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Head Start uses grants to expand early-childhood program

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URBANA – Champaign County Head Start has expanded its Early Head Start program to provide services to 56 more infants and toddlers.

And it has more space in Urbana for those very young children, thanks to a federal grant.

The program received \$810,000, from federal stimulus money, to expand its Early Head Start services.

In May, it had a waiting list of 156 families who wanted to enroll infants and toddlers in the Early Head Start program. The expansion got one-third of those children off the waiting list and into the classroom.

"Infant and toddler care is at a premium throughout our community, so we chose Early Head Start expansion over Head Start expansion," said Head Start Director Kathleen Liffick.

There are now 136 children getting Early Head Start services in Champaign County, and a total of 584 in Head Start programs, which started the new school year this week.

Champaign County Head Start applied for a competitive federal grant that was awarding money for expansion of Head Start programs.

The grant money "provided the opportunity for us, for the first time in many years, to expand our enrollment," said Cameron Moore, chief executive officer of the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, which operates the Champaign County Head Start program.

The money went to hiring 23 additional staff members, including teachers, teacher aides, a family advocate and two staff members who do home visits.

A good deal of the funding will go to staff training as well.

"Early Head Start services are very expensive," Liffick said, noting that state standards specify that there must be a teacher for every four children, and the children are in groups of no more than eight.

The state also specifies the amount of space a center must have for cribs and playtime on the floor. The Head Start program provides all diapers and formula for the children it serves. And the program also provides family support services and child health services.

"These are intensive services," she said.

The grant also allowed the program to take over the building in Urbana where it was providing services. Head Start had been leasing two classrooms in the Marilyn Queller Child Development Center, 108 S. Webber St., U., for two years. It had two Head Start preschool classrooms there for children ages 3 to 5.

The staff from the Marilyn Queller center were offered jobs with Head Start, and most took them, Liffick said.

The money also provided family support services and child health services to two classrooms run by the Marilyn Queller staff.

Now, Head Start is leasing the entire building, with its five classrooms, from the Webber Street Christian Church, and the Marilyn Queller center is being dissolved.

"It seemed to make sense we would become operators of the program," Liffick said.

That means all the children in the building – three preschool classrooms for 3- to 5-year-olds and two infant and toddler rooms serving children from birth up to age 3 – will receive Head Start services.

The 56 additional children in the Early Head Start program are spread among several locations. Eight are at the Urbana center, 24 are in Rantoul, and 16 are receiving home-based services.

The other eight children are part of a new collaboration with the Center for Women in Transition to provide Head Start services to homeless families.

The grant money helped pay for operating costs, including leasing the building in Urbana. Head Start also did some building improvements in Urbana and Rantoul, including upgrading the kitchen in Urbana. The Urbana, Rantoul, and Savoy sites all got new playground equipment.

Head Start also bought a van to take children whose families have no car to health appointments.

In addition to the federal money, the Head Start program received a \$68,000 grant from Blue Cross/Blue Shield, which helped improve the playgrounds.

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