

July 14, 2022

### **Columbus Early Head Start Facilities Grant Approved**

The morning of July 6 Lola Montgomery, Office of Head Start Program Specialist, called Linda Carter to tell her our \$1,906,474 facilities grant for Columbus had been approved! We originally applied for this grant in January of 2021. We had been tracking the approval process for several months. The process got sticky at a couple of points. I want to thank Kim Wilson and Senator Thom Tillis's office for their help in getting us to the finish line. Also, Ibbby Whiten, Linda Carter, and consultant Chris Barns for their perseverance. Terri Bowman wrote the narrative for the grant and worked with WNCSource's children's services and finance departments to submit it.

This will be great news for Thermal Belt Outreach and our other partners in Polk County. This is a giant step forward. Sometime in 2023 we should have an state of the art Early Head Start facility to serve children and families in Columbus.

### **Impact Health Application**

In 2021 the 18 western most counties in North Carolina were awarded a \$650 million five-year grant called Healthy Opportunities. This grant provides for nonmedical interventions that should improve the health of Medicaid participants. These interventions include:

- Inspection for Housing Safety and Quality
- Essential Utility Setup
- Housing Navigation, Support and Sustaining Services
- One-Time Payment for Security Deposit and First Month's Rent
- Healthy Food Boxes for Pick-Up or Delivery
- Reimbursement for Health Related Transportation



All of these are services that WNCSource is providing or has provided before. WNCSource will submit an application to Impact Health to provide these services during the remaining four years of the Healthy Opportunities pilot.

When the original announcement for the grant was announced I was less than enthusiastic. I had very much supported our region receiving the pilot grant, but the reimbursement rates for services were too low. Since then, the addition of funding for capacity building, and higher reimbursement, rates are making participation look more attractive. Rachel Walker, a former WNCSource employee, has also done a good job of communicating the way the Healthy Opportunities will work.

WNCSource will ask for additional staff and equipment to build capacity. Our transportation, housing and older adults services departments would each see the addition of at least one staff person. Healthy Opportunities uses NCCares360 for most functions. WNCSource has not used NCCares360 very much. All of these services will also require additional reporting. We will also ask for two additional vehicles.

One to expand health related transportation in Henderson County, and another to expand nutrition services to the Cedar Mountain area of Transylvania County.

The devil will be in the details. If Impact Health approves our application, then WNCSource Board and staff will need to decide that the contracts are financially acceptable. This is a pilot. If these interventions work, Medicaid participants will see improved outcomes. That will mean less emergency room visits, hospital stays and other expensive medical interventions. If the pilot programs are successful, WNCSource may play a role in reshaping the future of Medicaid.

### **Covid Vaccinations, Accommodations and Masking**

Last September, President Biden announced that employees of Head Start grant recipients would have to be vaccinated. WNCSource's Board and senior management supported this mandate and moved quickly to protect the children, families, passengers, and other clients we serve. We also believed it was important to protect our fellow employees. We made the mandate effective for the entire agency. WNCSource offered a full week of paid time off for employees that were fully vaccinated. We did grant religious and medical accommodations for employees that could perform their work remotely.

These steps were taken with input from our attorneys. Approximately twenty employees chose not to be vaccinated and either resigned, or had their employment with WNCSource terminated.

With a vaccine for six month to five-year-old children now available, it is a good time to review our policies. Hospitalizations and deaths from Covid are down nationwide. Masks mandates have been lifted for most work and school settings. The Office of Head Start is not enforcing its own mask mandate, but WNCSource is following the masking rules in the Head Start Performance Standards.



If there is some flexibility in Head Starts rules, or there is a way to broaden WNCSource's accommodations, it may help us with recruitment of employees. Senior management, with advice from attorneys, may suggest changes to our current Covid related policies. I will certainly look for Board support and input for changes in these policies.

