Leadership Pathways for Home Visitors of Color:
An Exploration

Leadership Pathways for Home Visitors of Color: An Exploration Core Team

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About Start Early

Start Early (formerly known as the Ounce of Prevention Fund) is a nonprofit public-private partnership advancing quality early learning and care for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to help close the opportunity gap. For nearly 40 years, Start Early has delivered best in-class doula, home visiting and Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Bringing expertise in program delivery, research and evaluation, professional development and policy and advocacy, Start Early works in partnership with communities and other experts to drive systemic change so that millions more children, families and educators can thrive.

Learn more at **www.StartEarly.org**.

The Project

The Leadership Pathways Project was created out of a need to learn directly from home visitors of color about the successes, barriers, and strategies that this vital component of the workforce incurs when striving for leadership opportunities. There is a current and much needed focus on home visitor workforce well-being, and numerous academic studies have been conducted to ascertain the barriers and resources that exist. There has been less of a focus on the well-being of home visitors of color and how they perceive and experience workforce wellbeing, and even less of a focus on leadership pathways for home visitors of color, how they define leadership, and how they experience the barriers and successes to leadership opportunities.

This project provides a window into the experiences of home visitors of color, in their own words and through their own observations. The purpose of the project was not to create more burden on home visitors and supervisors to fix the problems that exist, but to provide information and data that can eventually lead to upstream system changes that better support home visiting professionals of color.

In November 2022, Start Early launched a national field engagement effort to center the voices and experiences of home visitors of color to define leadership within the home visiting field, determine a vision for developing and supporting leadership trajectories, and to address what is necessary to support that leadership development. Sometimes, programs, organizations and systems try to create solutions without fully understanding the perspectives that shape problems. However, using a human-centered design approach with this project allowed voices from the field to be intentionally centered during the design, development, implementation, data collection, and data synthesis stages.

The Team

To fully represent home visiting voices of color, Start Early acknowledged that project leadership must include home visitors of color from the beginning to co-design, plan, and implement the project. However, the necessary time it takes to onboard home visitors as project leaders was significantly underestimated in the original project plan. This oversight required the Start Early team to step out of traditional ways of working, pause the project, and reconfigure the project timeline and work plan. Subsequent conversations with funders also followed to build a common understanding of and approval for project delays.

The project team was led by two home visitors of color who each had 6 to 10 years of experience in the home visiting field. The home visitor leaders were paid an hourly consulting rate for their time and expertise through the entire project. Additionally, the project team included individuals from Start Early who collectively had expertise in home visiting, community systems building work, workforce development, research and evaluation, human-centered design, and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) principles. Start Early team members were recruited by January 2023; however, work did not begin on the project until the home visitor project leaders were recruited and onboarded. This occurred in April 2023.

Notably, the project team engaged in necessary pivots to ensure home visiting professional voices remained the project anchor. The learnings, reflections, and solutions from this field engagement cut across practice and policy and were driven by *what home visitors and supervisors of color*

identified they needed to feel supported and invested in as professionals and people. The words "leadership" and "voice" are used frequently in the nonprofit world, but how they are identified and defined were critical to this project. This was an opportunity to move beyond creating projects that ask for "input and feedback" to intentional planning and authentic leadership opportunities. The home visitors co-leading this project had full decision-making authority and most often had the final say on project decisions about timelines, process, data collection methods, and focus group and survey content. Both of the home visitors leading this project shared reflections of their experiences of this project as steppingstones in their own leadership pathways. One of the home visitor project leaders reflected on her experience of being heard. "From the beginning, my experience as a home visitor was heard — [it} wasn't like, 'OK we know this so let's try it this way'; my experience was able to lead the project in a kind of way that has validated me in a way that I haven't felt in my career yet."

They also acknowledged that the project team conversations were not always easy and appreciated that everyone on the team who was not BIPOC made space to be transparent, realizing that the kind of feedback the project may or may not get could be based on how things are presented. One leader stated that the openness and honesty of the project team helped them to "speak more freely about whatever was on my mind; people were aware of themselves; positionality isn't always something that people are aware of."

Human-Centered Design

A human-centered design approach was used at all stages of the project (i.e., from recruitment of the home visitor project leaders through developing the set of professional learning, systems, and policy recommendations).

Human-centered design is a framework that includes those most impacted by the creation of a potential solution in the design and development of that solution.

Using a human-centered design approach with the project allowed for better understanding of the needs, concerns, and motivations of home visitors of color, which led to more flexible and customized processes and approaches throughout the project. It also resulted in gathering information from the field that directly relates to the field.

Definition of Person of Color

For this project, the term "person of color" encompasses Asian, Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e, Middle Eastern/North African, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander communities. We recognize that this definition is not exhaustive and may not capture the full diversity of racial and ethnic identities. However, we aim to be inclusive and representative of a wide array of identities, acknowledging and valuing the unique experiences and contributions of each group. This inclusive approach is foundational to our commitment to equity, anti-racism, and the celebration of the strengths and resilience inherent in diverse communities.

Key Deliverables

Deliverables of the project included:

- Conduct a national landscape analysis on leadership pathways for home visitors.

- Recruit home visitors and supervisors of color from the field to co-design and lead the project as part of a multidisciplinary team.

- Engage with 5 to 10 groups of home visitors of color using focus groups to gain deeper, more detailed information about experiences with leadership and the gaps, barriers, and successes they have incurred.

- Develop national survey from learnings gathered in focus groups, using the voice of home visitors.

- Implement survey with a minimum of 20 home visitors from various geographical locations and program models/sizes (Start Early ultimately received surveys from 364 professionals of color).

- Analyze and synthesize data from focus groups and surveys.

- Document and disseminate findings and recommendations, via a written brief, to the field.

Introduction

Meet Twanna, a middle-aged Black woman who is a dedicated and experienced home visitor who loves her job. Twanna brings immense value to her role and is passionate about her work. Despite her commitment and expertise, Twanna has faced barriers to getting paid a living wage and opportunities for career advancement. Observing her workplace, Twanna notes that the home visiting staff does not fully represent the diverse community they serve. As one of only two home visitors of color, Twanna understands the importance of cultural competence and shared experiences in building trust with families. Her supervisor acknowledges that families of color often feel more comfortable with someone who shares their background. Recently, Twanna applied for a supervisory position, and despite her extensive experience of over 10 years, she was informed that a degree was a prerequisite for the role. Twanna's pursuit of higher education has been hindered by the demanding and unpredictable nature of her schedule, which is tailored to the needs of the families she supports.

Twanna's story is a testament to a broader challenge in the home visiting field, which is working towards greater representation and inclusion of people of color, especially in leadership roles (Sandstrom et al., 2020)[1]. Beyond representation, it is crucial to focus on promoting workforce wellbeing (Sparr et al., 2022)[2], retaining, sustaining, equitably compensating, and nurturing leadership opportunities for home visiting professionals of color (Sandstrom et al. 2020). The Leadership Pathways Project has gathered powerful stories like Twanna's from home visitors nationwide, highlighting a clear message: Intentional and strategic investment at all levels of the home visiting system is vital to support leadership pathways for home visitors of color.

From November 2022 to April 2023, the Start Early team actively prepared for field engagement. This preparation involved conducting a comprehensive landscape analysis of current leadership pathways within the home visiting field, recruiting dedicated Start Early staff to join the project team, and developing targeted recruitment materials for home visiting project leaders.

This initiative underscores the importance of creating supportive, equitable environments that empower home visitors of color to thrive and lead.

From April 2023 to July 2023, the project team began developing the national reaching data collection mechanisms (e.g., survey and focus group). The team initially developed a quantitative survey to be delivered to the field. However, upon discussion and reflection, there was a concern that the quantitative survey did not provide a true opportunity to gather the voices and lived experiences of home visiting professionals of color. To address this concern, the project team then changed the sequencing of the project to hold the focus groups first so learnings from those groups could be used to create the survey.

During July and August 2023, six virtual 90-minute focus groups were offered as part of this project.
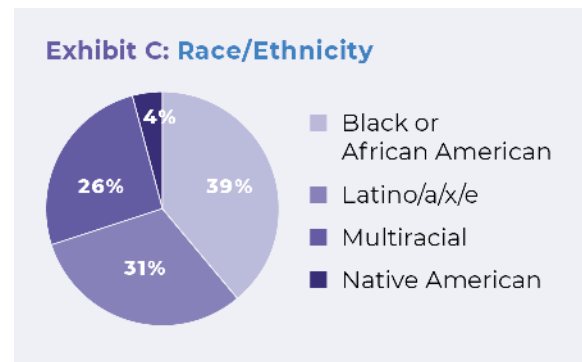
The home visitor project leaders facilitated each of the groups with support from some of the Start Early project team members. Focus group recruitment was conducted by project team members who engaged with their local, state, and national networks. Focus group participants were paid with a $50 Visa gift card for their time and expertise in engaging in the focus groups.

A total of 39 individuals completed the initial focus group interest form. Two individuals did not identify as a person of color, which was a criterion for inclusion in the focus group. Therefore, a total of 37 people were included in the scheduling. Of the 37, 23 participated across the six focus groups. Of the 23 participating individuals, 16 identified as a home visitor and 7 identified as a home visitor supervisor. (Exhibit A)
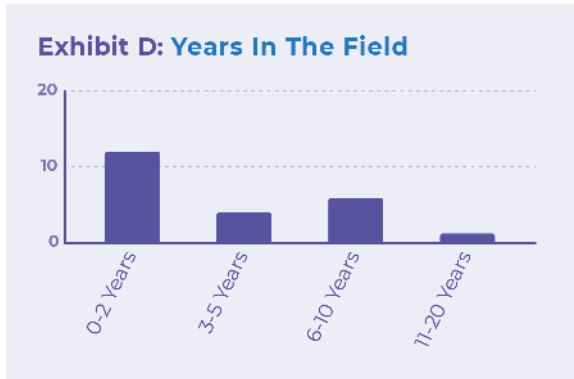
The 23 participants represented six states: Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Oregon, Texas, and Washington. (Exhibit B)


Exhibit B: States Represented
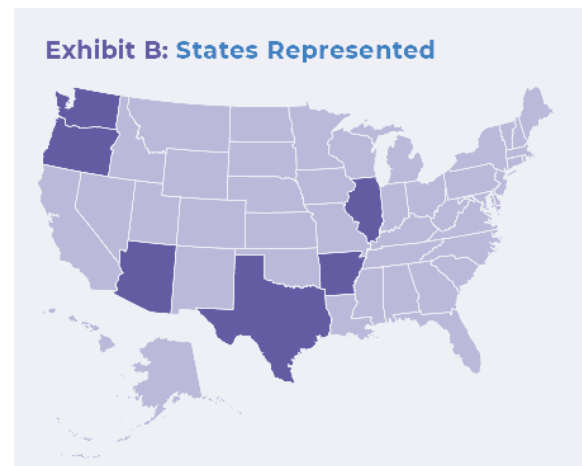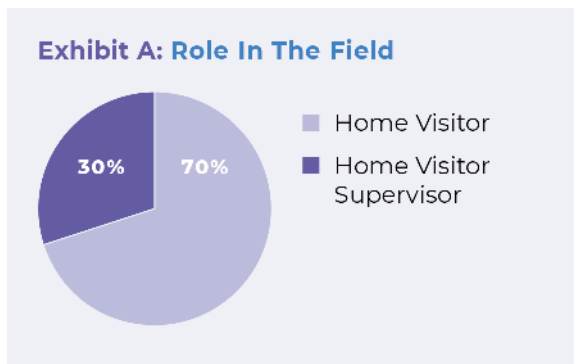
Nine of the 23 participating individuals identified as Black or African American, seven as Latino/a/x/e, six as multiracial, and one as Native American. (Exhibit C)

Exhibit A: Role In The Field

- Home Visitor
- Home Visitor Supervisor

30% 70%

Exhibit C: Race/Ethnicity

- Black or African American
- Latino/a/x/e
- Multiracial
- Native American

4% 39% 31% 26%

Of the 23 participants, 12 had been in the field for 0 to 2 years, four had been in the field for 3 to 5 years, six had been in the field for 6 to 10 years, and one had been in the field 11 to 20 years. (Exhibit D)

Exhibit D: Years In The Field

Finally, the 23 participants represented at least five different home visiting models: Healthy Families America, Parents as Teachers, Healthy Steps, Nurse-Family Partnership, ParentChild+, Nurse Family Partnership, and "other". (Exhibit E)

**Exhibit E: Home Visiting Models**
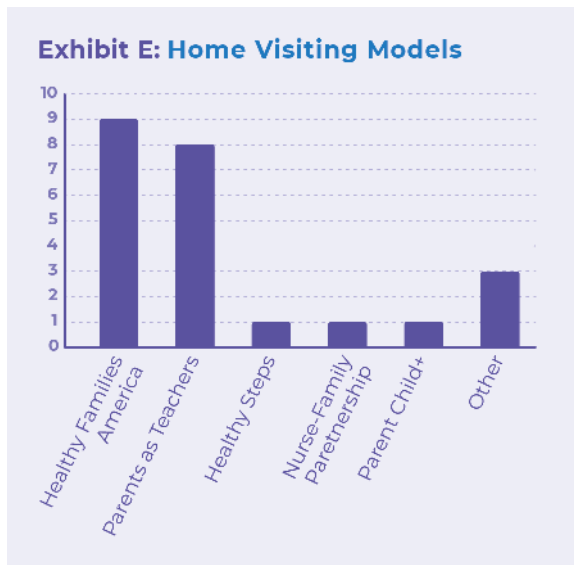
After the six 90-minute focus groups that engaged 23 home visiting professionals of color were completed, the Start Early researcher and expert in human-centered design developed themes from the focus group transcripts. The project team then used the information from the focus groups to create the quantitative survey. The project team intentionally included examples and the "voices" from focus group participants in the survey creation.

The survey was open to the field for a two-week period, ending in mid-October 2023. Survey recruitment was conducted by national partners (e.g., via the Rapid Response Home Visiting collaborative email list serv) as well as via the project team and Start Early partners. A total of 364 individuals from 39 states and the District of Columbia completed the survey.

Of the 364 participating individuals, 267 identified as a home visitor and 97 identified as a home visitor supervisor. (Exhibit F)

Exhibit F: Role In The Field

27% 73%

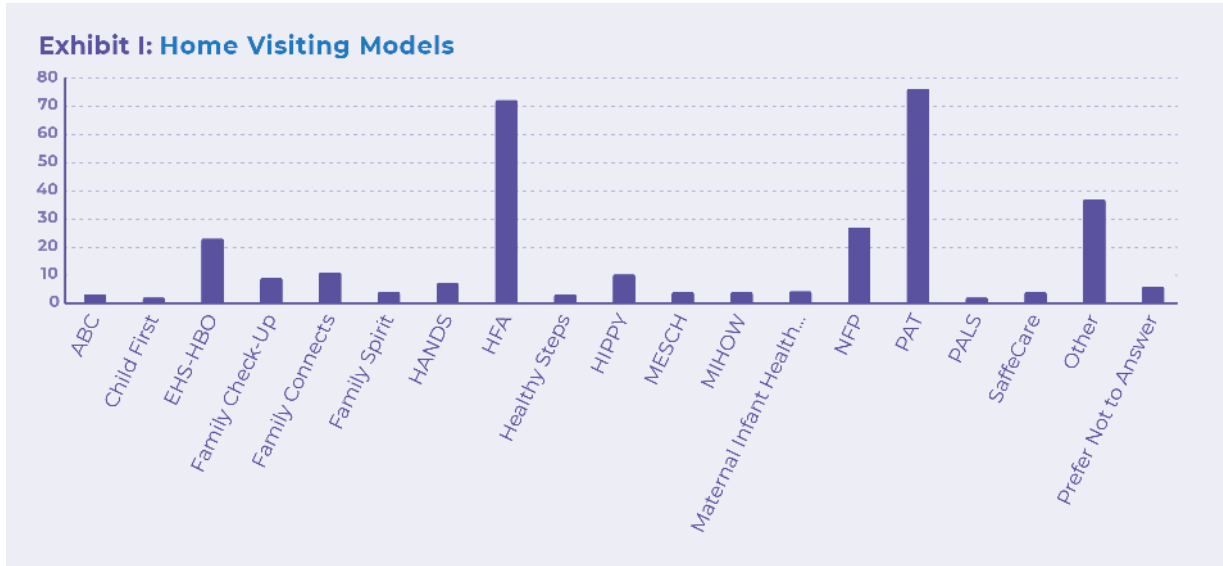■ Home Visitor
■ Home Visitor Supervisor
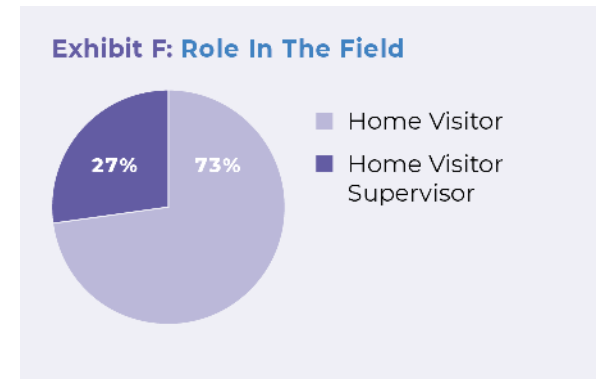
161 of the 364 participating individuals identified as Black or African American, 5 as American Indian or Alaska Native, 11 as Asian American or Asian, 113 as Latino/a/x/e or Hispanic, 6 as biracial black and Latino/a/x/e, 14 as biracial other, and 5 as multiracial, and several respondents chose "other/prefer not to answer." (Exhibit G)

Exhibit G: Race/Ethnicity
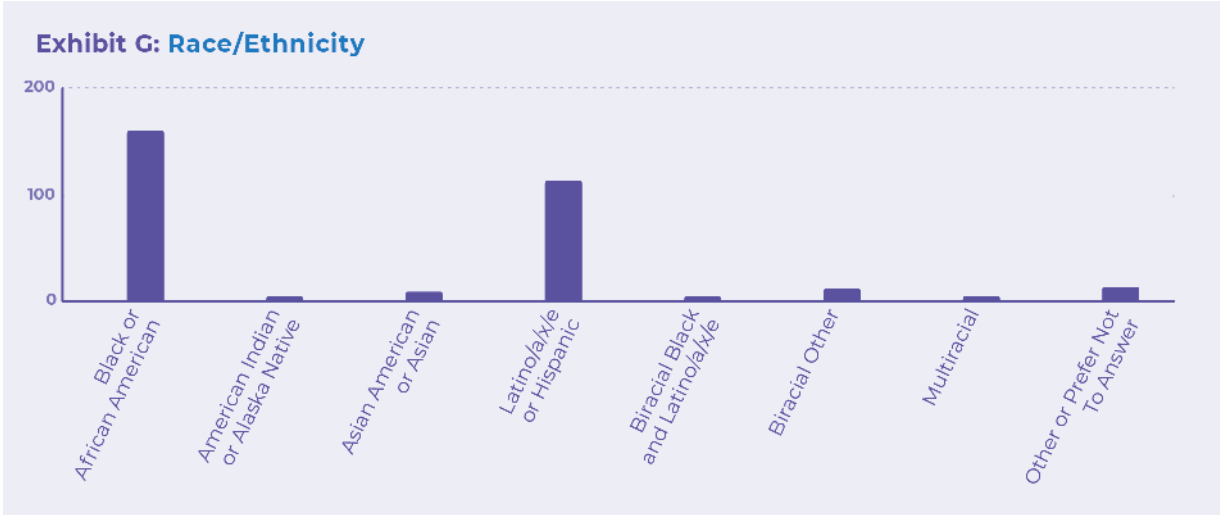
Of the 364 participants, 80 had been in the field for 0 to 2 years, 95 had been in the field for 3 to 5 years, 107 had been in the field for 6 to 10 years, 59 had been in the field 11 to 20 years, and 23 had been in the field for more than 20 years. (Exhibit H).

Exhibit H: Years In The Field
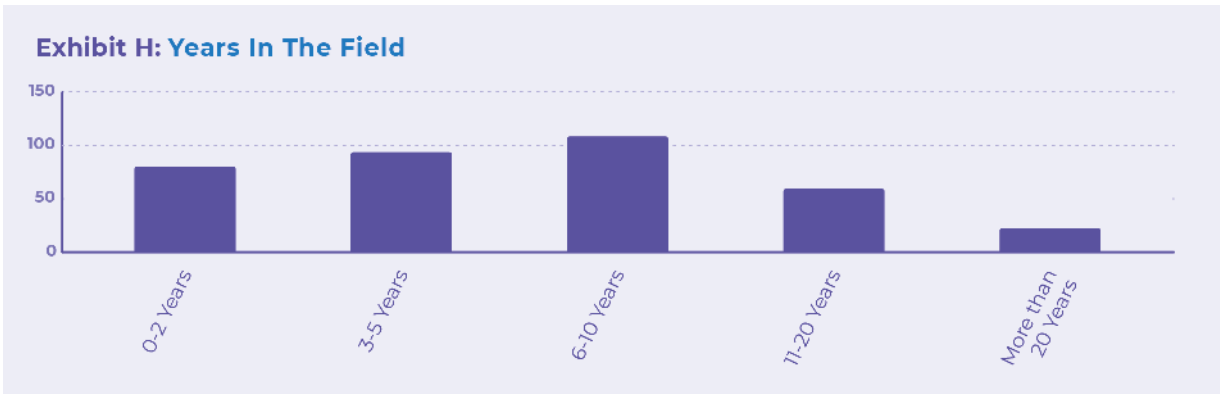
Finally, the 364 survey participants represented 18 different home visiting models. (Exhibit I)

Exhibit I: Home Visiting Models

Key Learnings from Field Engagement

DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP

Using a word cloud analysis, home visitors and supervisors described a multifaceted definition of leadership, using over 60 unique words/phrases to describe how they defined leadership within home visiting. From these words/phrases emerged five overarching themes:
1. personal characteristics and traits (e.g., being empathic, supportive), 2. experience (e.g., direct field experience, understanding of home visiting role), 3. interpersonal approaches (e.g., being an active listener, transparency), 4. work/life balance (e.g., valuing self-care, disconnecting from work during off hours), and 5. organizational approaches (e.g., creating structure, integrating organizational processes). Notably, overall, the most elevated leadership qualities were anchored to relationship-based traits, which is the foundation of the work that home visitors do.

The emphasis on relational qualities points to the importance of creating and nurturing the ability for home visitors and supervisors to use these kinds of leadership skills in their work.

Examples of each leadership category that were included on the survey:

- Personal characteristics and traits: being kind, supportive, empathetic, honest.

- Home visiting experience: direct field experience, understanding of home visiting role, able to provide guidance.

- Interpersonal approaches: being an active listener, identifying skills in others, invested in staff, transparency.

- Work/life balance: valuing self-care, disconnecting from work during off hours, taking time off.

- Organizational approaches: creating structure, delegating tasks, integrating processes.

STRENGTHS AND SUPPORTS

By and large, the home visitors who engaged in this project indicated satisfactory levels of support and interaction with their direct supervisors.

- 76% of home visitors stated they see personal leadership characteristics and traits demonstrated by their direct supervisors often or always.

- 69% of home visitors stated they see home visiting expertise demonstrated by their direct supervisors often or always.

- 74% of home visitors stated they see interpersonal approaches demonstrated by their direct supervisors often or always.

- 76% of home visitors stated they see work/life balance demonstrated by their direct supervisors often or always.

- 72% of home visitors stated they see organizational approaches demonstrated by their direct supervisors often or always.

Home visiting supervisors serve as a primary foundation of program stability and provide tools, resources, and relationship-based interactions that ground and support home visitors in their work with families. But data from this project reinforced that, supervisors alone, no matter how skilled, cannot solely be responsible for home visitor job satisfaction or retention: 37% of respondents saw themselves in HV field 5 years or less, and another 20% don't know.

BARRIERS TO STAYING AND ADVANCING WITHIN THE HOME VISITING FIELD

Key findings from the focus groups and survey of home visitors of color indicated several barriers that impacted both their interest and ability to stay within and advance into leadership roles in the home visiting field. Many of the identified barriers are chronic systemic issues that apply across the home visiting field at large, such as:

1. **Pay and compensation:** Home visitors feel their pay is generally low and does not reflect the reality of the role (e.g., relational work, home visitors providing additional services to families when needed). For example, one home visitor of color noted, "[People] working in [the] home visiting field [are] being compensated just enough to be a half step-in front of the people you are actually serving". Home visitors in leadership positions also feel their pay is generally low. In fact, some home visiting supervisors face similar financial challenges as the families they serve. Home visitors across all roles desire appropriate compensation for the reality of the role.

2. **Lack of leadership roles:** Typically, the only advancement for a home visitor is as a home visiting supervisor. This becomes problematic, as home visitors can only advance in the model in which they have training and skills. This may mean there are multiple home visitors competing for one job. In reality, home visitors tend to bounce from agency to agency about every two years to increase their pay and promotion opportunities. "I've been in this field for… six or seven years and still don't feel like I'm going anywhere", one home visitor of color shared. She continued, "…I'd move to another job thinking maybe that's the thing, like bouncing

around from one agency to another. It's the only way to be able to move up the ladder, but also get paid more for doing this work…". Further, there are not many kinds of leadership roles in home visiting (i.e., limited to supervisor, program director, etc.). And even when they are not "advancing" traditionally into supervisor positions, home visitors feel like they often perform in a leadership capacity without the title or salary increase.

3. **Additional job responsibilities and administrative work:** Home visitors indicate that they are often tasked with performing multiple duties with families during visits (e.g., case management or addressing family hardships) in addition to delivering the home visiting curriculum. Home visiting work, especially when working with families who have been marginalized, requires a lot of case management and addressing the hardships families face. This is challenging because home visitors are not always professionally or emotionally trained in case management. One home visitor explained, "You think that you are coming into a visit for 30 minutes to promote literacy…but you spend 45 minutes navigating how someone can get rental assistance or navigating how they'll get to the food bank…those issues are going to take precedent over anything that you brought or provide because you want them to eat. You want them to have shelter. You want them to be in safe spaces."

Home visitors of color, however, identified additional barriers that pertain specifically to the systems and structures they navigate within the context of their roles, including:

1. **Education:** Due to the common requirement of higher education or additional training needed to advance in the home visiting field, the home visitor role was seen by many focus group participants as a "steppingstone" or short-term role that would provide skills for future leadership opportunities in other fields. As one focus group participant put it, "it's really hard because if you don't have the training or the education or the time [because] you haven't been in the job long enough, you are just not going to be considered for that next role."

2. **Additional job responsibilities leading to emotional and/or workload burden due to expectations of working with families with complex characteristics because of shared racial/ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or lived experiences:** Home visitors of color also bring language skills and cultural matching, a connection for many families that is an asset, that comes with additional responsibilities often not recognized or compensated. One home visitor stated, "I wish that [leadership] did understand what we bring, right, like what we bring as people of color, what we bring as people that have some understanding of what our families really need even though, like they say, what we bring is good, but they need more than what we're offering."

3. **Viewpoints of diversity by leadership:** Some home visitors expressed a belief that direct supervisors are invested in home visitors of color because diversity is seen as a genuine asset, but the leaders above them see it as "checking of a box". Said one home visitor, "Yes, and it's the qualities that you learn that you have to project. You basically have to… act white, you know, speak well, write well, and then you'll seem familiar to them so that then they can move you along, but I've been discovering that then that's not my true self."

4. **Challenges of supervisor and organizational leadership:** Home visitors stated that they see a lot of white people at the senior leadership levels, and home visitors are mostly people of color. They also describe a lack of transparency and understanding of what home visitors

of color contribute. Said one home visitor, "Most of the people providing the direct services are all BIPOC people, right. Everybody's BIPOC. It's not till we get to, you know, managers are still people of color. And then we get to directors and senior directors, it changes. They are white…so I think…the agency that I work with is really trying to just figure out ways to support their BIPOC staff, but we're not there yet I don't think."

Home visitors reported that often, families of color are grouped together and given to the home visitors of color. This does not honor individual family experiences and challenges. Home visitors of color should be recognized for their unique strengths and not just the potential bilingual, race, or cultural match.

How to Support Leadership Pathways

"Bipoc home visitors are the backbone of the communities in which they serve and deserve to be recognized and celebrated." —Claudette Kabera and Clarissa Williamson

The home visiting field is at an equity pivot point. Intentional and planful investment at all levels of the home visiting system to support leadership pathways for home visitors of color is critical. Additionally, it is critical to center the voices of those with lived experience in determining what those needed supports look like.

This project was an opportunity to redesign how data are collected from the home visiting workforce by including the voices and experiences of professionals of color as they have pursued leadership and advancement opportunities in the field. In addition to sharing barriers to staying and advancing within the home visiting field, home visitors and supervisors of color who participated in both the focus groups and the survey brainstormed needed investment in the workforce at every level of the home visiting system. Their recommendations:

Policy:

- Increase compensation and benefits for home visiting roles.

- Redesign data and information systems to better reflect the needs of home visiting programs and the families they serve.

Funders:

- Prioritize funding for additional research related to supporting home visitors and supervisors of color.

- Expect time and resources to be built into grant applications and program practices that require intentional and equitable inclusion of home visitors' and supervisors' needs, instead of grant requirements mainly driving program priorities.

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Education:

- Develop a direct pipeline in undergraduate programs to recruit people of color into the home visiting field.

- Collaborate with graduate programs for current home visitors to receive their master's degree with flexible schedules and financial support.

- Develop new formal leadership training or other nontraditional routes to support leadership for home visitors of color.

- Develop Communities of Practice or general support groups specific for home visiting professionals of color to create a safe space to connect, learn from, and support one another across states and programs.

State Systems:

- Develop more or new job opportunities to allow for increased advancement, improved workload, and skill building.

- Create additional mental health support and benefits and consider the additional burdens experienced by home visitors of color (i.e., time off, therapy, support groups, etc.).

- Require that support for supervisors is identified as part of the funding and budgeting process.

- Consider requiring training and supports for senior systems and program leaders that focus on inclusive practices and the unique needs of home visitors of color.

Program:

- Improve the home visiting field culture by establishing and sticking to work and personal life boundaries.

- Create additional mental health support and benefits and consider the additional burdens experienced by home visitors of color (i.e., time off, therapy, support groups, etc.).

- Develop team building opportunities with other home visitors and supervisors in your organization.

Conclusion

The Leadership Pathways for Home Visitors of Color: An Exploration project sought to redefine the process of "traditional" field engagement by centering the voices of home visitors and supervisors of color at all levels of the project – design, development, and recommendations. Intentional and planful investment at all levels of the home visiting system to support leadership pathways for home visitors of color is critical.

Additionally, it is critical to center the voices of those with lived experience in determining what supports are needed. The team also took a flexible approach to implementing the work, engaging in necessary pivots across the project plan, timeline, and focus group and survey content to ensure that the voice of home visitors and supervisors of color remained the anchor to the project. Project team members engaged in both self and group reflection to build trust and the ability to have transparent and brave conversations around the project goals and implications.

To support an effective human-centered design approach, the project team identified resources (e.g., time, funding) and infrastructure (e.g., adequate staff allocations, ability to hold previously unplanned meetings, support around contracting and invoicing) needs that are essential. The ability to make this project an iterative process, building in time to slow down the development and make necessary pivots was a must. Using an iterative process also often meant adjusting the project timeline and moving at a slower pace than anticipated.

Recent research has pointed to the importance of building in time and resources specific to relational aspects of project planning and implementation. Reflections from this project team indicated that the emphasis on building trusted relationships – strengthened by the ability to be flexible and pivot as needed – was an essential part of the work and resulted in the ability to hold deep conversations with and collect rich information from the field.

Start Early feels lucky that so many home visiting professionals of color were willing to share their experiences and feedback as part of this engagement. We recognize the importance of next steps to elevate and create action around what project participants have shared.

We are indebted to the two home visiting project leaders, Clare Williamson and Claudette Kabera, who joined this work. Their expertise, wisdom, and thoughtfulness shaped every piece of the project. We are also grateful to the home visiting professionals of color who took the time to share their perspectives as part of the national focus groups and survey.

[1] Sandstrom, Heather, Sarah Benatar, Rebecca Peters, Devon Genua, Amelia Coffey, Cary Lou, Shirley Adelstein, and Erica Greenberg. 2020. *Home Visiting Career Trajectories: Final Report*. OPRE Report #2020- 11, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[2] Sparr J. L., van Knippenberg D., Kearney E. (2022). *Paradoxical leadership as sensegiving: Stimulating change-readiness and change-oriented performance*. Leadersh. Organ. Dev. J. 43 225–237.