screening for special needs.

Improved practices in other areas were also identified as needed including practices related to staff training and certification, quality standards and evaluation, reporting and data management, and hours and days of program operation.

Percent Discussion Group Participants Indicating Need for Improved Practice



When asked what West Virginia should do to improve services for young children, many survey respondents addressed the need to increase the level of funding supporting early childhood programs in order to improve quality, raise standards related to qualifications and training, and improve the salaries and benefits of the early childhood workforce.

Comparative Analysis of Survey Data by Sub-Groups of Respondents

The survey data was filtered by area of residence of respondent (larger city, smaller towns, and rural areas) in order to determine if there were any notable differences in response patterns based on area of residence. No meaningful differences were noted in the views and opinions expressed by the survey respondents when responses to the survey questions from people residing in rural areas, small towns, and larger cities are compared with one another.

Survey data was also filtered to sort out users of the Medicaid or CHIP programs and those

“Families should have access to a **‘one stop shop’** and not have to visit lots of different programs in order to find needed early childhood services.”

- Survey Participant

persons who indicated they use early childhood services but are not eligible for Medicaid or CHIP. Presumably, this type of analysis provides some insight into how lower income families (those that are Medicaid/CHIP eligible) perceive the early childhood system as compared to the perceptions of higher income families (those not Medicaid /CHIP eligible). Seventy-three (73) survey respondents indicated they had used the Medicaid or CHIP program within the past three years. The responses to survey questions for these persons were compared to responses from 162 persons who indicated they had used early childhood services but had not used either the Medicaid or CHIP programs. This comparative analysis was conducted in order to determine if Medicaid/CHIP eligible families viewed the early childhood system any differently than other users of the system.

Some differences in response patterns were noted based on Medicaid/CHIP utilization. A higher percentage of respondents who use the Medicaid or CHIP programs agree that:

- Public funds should be used to help low income families purchase high quality child care (84% of Medicaid/CHIP users agree compared to 72% non-users).
- Priority should be given to children with special needs and those residing in families below the FPL by programs supported with public funds (59% of Medicaid/CHIP users agree compared to 43% non-users).
- Reaching more families and young children in need of services is more important than increasing quality within existing programs (29% of Medicaid/CHIP users agree compared to 17% of non-users).

Some differences in the types of services used were noted when service utilization patterns were compared for the two groups as well. The Medicaid/CHIP group of respondents tends to

use Head Start, home visiting services, and Public Pre-K programs at higher rates while the non Medicaid/CHIP group uses private preschool programs at higher rates.

It should be noted that the stakeholder survey was not designed to provide for a rigorous comparison of sub-groups of respondents by income and the above findings based on usage of the Medicaid or CHIP programs is based on relatively small numbers of survey respondents.

Conclusions

Findings from the stakeholder involvement process lead to the following conclusions about the current early childhood services system in West Virginia.

- Stakeholders understand and appreciate the relationship between early childhood development and success in school and later life.
- Additional public investments are needed to improve the quality of existing services and expand access to services in underserved areas, and there is considerable support for additional investment of public funds in high quality programs.
- Stakeholders believe private sector employers have a role in supporting their workers with young children and see public-private partnerships as one strategy to improve services.
- Salaries and benefits of the early childhood workforce need to be improved in order to attract and retain qualified staff within many early childhood programs.
- West Virginia's collaborative Pre-K program is a recognized strength within the early childhood system and cited as an example of what can be accomplished given the necessary policies, funding and timeframe.
- Quality childcare is often unavailable or unaffordable for many West Virginia families.
- A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) should be implemented to the extent possible.
- Early childhood services need to be better coordinated at both the state and local levels to promote a seamless system of services that supports parents and promotes early childhood development.
- There is a general lack of awareness about programs and services for young children among healthcare professionals and providers of human services.
- Consumers often lack knowledge about early childhood programs that serve their area and/or how to gain access to these programs.
- Communication and information sharing between healthcare professionals serving young children and early childhood programs needs to be improved.
- There is a need to improve special needs screening and increase access to specialists in areas of speech, PT, OT and behavioral health.
- Home visiting programs are valued by families and by providers of health and social services. There is a desire to increase access to evidence-based home visiting programs in underserved areas of the state.

Appendix – Summary of Stakeholder Discussion Session

| Type of Participants | Location | Convening Organization |
|--|-------------|---|
| Parents of Young Children | Beckley | KISRA |
| Incarcerated Mothers at Lakin Correctional Center | Lakin | KISRA |
| Parents and Early Childhood Professionals | Charleston | Birth to Three |
| Head Start Parents & Professionals | Wheeling | Northern Panhandle Head Start |
| Healthcare Professionals | Morgantown | WVU Children's Hospital |
| Healthcare Professionals | Charleston | Perinatal Partnership & CAMC |
| Parents of Young Children, Providers, Elected Officials and General Public | Kingwood | Preston County Starting Points |
| Home Visiting Professionals | Roanoke | Partners in Community Outreach |
| Parents of Young Children | Wheeling | Teach for America |
| Head Start/Early Head Start Parents and Staff | Martinsburg | RESA 8 |
| Child Abuse Prevention Advocates & Parents | Moorefield | Partners in Prevention - Eastern Regional FRN |
| Pre-K Leadership Institute | Charleston | WVDE |
| Child Care Center Directors | Charleston | Child Care Centers United |
| Child Care Resource and Referral | Beaver | Mountain Heart |
| Parents of Young Children | Institute | Partnership of African American Churches |
| Parents of Young Children and Providers | Richwood | Nicholas County Starting Points |
| Business Leaders | Charleston | Vision Shared |
| Advocates | Charleston | Legislative Action Committee |
| Parent Leaders | Charleston | Family Leadership First |

