



HRA's Office of Child Support Enforcement Hosts Conference on Supporting Young Families

On Tuesday, October 6, HRA's Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) hosted the latest in its series of policy conferences. This year's conference included representatives from over 120 different organizations, all coming together to focus on the important role Child Support plays in fighting poverty. This year's conference broke new ground in asking attendees to think of ways OCSE can better serve young families, headed by parents between 18 and 24 years old, and how to help them become partners in the child support program for years to come.



HRA Commissioner Steven Banks

"There's been a lot said about families, but not a lot of focus on young families," said

Commissioner Steven Banks in his opening remarks. "At HRA, we're moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and finding ways to serve and build relationships with young families and address the unique challenges they face. I'm looking forward to hearing the imaginative ideas that come out of this meeting."



Executive Deputy Commissioner of HRA's Office of Child Support Enforcement Frances Pardus-abbadessa

"HRA is working diligently to improve the relationships young unwed families have with child support," said HRA's Chief Program Officer Lisa Fitzpatrick. "At the end of the day, it's about the children, and how we can help forge a bond between parents and help break the cycle of poverty."

"We need to be sensitive and aware of the differences in communicating with young parents," said HRA's Executive Deputy Commissioner of Child Support Enforcement Frances Pardus-abbadessa. "Meeting young people where they are now can help them have long term success with the program and have better outcomes for their children."

The event's keynote speaker was Dr. Linda Lausell Bryant, Clinical Assistant Professor and Director of Undergraduate Field Work at the NYU Silver School of Social Work. Her distinguished career in

youth services spans 30 years in both the private and public sectors.

“Young parents are in a different place developmentally. Everything you need to be as a parent is everything that, as a young person, you haven’t yet become,” said Dr. Lausell Bryant. “When young adults are better able to meet their own needs, they are better able to meet their child’s needs. Time is needed to build trust and respect with young parents, and it is important to let them share their stories.”



Keynote Speaker Dr. Linda Lausell Bryant

Dr. Lausell Bryant described the importance of a two-generation approach, providing services to both parents and children. She stressed the importance of access to pre- and post-natal care, and to co-parenting mediation and counseling for both parents. She encouraged City agencies and community groups to partner as much as possible to provide a broad range of services.

HRA’s Office of Evaluation and Research presented a study of young families in NYC, showing that they are a high-need segment of the population with substantial differences from other child support cases. Young and unmarried custodial parents often live with parents or romantic partners (which may be the child’s other parent), but they are still likely to be in poverty. OER’s report suggested an approach to young families should consider how to reach out to young parents still living with their own parents, and how to best support young unmarried parents.

Dr. Jeff Gardere, a noted psychologist and a frequent contributor to television and radio, then led a presentation on the psychology of young adults. Dr. Gardere also moderated the first of two panel discussions. The first panel featured young parents who work as peer educators in HRA’s No Kidding: Teen Pregnancy Prevention program along with another young parent and Ashleigh Washington from the Department of Education’s LYFE program, which provides support to student parents. Panelists shared their insights into the challenges facing young parents. The result was a lively and honest discussion that ended with a standing ovation.



Panel 1: The Challenges of a Young Parent

“I would be grateful for any amount of support, even \$25 dollars a month,” Jelysa Roberts, the Outreach Coordinator and a former Peer Educator for No Kidding, told the audience. “Then I would know my child is able to have snacks for the month. It makes a difference.”

For the second panel, some of the peer educators joined Dr. Lausell Bryant, Sabrina Evans-Ellis of the Youth Development Initiative, and OCSE Director of Communications and Publications David Ramm to discuss ideas that

conference attendees had come up with during the event's breakout sessions.

Among the ideas for addressing young families were employing more young parent peer mentors and ambassadors, along with more peer-to-peer sharing and counseling; expanding alternatives to court such as OCSE's existing Parent Pledge and Cash Assistance Agreement Program, which allow parents to establish a child support order in a more collaborative environment; and comprehensive parenting courses for both mothers and fathers. The participants agreed young families are more engaged when their strengths are emphasized instead of the challenges they face.

The event also included talks by the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence and the Mayor' Office of Immigrant Affairs, as well as an interview with a support magistrate from the New York State Family Court about the court's perspective on serving young parents.