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OWF/PRC Guidance Letter No. 30

TO: Directors, County Departments of Human Service
Directors, County Public Children Services Agencies
Directors, Child Support Enforcement Agencies

FROM: Jacqueline Romer-Sensky, Director

SUBJECT: PLAN OF COOPERATION FOR EARLY START

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) strongly supports the Ohio Early Start program which is administered by the Ohio Department of Health (DOH). Consequently, Early Start language has become part of the amended Partnership Agreements effective July 1, 2000, with amended Plans of Cooperation addressing local coordination for Early Start implementation due November 1, 2000.

Based upon feedback from counties, there is often a lack of clarity of state expectations relating to Early Start and/or uncertainty regarding county-determined procedures. The purpose of this document is to clarify state expectations and suggest areas where local partners can develop working relationships for operating this program.

What Is the Purpose of the Early Start Program?

Ohio Early Start is designed to provide a comprehensive set of services and supports for families with very young children. All available research demonstrates the time span prenatally to three years of age play a critical role in the development of intelligence and personality. The services provided by Early Start not only combine to establish an important prevention activity for at risk OWF and Child Welfare families, but also to offer participating children the opportunity to be emotionally, physically, and mentally ready to enter school with optimum success.

Few agencies have the capacity to meet all the variety of needs of families participating in Early Start. Creating an effective program requires many agencies and organizations to work together. It requires partnerships with families (including extended families), County Departments of Job and Family Services, Early Intervention, Welcome Home, and Early Head Start, to name a few. Cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork will result in more and better services available to Ohio's children and their families.

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What Is the Early Start Plan of Cooperation Expected to Accomplish?

Each county's Early Start Plan of Cooperation is essentially the protocols established to help a local collaborative group function effectively. It is a document that outlines linkages among agencies and explains the working arrangement of operating the Early Start program. Each County's Early Start Plan of Cooperation should specify how the county's family services agencies and other government entities included in the Plan are to exchange information, as well as, coordinate and enhance services and assistance to individuals and families. Since there may be several agencies involved in operation the program, the CDJFS and CFCF Council are encouraged to bring all parties together in order to define and communicate the critical roles and responsibilities of each entity. It should support/reinforce the Early Start core services (*screening, referrals, service coordination, individualized family service plan [IFSP], family support and home visits*) outlined in the Performance Agreement between the Ohio Department of Health and the Early Start provider. Finally, upon completion, the Early Start Plan of Cooperation should be distributed to all agencies involved in Early Start.

Who Does the Early Start Plan of Cooperation Affect?

The Early Start Plan of Cooperation should target local partners. Minimally, this should include:

- the County Department of Job and Family Services through its Director (or his/her designated representative);
- the local Family and Children First Council through its Coordinator;
- the Family and Children First administrative agent (if different from the Coordinator);
- the Early Intervention County Collaborative through its Chairman/Coordinator; and
- the Ohio Early Start program contact (this person should be part of the Early Intervention Collaborative - if not, one needs to be appointed).

Areas of Cooperation

Following are some suggested areas of cooperation in which partners of the Early Start program should be involved:

- *program planning;*
- *information sharing,*
- *referrals process* (e.g., CDJFS's have ready referral resources at their fingertips through Medicaid, LEAP and child welfare participants);
- *program evaluation* (CDJFS's should receive Early Track reports at least monthly); and
- *funding* (contracting, billing, etc.) - CDJFS's should share fiscal information with the local FCF Council.

Counties are not limited by this list, and may want to incorporate additional areas of interaction into the program.

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What Is the Suggested Outline?

The Early Start Plan of Cooperation should be a brief one or two page description reflecting a workable, communicative linkage among Early Start partners. The program will achieve its greatest success if everyone involved knows what is going on, why it is so important, how each individual's role enhances the existing program, as well as, program expansion.

JRS:sb

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