

Tribal Head Start program scores top review

By Danielle Frost
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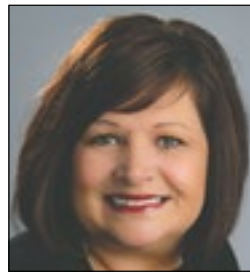
Investing in its members' education is something the Tribe has been committed to since Restoration, and this includes its youngest learners.

That commitment has paid off with the Tribe receiving top scores on a recent federal comprehensive review of its Early Head Start preschool program.

Early Childhood Program Manager Angie Blackwell says it is especially notable because of the program's expansion in the past three years and a relatively new management team. Blackwell has served as manager for three years. Two of the four program coordinators have been in their positions for one year.

"It's really a whole team effort here," she says. "We have excellent teachers who are well-educated and deserve to be paid well. In general, this field has a lot of turnover, but not here because the Tribe recognizes this and invests a lot into this program so I can afford to pay the teachers (fairly). We have teachers who have been here for years."

The review was conducted by the Administration for Children & Families Office of Head Start.



Angie Blackwell

Four reviewers were on site for a week while they evaluated six different areas of the Tribe's program — program management and quality improvement, quality education and child development services, quality health services, quality family and community engagement services, fiscal infrastructure, and monitoring eligibility, recruitment, enrollment and attendance.

"It's very comprehensive," Blackwell says. "They send out a team, and meet with management, the parent policy council, Tribal Council, do classroom observations and meet with staff, both as a group and individually. We have to provide evidence that each component of the program is being met. Head Start is very heavily regulated."

The program's last federal review in 2014 also netted a perfect score. Standards were revamped in 2017, which meant staff had to adjust to and understand the new requirements.

"We have a team who puts in

the hours and are committed to high quality services," Blackwell says. "It took a lot of late nights to understand the new standards and prepare for the review."

The Head Start program serves both Tribal and Grand Ronde residents, as well as Tribal residents in Willamina and Sheridan. There are 112 children enrolled in the program, and 42 of these are home-based services only. The rest are onsite five days a week.

There are 30 regular, full-time staff and five to seven on-call substitutes for the five preschool classes.

"It's a very comprehensive program," Blackwell says. "We include the whole family and work with a lot of health issues. Health is a big challenge for some families."

General Manager David Fullerton says it's highly unusual to receive a perfect program review.

"There is a lot of preparation that goes into those and it really speaks to the level of services offered," he says. "It goes from the dedication and work by the staff and leadership, to the high level of expectation established by Tribal Council for those programs."

In a nine-page executive summary written by the federal reviewers, it noted the "innovative service delivery" of the program's oral health and nutrition components.

The summary highlights the


pre-school's "Making It Work" curriculum to support cultural health strategies, where children in both center- and home-based programs are given a chance to eat traditional foods each month.

"As a holistic approach, the grantee offered traditional foods to children and families with a focus on the food's nutritional value, cultural values and the traditional lifeways connected to food cultivating, harvesting, processing, storing and sharing. The staff, parents and community have invested time and have fully engaged themselves in the curriculum and building interdepartmental capacity to identify and serve community health needs."

Regarding the oral health program, reviewers stated, "In 2012, children in Grand Ronde Head Start Preschool had a dental decay rate of 25 percent. Through successful programming, they have seen the decay rate of students drop to 10 percent in 2018. At the Grand Ronde Dental Clinic, access to dental services improved for children ages 0 to 5 by 450 percent between 2013 and 2017."

Blackwell says the that program's successes during the past five years boils down to staff dedication and Tribal Council investing in its youngest Tribal members.

"We are very, very blessed here," she says. ■



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