

**TESTIMONY OF MYIA SMITH
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HENRY BOOTH HOUSE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORKER & FAMILY SUPPORT
“IMPROVING FAMILY OUTCOMES THROUGH HOME VISITING”
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Good morning, Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Myia Smith, a Family Support Specialist with the Healthy Families America program at the Henry Booth House in Chicago, Illinois, located in your district, Chairman Davis.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and share my experiences working with parents and children in my community.

Over the last 124 years, Henry Booth House has provided comprehensive and integrated early childhood education, health, and social services to children and families across Chicago communities. Our 33-year partnership with the State of Illinois has allowed us to operate the Healthy Families America program to support families with children from birth to three years of age.

Healthy Families America, or HFA, is the nationally recognized, evidence-based home visiting program of Prevent Child Abuse America. HFA works with families and communities to strengthen networks of support and believes nurturing relationships are the foundation for healthy child development. HFA is one of 19 models supported through MIECHV funding. My position with HFA at Henry Booth House is 100% funded by MIECHV.

The Henry Booth HFA program is part of the national HFA network, with about 600 sites including Healthy Families Illinois, Healthy Families Indiana, and Healthy Families Massachusetts, to name just a few. Each year, HFA serves nearly 70,000 families in 38 states, D.C., and all five territories. In Illinois,

HFA has 42 program sites serving more than 2,700 families and in Indiana there are HFA services in all 92 counties.

Before working at HFA, I was an early childhood teacher for 16 years at a childcare development center on Chicago's westside. I worked with kids every day and loved it. But I also knew that we could only do so much. After so many years, I wanted to make a difference outside of the classroom. I wanted to work with the kids AND their parents.

I've been a Family Support Specialist for the last 3 years with the HFA program at Henry Booth House. As an HFA Family Support Specialist, my goal is to be caring, present and responsive with families. During home visits, we work with parents and caregivers on what is most important to them and their family.

During our visits, we do regular screenings with the children. We work with parents to be sure they make their doctor's appointments, whether prenatal or well-child visits. With the parents, we use a life skills progression assessment and a parent survey, and screen for maternal depression. As we see needs arise, we make referrals to mental health, housing, employment, and education specialists. I always follow-up with the family to be sure they have been able to access the resource.

Across the country, HFA programs work with all different types of families. Some of the diverse populations that HFA programs work with include youth in foster care, pregnant and parenting youth, fathers, first-time parents, child welfare involved parents, and incarcerated parents. We work in cities, like Chicago, but also in suburban and rural communities, and in 22 tribal communities.

At Henry Booth House, we have home visitors that meet our community's needs. I'm from the community where I work. We also serve Chinatown, so if I meet parents who speak Mandarin and Cantonese, I refer them to one of our Family Support Specialists who speak their language.

I love supporting parents and helping them get their children ready to start school, find stable homes, finish their own education, and set and achieve their own goals. But first, parents have to learn about the program and want to be involved. Some moms may feel like they don't need the program. But I tell them all parents need to feel supported.

Many of the parents I work with have trust issues. Just having them open up to me is a huge success. When I meet moms, I don't talk about the program first. I approach families with respect. I want to build a relationship; I want to build trust. And then I talk about the program, if they are interested. I tell them how it can benefit them and the whole family.

Personally, I've worked with a lot of first-time moms and young moms that are under age 21. One of the first mothers I worked with was a teen mom. She was 16 at the time, and her attitude wasn't great! Many teen moms are resistant and distrustful at first. Many moms have had people in their lives they can't trust. They don't have that support, so I am there to help them.

For this mom, I continued working with her – and when she had the baby, her attitude completely changed! I worked with her over the years, did a lot with her, gave her strategies for supporting her baby, and for when she's frustrated. She's doing well now. I am very proud of her. The baby is about to turn 3, and Mom has graduated from high school!

Another first-time mom I worked with was about 19 or 20 and had her baby early. The baby was in the hospital for three months. While the baby was in the hospital, the mom lost her job, and was homeless. She didn't have much support and was feeling hopeless. I started working with her to help her find a place to live. She found a place and got rental assistance from Catholic Charities. She moved in just a couple weeks before the baby came home last September! She is still there, has two jobs and wants to go back to school for nursing. Her son is doing well.

Erica was referred to me by the doula program when she was pregnant. I had been given the wrong phone number but ended up running into Erica at the WIC office. I asked how she was feeling and if she was excited for the new baby. We just talked. She had a lot going on and didn't have the support from family that she wanted and needed - I gave her a hug. It's all about building trust and relationships.

At our first visit, Erica opened up right away. I was honored! It usually takes 3-4 four visits to build that kind of trust and have parents open up and talk! Louis was very engaged right away too and agreed that the program was a good thing. He asked for a dad's group at the first meeting!

Before her son was born, I met with Erica every other week. I was there to support her prenatally and immediately after having Calais. After Calais was born, we had a visit every week, and now, based on all the family's progress, it's every month. We immediately started setting goals for both mom and baby. Erica immediately started achieving them and still is, but I'll let her tell you more about that!

Erica and Louis text me all the time about what he's doing. They send videos of him zipping up his coat and counting -- whatever his next milestone is! During the pandemic, I met with families through Zoom. If they didn't have access to Zoom, we would give them tablets. I would also talk with Erica and Calais through Facetime. I hated that I couldn't be there physically, but I wanted to let them know I was still there for them.

I didn't know about home visiting when I had my son, and I wish I had because I would have enrolled. I tell every mom I meet to take advantage of these programs because you never know when they will take it away. A lot of moms don't know about setting goals or don't know about different strategies to use so they won't get frustrated with their babies. During covid, a lot of parents were home all the time with their kids and it became overwhelming and stressful. A lot of child welfare cases involve parents that don't have strategies to know how to deal with their babies and that's why home visiting is important.

I'm helping families through their challenges, while also helping them strengthen relationships with their children. I'm helping parents get their children ready for school so they will succeed. HFA helps parents and families by offering critical support when it is most needed. I love what I do, to see them be successful lets me know I am doing my job right. I know the research shows HFA has amazing outcomes with families, and I know for sure that is true based on my own experience working with so many families in HFA! Our programs produce real results in the lives of children and families and I am proud of the work I do.