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D.C. LEARNs to Develop Volunteer Corps to Support Pre-K Literacy

The District of Columbia Department of Human Services (DHS), Early Care and Education Administration (ECEA) Will Fund New Collaborative Project

Washington, DC, December 13, 2006 — The District of Columbia Department of Human Services (DHS), **Early Care and Education Administration (ECEA)**, has announced that **D.C. LEARNs**, Washington D.C.'s literacy coalition, has been selected to oversee and provide management for the **Early Readers Now** volunteer literacy program. Previously managed by ECEA staff, the Early Readers Now volunteer program was initiated by ECEA in 2005 for three- and four- year old children in early education settings (child care centers or family child care providers) in Washington, DC. The program was designed to enhance the emerging literacy skills of those children and help prepare them for kindergarten by employing volunteers trained in interactive read aloud techniques to read one-on-one with a child.

D.C. LEARNs will manage a renewed Early Readers Now initiative in partnership with the **Friendship House Association**, a longstanding D.C. LEARNs member.

One of the goals of D.C. LEARNs' current three-year strategic plan is to identify, support, and pilot efforts to address gaps in literacy services, while increasing coordination between literacy programs and related issues and services. "Our plan for Early Readers Now is to pilot a process by which we recruit and coordinate with literacy programs in our coalition to train and support volunteers that will be placed in pre-K childcare programs in their communities and across the city," explains Jeff Carter, Executive Director of D.C. LEARNs. "Our strategy seeks to tap the literacy expertise that exists in our coalition and use it to support literacy volunteers in the pre-K childcare environment, where there is a significant lack of resources available for literacy instruction. This will, we hope, not only improve the literacy instruction and support available to those centers, but also raise the profile of the existing literacy programs in their communities."

The public awareness, volunteer recruitment, and childcare center recruitment responsibilities will be centralized at D.C. LEARNs. Community-based literacy agencies will be recruited to serve as the local hub for volunteer training and support.

“We view this one-year grant as essentially a pilot for this new strategy,” Carter says. “For this first year, we will be working with a single D.C. LEARNs member to serve as the literacy agency partner, and we are fortunate that Friendship House has agreed to try this out with us. Long term, if the project receives funding to continue after the first year, we hope to establish Early Readers Now partnerships with additional literacy agencies throughout the city. The overall shape of the project after the first year will depend on how well the model we develop works, and the degree to which our coalition wants to be involved. If it works well, and the interest is strong, we think we can transfer the majority of the work—and the funding—for this project to our members. While our strategic plan calls for piloting new initiatives and approaches, these pilots will always be done in collaboration with our members, with the idea that successful pilots can eventually be transferred to them.”

“Plus,” he adds, “in this case, by simply initiating the discussion with our members, it potentially opens up a larger discussion about early childhood and family literacy strategies at both the program level and citywide.”

Carter notes that D.C. LEARNs’ role as the volunteer recruitment and management center for the project is a logical compliment to the organization’s current efforts to recruit literacy volunteers for literacy programs throughout the District. “Relieving local literacy programs from the administrative burden of recruiting and managing the volunteers will, we hope, encourage them to participate,” he says.

In October, the ECEA announced the award of the one-year \$125,000 grant to fund the project. The grant agreement will be finalized between ECEA and D.C. LEARNs by the end of 2006. In the meantime, planning is already underway, and an announcement regarding staffing for the project is anticipated for the week of December 4th.

This is not the first time D.C. LEARNs has been involved with the Early Readers Now program. In 2005, D.C. LEARNs was awarded a grant from what was then known as the D.C. Office of Early Childhood Development to design and build the first Early Readers Now Web site. Later the Web-based support for the program migrated to the D.C. government Web site.

D.C. LEARNs (<http://www.dclearns.org>) is a nonprofit citywide coalition of more than 80 members (<http://www.dclearns.org/members.html>), most of whom are organizations providing adult, family, and children's literacy services to the residents of Washington, D.C. Our mission is to work with these organizations to strengthen adult, family, and children's literacy services and present a strong, unified voice on the importance of literacy as an investment in the community. We work to raise public awareness of literacy issues, recruit volunteers, and provide the materials, research, training, and technical assistance needed to raise the quality of literacy services available to D.C. residents.

Our vision is that Washington, D.C. will become a city where effective and innovative literacy services are available to all, guided by the leadership of the literacy providers themselves, and supported by a community that is committed to the education of all its citizens.

D.C. LEARNs manages the *Read Out Loud* Literacy Hotline, 1-866-READ-OUT (1-866-732-3688). *Read Out Loud* is Washington, D.C.'s public service campaign designed to help people looking to improve their literacy skills find opportunities and services available here in the District of Columbia.

The Friendship House Association is a non-profit, multi-service, community-based social and economic development agency located in Southeast Washington. Since 1910, the Child Development Center at Friendship House has provided high quality early education to children ages 2 through 12 years of age with programming designed to enhance children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. This family-centered program promotes school-readiness through literacy enrichment opportunities in everyday classroom learning experiences. The Childhood Development Program has been a major provider of early intervention services to high-risk children from two to twelve year of age, and currently serves approximately 75 children daily.

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