

## Community Care During a Pandemic Takes Kindness, Strength and Heart

Laughter, learning and compassion fill the hallways and classrooms at the Neosho, Granby and Longview Head Start and Early Head Start (EHS) centers, where we serve 4 EHS children and 91 Head Start children and their families.

March 23rd, was when our students were scheduled to return from spring break. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, rather than returning to class our daily routine changed. Virtual classrooms and weekly parent communications became the norm, and we joined forces with our local school districts to deliver meals to children and families.

During the first week, we delivered an amazing **970** meals to children and families. ESC's Head Start and Early Head Start staff continued to deliver meals for the next eight weeks, with meals more than doubling the second week before reaching **2,025** meals delivered the week of March 30, 2020. All told, we delivered meals to families for nine weeks, totaling 15,164 meals. During our third week of delivering meals, we were joined by a new partner, Opal Foods, who donated 230 dozen eggs — providing each of our families with 2½ dozen. Our staff also connected with local Farm to Families and helped distribute thousands of boxes of produce and milk to families in need during the next several months.

On May 19th, our EHS classrooms returned to in-class learning. Our EHS staff needed time to adjust to new procedures and changes in classroom arrangements to ensure safety during this Pandemic. This was an exciting day for our families!

In June and July, we offered all children who would be entering kindergarten in the fall the opportunity to attend a Head Start Summer School — the first summer school in 50 years. We had ten children attend. One of them was David, who was able to attend both June and July sessions. When he started in June, he would not make eye contact with anyone, including other children. His hand would shake when he held a pencil or crayon, and he would shrug his shoulders when you asked him questions. By the end of the seven weeks, he was leading the other boys in games, writing his name, and talking over other kids to give answers.



As we approached August and the beginning of a new year with the COVID-19 numbers increasing in our community, we decreased our class sizes per CDC guidelines. Early Head Start remains full, with four children, and Head Start now has 60 children, 10 in each classroom in our Neosho, Granby and Longview centers.

We currently offer five children virtual services, including mental health consultant virtual visits, weekly family virtual visits, meal delivery and daily social media posts.

We are a small but **STRONG** community. As of November 10, 2020 our county has had 2,569 total positive COVID-19 cases and 38 deaths.

Our Head Start and Early Head Start centers are **OPEN** and we are **HERE** to help the children and their families while taking precautions and following CDC guidelines. We will continue to do whatever we can to help ensure we meet the needs of the children and families we serve.

One member of our team summed it up: "I am thankful to be a part of this wonderful team. We are inspiring each other, and we will survive this and together we will come out stronger."





Lydia Mouse is in her third year as a parent volunteer in ESC's Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS). Her journey started at Head Start with her daughter, Harley, and her son, Artaveus, in Early Head Start. Harley has since moved to kindergarten, thanks to readiness skills obtained in Head Start. Artaveus has transitioned to Head Start, and Lydia's youngest, Luna, is now in EHS childcare. Through her time in the HS/EHS program, Lydia has worked toward self-sufficiency, beginning with obtaining her Missouri driver's license.

Nevertheless, let us back up and start at the beginning. Lydia lacked the confidence to drive on her own. It was through her relationship with her Early Head Start Home Visitor that Lydia was encouraged and motivated to achieve this goal. Lydia eventually decided to seek employment, and later transferred her children from EHS home-based to EHS center-based participation. As everyone got used to changes that now included a work routine, Lydia realized that advancing in her employment required her to obtain her GED. It was difficult to make the decision because she did not know where she would get the time to do it in addition to working, taking care of her children and maintaining her home. Head Start stepped up to help build her courage and strength. It was the encouragement of her Head Start Family Resource Specialist that gave Lydia the strength and determination to keep moving forward. Lydia passed her GED and has her certificate now. What is next? Who knows? The sky is the limit for Ms. Mouse, who now has more employment and educational opportunities!

## The Value of Preparing Head Start Children During a Unique Year

I have worked in the Southwest Area local Head Start Program for 24 years as Teacher and Health and Development Assistant. During July 2020, Granby Head Start was one of the few centers to hold summer school in over 50 years. Summer school focused on children who were going on to enter kindergarten in August.

The last two years, I was this group of children's teacher — I had been with them as they grew from three, to four and into 5 year-olds. Over the four weeks of summer school, I helped feed these children's curiosity as they worked on creative projects, developed important writing skills, built and constructed with various materials, enjoyed quiet times to relax and read, and participated in the ever-popular outdoor summer games and activities.

Summer school was the perfect way to help these pre-kindergarteners polish their social-emotional skills and academic abilities in preparation for their journey into elementary school in August. I watched them transform into responsible and skilled boys and girls.



## Driving Innovation Through Partnership

Each year we work collaboratively with each school district to ensure that children with special needs receive high quality services and interventions. The collaboration is outlined in a "Memorandum of Understanding" and implemented in a variety of ways with different school districts. This year, we faced many challenges due to the COVID-19. One example; getting children with disabilities the services they need without putting other children at risk by having outside providers in the classroom.

We are particularly proud of the innovative approach that we established with the Carthage School District.

Carthage Head Start has always been an innovator. When presented with a challenge, they rise to it. The Carthage Head Start staff developed a partnership with the Carthage School District several years ago wherein an Early Childhood Special Education teacher from the school district is housed at the Carthage Head Start center. This partnership eliminated the need for children to be transported to another location to receive services and allowed them to learn in their own classroom. It also provided consistency in that one person provided all the services to our Head Start children.

When presented with restrictions due to the Pandemic this year, we started brainstorming with the Carthage School District on ideas to maintain quality services. ESC's Area Supervisor, Kathy Miller, proposed making a change to the child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), naming the Head Start teacher as the implementer of services, to be overseen by the school district. The school district agreed.

Guess what? It works great! The school district now provides a packet that is specifically designed for the child with the IEP and they meet with the Head Start staff every other week, via phone or Zoom to discuss progress and needs. This is working very well and is only strengthening our partnership with our school district as well as building the skills of our teaching staff.

In a very difficult time due to the Pandemic, our children are receiving great services and meeting their goals. Our teachers are also very appreciative of the opportunity to be implementers and partners with our local school district. And best of all, children are receiving the services they need.

