Overview of Head Start

- Head Start is a national organization that provides learning, health, and family well-being services to children from low-income families across the nation. It was founded in 1965 as part of the "War on Poverty" under President Lyndon B. Johnson.
- Families apply for eligibility through their local Head Start agency. Eligibility is based on family income at or below the federal poverty level, although children who are homeless, foster care, or receiving public assistance are eligible regardless of their family's income.
- Both public and private nonprofit agencies carry out the services provided by Head Start. These agencies receive grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and may receive additional funding from local, state, or federal programs.

Head Start programs are located in community centers, schools, and child care homes. Children may stay for a half day (4 hours) or full day.

Worcester Head Start currently provides services to 649 children and families across 4 schools.

Objectives of the 2015 Clerkship

- Understand how Head Start services contribute to specific and population health outcomes.
- Work collaboratively with other health professional students, providers, and community leaders to develop a service project that meets a specific need within the program.
- Recognize personal reactions to people with particular health issues through guided reflections.

Student and Family Demographics

In Worcester, 2014:

- 608 children and families were enrolled in Head Start Classes (by October deadline)
- 649 total students enrolled by the end of the academic year
- 73.3% were from low-income families
- 4.5% were students with disabilities
- 62.2% were English Language Learners

Nationally, 2013-2014:

- 8,672 children across 832,828 families
- 73% of families used at least one family service
- 12.2% with an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)
- 2% were in foster care
- 4.1% were homeless at some point during the school year

Available Health Services

- Head Start provides comprehensive health services to all children, covering medical, dental, nutritional, and mental health.
  - Home Visits
  - Health screenings
  - Immunizations
  - Medical Services
  - Oral Health & Dental Education
  - Nutritional Services

Service Project

Our role during this clerkship was to help the nursing staff at each of the three Worcester Head Start schools to provide both preventive and post-hoc medical care to the students. Health screenings are a vital portion of the preventive care offered by the Head Start program, and we provided care to 100% of the height, weight, blood pressure, hearing, and vision screenings for the 749 enrolled students.

Hearing Screening:

- The hearing screening consists of a board of simple pictures and headphones with progressively softer auditory commands. If the child successfully completes the hearing screening, the hearing screening will be repeated on a second day. The second day typically involves word comprehension, which can also be considered a language screening. For this reason, many of the children who failed the initial hearing screening are offered a second language or simple word to understand the task. In those situations, we revisited the hearing portion of the screening from the language portion to purely test the child's hearing.

Vision Screening:

- For vision screening, we tested the children's visual acuity by covering one eye at a time and asking them to identify shapes at a distance. The second part was a strabismus screening, where we tested the children's ability to move their eyes together to identify a fixation letter "E" on a board. Many of the children who had difficulty with the vision screening simply didn't know the names of the different shapes. However, they passed the screening if they were able to consistently use the same incorrect name for each shape.
- We also performed weekly head-checks on all of the students to look for lice. If a child had lice, we called one of the parents into the nursery office to inform them about proper lice treatment. To prevent the spread of lice, children cannot return to school until the lice are eradicated.

In addition to our screening roles we supported Head Start with their recent endeavors with the Prevention Wellness Trust Fund grant. This grant focuses on pediatric asthma and reducing school absences as a result of asthma. Our goals were to assist in establishing asthma action plans for the individual students of Head Start and to put together educational materials for parents of asthmatic students to help them navigate their child's condition.

Asthma Action Plans

- There are 80 students currently enrolled at Head Start with a diagnosis of asthma, each with differing levels of severity and different medication needs.
- Currently these do not have individualized asthma action plans, plans that are developed by the child's doctor to address their individual needs.
- These plans are meant to establish a guideline for how to approach the child's condition including their triggers, daily care, and what to do in emergency situations. We worked closely with the nurses at each Head Start site in Worcester to consolidate information on the students with asthma and to prepare letters to send their doctors to ensure that individual action plans are established.

Asthma Education Project

- Our other goal was to prepare a piece of educational material that the parents of children with asthma could use as a basic resource for understanding their child's condition and how to approach emergency situations.
- We provided basic information on what asthma is, what some potential triggers of an asthma attack may be, the signs and symptoms of an asthma attack, what to do in the setting of an asthma attack, and the basics of the different types of asthma medications. This resource was designed to be easily digestible and easy to understand with everything written in plain language at a 4th grade reading level.
- We hope that this handbook will be used at the Head Start sites to provide parents with the information they need to further help their care for their child.

Conclusions

- Head Start is a national organization that provides early education for at-risk children, including children who have low income families, and particularly the students and families of Worcester Head Start for sharing their time and teachings throughout this clerkship.
- Our service project included prevention measures such as hearing, vision, weight, blood pressure, and lice screenings.
- We also provided educational materials and asthma educational packages for parents of asthma children.
- In addition, the students and families of Worcester Head Start provided us with invaluable learning experiences and opportunities to see the impact of the Head Start program on children and families.