



Early Intervention Family Alliance

www.EIFamilyAlliance.org

Setting the Stage for Meaningful Family Involvement ***Conference Participation by Family Leaders Benefits State Part C Programs***

December may seem far away, but now is the ideal time to begin laying the groundwork for getting your family leaders to the OSEP National Early Childhood Conference. As family leaders we are eternally grateful to our Part C coordinators who laid the early groundwork to enable our participation at this importance conference. Like any good production there is a lot of behind the scene's work that is essential to making sure this event is a success. Here are some successful practices that we hope you can use to ensure that your family leaders can gain the most from this important conference.

Outreach & Advertising—all successful productions focus on outreaching to the community. Family leaders may not be aware of the dates for the OSEP conference, providing them with the Save the Date information is essential for planning ahead. It can also be helpful to share copies of a previous year's session brochure so family leaders can get a sense of the content. It is important that family leaders be provided with the opportunity to express an interest in attending upcoming conferences. If you can only send a handful of your family leaders you may want to set a deadline for expressing interest in attending a particular conference. Have a set protocol on how participants will be chosen and stick to it. States have used such simple means such as; picking names from a hat, agreeing that new ICC members get priority, that a participant must have 6 months of prior involvement or asking that the family leaders create their own framework for choosing who attends which conference.

Production Costs—having a financial plan and budget is fundamental for ensuring family leaders can attend conferences. This means you may have to put it in contract language or find the place for the budget to work. Using the state's travel bureau or a non-profit parent organization to purchase airfare can usually result in lower costs and will make certain that a parent does not incur interest charges while awaiting reimbursement for travel. If state assistance for travel is not available, be creative. Beyond utilizing the assistance of a partner non-profit, family members may be able to apply for training grant funds through other organizations or local disability councils. Some states ask that their family members room together; this may mean more parents can attend and provides them with a partner at the conference. It is also important to explain that hotels typically require a credit card to cover the cost of incidentals and a debit card is not advised. As using a debit card can result in significant sums being placed on hold in their checking account throughout the duration of their stay. Keep in mind, some families do not have credit cards and arrangements should be made on how to pay for hotel, travel and an advance for meals. Some states pay for the hotel through their PTI or other non-profit. Other states negotiate with hotels to avoid the incidental charges and

remind parents that this means no minibar, movie or internet access during their stay. Discussing finances can be a delicate matter, but being honest and upfront is always the best strategy. Most conferences provide some meals as part of the registration fee. Families need to know which meals will be provided and if they will receive per diem reimbursements or not. Some states provide this money to parents up front and require them to provide receipts at the end of the conference. All parents should be informed of the need to request receipts. EIFA can provide you with a template to assist families in keeping appropriate documentation required by the state. Remember, some parents may have extensive business travel experience, while for other families this may be their first experience, be sure that each parent knows what is expected of them.

Company Manager—taking the show on the road requires careful planning. Families need to think about who will care for their children at home and whether they will incur costs for additional childcare expenses. State partners need to share with families whether they have the ability to provide additional monies for these expenses or if stipends are expected to cover this cost. Consider accessing state respite programs to assist families with their child care needs; as long as this does not affect their total allotted respite time. A “leave at home” sheet that can be filled in with flight numbers and times, hotel address, phone numbers or web address and the general timelines for the conference can be a godsend. EIFA has a sample information packet for attendees for those who are interested. In addition, the amenities of the hotel or the web address of the hotel can be very helpful for families to plan their stay.

Production Director – You have identified family leaders to attend, found funding assistance and have prepared them to leave home; but what about when they get there? Some states employ family leaders who provide support to family representatives, this family leader can insure that new parents are provided with information prior to the conference and can orient them to the conference. In other states the Part C Coordinator takes on this role, orienting parents to the conference. Using a mentor model has also been successful, having a family member who has attended previously help prepare new attendees. A brief orientation or refresher about IDEA Part C and Part B relationships, Part C on a national level, Federal regulations and State implementation is needed. It is also helpful to share who else attends, how to network and outreach to family members from other states, what happens to meals off-site, etc. It is important to inform family members that most conference participants will be dressed in business casual attire, and that comfortable layered clothes are essential to help account for unpredictable hotel room temperatures. No matter who is responsible for this, it is imperative that parents are fully aware of the details and what to expect for the ‘flow’ of the conference

On with the Show – maintain meaningful involvement throughout the conference. Once you have arrived be sure to remind family members to fill out any forms and gather receipts they will need for reimbursement. It is essential to discuss the state’s expectations with regard to conference attendance with families. Are there required sessions they must attend (i.e. ICC national meeting)? Do not assume that family members know when they can take ‘down time’. Will they be required to submit a written summary of their activities, share session information with a larger group, present

at an ICC meeting? Is there an expectation that certain information be acquired on other state's practices? Families should be informed that they need not stay with their state team throughout the duration of the conference, as discussing conference presentations with folks from other states can give families new insights. There are many opportunities for learning and sharing, be confident that your family leaders are taking advantage of them by preparing them.

Bravo: Closing Curtain – the after effects and benefits of prepared and informed family leaders. Empowered, knowledgeable family leaders are the cornerstone for quality EI programs. With careful planning your state can reap many benefits by sending family leaders to conferences. Informed family leaders are your essential allies when developing and implementing Part C policies. They will come back with increased passion for the ICC and the importance of early intervention. They will have increased awareness of the national issues that relate to your state and their role in shaping state and local policies. The opportunity to network with other Part C professionals, ICC members and family leaders will inspire them to partner for more years to come. Allow family participants to share their ideas, what they have learned and their vision for the future.