Letter from the Director

Dear Friends,

At the start of every year, Children’s Friend always looks for new ways to innovate and improve services to ensure that we are truly living out our organizational mission. At the end of the year, I am always struck by how much we accomplish when we all come together and go “all in.” It is because of you that we are able to do the work we do.

I am really proud of what we, together, have achieved this year for our Head Start and Early Head Start children and families. With ingenuity and creativity, hard work, and the investments of our funders, partners, and staff, we were able to launch exciting new initiatives and streamline services to have a greater positive impact on our most important stakeholders—our Head Start children and families.

These accomplishments include the launch of a robust Early Head Start - Child Care Partnership, which expanded access to high quality early learning opportunities for Rhode Island infants and toddlers. I feel so fortunate to have embarked on this with our current child care partners who have embraced everything this partnership means, including striving for such high quality early childhood educational experiences, and having put in the hard work to make it a reality.

We began an exciting new project to support dual language learners in culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms, and are looking forward to expanding this approach in the coming year. Our integrated nutrition project, in which we combined WIC and Head Start nutrition services, has shown many positive benefits, including more efficiencies for staff and less duplication of services for children and families. We have also engaged in exciting efforts around literacy including the Providence Talks project and socialization groups in the community. As always, we continue to support children with disabilities through our relationships with school departments and the Kids Connect Program in our classrooms. We were pleased to host another successful parent conference and I am so impressed with the efforts of everyone who came together to make it happen.

I can’t say enough how grateful I am to our Children’s Friend community – you – for your support and dedication. Your involvement is what makes it possible for us to innovate, improve, and effect change for the better.

Thank you for being all in.

Aimee G. Mitchell
Senior Vice President, Programs & Operations
Director, Head Start
Research shows that high quality learning experiences are critical for children in the earliest stages of life, when their brains are growing rapidly. Federal and state governments recognized the importance of investing in early childhood education in January 2014, when Congress authorized $500 million to expand opportunities for high quality infant and toddler care through national Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) grants.

Children’s Friend, with its long history of quality partnerships with child care providers to improve services for children, was one of only 275 recipients of an EHS-CCP grant in 2015. The grant increases access to full-day, full-year child care for Early Head Start children and families. Children’s Friend partnered with 10 licensed child care centers in Rhode Island core cities (Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket) to provide these new services.

All participating child care partners need to meet vigorous Early Head Start standards in teacher credentials, early childhood education and development, health, and family engagement. The first 18 months of the grant period were dedicated to helping prepare partner programs to meet these standards, and this start-up period has been critical.

“These first 18 months we’ve had some work to do, but it has been exciting, and a learning opportunity for everyone involved,” shared Kristen Caine, Head Start/Early Head Start Partnerships Manager at Children’s Friend.

To help the partners prepare, sites completed the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) to assess space, interaction, activities, schedule, and health/safety in their infant and toddler programs. Children’s Friend paired a liaison and mentor with each site to create an individualized plan for meeting the standards and to support teachers in creating high quality learning environments. Partner programs were also able to access funds to purchase lesson plans, child assessment software, classroom materials, or pay for teacher training, to further enhance the quality of their classroom(s).

This is a unique model that leverages strong relationships with a commitment to shared leadership and governance across all partners. “We are integrating comprehensive services into child care programs, so having shared governance is very important,” explains Kristen.

Kelli DiDomenico, Vice President of Family Engagement at The Children’s Workshop, a program partner, offered this perspective: “The best thing about this partnership is that it is a true partnership and collaboration, and the support Children’s Friend provides...I can’t say enough about what having a true collaboration with a community partner like Children’s Friend means."

The Partnership enrolled 120 children during the 2015-2016 school year.

In 2015, the ITERS was completed on all Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships (EHS CCP) sites. On a scale from 1-5, the average score in 2015, prior to joining the partnership was 3.63. After the initial year, scores increased to 3.87. Especially of note, sites that began with a score under four, improved their scores dramatically: from 2.79 to 3.78.

2017 ITERS observations are in the process of being completed at all partner sites.

In 2013 Catalina started working at the Genesis Center as a substitute teacher. Although she slowly got more hours, she lacked the credentials to move to full time status. After her daughter Jade was born in 2015 she was enrolled as one of the first EHS CCP children at Genesis Center.

Catalina’s work with the EHS and Child Care teams sparked her interest in child development and in late 2016 she completed a three credit college level CDA course supported by EHS CCP funds. She recently moved to full time status which she cherishes: “before, I worked two or three jobs, I was never home and I wasn’t giving my kids enough time”.

More importantly, she says, her coursework helped her “recognize the importance of how I interact with my kids, and how I teach them in their everyday lives”.

Now, as she completes her final CDA requirements, Catalina will receive full employee benefits as she works as one of the first staff in a newly opening toddler classroom. And she’s not stopping there: “with the confidence from completing the [CDA] class and I want to enroll in college courses to become an interpreter".
INnovation in Immersion: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Classrooms

Across the nation, the number of children who are dual language learners (DLLs) is a large and fast growing population. In Rhode Island during the 2014-2015 school year, 49% of DLL students were in grades Pre-K to 3. Research shows that supporting children in both English and their home language early on has many benefits, including improved school-readiness and a strong foundation for continued language development.

At Children’s Friend, we are working to do just that through a pilot project aided by a $40,000 grant from Collette, which has helped to pay for learning materials, literacy backpacks, and mentor coaching for the teaching staff. The materials are intentionally chosen to support dual language learners, and have been an important component of the high-quality dual language learning environment for the children.

Within our 10 culturally and linguistically responsive classrooms, children are supported in their home language and culture through bilingual interactions with teachers and a multicultural approach to learning and family engagement. The program is responsive to children who speak only one language, as well as children who are bilingual or multilingual.

“Our goal is to support children who are dual language learners and ensure they become successful graduates, ready for kindergarten,” explains Bertha Dischert, a Child Development Manager at Children’s Friend and project leader of the DLL Classroom Pilot. “We have bilingual teachers in each classroom to support the home language, and all of the classroom activities have a lot to do with language and literacy. We have books in multiple languages, multicultural materials, and focus a lot on parent engagement, which is very important. Parents have come into the classrooms to share stories about their culture, and they help support the staff – for example, by sharing phrases in their language that can be used to help guide a child throughout the day.”

The benefits of the DLL environment have already been felt by our families and children. “We had a parent return to her child’s teacher at the end of last school year crying,” shared Bertha. “She was crying because for the first time, her child had been able to communicate with his grandmother who did not speak English. The child could now communicate in his parent and grandparent’s home language, even though his first language is English.”

Bertha added, “We have many success stories on the other side, with children now communicating in English, which was a new language to them when they first enrolled. Ideally, we should be doing this in all of our classrooms. Over the next year, we’ll be thinking about how we can expand these essential services.”

*“Dual language learners” are children who are learning two (or more) languages at the same time (Office of Head Start, 2016). [Office of Head Start](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/Dual%20Language%20Learners/DLL_%20Resources/OHSDefinitionof.htm)


Data for Culturally & Linguistically Responsive Classrooms

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Besides Head Start and Early Head Start, Children’s Friend offers an array of programs to support children and families in Rhode Island. One of these programs is WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, which provides nutrition assistance and support for young children and new moms. Children’s Friend has provided WIC services since 2009, and four of the five Children’s Friend WIC offices are located at Head Start Centers.

When Vanessa Albanese was working as a part-time nutritionist for both Children’s Friend’s Head Start and WIC programs, she noticed that there was an overlap of services between the two. “We were serving the same families and providing the same nutrition education,” she explained, “[but] there were separate teams and we didn’t communicate or share services.” She wondered whether there was an opportunity to work as one collaborative team. “This idea that WIC nutritionists could also become Head Start nutritionists was a new and exciting project…. combining staff allows us to stretch our resources and improve coordination of care among families.”

The integrated project now has 11 nutritionists with each one assigned to a Head Start site. Vanessa, who is now the Nutrition Supervisor for Head Start, Early Head Start and WIC Programs, said that with the integration of services, there are several benefits for families: “There is a lot less seeing a different face, and it is much easier to set one clear nutrition goal between the two programs – this helps make things more achievable for families.” She added that families have more opportunity to talk to their nutritionist between appointments and that Head Start offers the flexibility of home visits.

One of the most important successes of the project is the increased potential for cross referrals and program outreach. Vanessa explained that the nutritionists can now see whether a child in Head Start is participating in WIC, and this information has been helpful for increasing access to services. “Our goal is to have all Head Start children participating in WIC, and we are reaching out to families who are eligible but not enrolled.” Vanessa added that there is also improved coordination between the nutritionists and other Head Start staff – “not only are the nutritionists contacting families, they are working with teachers, family workers, and nurses. This way there are more people on the team reaching out to families to let them know they could be eligible”.

While integrating programs and services can be challenging, combining WIC and Head Start nutrition services was a natural step towards improving the coordination of services for families, and Children’s Friend is looking forward to making even more improvements. “This is a new project, and we’re still figuring out what works, what doesn’t, and what changes we need to make,” shared Vanessa. “The goal of this integration is to have the most positive impact on families.”

Integration in Action

“For a busy mom of three it is extremely comfortable to have it all in one building and see a familiar face” – a WIC/Head Start Mother

Previously, if a family were to talk to their WIC counselor about a child’s weight gain or other concerns, the WIC team would work with mom on diet and try to consult with other professionals where possible. However, when Jose’s mom came in to the WIC office concerned about Jose’s weight and continued use of a bottle in Head Start, the WIC/Head Start nutritionist was able to work directly with her to implement a holistic plan.

As a group, they developed a plan for weaning Jose from the bottle and increasing his weight.

Jose received weight checks every couple days in the WIC office when mom picked him up from Head Start, and they are able to follow up on any concerns or issues. Within a week Jose had been weaned from the bottle, and ongoing weight checks confirm that his BMI is improving!
For many families, navigating the school department for the first time can be intimidating. If your child has a mental health concern or disability, it can seem even more challenging to know where to start.

That is where the Head Start Mental Health & Disabilities Team comes in.

“We coach families through the meeting process with the school department, help families coordinate Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and assist them with strategies to help make these meetings effective,” says Lisa Afonso Lynes, Mental Health & Disabilities Supervisor for Head Start and Early Head Start at Children’s Friend.

Supporting children with disabilities is an important part of the Head Start and Early Head Start performance standards, and we are committed to making sure children and families have the tools they need to be successful.

As part of this, we have built strong relationships with local school departments and mental health providers to make sure that kids get the services they need.

Last year, 598 children were referred to the mental health and disabilities team for consultation and 127 children received school department services such as occupational therapy, speech and language, and other resource services. An additional 57 Early Head Start children not yet old enough to receive school department supports were provided Early Intervention Services.

Children’s Friend also offers Kids Connect, a program that helps children with special needs to learn, play, and socialize with their friends in the classroom. The program supports children by providing a trained staff person to help guide the child through the day, in an inclusive environment with their peers.

In the coming year, we will continue our extensive support services for children with disabilities. Our approach to ensuring children are successful is to involve the entire team (family members, teachers, nurses) working with the child. As Lisa puts it, “Our greatest success stories are when we come together as a team to advocate for the child and promote their success.”
How did you first get involved as a parent? What led you to Policy Council?

I had been very active in my children’s education and was involved with the PTA at my older children’s schools. At the time, my son was in Early Intervention and had just entered Head Start, so I joined the Parent Committee and was very dedicated to that.

When my daughter entered Head Start, I decided to try Policy Council. After being elected Chair, I attended a conference where I remember thinking, ‘wow, I didn’t know there was this much to know about Head Start’. I later learned about and joined the State Head Start Association. Eventually, I was elected to the regional Policy Council and then the National Board. This has been an opportunity to give back and make the program better for not just my children, but all future Head Start children.

You have helped organize a conference for parents, the Ready, Set, Kindergarten! Conference. What are some of the highlights of what this conference has to offer?

The Ready, Set, Kindergarten! Conference started out of a desire to make a conference available for Head Start parents to attend in the state. Although I didn’t have any experience with conference planning, I took it on.

The first year it was held at one of the Children’s Friend sites and had 40 attendees. The next year we held it at the Marriott, and over 80 people attended—so participation doubled in one year. This past year, we invited our congressional representatives and Mayor Elorza—a Head Start alum—who joined us to talk about the transition to Kindergarten.

The feedback has been wonderful. Parents loved it, and we had over 100 attendees. We are hoping to continue to grow the conference, especially our partnerships with the school departments, who join us to talk about the transition to Kindergarten.

Can you talk about some of the work that Policy Council does and what parents should know about getting involved?

Just come! Some people feel intimidated, but I want parents to know that just showing up is important, and you don’t have to speak out if you’re not comfortable. Policy Council involves parents and management coming together to make decisions about program policies and operations. It gives parents a voice within the agency and the community. It is really an opportunity to effect change.

Just coming can change your outlook on things—it did for me. The training and support that Children’s Friend gives you is not only a résumé builder, but you build relationships that can last a lifetime. If I had known four years ago what I could have been doing, I would have pushed myself harder. I also want to commend the staff at Children’s Friend, because if not for them, I wouldn’t be where I am today. They are like my family, and they can be yours too.

Dear All,

My name is Sokpha Chea, former parent of a Head Start child at the Friendship Center and current Community Representative on the Head Start Policy Council. I was also Chair of the Policy Council for over one year.

When my son started Head Start three years ago, I was asked to be part of the Policy Council. At first, I was not sure if I wanted to be part of it. I was going to the Parent Committee meetings at Friendship and they explained the purpose and goals of Policy Council. Almost a year after my son was enrolled, I finally joined the Policy Council.

Since becoming a member of Policy Council, I have learned so much about myself. I have learned that my voice is very important and that my opinion matters. I have reached goals that I never thought I would achieve. I had the opportunity to go to regional and national conferences and learned so much from the other parents I met.

Now, I am more confident and stronger than before. I appreciated the support, help and guidance that I received from the Family Engagement Team, the staff, and other parents and members of Policy Council. With everyone’s support, I now believe in my leadership skills, I am self-confident, and know that I can achieve my goals or dreams, and that I can do anything I want.

Thank you very much Head Start staff (Family Engagement, Teachers, Family Workers, and Board Members, especially Mrs. Charlotte Diffendale), for believing in me and helping me on this journey. Now, I am working and very involved in my children’s PTO in the public school system. Once again—thank you so much everyone.

Yours truly;

Sokpha Chea
Former Policy Council Chair and current Community Representative.

INnovation in INVolvemen:
Family Engagement & Empowerment

Robyn Giragosian is a mother of six and became involved with Children’s Friend several years ago when her young son entered Head Start. A former Policy Council Chair, she now serves as a Parent Representative on the National Head Start Association Board. We interviewed Robyn to hear from her about the great work she has done for our children and families, and what she has to say to other parents about getting involved.

INnovation in INVolvemen:
Family Testimony

Sokpha has been involved with Children’s Friend since 2008 when her daughter began receiving Early Intervention services. Her son joined Head Start in 2013 and Sokpha’s motivation to advocate for children quickly moved her from Parent Committee to Policy Council, and on to serve as Chair of Policy Council for her son’s final year in Head Start. Sokpha remains involved with the council as Community Representative.
The earliest years of childhood, when the brain is growing rapidly, lay the foundation for school success. During these first years, children are beginning to develop language and literacy.

Interactions that build language start at home, in relationships between children and their families. Children’s Friend supports these relationships and the impact they have on a child’s learning through an innovative initiative called Providence Talks.

Providence Talks began as a pilot program and expanded to include several community partners, including Children’s Friend. It works by combining technology and targeted coaching to help families increase the amount of words spoken in the home. Jonathan Keller, a Bilingual Providence Talks Worker, describes his work this way: “I always try to recognize and affirm that parents want the best for their child, and they know their child more than anyone. I try to build on that and notice what they are doing, and encourage them. Every interaction is really important, as is recognizing that parents are their child’s first and most important teacher.”

Families participate in Providence Talks for several months to a year, tracking their progress over time and setting goals with their Providence Talks Worker. “One parent was jumping for joy based on her accomplishments…this is an area where she shines. We have had wonderful sing-a-longs and her older child has read stories to her younger son...she really enjoys our time together,” shared Jonathan.

All Children’s Friend Providence Talks Workers are bilingual and approach the work by affirming the family’s home language and culture. To date, 195 children have participated in our Providence Talks program.

Providence Talks is not the only Children’s Friend initiative that supports parent-child interactions and literacy. This past year also saw the introduction of an evidence-based curriculum for Early Head Start and Early Head Start socialization groups. The curriculum helps support families through an “empathy-parenting” approach, which places value on the perspective of the child. “Parents really like [this curriculum],” stated Malia Goodwin, Children’s Friend Family Development Manager. “There are lots of activities in it that support interaction between the child and the parent.”

Other Early Head Start socialization groups, designed to help children and families form relationships and feel comfortable in their community through trips to educational centers (like local libraries and the Providence Children’s Museum), have also been successful.

“We are really working with families to help them understand the impact they can have on child’s learning and school success,” shared Malia. Jonathan added, “The focus is on literacy, but it is really about parents connecting with their child and seeing them be successful.”
**Recycling Fashion Show!**

What do a bunch of kids and their teachers do when they see a pile of trash? Create a fashion show worthy of Paris, of course! Teachers at our Carter site saw all the paper and other recyclables in the bin and got creative teaching kids about the three R's. Children designed and created their dresses, hats, jackets and accessories out of plastic bags, paper towel tubes and bottle caps. This is integration in action.

Supervisor Sandra Frankel says of the event: “Those kiddos ROCKED the runway! I originally sent out a ‘please help, we need all hands on deck’ email. I thought only a few could help out after hours. Almost all the staff were here to help! Staff from the Food program was here, the Mental Health team was here, some went home and came back to help, some were late to other jobs or classes, some made this a very long day.”

**Annual Financial Statement**

**Income: 8/1/15 - 7/31/16**

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**Expenses: 8/1/15 - 7/31/16**

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**AFC Budget: 5/1/16 - 4/30/17**

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**Looking for Ways to Help?**

We need you! There are countless ways to make a difference in the lives of our youngest and most vulnerable children. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact Maryellen O’Mahony, Director of Advancement, at 401-752-7624 or momahony@cfsri.org.
Services Provided in 2015 - 2016

Children’s Friend provided essential services to many of Rhode Island’s most vulnerable children through the Head Start and Early Head Start Programs. Let’s do the numbers...

1,469 children received services from Head Start and Early Head Start.

100% Funded enrollment: Head Start served an average of 1,036 students monthly, exceeding its funded capacity of 1,034.

102% Funded Enrollment: Early Head Start exceeded its funded capacity of 160, serving an average of 164 students monthly.

Head Start provided 1,184 children and their families with quality child care and education, health, nutrition, and social supports.

Early Head Start served 19 pregnant women and 285 children and their families through home visiting and center based services that support positive parent-child relationships, and promote positive growth and development in children.

93% of Head Start children and 96% of Early Head Start children received a medical exam in the course of the year.

With support from a partnership promoting dental health, 91% of Head Start and 72% of Early Head Start children received a dental exam.

Head Start and Early Head Start served 67 homeless families, successfully supporting 57 of them to obtain housing ensuring a more stable environment for children and enhancing their capacity to learn and develop.

184 children with disabilities received services in Head Start (127) and Early Head Start (57) including counseling for children and families, one-to-one classroom support, and coordination with other service providers.

Measuring Progress

Each year we seek to improve the outcomes for children in Head Start and Early Head Start. This year was no different. We use the Teaching Strategies Gold to develop curricula and track child outcomes.

Infants and Toddlers in Early Head Start are assessed using the Developmental Readiness Review, which identifies children “at risk” in the domains of Receptive language, Expressive language, and Print Knowledge. The percentage of children enrolled in EHS that were “at risk” dropped in each domain between the Fall of 2015 and Spring of 2016 with an especially large reduction in risk for Receptive language.

* Note: EHS enrollment fluctuates as children graduate and new children enroll over the course of the year. Therefore, not all students assessed in Fall are still enrolled in Spring. Similarly, some of those assessed in the Spring may not have been.
Children’s FRIEND

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