



## Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships Offer a Path for Recovery

*By Paula Gates, chief program officer of Early Childhood Services, Sunbeam Family Services & Melissa Manning, training & professional development coordinator, Sunbeam Family Services & Educare EHS-CCP community of practice facilitator*

Recently in Oklahoma City, Jasmine,<sup>1</sup> a medically fragile 2-year-old with a restricted diet, was ordered by her doctor to stay home from child care due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this, Jasmine attended a community child care center while her mom worked the day shift at Whataburger.

Now, while Jasmine is home, her teacher reaches out weekly to read to her virtually and to share parent-child activities with her mom. Additionally, family advocates at Sunbeam Family Services are arranging special meal deliveries for Jasmine, and her family is receiving food, diapers, formula, books, toys and child development materials regularly.

“Our child care center has been a lifeline of support for Jasmine and our whole family,” says Audra, Jasmine’s mother.

### Impact of Partnerships

Jasmine is one of 680 infants and toddlers enrolled in the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (Partnerships) at [Sunbeam Family Services](#). Through our Partnerships, we provide relationship-based, comprehensive services for young children and their families living in targeted zip codes. Sunbeam, which operates Educare Oklahoma City, has 12 partners, including nonprofit, for-profit, and school-based child care providers who serve 680 children directly, and another 850 children benefit from enhanced services indirectly at these sites.

Through the current COVID-19 crisis, while our family advocates continue to provide resources and support for Jasmine and the other children and families served through the Partnerships, our instructional coaches continue to provide resources and support for the Partnerships’ child care teachers, center directors, and home providers while they navigate these new circumstances.

“Our partnership with Sunbeam is built on helping families, but it’s been so much more. We feel we are part of a much bigger picture than we ever could dream of being,” say Larry and Jana Harrell, owners of Southwest Child Development Center, one of Sunbeam’s child care and early education partners.

### What Does This Mean for the Field of Early Learning?

The COVID-19 crisis has more broadly exposed what we in early education have always known: although child care programs operate on razor-thin margins, they are vital to educate and nurture young children, support working parents, benefit employers, and sustain the economic and social fabric of communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Names of subjects have been changed to protect their privacy.

Partnerships, like the one at Sunbeam, offer a model for immediately stabilizing child care in our communities and setting a path for recovery. By infusing new resources into existing, under-resourced marketplace child care, centers and family child care homes can afford to raise the quality of the services they offer. Through Partnerships, children receive access to a higher-quality early care and education, as well as services like nutritious meals, access to health and dental care, and their families benefit from family engagement opportunities, mental health supports, and job and housing assistance.

Our state's seven Partnerships grantees, including those operated by the Choctaw Nation and Delaware Tribe, meet regularly with Child Care Services administrators within the Oklahoma Department of Human Services to build upon the wealth of [lessons learned](#) from our work. In recent years, this has resulted in policy reforms and new investments to strengthen the broader child care system in Oklahoma, including:

- Raising the bar for child care quality through a statewide Infant-Toddler Specialist Network and supporting child care teachers to earn the higher credentials.
- Informing policies that allow for layering Head Start and public child care funds to build the supply of family centered services within high-quality early learning environments.
- Expanding opportunities for working families with incomes below the poverty level to access high-quality care by waiving copays for eligible families and extending eligibility for child care assistance.

The pandemic has demonstrated that child care is critical to our state's core infrastructure. Working together, we must strengthen the networks, supports, and financial models that are the foundation of effective early care and education systems and will allow parents to get back to work quickly and children and families to flourish. Many of the mechanisms we need to move forward are already in place but need to be expanded.

## Strategies for Success

Partnerships across the country, as highlighted in the Ounce report, [Expanding High-Quality Child Care for Infants & Toddlers - Lessons from Implementation of Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership in States](#), offer strategies states have enacted that could be scaled further to strengthen infant and toddler child care through recovery from the current emergency and strengthen it against future crises. Such strategies include:

- Leveraging multiple funding sources and state systems in new ways to support local program success and quality.
- Supporting continuity of care without interruptions for infants and toddlers in working families with low incomes.
- Raising the bar for what quality infant and toddler child care could and should be.
- Creating higher education pathways to build new skills and competencies for the infant and toddler workforce.
- Scaling reforms to improve care for many more infants and toddlers.

We should invest state and federal funds, creating additional Partnerships between child care providers and Early Head Start grantees to strengthen opportunities for infants and toddlers. Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and its impacts is an opportunity to forge new pathways that ensure child care programs not only survive but thrive.