

Region 4 Episode – South Carolina

Guests: Georgia Mjartan and Rachal Hatton

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we continue our regional story series, looking at the innovative work being done in states and communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Initiative. Host Debra Andersen takes us to South Carolina where a new portal is connecting families with valuable programs and services across the state. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Debra Andersen:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Debra Andersen, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Specialist with the National Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five. Today, I'm happy to be speaking with two early childhood leaders from South Carolina about an innovated new portal, connecting children and families with valuable services and supports across the state. First, we have Georgia Mjartan, Executive Director of South Carolina First Steps and the South Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council. Welcome, Georgia.

Georgia Mjartan:

Thanks, Debra. It's great to be here.

Debra Andersen:

Thank you. We also have Rachal Hatton-Moore, Two-Generation Coordinator also with the South Carolina First Steps and the Early Childhood Advisory Council. Thanks so much for joining us, Rachal.

Rachal Hatton:

And thanks so much for having me, Debra.

Debra Andersen:

Happy to have you. Quickly before we begin, and for those who might not be familiar with your organization, Georgia, can you tell us a little bit about First Steps and its role in South Carolina's early childhood system?

Georgia Mjartan:

South Carolina First Steps is the state's dedicated early childhood agency. Our work involves families and parents, educating and equipping them to be their child's first and best teacher. We also provide quality enhancement and scholarships to children across the state. We're the provider of pre-K4 for children who are Medicaid-eligible in child care centers, private schools and charter schools, and we have the responsibility to coordinate and convene our state's early childhood system, which constitutes eight different state agencies and many other providers.

The reason we called this First Five South Carolina is certainly an acknowledgement of the importance of the first five years of life, that's who this portal's for. But also we bucketed the 44 different programs and services into five domain areas, child care and early education, health and safety, special needs and early intervention, food and nutrition, and parenting and family support. We

acknowledged that families oftentimes are looking for one or two of those things, but could benefit from many more. We wanted to make it really easy for families to understand that the early childhood state system is more than just child care. It's more than just meeting children's special needs, if that's a need of a family; it's a comprehensive whole child, whole family system.

Debra Andersen:

Wow. It seems like First Steps is really an effective way to fill some of those gaps that can impact school readiness, and certainly brings a lot of services and partners together under one umbrella. In many ways, that sounds like the driving force behind the state's latest early childhood innovation, a new online portal called First Five South Carolina. It launched this February after years of design and effort and with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five or PDG B-5 and it already seems to be having an impact. To start, Rachal, could you give us an overview of what First Five is and how it works?

Rachal Hatton:

Sure. First Five SC contains an eligibility screener with 44 early childhood programs and services and information for over 60 early childhood programs and services across 11 state agencies. We built this so that families could easily self-navigate through the early childhood system in our state and find the resources that they were looking for, regardless of if they were in the upstate or in the low country, as we call it. No matter which county in South Carolina you're in, the programs and services are mapped to your area. You can go on at any time of day or night and find out the information that you're looking for instead of having to wait until an office is open. That way you can find which programs best fit your family and then through five simple screens, find out if you're eligible or not.

Debra Andersen:

Thank you. Could you tell us a little bit about the roots of First Five? What were you seeing in South Carolina or even in early childhood in general, that led you to decide you wanted to do this work and what kinds of resources or programs did you already have in place that helped you get started?

Georgia Mjartan:

In South Carolina, we have a strong early childhood state system. We have eight different state agencies and entities that touch the lives of young children and their families. That's a good thing. That's something that we were very proud of in our state. We have federal state and local dollars flowing into programs and services for young children and their families. But despite all that good, we heard from parents directly that even though we had all this great support, all these great programs happening, families didn't know how to access them. People who were in need couldn't find them. And frankly, the process to find out if you were eligible and apply was time consuming and difficult. As a state system, we began by mapping out our flow of state and federal funds. I can tell you Debra, that the legislature loved our map of the flow of state and federal funds, but that map didn't answer the question for families with young kids, for a mom who has two kids and is trying to spend 15 minutes at the library, finding out what's available, seeing a map of where dollars go, doesn't really help her.

Debra Andersen:

Georgia, how did the PDG B-5 Initiative influence your state's decision to create First Five South Carolina?

Georgia Mjartan:

The Preschool Development Grant gave South Carolina the impetus and the opportunity to conduct a statewide needs assessment. Through that process, we were able to hear from over 5,000 people, the majority of whom were parents with young children. We heard from families that while they knew about some programs in our early childhood state system, they absolutely did not know about all of the opportunities that were available to them. We also realized that families were spending a lot of time finding out what they were eligible for, applying for different public programs. From that, we made the commitment, as a state system, to build a single portal into these services. When I say we made a commitment, it was a formal vote that our state's Early Childhood Advisory Council took to say, "We are in, we needed support and funding," and that's what the Preschool Development Grant provided. Certainly without the funding, we would not have had the ability to do that needs assessment nor to build this very innovative, nationally unique eligibility portal and what will become a common application into all these different programs and services.

But we also knew that this was something that if we were going to commit to it, as a public early childhood state system, we needed that ongoing sustainable buy-in. We actually got that buy-in before we ever even began the build out process, not only for the eligibility screener, but also for the common application.

Debra Andersen:

Thank you. That's just such a great overview of why you decided to create the portal. Now that it's been in place for a little bit, what benefits have you seen both for families and providers. Georgia, would you like to start?

Georgia Mjartan:

On Friday afternoon, I was leaving the Department of Social Services building; I had been there for a meeting. There was a mom with her five-year-old and her four-year-old. She had just stopped by the state social service agency to ask what was available to families like hers. She had just moved to the state and it was an amazing moment to be able to say to that mom, with her two busy kids in tow, "Check out First Five SC and rather than stopping by one agency at a time to figure out what that agency can do for you and your young children, you can go to this one place and it will give you that map. It will give you that entry point to not only the programs available through the Department of Social Services where you happen to come, your first stop, but also through First Steps, and through the Department of Education, and health and well-being programs," as well as those child care programs that I think that mom was seeking.

Just stories like that, there are many, but that literally happened last week. So I think that's a great example of how families are really seizing onto this. I'll tell you, too. She was incredibly excited. She wrote it down and she said, "This is the answer. Thank you so much. This is amazing."

Debra Andersen:

That's so exciting. Thank you. That's a great story. Rachal, you're a little bit more familiar with the behind the scenes work with the portal. What benefits have you been able to determine?

Rachal Hatton:

We've heard a lot from case managers and people who work in direct service with families who are able to help families connect not just to the programs that they offer, but to the entire early childhood system so, finding things under the categories of food and nutrition or parenting supports. We're really

proud of that, that we're able to provide families with a place to find this information in one spot so that, like Georgia said, they don't have to go repeatedly to different agencies and sit there and wait for information or try to call on their break from work or before they go into their second shift. It's really important that we have something that works not just for families, which is our primary audience, but something that also supports all of us who support families and want to make sure that they're able to access what they need.

Georgia Mjartan:

In addition for providers, many of us in the public state system, we have a specific allocation of state dollars or federal dollars, and those are resources that we want to use by connecting to families. One of the motivators for the public programs to participate in this was that for some of us, we end up where we have carry forward or we have unspent dollars. This is a portal that allows the providers to go in and grab what we call leads. They can go into the back end of this portal and see who has gone through the eligibility screener and is eligible for their programs and services. If there's a pre-K program that has resources and slots available, they can see the families who are eligible for that and can actually proactively reach out to the families and say, "I saw that you're eligible. Would you like to know more about our program?" That's a way that we are using this portal to help ensure that dollars that are intended to serve families are most effectively reaching those families.

Debra Andersen:

That's fantastic. You guys have made so much progress on your portal. I do understand that you have more plans for the future. Rachal, can you tell us a little bit more about where you're hoping kind of what the next horizon is for your portal?

Rachal Hatton:

Absolutely. As Georgia mentioned, we did recently launch the backend portal for programs and services to be able to get lead information and contact those families. Part of our future plans are to continually build out the leads portion so that programs and services are able to access that and also training them on how to use that so that they can make best use of it. We're also currently in development for the common service application, which means that we have discovery meetings where we talk to each of the programs that will be included about specific application details, regulations, any statutory requirements for applications, such as what order things have to be asked and what kinds of supporting documents must be included, so that we can make the application as simple as possible for families. That includes understanding when things have to be worded a certain way while also making sure that it's in plain language for families.

Because one of the things that we know is that sometimes forms are confusing and eligibility determination can be confusing. We want both the eligibility portal and the common application to mirror each other in language and also to collect information in the easiest way possible for families so that it saves them time, but it also saves time for people who receive applications and so we're able to meet agencies and programs where they are, many of whom don't currently have online applications, so this would make it easier for them in some ways to collect the information, as well.

Debra Andersen:

That's great. This is no small undertaking, and I know that many states have interest in the work that you're doing now. Georgia, from your perspective as Executive Director of First Steps, what advice do you have for other states about creating an online benefits and enrollment portal?

Georgia Mjartan:

Co-design from the beginning is key. Getting that buy-in from all of the stakeholders, both the public agencies that provide the services and also from the important and essential nonprofits in the community who provide that role of being a system navigator. We included everyone in the initial design and development of First Five. I think that, that's part of why once we were able to sort of flip the switch with Preschool Development Grant funds, why we were able to move so quickly. Also, I will say having some proof points was key. Use us, use the fact that South Carolina has accomplished this as a proof point that it can be done. And that was important to us. We looked to other states, in particular, the state of Colorado, which had built Colorado PEAK a decade ago. That was a way for us to overcome some of those questions, questions about data governance, questions about privacy.

We were able to say, "Look, here's another state that's overcome it." And then I think last but not least, really mapping out what that end user experience is - that we all desire. I remember a meeting where we were kind of going back and forth about whether we were going to call it pre-K or K4 or 4K, and just the semantics of the words we use and how all these different agencies and different programs call things different names. It sounds small, but coming up with those decisions together, when you're talking across 44 different programs and more than eight different agencies in the room, that can be challenging.

We took a step back and we said, "What do we want families to experience?" That became our north star. We realized that we wanted families in South Carolina with young children to say, "I am so happy that I am raising my child here. This is a state that cares about me, that cares about the future of my child, and that's here to support me and my young child." Once we kept that north star in mind, we were able to move forward through some of those sticky conversations. Some of them were about words. Some of them were about how this thing was going to be funded or marketed, but just keeping that common shared north star in mind really helped guide us and that's key advice I would give to other states.

Rachal Hatton:

I also wanted to add that throughout the development of First Five, it was really important to us that we govern the data in such a way that it belongs to the state and that we don't use proprietary software for the development of it, and that we are able to maintain it and own it and have the information belong to us so that we can be sure to share it out as a state system.

Debra Andersen:

Thank you. That is so helpful and no small undertaking. While you talked about the challenges of that, those are definitely very important steps to be taken in the development of this. Rachal, you have again, the perspective of data management. From maybe more of a technology perspective, what advice do you have for other states?

Rachal Hatton:

Well, let me start by saying that I'm a social worker, so every piece of data in my mind represents a whole person. It's really important that we center family voice and experience, just as Georgia has mentioned, and recognize that as we collect data, it should always be used for the sole purpose of improving the system and delivery systems. I think First Five offers some really unique possibilities for that, that I hope other states will think about and replicate and we're happy to talk to other states. Since we launched in February, we've had over 12,000 unique viewers and over 35,000 page views. One of the things that we're able to see is what are people going to right now? What's most important? Over time, we'll be able to trend those to look at maybe next year, we can say, "Well, in March, everybody's going

to look at food nutrition in advance of summer nutrition sites, or in April, everyone is looking to enroll their child in pre-K," for example.

We know that the information that we're collecting now is going to be useful in the future, as well. We're really excited about that. We can find out which programs families are eligible for, and that can help us sort of tailor outreach efforts, but also provide that information back to agencies about what are the eligibility criteria that people seem to be meeting and where might any gaps be? We've had many questions about how this was budgeted and paid for and how the development happened. We budgeted into several different phases of development first for the eligibility screener development, and then second for the common application development. We also had a separate budget for outreach so that families would be able to learn about it, and then we would also be able to do training with different providers around the state so that they could share it with their clients, but also so that their own direct staff would be able to use it.

Debra Andersen:

Thank you. You've both really highlighted that this is so much more than an online portal for families to find out about services and programs that they're eligible for and have really given the big picture of the impact on your state. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Georgia Mjartan:

A statewide initiative like this couldn't be done without significant high level political support. Additional advice I'd provide for other states is getting that buy-in not only from agencies, many of which are cabinet level, but also from the governor's office, getting legislative champions. We were building out this portal in a conservative state with a big focus, at the time that we were building it, on helping families return to work or school, post COVID. Being able to articulate how, when a family can access all the supports they need that provides the opportunity for mom or dad to be able to go back to work because they have access to child care or pre-K because their young one who needed early intervention services gets them. When we were able to communicate sort of the broader public value of this, even beyond the families with young children who it would serve, but to the employers, to the community at large. I think that was part of what helped everyone get behind it.

Debra Andersen:

Thank you. Well, this has been a wonderful conversation and a very valuable look into the work that your team and so many others have been doing in South Carolina. Georgia and Rachal, thank you so much for sharing your time and your knowledge with us today.

Georgia Mjartan:

Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Rachal Hatton:

Thank you.

Narrator:

Thanks for listening to Early Childhood Policy Matters. Produced by the National Technical Assistance Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five. Find more episodes by going to childcareta.acf.hhs.gov and searching for Early Childhood Policy Matters. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app or on SoundCloud at EC Policy Matters.