

## Head Start Ambassadors Connect with “Hard-to-Reach” Families

Each summer and fall, low-income parent leaders called Head Start Ambassadors knock on thousands of doors in their communities to talk with other parents about early learning and Head Start. These COFI-trained parent Ambassadors post flyers in places where they know parents will see them. They set up tables in drug stores, grocery stores, WIC offices, and laundromats to talk with neighbors and distribute information. They team up with staff of under-enrolled Head Start centers to reach out to parents in those neighborhoods. They talk with parents at block parties, community festivals, parades, and health fairs.

Most importantly, the centerpiece of the program is door-to-door, parent-to-parent conversations. Ambassadors knock on doors to get to know families and to identify

those with children who are eligible but not enrolled in Head Start. The Ambassadors talk with the parent or caregiver about why early learning is so important. They share their experiences enrolling their own children or grandchildren in Head Start, and provide information about programs in the area. When there is interest in a referral, the Ambassador gets the names, birthdates, and contact information for each eligible child. This information is sent to Illinois Action for Children, the local referral group for Head Start and child care. Illinois Action for Children then responds to the family with information on local Head Start centers.

Every other Saturday, the Ambassador teams are joined by 15-20 newly-trained Head Start parents to go door-knocking in their neighborhoods. These Saturday Outreach Team members are mostly young mothers who work or are in school full-time and do not have the time to be an Ambassador. However, they are equally committed to bringing the message about the importance of early learning to

their neighbors and others. These parents cycle into the program each spring and are mentored in their role by more experienced Ambassadors.



*In teams of two, Head Start Ambassadors knock on doors in their neighborhoods to get to know families and to identify those with young children who are eligible but not enrolled in Head Start. They tell their own stories of enrolling their children or grandchildren and provide information about Head Start programs nearby.*

### Promising practices to enroll hard-to-reach families in quality early learning programs

This policy and practice brief comes from COFI (Community Organizing & Family Issues), the umbrella organization that trains and supports grassroots parents to be powerful leaders on issues that affect their families.

The Head Start Ambassadors program is an innovative, parent-created pilot project that is increasing participation of at-risk, low-income children in quality early learning programs.

It is one promising avenue for positive change. We share our experience in the hope that it can serve as a model and a process for addressing community problems with a “bottom-up” approach of authentic parent engagement.

For more information, visit [www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org) and see the parent-to-parent research report, “Why Isn’t Johnny in Preschool?”

**Head Start Ambassadors have had peer-to-peer conversations with nearly 20,000 families, about half of them with a child under age 5.**

**Ambassadors have referred more than 3,000 children for Head Start programs.**

# Why does it work?

**Because Head Start Ambassadors are uniquely effective at connecting with hard-to-reach families**



Ambassador Felipa Mena



Ambassador Gloria Harris



Ambassador Louise Evans

## » **Parent Ambassadors build relationships**

The Ambassadors have existing relationships in their communities and use the door-to-door outreach to build more.

**“It’s important that we are members of and a presence in our communities. People see us in churches, libraries, doctors’ offices, everywhere.”**

—AMBASSADOR FELIPA MENA

As Ambassadors go back to some of the same doors year after year, people recognize them and are more likely to pay attention to what they are saying.

**“This lady that lives in my neighborhood said this was the first time she had seen people come back. We weren’t just in the neighborhood one time—we came back. She said she got her granddaughter into a program. Coming back each year—that is what it takes to get people the information.”** —AMBASSADOR GLORIA HARRIS

## » **Parent Ambassadors speak from experience**

When Ambassadors talk with other parents it is peer-to-peer. They share stories from their own lives and their experiences with the early education system.

**“A professional uses a lot of fancy language, while we tell them personal stories. I give them a testimony from my grandson. He is doing well in kindergarten now. Many of the moms—especially the young moms say—‘I don’t want to let my baby go.’ But I told them how it would help their kids get ready for school.”**

—AMBASSADOR LOUISE EVANS

**“You have to get your own self involved—give them your own story. I tell them how proud I am of my daughter who is 6 years old and doing so well—she is in the highest group in first grade.”** —AMBASSADOR REGINA SIMMS

## » **Parent Ambassadors share valuable information**

The Ambassadors receive training from Head Start experts on topics like children with special needs and the support services that accompany Head Start and Early Head Start, which they share with other parents.

**“The trainings gave us the information so that we could not just enroll children, but also educate parents. There is lots of misinformation about Head Start. Through the trainings we participated in, we made people—parents, schools, churches, businesses—aware of how beneficial Head Start is to the entire community.”** —AMBASSADOR RUBY MURPHY

## » **Parent Ambassadors dispel myths and offer support**

The Ambassadors are able to offer support and encouragement for parents who may not want to send their child because of their own negative school experiences or fear of entering the “system.”

**“I met parents who were undecided or nervous about sending their child to Head Start because that was their first child. We let the parents know that they could sign up to volunteer or work at the agencies their children attend.”**

—AMBASSADOR CONCEPCIÓN SALDIVAR

» **Parent Ambassadors share their personal commitment to quality early education**

Many of the Ambassadors' own children and grandchildren have participated in Head Start or other early learning programs. They see the difference it makes in children's lives. They know that the sooner children get into quality early education programs, the better opportunities they will have.

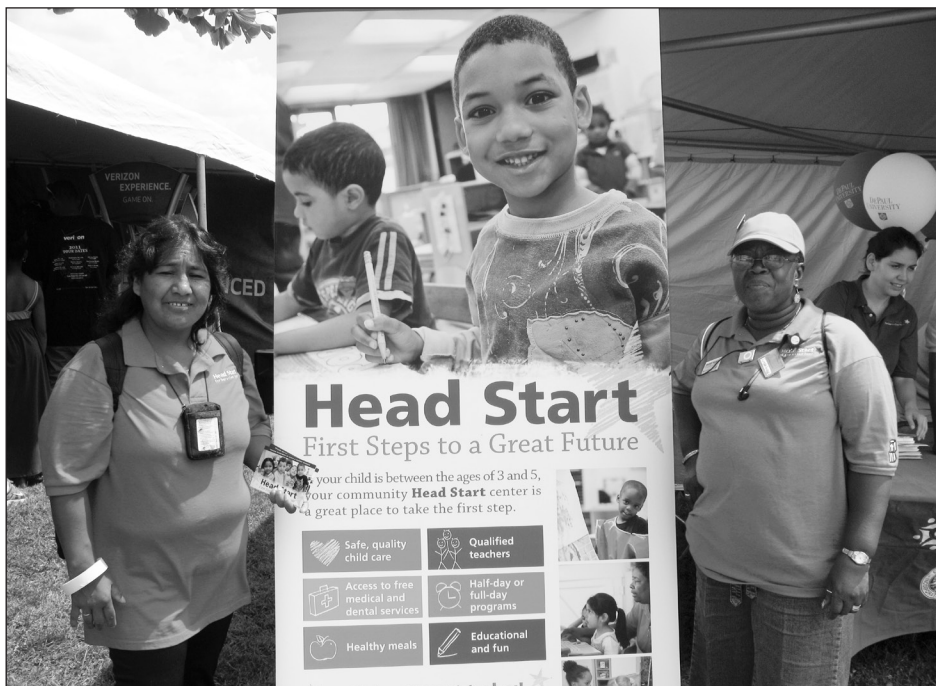
**“People appreciated us trying to get the babies in school—our eagerness and purpose, even in 90 degree heat. We didn’t care what the weather was outside; we want these children in school.”** —AMBASSADOR MICHELLE MORTON

It is well established that peer-to-peer outreach is a game changer in low-income communities. Public health practitioners long-ago realized that the messenger is as important as the message. The successful transmission of the message often depends upon the legitimacy and “street cred” of the person delivering the message. For example,

**“We are the ‘go to’ people in our community about Head Start.”**

—HEAD START AMBASSADOR  
ROSALIA GRILLIER

*Promotores de Salud*, or Health Promoters, serve to connect communities that are often low-income, underserved, and/or marginalized with resources, information, and support. Another highly regarded peer-to-peer effort is *Ceasefire*—which engages formerly gang-involved residents in intervention efforts to prevent violence among current gang members.



In addition to knocking on doors, Head Start Ambassadors set up tables in drug stores, grocery stores, WIC offices, and laundromats to talk with neighbors and distribute information. They talk with parents at block parties, street festivals, parades, and health fairs.



Ambassador Regina Simms



Ambassador Ruby Murphy



Ambassador Concepción Saldivar



Ambassador Rosalia Grillier





*The Latino Community Head Start Ambassadors reach out to families who speak Spanish.*

## Following parents' lead to address community issues

Head Start Ambassadors are all COFI-trained and supported parent leaders. They are members of a powerful citywide, multi-racial network of low-income parents called POWER-PAC, Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council. These parents interviewed over 5,000 parents with preschool eligible children who were not participating in structured preschool programs. They found many families lacked basic and needed information:

- » Families didn't know the importance of early education;
- » Or if they did, they didn't know that there were free preschools in their community;
- » Some worried that the family might lose their child care subsidy;
- » While others worried about their immigration status;
- » And many thought that their child was not ready for preschool because the child did not speak English, was too shy, or for other reasons.

POWER-PAC leaders concluded that despite the efforts of early educators and public education campaigns, many of the hardest-to-reach families were still not aware of the importance, ease, and benefits of preschool enrollment.

They proposed and advocated to create a grassroots door-to-door, parent-to-parent outreach program. Parent leaders understood that information would be best processed if it came from people that the families could relate to—*other low-income parents and grandparents who have similar life experiences.*

POWER-PAC leaders took the idea of a peer-to-peer outreach program to the City of Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS) which administers the City's Head Start programs. The Ambassador program was born. City administrators found the idea compelling and were eager to invest in this innovative solution. Many Head Start programs struggled to fill slots yet knew that low-income families who

*It is well established that peer-to-peer outreach is a game changer in low-income communities. The messenger is as important as the message.*



could benefit were not enrolling their children. DFSS recognized that POWER-PAC parent leaders were determined, committed community residents (mostly mothers and grandmothers) with deep roots in Chicago's low-income neighborhoods and a "can-do" attitude about addressing intractable problems. Administrators believed that by employing these parents as outreach workers they would be creating a job-training experience in addition to bringing the early learning message to families.

In 2009, the Head Start Ambassadors Pilot Program was launched as a partnership of DFSS, COFI, and the Coalition of Site Based Child Care Administrators. The Head Start Ambassadors program is part of a multi-faceted approach to public education and marketing of Head Start in the City of Chicago.

### **Making a difference: results, cost-effectiveness, and benefits**

Over the past 3 years, Parent Ambassadors have:

- » Knocked on 50,708 doors,
- » Spoken with 19,272 families, 9,085 of them with a child under age 5,
- » Referred 3,163 children for Head Start, and
- » Bottom line, Ambassadors helped fully enroll Chicago's Head Start program for the first time in years.

The Head Start Ambassadors program has proven to be *very cost-effective* with an average cost of \$175 per referral. The cost includes Ambassadors' salaries and the organizational expenses of providing training, supervision, and administrative support.

Each Head Start enrollment brings federal dollars into local programs, a national average of \$9,000 per child. If even half of the referrals generated by the Ambassadors program become actual Head Start enrollments, *the total program investment is bringing back 32 times its cost in early learning program revenues*. This figure is based on the conservative assumption that one-third of those enrolled will participate in Head Start for the full two years.

**"Since we started working with the COFI-trained parent leaders, we have surpassed our enrollment goals every year—and we've surpassed them *earlier* each year."**

—VANESSA RICH, CHICAGO  
DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND  
SUPPORT SERVICES

Moreover, research shows that participation in quality early education programs increases a child's likelihood of graduating from high school, attending college, and earning more money. Early learning also decreases the chance that they will be involved in special education or the criminal justice system.

Less readily measurable, but an important potential benefit to examine further, is the extent to which those 19,000 plus conversations helped create a buzz in the community that, over time, is increasing awareness of the importance of quality preschool programs. Also, these conversations help re-weave social connections and trust within communities and support community building, so that both Ambassadors and the people they speak with feel more connected to their community.



### **Head Start Work Leads to Jobs**

**"Thanks to COFI training and the Ambassador program, I have completed my education and now have a job as an outreach worker for families in public housing."**

—KEOSHA GAMBLE

Keosha Gamble is a young mother from the Altgeld public housing neighborhood on Chicago's far south side. She began COFI leadership training at her child's Head Start center, and joined the Saturday Outreach Team. As she explained: "I have young children in Head Start and I'm able to talk to mothers first-hand about the benefits of Head Start. Now I feel I'm really giving back to my community."

The skills, confidence, and connections Keosha gained through her work as a Head Start Ambassador, along with her passion for early learning, helped her land a full-time job with Illinois Action for Children doing outreach with families in public housing!

Other parents have also gotten outreach jobs and some are now training to be community health workers.

# Keys to success



**“We meet parents at their comfort level. Parents might be intimidated by someone from the Center, but as the parent of a young child, I go to them and they talk to me.”**

—MICHELLE MORTON,  
HEAD START AMBASSADOR AND  
SINGLE MOTHER OF A TODDLER

## **Strong leaders, effective training, and good management**

The Head Start Ambassador project is managed by COFI which recruits and selects Ambassadors on the basis of leadership skills and experience, ability to build relationships with parents, and demonstrated passion about the importance of quality early childhood education. Ambassadors are all low-income African-American and Latina mothers and grandmothers who are veteran activists in their communities.

The 12 Ambassadors are divided into three teams by region and language spoken. One team is assigned to the low-income African-American communities on Chicago's westside, another to the African-American communities on Chicago's southside, and a third team works in the Latino communities on the northwest and southwest sides.

Each team goes out together 3 days a week for 4 hours at a stretch. Every other week Ambassadors are joined by Saturday Outreach Teams, newly trained Head Start parents who are motivated to spread the word in their communities.

Ambassadors earn about \$500 per month, and Head Start parents who join them every other Saturday receive a small compensation of \$10-\$11 per hour. Program materials, such as sample scripts, tally sheets, scheduling and management forms, are available from COFI.

## **Carefully select, screen, and support Ambassadors**

By design, Head Start Ambassadors are low-income parents themselves. In many cases, they are struggling to keep their families afloat and facing a myriad of personal challenges. Many have had difficulty finding or keeping jobs, and may struggle with basic expectations of timeliness and organization. Several of the Ambassadors have limited literacy skills and some do not speak English. None own a car and most do not have a driver's license. Most do not have home phones and some have no access to a telephone or computer of any sort. And for many, balancing work with family responsibilities and crises creates continual obstacles. While the Ambassador role is part-time and temporary employment, participants are expected to treat it as a “real” job and to learn job skills where appropriate. Practical strategies that have helped include:

- » Building incentives (for perfect attendance and on-time record) into the pay scale, but still providing flexibility for those who run into an occasional problem;
- » On a weekly basis, each outreach team can adjust its schedule to accommodate individuals with conflicts such as doctor appointments or court dates;
- » Some Ambassadors have been asked to leave due to the challenges around reliability and timeliness;
- » COFI staff with cars help transport bags and materials to outreach sites;
- » Providing public transportation passes to Ambassadors moving from site to site;
- » Checking in face-to-face and via team cell phones for those without phones of their own;
- » Pairing Ambassadors with different skill sets together so that they can communicate effectively with a range of parents and to compensate for

Ambassador limitations, including language and physical barriers. For example, the more physically fit Ambassador might carry the materials, while the less fit Ambassador holds the clipboard.

### **Provide introductory and continuing training to the Ambassadors**

In this pilot, all the parents involved in the program—Head Start Ambassadors and Saturday Outreach Team members—are graduates of COFI’s *Self, Family & Team* leadership program, a 7-session series that works with the parents to set and achieve personal, family, and group goals. The training helps parents to focus on positive, long-term goals for themselves and for their families, and to develop action plans for moving forward. COFI offers *Self, Family & Team* trainings in selected communities and, through its partnership with DFSS, to 30-40 Head Start parents annually at multiple sites around the city of Chicago.

Once recruited—and with COFI leadership training under their belts—Ambassadors and Saturday Outreach Teams participate in another 8 hours of intensive training: 4 hours of which are provided by COFI about community outreach, and 4 hours about the importance of early learning and about Head Start programs and policies, provided by Head Start experts. Ambassadors also participate in weekly on-the-job follow-up training sessions. Topics include community visioning and goal setting, how to listen to others, techniques for building relationships one-on-one, identifying community stakeholders, time management, professionalism, “hats” (mindfulness about the Ambassador role and how it is both different from and complementary to that of the community leader role), and specific sessions on Early Head Start, services available to special needs children, and supportive services to families available through Head Start.

### **Offer continuing support to parent Ambassadors, especially rookies**

In addition to its trainings, Community Organizing & Family Issues provides physical, practical, and emotional support to Ambassadors. Each Ambassador team is supported by a Team Leader, a COFI staff professional who is trained in parent leadership development. A Team Leader works approximately two hours for each hour of outreach. COFI Team Leaders:

- » Organize the teams’ schedules and assignments, including developing maps and meeting points;
- » Structure outreach strategies—such as providing coordination around community events, identifying under-enrolled programs to partner with, and stuffing bags of materials to distribute to families; and
- » Supervise and tabulate data records—including outreach destinations, logs of families spoken with, time sheets, and mileage/travel expense reports.

Above all, COFI Team Leaders coach, mentor and advise the Ambassadors, helping them to become ever more effective parent educators who serve as community resource people on Head Start.



*Over the past three years, Head Start Ambassadors have spoken with nearly 20,000 families.*

### **Supporting each other, celebrating success**

Head Start Ambassador work is physically and emotionally draining. The Ambassadors are out walking for four hours at a stretch. They are going up and down the front steps of buildings and up and down stairs inside of apartment buildings. Some families greet the Ambassadors with welcome and appreciation, but some doors are slammed in their faces. The Ambassadors need time to share these stories and to unwind from the daily grind. A weekly two-hour meeting to unpack the week’s work and to plan for the coming week is helpful. At these meetings, COFI also works with the Ambassadors to balance the stresses of the work with the feelings of accomplishment. It is vital to celebrate reaching targeted numbers of referrals and goals!



## **COFI**

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## **You can help spread the success of this program**

The past three years of the Head Start Ambassador program have shown that peer-to-peer outreach is a promising practice in reaching low-income families who have eligible but unenrolled preschool-aged children and in spreading the message about the importance of early childhood education. However, peer-to-peer outreach is not yet a routine part of early education programs. We ask that early education centers, policy makers, and advocates consider the following ways which they can help make sure more “hard-to-reach” families have access to quality early learning programs:



*Head Start Ambassadors going door-to-door*

**Invest in grassroots parent leadership, engagement, and organizing as a way to identify new policy and practice solutions from the ground up.**

**Encourage programs and communities with high numbers of at-risk unenrolled children to try parent peer outreach as a marketing strategy.**

**Carefully evaluate the impact and the cost-effectiveness of parent peer outreach, with specific respect to increases in enrollments and costs relative to existing marketing and public education programs.**

**Explore targeted funding mechanisms, like partnerships with corporations who recognize the importance of early learning, to provide seed funding for areas with high numbers of eligible but unenrolled children to pilot parent peer outreach programs.**

**Explore public funding partnerships with workforce and economic development agencies to create transitional jobs in preschool peer-to-peer outreach.**

**Ultimately, commit to increased investments to build a more integrated and seamless early learning system.**