

Community Assessment 2020-2021

Pandemic Response

At Head Start, we continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and follow safety precautions provided by the Office of Head Start and the North Dakota Department of Health. In August of 2020, we felt fortunate to be able open up Head Start/Early Start to in-person programming, as other programs were not as fortunate.

Staff and children in our programming continued to wear masks and followed the most up to date safety guidelines. Parents, volunteers, and other outside personnel were not allowed to come in the building, so staff met parents outside at their vehicles to bring children in and out of our facilities.

In December of 2020, we experienced high case counts of COVID-19 amongst our staff and subsequently had to shut down various classrooms to accommodate their absences.

Like much of the country, or arguably much of the world, our community has been greatly impacted by the pandemic. Our local mental health professionals describe an increase in needs and a decrease in capacity to meet those needs. Administrators from two large local agencies reported that clients are presenting with increased symptom severity while simultaneously, mental health professionals are leaving the field or entering private practice and not serving higher risk populations. This leads to longer wait times for community members seeking mental health services and a greater degree of stress on the existing providers. One professional stated, "People who used to be doing well are now struggling and those who were struggling are now in crisis. . . Community mental health is struggling to maintain staff and meet the high need while prevention and early intervention services are basically non-existent."

However, on a positive note, local schools are now incorporating social workers and mental health providers in their buildings, making some services more accessible to students. Our own Head Start program has also contracted with an on-site therapist for our children and families. Decreased stigma regarding mental health treatment is also a positive trend seen nationally and locally.

Our local infant developmental disabilities services administrator from the Southeast Human Service Center Infant Development Program is reporting that he has not seen an increase in needs in the birth-to-three program. However, it may be that the needs that exist are not being seen as quickly due to increased isolation prompted by the pandemic.

Additionally, our own Head Start preschool classrooms have noticed an increase in the number of children who presented with very low cognitive skills, including several 3-year-olds who had little to no expressive language skills.

Our community continues to feel the financial strain of the pandemic resulting in additional business and daycare closures. Staffing shortages at all levels continues to be a concern, and

Head Start/Early Head Start is no exception. We are struggling to fill vacancies and are receiving very few applications for the positions that are posted.

Community Updates

In early 2021 SENDCAA expanded its Workforce Development program and has added an additional Workforce Development Case Manager. The overall goal of the Workforce Case Managers is to help clients achieve a more livable wage, ideally through advancing their training and education. SENDCAA has also expanded their Supportive Services for Veteran Families program and also added Self Sufficiency Case Managers to provide additional support to low-income families in our community. The Head Start program has developed a close relationship with the Self-Sufficiency department and regularly share opportunities that can help support the families we serve.

In Lisbon, the local food pantry is regularly stocked by community groups, and continues to have a drive by option. The Great Plains Food Bank in Fargo drove to Lisbon multiple times to do drive through food distributions. The Lisbon schools were back to normal with an optional hybrid format for those still nervous about COVID exposure or for those needing to quarantine/isolate. Community needs for Lisbon continue to be affordable housing, including rentals; affordable full and part-time childcare; and Pre-K education. One additional need that arose during this time was the need for affordable and accessible counseling. Fargo was the only option and that was a hindrance for most needing it.

In Wahpeton, for the first time ever, their community had the Great Plains Food Bank truck come. Public Health also did community COVID screenings. In May of 2021, Zimmerman Elementary which houses ECSE and Kindergarten had to shut down because of a severe mold issue. The Kindergarten classrooms had to be shifted over to the Wahpeton Elementary School for the 21-22 school year. They plan to have the school ready for 22-23 school year as it will undergo a complete interior deconstruction and construction.

The Fargo/West Fargo area schools provided free meals to k12 students for the entire school year utilizing federal COVID relief funds. In addition, the schools provided children with food for the weekend every Friday.

A growing obstacle for families that continues to be a concern at Head Start is that we don't have a full-day Head Start program at our West Fargo site. Many families living in West Fargo come to our Central and South locations in Fargo because they need full day programming. Since they have a West Fargo address, they can't receive services, such as therapy, or transportation to an ECSE program. We hope to open a full day program at our West Fargo site in the future to address this need.

Our program continues to be a resource for families in the Fargo, West Fargo, Wahpeton, and Lisbon communities throughout the pandemic.