



FIRST THINGS FIRST NEWS UPDATE

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CONTACT: Tiffany Erickson 602.771.5022 / Tiffany.Erickson@azecdh.gov

First Things First Adopts Strategic Plan, Designates 8 Million Dollars in Statewide Funding for Early Childhood

PHOENIX (March 31, 2008) First Things First – the Arizona Early Childhood Development & Health Board, during its scheduled open meeting on March 25 and 26, 2008, approved a 3-5 year strategic plan. Included in the plan are: goals in six areas identified to be key elements of an effective early childhood development and health system, key measures to evaluate progress of the goals, and strategies – both funded and unfunded – to execute on the adopted goals.

“First Things First is designed to support and build on existing programs, and create a system that is interconnected and comprehensive while being culturally responsive, family driven and community-based. This is an exciting time for the Board and Arizona,” said Chair Nadine Mathis Basha. “In simple words, we are about providing young children with fair chances and parents with good choices.”

Goal areas include:

- Quality and access to early care and education programs and settings
- Health of children birth through age five
- Professional development of the early childhood development workforce
- Family support for education and access to information about early childhood development
- Coordination of existing efforts at the tribal, state and federal level
- Communication of the importance of early childhood development and health

Key measures for each goal area were adopted in order to for First Things First to ensure accountability for the work the Board is doing on behalf of children birth through age five.

First Things First built the strategic plan based on, in part, a careful review of each the gap areas in the current early childhood landscape revealed in the *Building Bright Futures – 2007 Needs and Assets Report*, specifically:

- a limited number of quality early care and education settings
- insufficient numbers of and lack of a highly skilled child development workforce, in some areas of both the education and health professions
- too few family resources giving parents the vital tools they need to support their children

First Things First also considered public input at the strategic planning session in January 2008, best practices in other early childhood systems, and consultations with other experts across Arizona and the country through work group and individual discussions in crafting the strategic plan.

In their deliberations, the Board carefully considered those strategies that supported the infrastructure needed for a coordinated and dynamic early childhood development and health system. They considered not only new

strategies, but how those strategies would align with and impact existing early childhood services and programs. The strategies selected for funding at this time will build upon efforts to strengthen and improve Arizona's child care resources as well as supports for parents and families. The Board focused on prioritizing strategies that will support or build on a statewide infrastructure, by providing the basic interconnected building blocks of the early childhood development and health system.

The adopted strategies are:

- **Quality Improvement and Rating System (QIRS) - \$4.5 million (State Fiscal Year 09)**
 - Establishes a rating system for child care settings. QIRS standards are built on the foundation of child care licensing requirements and then improve quality beyond licensing. FTF, with community involvement, will be developing consensus on the standards used to define quality, standards which both reflect research-based practices which promote positive outcomes for children and which are achievable within Arizona. Accountability will be assured by ongoing monitoring and evaluation. This funding allows approximately 300 programs to receive supports and funding grants through the QIRS.

- **Child Care Health Consultation - \$.6 million (SFY 09)**
 - Establishes Child Care Health Consultation as a component of the Quality Improvement and Rating System (QIRS). Child Care Health Consultants (CCHC's) are health professionals, usually nurses, who work directly with child care staff to promote and support children's health and wellness in early childhood education settings. They provide health and safety assessments and information to support best practices in health and safety and provide resources so that child care settings support the social emotional development of babies and young children. Funds approved will provide for building the infrastructure to support recruitment, training, continuing education, and outcome evaluation of child care health consultants as well as providing for a core group of child care health consultants to work with centers involved in the QIRS.

- **Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) - \$.375 million (SFY 09)**
 - Establishes and coordinates the implementation of a comprehensive statewide scholarship system to improve quality in the professional workforce. FTF will work with the T.E.A.C.H. parent organization to design a statewide scholarship system that will be uniquely suited to Arizona's workforce and FTF's strategic plan. A non-profit administrative home for the scholarship will be identified and an Advisory Board of partners and stakeholders established (including representatives from *service providers, advocates, community members, state agencies, higher education, and philanthropy*) that will work with the FTF Board to identify design elements, monitor progress and advise on continued actions. Arizona is distinct by expanding the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship model to include child development professionals who work with young children birth to age five and their families, in settings outside of classroom or family homes.

- **Statewide distribution of Parent Kit - \$.5 million (SFY 09)**
 - Provides statewide distribution of parent kits contingent upon Virginia Piper Foundation's continued support of distribution within Maricopa County. Parent Kits are provided through hospitals to families after the birth of a newborn. Materials currently include a booklet which provides information on infant and toddler development and parenting, a set of videos and other resources about early childhood development and health.

- **Public Awareness - \$2 million (SFY 09)**
 - Development and execution of a communications plan whose ultimate goal is to increase public awareness about the importance of early childhood development and health, as well as generate sustainable financial and political support for early childhood development and health, resulting in improved outcomes for children and families.

The Board also adopted over 17 strategies not requiring funding, including:

- Advocating for increased wages for the early childhood workforce, and increased formal articulation between community colleges and universities.
- Advocate for and coordinate with the Department of Health Services, Office of Child Care Licensing, and the community to improve regulatory standards as a foundation for quality in early care and education. DHS is now in the process of reviewing and recommending changes in licensing regulations for centers. FTF will continue to advocate for higher standards and assist centers in reaching those standards.
- Advocating for increased home visiting services and other parenting skill programs to support parents and families in their natural environment.

“By adopting these focused goals, and more importantly, these well researched strategies, we are taking a profound step forward in shifting outcomes for children in Arizona.” said Elliott Hibbs, executive director.

The Strategic Plan Roadmap, which includes all goals, measures and strategies adopted, is available on the First Things First web site at www.azecdh.gov, under Latest FTF News.

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