

## Early Head Start slots to underwrite fatherhood initiative

### Scaled-back Manhattan program means money for SRS fatherhood push

Photo by [Dave Ranney](#)

Dana Book plays with his daughter Savanna, 3, during “Families Making a Difference,” a recent conference in Topeka sponsored by several advocacy groups, including the Kansas Head Start Association. Book, president of Topeka Fatherhood Action, said he’s a “big believer” in fathers playing with their children at eye-level. He said he welcomes a SRS plan to spend \$1.1 million on fatherhood programs.

By [Dave Ranney](#)  
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TOPEKA — Officials at the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services plan to use a portion of the state’s Early Head Start budget to promote fatherhood.

Their plan is to take \$600,000 initially set aside for services for infants and toddlers enrolled in the Early Head Start program in Manhattan and instead use it to encourage fathers to play a more active role in their children’s lives.

The Early Head Start program in Manhattan reduced its enrollment last month, going from 78 children to 10, freeing up money for the new SRS initiative.

SRS officials say they want to use the budgetary windfall to enhance fatherhood programs at other Early Head Start programs across the state.

The agency plans to begin soliciting grant proposals from them this fall.

The grants also are cited in the department’s proposed budget for next fiscal year, which was recently posted on the agency’s web site.

The budget documents do not indicate how the programs would be expected to promote fatherhood. Instead, they note: “When children are raised with involved, committed and responsible fathers, their positive outcomes are greatly increased.”

The document narrative also mentions that, “As part of Gov. Sam Brownback’s Roadmap to decrease childhood poverty, the agency intends to work with our Early Head Start providers statewide to enhance their fatherhood programs by providing increased opportunities coupled with program development and support.”

Angela de Rocha, communications director for SRS, said the department also plans to put an additional \$500,000 toward the initiative in the current fiscal year, pushing the funding package to \$1.1 million.

All of the money, she said, will be spent on fatherhood programs.

Each child enrolled in Early Head Start costs about \$10,000 a year.

#### Waiting lists

Some children's advocates said that the money being targeted for the fatherhood initiative could be better spent other ways.

"I'm concerned that we're launching a new initiative while at the same time we're reducing the number of children receiving Early Head Start services," said Shannon Cotsoradis, chief executive of Kansas Action for Children. "It would make a lot more sense to redirect the \$600,000 to children on other (Early Head Start) programs' waiting lists."

Lori Alvarado, executive director of the Kansas Head Start Association, said that on average 500 infants and toddlers were waiting to get into one of the state's 14 Early Head Start programs.

"These are children who desperately need the kinds of intensive services that Early Head Start provides," Alvarado said. "With these services, they will be ready for school, which translates to higher assessment scores, which means higher graduation rates, which hopefully will lead to greater opportunity for better employment, self-sufficiency and a better place in life."

But de Rocha said the decision how to use the money rests with SRS, not advocates or the program operators.

"When the Manhattan program decided to give up its funding, all the other (Early Head Start) programs thought they were going to be able to just divvy up the money," she said. "But they're not going to be able to do that except to strengthen their fatherhood programs. That was our decision to make, not theirs."

The plan, de Rocha said, is in keeping with the department's commitment to decreasing childhood poverty by promoting fatherhood, healthy marriage and adoption. Decreasing childhood poverty is part of Brownback's Roadmap for Kansas, which was laid out during his campaign for governor in 2010.

The 14 Early Head Start programs in Kansas already provide child-rearing courses and training for fathers, mothers and other parental figures, including grandparents, aunts and uncles. The new fatherhood grants would enhance those efforts.

### **'Not up to snuff'**

De Rocha said SRS was under the impression that federal regulations require Early Head Start programs to promote fatherhood and that the programs' current efforts were "not up to snuff."

But Alvarado said she'd not heard of any such federal requirement.

Ben Allen, public policy and research director at the National Head Start Association, said Early Head Start programs are required to enter "partnership agreements" with each child's family.

The process, he said, includes setting goals for both the child and the family, coming up with a plan for meeting the agreed-upon goals and making it happen.

"If one of the goals is for the father or a father figure to be more involved in the family, then that becomes one of the goals that's worked upon," Allen said.

"There are a lot of services and programming available for that, but they're not exclusively for fathers," he said. "They're for whoever the family feels needs to be more involved in a child's life and for whatever needs to happen to strengthen the family and the child."

All Early Head Start programs, he said, are required to provide family-support services. Whether these services include promoting fatherhood depends on the agreed-upon goals.

The program officials keep track of the goals and whether they're met.

### **Jump at the chance**

Rose Sigmund, who runs the Northeast Kansas Community Action Program's Head Start and Early Head Start programs, said she plans to apply for one of the fatherhood grants. Her organization serves about 600 children from a nine-county area.

"In a perfect world, yes, we would love to be able to serve more children, absolutely," Sigmund said. "But the fatherhood initiative is important, too, and if there's going to be grant money available, we're going to jump at the chance to apply for it."

NEK-CAP, she said, already sponsors several community events for fathers and their children.

"If we had more money, I suspect we'd be able to reach out to more fathers, do more to enhance their parenting skills and do more to get them to understand just how important they are in their children's lives," Sigmund said. "If we could come up with a way to have a positive role model in every child's life, we'd be so far ahead of where we are now."

Dana Book is the volunteer director at Topeka Fatherhood Action, an advocacy group. He said he welcomed the SRS plan to spend \$1.1 million on fatherhood programming.

"It's just unbelievable," he said. "There's so much more that could be done, and we know the positive impact that a dad's involvement can have on a child's life."

### **Declining enrollment**

Financed with a mix of federal and state funds, Early Head Start programs are targeted at pregnant women and children ages 0 to 3. Services involve both home visits and child care settings designed to promote early childhood development.

Almost all of the children in Early Head Start live in households at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$1,226 a month for a mother with one child. Exceptions are made for children with disabilities.

Head Start programs are for children ages 3 to 5. They are federally funded and all but a few are center-based.

In Kansas, 28 Head Start programs provide services in 87 counties; 14 of these programs offer Early Head Start services in 47 counties.

In recent months, the state's Early Head Start enrollment has declined from 1,165 infants and toddlers to 1,000.

The reduction, de Rocha said, is due to cuts in state spending and the Manhattan program deciding to reduce its enrollment.

### **Manhattan decision**

"A lot of things contributed to the decision," said Sally Frick, the Manhattan program's executive director. "But the biggest thing, I think, is that Manhattan – because the university (Kansas State University) is here and because Fort Riley is so close – is very transient."

Many families, she said, left the program after only a few months rather than after two or three years, making it difficult to meet federal performance standards.

Other factors, according to Frick:

- Competition from federally funded child care programs at Fort Riley;
- High turnover among non-military child care providers;
- Uncertain funding.

In early June, she said, SRS had a conference call.

"We were told that there'd been a decrease in funding and that in six months we (and the state's other Early Head Start programs) would have to rebid our contract and that new contracts would be awarded by Dec. 1," Frick said. "We were pretty shell-shocked, to say the least. I mean, how do you hire and train staff if you don't know if you're going to be open after December?"

SRS, she said, later rescinded its plan to make Early Head Start programs rebid their contracts, which historically have been carried forward from one year to the next.

But the uncertainty generated by the initial announcement, Frick said, caused her and her staff to cut the program's ties with SRS. The program retained its federal funding.

"Everything just got too iffy," Frick said. "We used to be state and federally funded; now we're just federally funded."

The regional Administration for Children and Families in Kansas City upheld the decision to reduce the Manhattan program's enrollment, she said.

In January, as part of the budget plan he presented the Legislature, Brownback proposed eliminating Early Head Start's \$11.3 million budget, arguing the money would be better spent on child care assistance and programs designed to improve fourth-grade reading scores.

Legislators balked at the governor's proposal, restoring all but \$1 million to Early Head Start.

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