

## **Four Lessons to Learn from the Neighborhood House Association**

The [Neighborhood House Association \(NHA\)](#) has provided the Head Start community with safe, innovative, and timely solutions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The NHA team continued to offer their services and adapted to the public health crisis by testing and implementing flexible learning tools and approaches, in addition to nutritious meals for children and families in need.

We sat with the Vice President of Early Childhood Development at NHA Dr. Deidre D. Jones—an accomplished educator, well versed scholar, and inspiring leader. Dr. Jones shared her experience working with NHA, making urgent, innovative solutions to provide education services to children while protecting their safety, during difficult times.

### **Highlights from the Interview:**

**Q:** How long have you been working with the Neighborhood House Association?

**A:** Three years with NHA! When I came on board, I came to a well-oiled machine, it was a breath of fresh air. In NHA, they know what to do and they're being innovative. I was trying to find my place at the agency, even though I came in as vice president of early childhood development. As a team, we're always looking for the next innovative thing we can do. What can we do to go farther and grow larger?

**Q:** How did you manage the COVID-19 crisis? What was that experience of dealing with a pandemic like?

**A:** The pandemic hit after I had been with the agency for five months. It was a huge change for everyone, but especially for me because I was new to the agency. But we pivoted. I had a very strong team that rallied together. We discussed what we could do and got to work.

**Q:** How did your partnership with Innovative Health Solutions (IHS) start? What did you collaborate on?

**A:** We purchased ZONO and HALO machines (IHS products). With the ZONO machines, it was first put on my radar by a teacher right on the onset of COVID-19 who was attending a webinar. There were many webinars at that period, to inform people about the pandemic, about what to

do, and how to clean etc. [...] The teacher sent me pictures and information about the product, and I said ‘this is a great idea but our sites aren’t open right now’ then as our sites began to open, my former boss suggested it and I said ‘yes, we need it, let’s get it.’ [...] Now, 29 out of our 31 sites have ZONO machines. The staff there loves it, you can literally just put everything into the machine, press the button, and walk away. Thirty minutes later, everything is cleaned and sanitized. As the training said, anything without a heart beat goes into the ZONO machine. [...] I then learned about HALO, after purchasing the ZONOs. I attended a webinar that talked about it. I had my safety director attend it as well. When I saw it, I was like ‘oh this is the ZONO of air purifiers!’ The HALOs we have at our administrative offices not in our classrooms. At the time, the only mitigation factors that we had were plexiglass up and safety stations with masks and hand sanitizers. I wanted another layer of protection for our staff so that when we fully reopen I wanted them to feel safe. HALO would do that, providing a sense of support and safety for our staff.

#### **Four Keys to Success from NHA’s Dr. Jones:**

Here are four keys to success that we can learn from NHA: maintaining the safety of children and staff, forming long-lasting partnerships, adopting innovative solutions, and addressing the workforce’s mental wellness.

##### **1. Safety First, Education Always**

The NHA followed local and federal health guidelines throughout and after the pandemic. Initially, they relied on distant learning methods and provided children and their families technological assistance, including tablets, laptops, and wifi access, to take online classes from the safety of their homes. It was also an opportunity for the parents and families to follow-up with teachers on their children’s progress and success, online.

While most schools were closed, the NHA continued to provide nutritious meals several times a week—the frequency depended on the evolving health guidelines and ranged from daily to twice a week—as well as diapers for the younger children. When collective activities were still considered hazardous, the NHA strategically selected their give-away locations to cover several sites at once, usually where there was the most traffic.

During the progressive return to classrooms, the NHA tested a pilot site before slowly opening several more sites at a time, while prioritizing sanitization and safety measures. The preschool classrooms applied a lower enrollment capacity than pre-COVID, as well as smaller groups of students to keep the six-foot distance. In addition to implementing health guidelines, the NHA held weekly telebriefing sessions with child-care providers and healthcare professionals to present the latest updates and adjust measures accordingly.

## **2. “Partnerships Bring New Ideas!”**

Collaborating with different partners inspires innovative, creative solutions.

“Building and maintaining partnerships help with the progression of ideas. I don’t have to do all the work on my own, my team doesn’t have to do all the work on their own. It really helps to put us on the forefront of innovative change, or to be an example or a guide for another program.”

Some programs reach out to exchange ideas and inspire new ones. For example, the NHA installed sanitization and ventilation systems in the classrooms and offices to protect both children and staff. Through such partnerships, the barriers and hurdles caused by the pandemic become less daunting and more manageable.

## **3. Adjust, Create, and Innovate**

When implementing flexible learning tools, the NHA installed different learning applications on tablets before giving them to parents and families. To make up for the learning loss during the pandemic, they launched the ‘Ignite by Hatch’ online program with differentiating instruction. This means that as children had different progress levels, the program adjusted the content based on the child’s developmental level and needs.

Another innovative resource was a website explaining different developmental milestones, based on the child’s age. To keep up with health guidelines, the NHA piloted, tested and applied different approaches and measures to safe learning in the classroom.

These innovative methods included: teaching two groups of students separately on different days of the week, following a hybrid group schedule where one group attended the classroom in the first half of the week and the other group in the second half, and changing the frequency of deep cleaning sites.

#### **4. Mental Wellness Matters**

Thanks to NHA's deeply-rooted commitment to wellness, being aware and mindful of the staff's mental health and stressors is a best practice.

"I don't like stress," said Dr. Jones. "We take a very coordinated approach to dealing with crises. Whatever we implement, we make sure we can do it without overwhelming our teaching staff. Some projects and ideas can wait, but they're still on our radar. I don't like to stress out my team. I don't want to do anything that my team doesn't support."

Given current child-care challenges such as workforce shortage, exchanging input with the staff about mental health helps to understand and address their needs better and sooner. In addition to constructive feedback, Dr. Jones encourages her team to share opinions and perspectives on all work aspects.

"I usually wait before I provide my input because I don't want them to just get along with whatever the supervisor says. I save my opinion for last so that they aren't influenced by it."