

Bear Creek facility gets a Head Start center

By Janese Silvey

Friday, November 4, 2011

A Head Start early childhood education center has opened in the recently renovated Bear Creek Community Center, a facility that will reserve at least four of its 20 slots for children living in the public housing neighborhood.

The center reflects a partnership between the Columbia Housing Authority and Central Missouri Community Action, or CMCA, which operates the Head Start programs. Representatives from both groups joined Columbia Area Chamber of Commerce members and city officials this morning to celebrate its opening.

“This is an amazing collaboration,” Mayor Bob McDavid said. “How better to invest in our future than to invest in our youth?”



From left, Shawn Marsh, 4, and Ace Herman, 3, play with toy trucks Friday at the new Bear Creek Head Start. Administrators and city officials attended a ceremony to celebrate the opening of the facility. - August Kryger

The city and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provided a \$73,569 Community Development Block Grant to renovate the building, which CMCA will use rent-free.

In addition to an improved kitchen and bathroom, the facility at 1400 Elleta Blvd. now includes a playground, offices and a main activity room where children this morning were coloring, dressing up and playing with cars.

But what looked like play actually is intense learning, Darin Preis, executive director of CMCA, said during the ceremony this morning. In the Head Start setup, children ages 3 to 5 are learning social and other basic skills they’ll need when they start kindergarten.

“An important way to address the achievement gap is to help kids prepare,” said Phil Steinhaus, CEO of the housing authority.

This is the third such partnership between public housing and Head Start. The two groups also operate an Early Head Start Program for infants through age 3 next door on Elleta Boulevard, and the two partner with Columbia Public Schools to operate both Head Start and Title I programs on Park Avenue.

Both the CHA and CMCA have goals to educate children and strengthen families. No one entity can achieve those goals alone, so partnerships are critical, Preis said.

“By partnering with CHA, we are able to effectively combine limited federal and community resources to help children prepare for school while also supporting parents in their efforts to re-enter the workforce,” he said in a statement. “Poverty and economic insecurity are complex problems, but CMCA is committed to engaging the community to find solutions. Everyone wins when agencies like CMCA and CHA work together.”

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.