

Meet Cover Director Jill Bradley School-Age and Child Care Services, Chicago Housing Authority

We all know that the position of director is a complex set of roles that need to be carefully balanced, requiring skills that must continually be refined. Jill Bradley, director of School-Age and Child Care Services for Chicago Housing Authority, is a director of tremendous skill, dedication, and enthusiasm. She takes great pride in the growth of services to children and families under her directorship and is excited about her involvement in the MOST Initiative (see box). Jill has high hopes for the impact of this Initiative on the quality of school-age care in the Chicago area.

Twenty years of experience in education and educational administration began for Jill with a high school teaching assignment in an all girls school — in fact, she taught her own sister. Like many of us, she then turned her attention to the preschool years and became director of a preschool program with no experience or education in that area. "It was trial by fire." She saw what quality was and raised the stakes, which eventually pushed her out of the job.

She joined the Chicago Housing Authority as a site director. "At Stateway, we cared for 134 children in three apartments. It was a community of need that continues. In an environment where violence is a frequent experience,

care is a place of safety. A gang stopped a grandmother from bringing a child into the program. The site director negotiated with the gang to keep the center open. Then and now we have to figure out unusual ways of keeping needed services available to families."

In 1981, Jill graduated from the Erikson Institute master's degree program in early childhood development. "They help you to learn to think about why you feel the way you do." She directed the City College Day Care Center — a lab school for students. When the program expanded to school-age care, it was novel for its time and place.

Through the Erikson Institute doctoral program in child development, she became a research associate in the public schools, exploring how to bridge Head Start and the primary grades in public schools.

When she was called back to the Chicago Housing Authority, there was 40% staff vacancy. The city was ready to withdraw contracts and staff morale was low. They talked her into it: "Just do it for a while and let us know whether it's worth saving or not," she was told. "Are you hiring me to resuscitate the program or direct a funeral?" was her response.

"We began taking baby steps in the right direction in each of the six programs we had then. I've been

here six years now and there are only two vacancies in the staff of 100. There is a wonderful team of coordinators and together we brought back the resources."

"Welfare reform is the next challenge staring us in the face. We have to shift our ways of being useful in the community. Our job is to figure out how to be flexible and humane and responsive to a changing reality. It's invigorating for me. I love the notion of all of us having to put up or shut up. Parents, staff, and the children we serve are all creating the answers to what the future is going to be."



Photographs by Bonnie Neugebauer

"This job would be kind of overwhelming and depressing except that I am a part of a beautiful family that supports me (including husband Carlos and daughter Ginneh and Allena). They are uplifting. They remind me of the reason I am doing what I am doing. When I think about the people we work with, they, too, have beautiful families. They want what everyone wants for their children, their aging parents, their community."

The Chicago Housing Authority has a 20 year history in the provision of child care for public housing residents and their families. Currently, there are child care center programs in seven public housing developments run by CHA. There is also a newly developed Family Child Care Network for providers of infant and toddler care and home based after school care in another CHA development.

Approximately 700 children are being served in the Head Start, Day Care, School-Age, and Family Child Care programs. The School-Age Program at ABLA Development is in a neighborhood surrounded by a diverse community. The University of Illinois in Chicago occupies an area just east of the development and the ABLA public housing development is made up of four smaller units of housing (Addams, Brooks, Loomis, Abbott). The northern edge of the community is the site of several thriving businesses and restaurants that support the University populace as well as others who travel to the community from the city's downtown area. Downtown Chicago is visible from the center on a clear day.

ABLA School-Age program operates full day during the summer and school breaks. Between the months of September and June, the program is a recreational and enrichment program for children who attend the public and private schools in the immediate area. This is an employment-related program that is state funded through a grant to the City of Chicago Department of Human Services Children's Services Division. The eligibility requirements are that parents of children between the ages of five and

twelve years of age are either working or attending school or a training program.

The School-Age Program at ABLA has doubled its enrollment to 40 children in the last year. There seems to be a growing awareness of the need for supervised activities by parents who formerly left their children in self care. At a time that the Day Care Center at ABLA was experiencing difficulty in recruiting eligible parents, children were literally climbing in the street level windows to get into the School-Age Center. The "get the picture" community needs assessment showed that a number of children in this age bracket were willing to come to after school care. This was due in large part to the talents of Dorothy Cage, group worker supervisor. She had developed activities and programming that were more responsive to children's needs.

ABLA is one program that has taken advantage of the Chicago MOST Initiative during the year and a half implementation phase. This site is one of ten involved in the pilot phase of

the program improvement project. The program has begun the After School Quality process having assembled an ASQ team and completed the questionnaires. The program has also applied for and received a program improvement grant as a part of the MOST Initiative. During the last year, the boundaries of ABLA have been extended through collaboration activities sparked by the MOST project.

This is a program that can truly demonstrate that an institution can grow and learn at the same time that it is guiding the growth and learning of children. Both program and children have taken on new challenges such as daring to "show" so that we can learn and grow.

The Chicago MOST Initiative is really a success story. "There were many obstacles to the lofty notion of improving quality in school-age programs at a time when resources are diminishing; but it's actually going to happen. We find ourselves actually running to keep up with the momentum." — Jill Bradley

The MOST Initiative

Making the Most of Out-of-School Time (MOST) is a national initiative of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The School-Age Child Care Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College serves as the national manager of the project as well as a source of school-age information.

The goals of the Initiative are to support, strengthen, improve, and expand services to school-age children and youth by implementing a host of community collaborative projects in a creative and comprehensive way.

Chicago is one of three cities in the country, including Seattle and Boston, to receive a three-year grant of \$1.2 million to respond to the needs to school-age children. The Chicago MOST implementation plan is the result of a year of collaborative planning undertaken by a variety of public and private partners with an interest in school-age services, including the Day Care Action Council of Illinois, the Chicago Community Trust, the Chicago Park District, and private and public child care providers, cultural institutions, and business representatives.

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