

# HEALTHY START EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING SUPPORT **PROJECT UPDATE**



## HEALTHY START EVALUATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING SUPPORT

The Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) is funding Westat, a research organization, to conduct a national evaluation and support capacity building of Healthy Start (HS) programs across the country. The comprehensive, four-year evaluation is assessing the diverse activities that HS programs implement, the services that their clients use, the transformative changes in their communities, and how these efforts improve pregnancy-related maternal and child health outcomes and reduce racial/ethnic disparities in rates of infant death and other adverse perinatal outcomes. The results of the evaluation will not only inform quality improvement efforts for the HS program, but will provide the requisite information needed by MCHB to report on a variety of outcomes.

**This evaluation looks at  
how HS programs improve  
pregnancy-related maternal and  
child health outcomes and reduce  
racial/ethnic disparities in rates  
of infant death and other adverse  
perinatal outcomes.**



## CAPACITY BUILDING AT HS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT CENTER NETWORKING CAFÉS

Providing capacity building support to HS programs is a core component of the evaluation. In the first year of the evaluation, Westat collaborated with the HS Technical Assistance and Support Center (TASC) at the National Institute for Children's Health Quality at Networking Cafés, which bring HS programs together to share information about their activities and experiences. Westat identified two HS areas of interest, Community Action Networks (CANs) and father/male partner engagement, and facilitated discussions at three Networking Cafés attended by a total of 79 representatives of HS programs. The discussions helped the evaluation team learn about programs' capacity building needs in these two areas, and the information shared was used to develop survey and interview questions for the evaluation.



### Community Action Network (CAN) Networking Café

(March 7, 2022)

The purpose of the café was to better understand how CANs are organized and function in different HS communities. The discussion covered how programs define their CANs, the structure of their membership and leadership, frequency of meetings, and core activities. The discussion revealed that CAN activities vary widely in the number and types of community events, workshops/trainings, and outreach efforts. Furthermore, CANs vary in the number of members, membership expectations, and level of commitment. Some programs saw increases and others saw

declines in active membership during the pandemic. Participants especially took interest in how other programs were approaching meeting logistics during the pandemic. The information learned during this session was used to improve the content and clarity of the Network Survey, which is expected to be completed this year by some HS partner organizations as part of the HS evaluation.

### Father/Male Partner Engagement Networking Café–Part I

(August 4, 2022)

The purpose of this session was to discuss how HS programs engage fathers/male partners, and it covered topics related to the program structure, curricula used, activities, strategies for recruitment, and types of referrals/services fathers needed most often. Key insights from the discussion included how the language used by programs plays a role in engaging fathers/male partners. For example, father participation increased when some programs used activity names other than “support group,” which can suggest a deficit. Furthermore, mothers can be gatekeepers to father recruitment, and some programs successfully use other strategies (e.g., through other male relatives) to involve fathers in HS. Additionally, fathers’ motivation to stay involved in HS depends on their personal needs (e.g., for basic assistance or educational information, referrals/coordination of services, or case management and individual and small-group support).



### Father/Male Partner Engagement Networking Café–Part II

(August 18, 2022)

This purpose of this session was to build upon the previous session to better understand:

(1) the participants in the HS fatherhood/male partners activities (including non-male/non-binary partners and other male father figures); and (2) the specific activities as well as their challenges and accomplishments. The café participants provided several suggestions that could improve fatherhood initiatives in their communities. These included increasing father-specific resources (e.g., making available specialized case managers); using more holistic communication with fathers that includes tending to their emotional needs as opposed to solely focusing on custodial issues and their financial responsibilities; taking a multigenerational approach to working with families; and increasing trust and transparency of government programs such as HS that support fathers.

The two sessions on father/male partner activities highlighted key ideas to consider for building capacity of father/male partner initiatives:

- Use messaging and communication that sees fathers not just as financial benefactors but as people with emotions who play an important role in the child's life;
- Develop a multi-generational approach towards engaging fathers/male partners (i.e., involve grandfathers, uncles, and others in the family);
- Reach fathers at their level of need and engage them accordingly (e.g., for basic assistance/education; referrals/coordination of services; or case management);
- Use language that does not suggest a deficit model (e.g., “support group” can be stigmatizing and terms such as “hangout” may be more appealing for fathers).





## SUMMARY

The Westat evaluation team found all three sessions to be both informative and engaging. Furthermore, not only did these sessions allow the evaluation team to learn more about program activities directly from those on the ground, but the facilitated discussion also allowed grantees to learn from each other and hear about strategies that could be implemented with their programs. Westat plans to continue collaborating with the TASC to engage with the grantees throughout the duration of the evaluation. Westat will use the information learned from grantees to inform the evaluation and to identify the needs of HS programs.

### Westat Evaluation Team

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