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**Framingham State College
Learning by Giving Foundation
2018 Request for Support**

About the Organization:

Mission and History:

Many would agree that Boston is a resource rich city. It boasts an extraordinary history as the cradle of the American Revolution, has a global reputation for its cultural institutions, is the home of some of the world's finest colleges and universities, and is known for its championship sports teams. A significant number of Boston's residents are highly educated, quite gainfully employed and are thriving in this great City.

There is, however, a large sub-set of families raising young children in the City of Boston, whom for generations, have not benefitted from the City's wealth of impressive assets. These families have been living in the shadows – extremely impoverished, underserved, and many new immigrants, struggling with multiple challenges; families who are largely isolated, and whom social services have, too often, failed to engage. These are the families with children at the greatest risk of falling into the educational achievement gap. These are the families sought out, engaged, and served by **Smart from the Start**.

Smart from the Start (*Smart*) is a family support, community engagement and school readiness organization with a mission to prevent the academic achievement gap among children living in Boston's lowest income, most underserved communities. Smart exclusively serves the lowest income families in the city, who struggle with a host of social and emotional challenges, and many of whom traditional social services have had difficulty engaging. Our **strengths-based approach** reaches out to the city's most vulnerable families and empowers them with the tools, resources, and support they need to break cycles of generational poverty and chronic school underachievement.

Initiated with the support of Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino in January of 2008, Smart has grown from 3 program sites to 26 sites in the Boston neighborhoods of Charlestown, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, Roxbury, Mattapan, Roslindale, South Boston and the South End. Smart from the Start's innovative, progressive, and holistic approach showed remarkable early success, and earned the program Root Cause's "2011 Social Innovator of the Year" Award. Recently, Smart has been selected to present our work, as a model of excellence at the 2013, 2014 & 2015 International Conferences for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect in Ireland, Japan & Mexico. We have also presented our program model at Zero to Three's National Training Institute in San Antonio & Seattle, as well as at the past three annual conferences of the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI).

We are respectfully submitting a request for funding in the amount of \$10,000 to support our trauma-informed "Address the Stress" Program.

Population Served:

Smart from the Start targets, exclusively, the most underserved families and communities in the city of Boston. The overwhelming majority of our families live in public or subsidized housing, and the average family income is approximately \$7,000 annually. 77% of our families are unemployed at the time of enrollment and at least half do not have a high school education. Despite incredible strengths and resiliencies, many of them struggle with issues such as maternal depression, substance abuse, domestic and community violence, teen parenthood and more.

Smart serves a culturally and ethnically diverse population of families, who hail from places such as China, Somalia, Haiti, Eastern Europe, Cape Verde, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Ecuador and the United States. We are currently facilitating programming in 5 languages – English, Spanish, Haitian-Creole, Cantonese and Somali. Family structures of current participants include single- and two-parent families, kinship and foster families, grandparents raising their grandchildren, and teen parents.

High Quality, Effective, Community Based Programs:

Smart from the Start programs are located in and around local public and low-income housing developments, homeless shelters and community centers, right where families live.

Recognizing that we cannot do this work alone, we have been successful in engaging and enlisting the support of both formal and informal community partners. Rather than duplicating existing services, Smart works in partnership with community-based organizations, stakeholders and families to improve access and utilization of existing community resources, then identifying and filling gaps as needed.

The latest research and data outlining and highlighting racial, economic and cultural inequities in education, both inform and drive our work. To that end, our goal is to prevent the academic achievement gap, instead of trying to close it once it exists. Current research proves that there are many contributing factors or “social determinants health” which often negatively impact a child’s ability to learn and grow. The message is clear – in order for children to achieve and sustain academic success, we must ensure that the parents, caregivers and families are actively engaged and supported. Smart’s focus is to prepare children to excel in school, educate families to better support and encourage their child’s development and to partner with community agencies to better understand child development, and how best to support very young children who are living in families and communities with a host of challenges.

Smart from the Start’s program model is ecological and holistic, recognizing that in order to ensure long lasting and sustainable change, we must address issues within communities and families, while promoting the healthy development of young children. Our approach is to engage families from a strengths-based perspective. Honoring and introducing families to their strengths helps to build trusting, mutually respectful relationships with families that inspire them to set and achieve goals they never imagined possible, with our support and guidance. Smart’s outreach strategy is unique because families are met where they are, rather than expecting them to come to us. We realize that we cannot serve a child in isolation from their family. If a family is not thriving a child has little chance of thriving.

Smart creates opportunities for young children, who are not in formal childcare settings, to gain the developmental skills necessary to be “school ready”. Simultaneously their families learn about child development and to confidently embrace their role as the child’s first teacher, while taking advantage of Smart’s resources and supports to increase family stability and self- sufficiency. Specific activities include, but are not limited to, prenatal programs, Welcome Baby home visits, baby basics classes, play-to-learn groups, young learner’s socialization groups, adult education classes, financial literacy, counseling, family leadership programs, fatherhood programs, and parenting classes. Additional services such as job readiness and counseling, nutritional education, life management skills training, crisis intervention, trauma-informed mental health services and emergency services are also provided at the Center.

Smart currently serves over 2,000 children birth to five, and nearly 6,000 young children, school-aged siblings and adult caregivers, with hundreds more families in the enrollment pipeline. We currently have a “no waitlist” policy, having committed to serving every young child and family who comes through our doors.

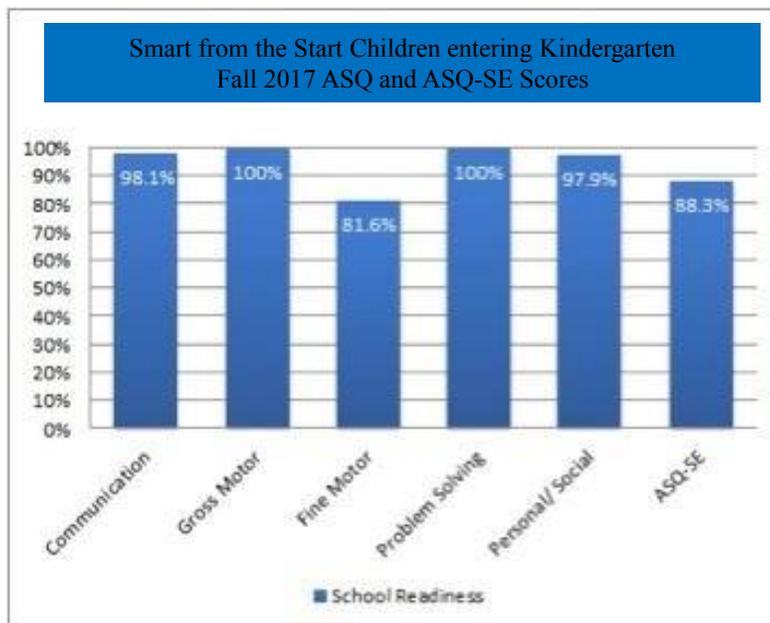
Children and families are showing remarkable success:

Children:

- **87% show increased language/literacy skills;**
- **88% showed increase in ability to transition and sit during circle time;**
- **91% improved fine motor skills.**

Parents/Caregivers:

- **92% read more to their children;**
- **83% Now employ positive disciplinary strategies;**
- **76% have set and achieved educational and employment goals**



Funding Request:

Many of Smart from the Start parents and caregivers have experienced a lifetime of tragedy and trauma, beginning in their childhood. Given the historical, ongoing stigma associated with mental and behavioral health diagnoses and treatment in most communities of color, along with the lack of culturally appropriate, easily accessible mental health services in low-income communities, the overwhelming majority of parents and caregivers continued to struggle without diagnosis, or treatment. As a result, they are now trying to raise their own children, with these ongoing stressors, in addition to trying to make do with inadequate resources. Despite possessing incredible reservoirs of strength and resiliency, Smart’s families struggle daily with issues such as extreme poverty, depression, substance abuse or self-medication, legal issues, domestic and community violence, teen parenthood and more.

The effects of raising young children in such challenging circumstances can have an irreversible impact on the child’s ability to learn and grow. The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University describes the effects of what they call “toxic stress” on young children. “Extensive research on the biology of stress now shows that healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body (especially the brain), with damaging

effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan.” (Toxic Stress: The Facts, 2012)

In an effort to streamline this work, while addressing families’ apprehension, along with the lack of culturally respectful mental health care, we have created and piloted an innovative program. Designed to break down stigma, increase access to culturally respectful and asset driven mental health treatment while combating the effects of toxic stress in our families, we invented the “Address the Stress” (ATS) Program.

We are respectfully requesting funding in the amount of \$10,000 to support Smart’s efforts to build capacity in our family support and mental health services, and to fund a continuation of “Address the Stress” to serve new families, living in shelter in Roxbury and Dorchester.

About the “Address the Stress” (ATS) Program

ATS was designed to dispel stigma related to behavioral and mental health services in communities of color, and to promote the healthy emotional development of young children. The program is led by Smart and facilitated by a small team of community-based multi-cultural clinicians and service providers who come together to lead fun stress-reducing group activities for parents while children engage in fun, resiliency building, therapeutic activities such as mindfulness yoga, art therapy, nature walks, water play and more. ATS was created to introduce resistant families to the benefits of talk therapy and behavioral health counseling by developing fun, and interesting group activities that promote mental, emotional and physical health without using words that carry the stigma that they often shy away from.

ATS focuses on alleviating “stress” instead of using the more clinical terms such as therapy, or counseling, that families have found intimidating and that carry stigma. We have begun to establish working relationships with a handful of bi-lingual mental health providers in the community to streamline referrals and increase the number of clinicians who will see Smart families in our Smart from the Start program sites, where they feel safe.

ATS pilot families met weekly during the academic year, to engage in one hour of facilitated group discussion, similar to what others may refer to as group therapy, and then one hour of a physical activity. Families had opportunities to go to a day camp in the

Blue Hills, during the summer months, to spend time outside in a beautiful, relaxing and serene environment. Parents and caregivers engage in yoga, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness exercises and group work to discuss and learn about ways to handle stress. As a result, caregivers increase their comfort level with “therapists” and build relationships with them away from the clinical setting, that often lead to traditional individual, group and/or family therapy. While adults are in facilitated groups with the ATS and “Breakthrough Parenting Curriculum,” children are participating in art therapy, mindfulness yoga and other curriculum based activities to alleviate the harmful effects of toxic stress and to build and strengthen the social/emotional assets they need to promote their healthy development.

Our pilot project has had phenomenal results. Our children’s social-emotional ASQ scores have increased dramatically, parents and caregivers have reported a noticeable decrease in yelling, and spanking, and an increase in anger management, the ability to respond calmly in crisis situations and to better negotiate challenges.

In their own words:

“That’s another thing that I got from this group [Address the Stress], learning how to ask for help when I need it, because a lot of the time, like I said, you may have that ego thing where it’s like, ‘Okay, well, I can do everything by myself...’ Sometimes it takes help. Can’t do it all by yourself. I learned that here too... I never

felt like anyone was judging me when I shared. I didn't feel like my story would be amusing to anybody... Like I said, open mouth, open ear, open mind.” – Smart Parent

“This program has helped me a lot since I do not have any family in this country...I participate in many activities. I am able to share with different families especially during the Address the Stress groups. This is a very necessary program during these difficult times we are living in.” – Smart Parent

Goals of Address the Stress:

- 1). A reduction in inappropriate disciplinary measures such as yelling and spanking, and instead caregivers engaging in positive reinforcement and appropriate behavior modification strategies;
- 2). Children acquiring skills to help them express and process their emotions and with greater resiliency to combat the effects of toxic stress;
- 3). Caregivers equipped with strategies and tools to help alleviate stress and manage anger while negotiating solutions to disagreements without resorting to violence;
- 4). Families increasingly more comfortable with engaging in mental and behavioral health services and treatment;
- 5). A reduction in anger induced domestic and community violence;
- 6). A greater number of providers engaged in and providing behavioral and mental health services to young children and families;
- 7). Added capacity to multi-linguistic family support team;
- 8). Early childhood staff trained to provide trauma informed educational programming;
- 9). All curricula enhanced to include activities and lessons to strengthen resiliencies and promote mental health for children 0-6;
- 10). To support trauma informed programs until the organization goes through the licensing and certification process to access third party billing for clinical staff services.

With a grant of \$10,000, Smart will be able to offer ATS to new cohorts of families struggling with the potentially devastating effects of trauma and toxic stress, while dealing with the addition stress that comes from being homeless. We would facilitate a total of 4 eight week groups, with families with young children, living in Entre Familia, and Project Hope residential programs.

All Smart programs are evidence-based, and are independently evaluated for efficacy and as well as family satisfaction. With the support of our evaluation partners at Tufts University, we will collect data related to both parent and child outcomes. Tools utilized by our data collection team include:

Ages and Stages Questionnaire & ASQ-SE; Parent/Child Activities Inventory; Assessment of Family Strengths and Needs; Initial Trauma Review; Break Through Parenting Assessment; Edinbergh depression scale; Individual Program Surveys.

The strengths-based, culturally informed model, enrolled families will be participating include therapeutic interventions that feel respectful, effective and empowering. As we work to unite communities and uplift families in the city of Boston, your support will make real progress in helping to create stable, loving relationships, conducive to the healthy development we promote for all of our children. Thank you in advance for your consideration.