

**Testimony to Committee on Education and Workforce Development
Meeting
Organization's Role in Early Childhood Care and Education
September 21, 2023**

Good morning, Committee Chairperson James, members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, fellow senators, and distinguished audience, both in attendance and watching remotely. I am Junia John-Straker, the CEO of Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands (LSSVI). Joining me today is Ms. Vaughn Hewitt, the Director of Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands' Early Head Start program.

Early Head Start (EHS) is a federally funded initiative designed, like Head Start, to break the cycle of poverty by providing comprehensive support to preschool children from low-income families. This support encompasses their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs. Head Start is proud to consider itself the original two-generation, anti-poverty program, focusing on families. Early Head Start, like Head Start, is governed by and adheres to the Head Start Performance Standards, which regulate the program. In September 2003, LSSVI established the only Early Head Start center in the Virgin Islands, known as EHS-Concordia West. In December 2009, LSSVI/EHS was awarded an expansion grant for Concordia East, which began providing services in July 2010. Our Early Head Start program serves children from birth to 3 years old, as well as expectant mothers.

The LSSVI/EHS programs are designed to serve a total of 120 children. Specifically, the East Center comprises 48 center-based slots, 12 home-based slots, and 12 slots for pregnant women. Meanwhile, the West Center has 24 center-based slots, 12 home-based slots, and 12 slots for pregnant women. This allocation totals 72 children enrolled in the center-based program, 24 children in the home-based program, and 24 expectant mothers in the Pregnant Women Program. **Furthermore, it is a requirement that ten percent of the Early Head Start population includes children with disabilities.**

Early Head Start places a strong emphasis on partnering with parents to promote holistic child development. We aim to equip parents with the necessary skills to support their children's growth, development, and school readiness. Our approach is guided by several key principles:

1. Every child is unique and can succeed with the support of nurturing relationships and environments.
2. Families are the primary caregivers, teachers, and advocates for children, and we empower them within our program and the broader community.
3. Providing nurturing, responsive, and consistent care creates safe environments where children feel secure and valued.

4. We recognize the interconnectedness of developmental areas, including approaches to learning, social and emotional development, cognitive development, language development, and physical development.
5. Our teaching is intentional and focused on how children learn and grow, offering developmentally appropriate opportunities for exploration and play.
6. We acknowledge and celebrate the diverse strengths of each child and family, rooted in their culture, background, language, and beliefs.
7. We foster relationships with the larger community, ensuring that families and staff are supported by a network of community agencies working in partnership.
8. We believe in developing a continuum of care, education, and services that provide stable support to families and children during and after their Early Head Start experience.

Embedded within Early Head Start's goal of school readiness for our children is a broader mission: strengthening families for the betterment of children's outcomes.

As part of the Head Start Program, we are required to assist parents in setting and tracking family goals and celebrating their progress and accomplishments. This is a crucial component of our Family Partnership responsibilities.

Now, let me provide an overview of **our Early Head Start curriculum**. Our curriculum is play-based, child-centered, and rooted in research. The HighScope Curriculum places active learning at its core. In our classrooms, children are encouraged to explore, interact, and exercise their creative imagination through purposeful play. Our well-prepared teachers support and extend each child's learning based on their developmental levels, ensuring that children are prepared and eager to learn when they enter school. We also work closely with parents and family members to promote children's learning by providing information about the curriculum, inviting family members to participate in classroom activities and workshops, discussing children's progress, and offering ideas for extending learning at home.

Now, let's turn our attention to **health**. Early Head Start collaborates with parents to promote children's health and well-being by providing medical, oral, nutrition, and mental health education support services that are accessible and comprehensible, even for individuals with low health literacy. Our Health Services Coordinator ensures that children are screened for vision, dental, and physical health on an annual basis. Furthermore, we provide health education resources and workshops to parents to address the health needs of children and families. Our program utilizes a referral and tracking system to connect students and families with specialized health and family services when needed.

Regarding **nutrition**, the nutritional component of Early Head Start is sponsored and regulated by the USDA. We provide three free sponsored meals daily to program participants, including breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack. Other food items, including nutritionist or doctor-recommended supplements, are provided as needed. All meals are prepared fresh daily on-site, with an emphasis on fresh produce when available. We do not serve prepackaged commercial baby food. Our program ensures that children are offered a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and protein-rich foods, all low in sugars and saturated fats. Meals are served in a family-style setting, with teachers actively engaging with the children. We also accommodate diverse dietary preferences, such as vegetarian,

pescearian, and vegan, and provide a culturally diverse menu to reflect the program's population and the community at large.

Promoting family literacy is a significant aspect of our program. Our Family and Community Partnership Coordinators (FCPCs) encourage parents to participate in initiatives like Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, where parents receive age-appropriate books monthly to read with their children. We have also partnered with the Department of Health and Education for the "Cradle to Literacy Program," which provides books and weekly sessions for parents in our Pregnant Women Program, aimed at instilling a love for reading in newborns. We invite bookmobiles to visit our centers and offer parents opportunities to apply for library cards. Additionally, we provide parent workshops on the Adult Education program, which enables adults to complete their high school education during the day or night, fostering family literacy.

To enhance parent involvement, we have established several avenues for parents to participate actively:

1. **Policy Council:** Each agency is mandated to maintain a policy council for the direction of the Head Start Program. Parents of children currently enrolled in each program option are proportionally represented on the policy council.
2. **Parent Committee:** We have established a parent committee exclusively composed of parents of currently enrolled children. This committee plays a crucial role in advising staff on the development and implementation of local program policies, activities, and services to meet the needs of children and families. It also serves as a communication bridge between the policy council, and the program. Furthermore, the parent committee participates in the recruitment and screening of Early Head Start employees. We actively encourage parents to volunteer and engage in various program areas, and we make special efforts to involve fathers through our Fatherhood initiative programs.

In terms of **assessment and screening**, our Early Head Start program utilizes the COR Advantage Observation-based child assessment. Children are assessed three times during the school year, with consistent growth observed in each assessment period, ultimately leading to the achievement of their readiness goals. We also employ the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) and the Ages and Stages Questionnaires-Social-Emotional (ASQ-SE) as screening tools. The ASQ pinpoints developmental progress in children, enabling educators to plan for each child's individual needs. Meanwhile, the ASQ-SE helps identify social and emotional challenges in young children, allowing educators to develop tailored plans to support these students effectively.

Finally, we recognize the importance of expanding access to the Early Head Start Program. The benefits are evident:

Pros:

- Increased service to the community for children and families.
- Enhanced early intervention for children, both in terms of physical and developmental needs.
- Strengthening families by providing comprehensive support.

- Greater opportunities for parents to seek employment, education, and job training while their child or children are enrolled.
- Improved ability to meet children's health and nutrition needs.
- Providing a safe haven for children away from community violence.

Cons:

- LSSVI faces challenges in meeting the federal match requirement due to limited funds.
- The employment pool lacks an adequate number of qualified staff.
- Non-competitive wages make it challenging to recruit and retain staff.
- Limited interest in volunteering within the community.
- Inflation continually drives up the program's operating costs.

In conclusion, I want to express our deep commitment to the Early Head Start program and our dedication to improving the lives of the children and families we serve. We appreciate the continued support of the Senate and look forward to working together to overcome the challenges we face and provide better opportunities for our community's most vulnerable members. Thank you for your attention, and I am now open to any questions or further discussions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,



Julia John-Straker
Chief Executive Officer