

Putting Kids and Families First

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Multnomah County Health Department” and other community organizations, she said.

“We are uniquely at the beginning of the development continuum,” she said. “We have this kind of “born to learn” program and what we are doing with parents and mothers – before they give birth – to help prepare them for educating their children.”

That’s just the beginning, she said, and after home visits are complete, BPI steers parents toward educational programs such as Albina Head Start and KairosPDX, a public charter school and nonprofit with the goal of closing the education achievement gap for black children.

“Those are very culturally specific and affirming organizations that serve a large population of our community members – African and African American and African American bi-racial families,” she said. “We just want to make sure that we’re strong on the front end of that continuum, making sure that all the services that we offer have sustainable funding streams, that people understand how they’re all connected to learning, and

how learning is very much connected to being able to be stable and also support social and emotional wellbeing. Those are all things that are very critical to this community.”

Overton said that BPI has seven full-time staff members, two student interns, a student with a bachelor of social work, and will soon have several students getting their master’s in social work.

The agency is outgrowing its space at 2915 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., and will soon be looking for a new home, she said.

“We’re going to hire a new director of maternal health and some more home visiting people,” she said.

As with most nonprofits, BPI relies on donations and will have a big fundraising gala in May, when Overton will introduce herself to funders. In the meantime, she said she will continue to focus on increasing awareness of BPI, including a book drive with Barnes and Noble in February,

Before getting into administration, Overton was a social worker and child and family therapist for 16 years, then worked for about four years for the Chalkboard Project, working with school superintendents and teacher leaders



“to center equity not only in their cultural centers, but in their practices and strategies.”

Overton is close to completing her doctorate in social work, focusing on black girls in foster care, and she gave one example of how missing cultural clues can have deleterious effects.

“I had a girl getting into fights and they said she was defiant with schizoid tendencies, she’s depressed — all those things,” she said. “But I discovered she was in a home with parents who were not African American who did not know how to care for her hair, so she was going to school getting teased by black and white

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PHOTO BY BEVERLY CORBELL/
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Bahia Overton, the new executive director of Portland's Black Parent Initiative, puts her focus on improving the cultural awareness social workers and others have in providing resources to the black community and growing support for BPI programs to help black kids and black families become successful.

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