

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 24, 2025

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C., 20201

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

We write to express our strong opposition to the actions you have taken to directly attack and undermine the federal Head Start program. Since day one, this Administration has taken unacceptable actions to withhold and delay funding, fire Head Start staff, and gut high-quality services for children. Already this year, this Administration has withheld almost \$1 billion in federal grant funding from Head Start programs, a 37 percent decrease compared to the amount of funding awarded during the same period last year.¹ It is abundantly clear that these actions are part of a broader effort to ultimately eliminate the program altogether, as the Administration reportedly plans to do in its fiscal year 2026 budget proposal.²

Head Start provides early childhood education and comprehensive health and social services to nearly 800,000 young children every year in communities across this country, and employs about 250,000 dedicated staff.³ Head Start is a critical source of child care for working families, particularly in rural and Tribal communities, where Head Start programs are often the only option for high-quality child care services. Head Start programs ensure children receive appropriate health and dental care, nutrition support, and referrals to other critical services for parents, such as job training, adult education, nutrition services, and housing support.

You even acknowledged⁴ the value of Head Start following a recent visit to a Virginia Head Start center, where you said, “I had a very inspiring tour. I saw a devoted staff and a lot of happy children. They are getting the kind of education and socialization they need, and they are also getting a couple of meals a day.”

However, as a result of your actions to withhold and delay funding and undermine the administration of this vital program, Head Start centers are in serious jeopardy and have already had their day to day operations impacted. Programs are increasingly worried that they will not be able to make payroll, pay rent, and remain open to serve the hundreds of thousands of children and families who depend on their services in communities across the nation.

Since the very start of this Administration, Head Start programs have been under attack. On January 27th, 2025, the Office of Management and Budget issued a memo ([M-25-13](#)) that

¹ <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/minority/new-trump-admin-withholding-nearly-1-billion-in-funding-for-head-startcrunching-centers-nationwide-and-forcing-devastating-closures>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/04/16/hhs-budget-cut-trump/>

³ <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2023>

⁴ <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/neighborhood-community-services/news/2025/rfk-hhs-0320a>

suddenly froze the disbursement of grant funding for federal programs and services government-wide, including Head Start. Despite the Administration's clarification that Head Start programs would not be the target of the funding freeze, many Head Start programs across the country were unable to draw down their grant funds through the Payment Management System (PMS) for weeks. At one point, the National Head Start Association reported 37 programs serving nearly 15,000 children across the country could not access their federal funding.⁵ Head Start programs operate with thin margins and on short-term budgets from HHS, and without any communication from the Administration about the status of funding, programs were forced to temporarily close or to lay off staff. In Wisconsin, the National Centers for Learning Excellence, which serves more than 200 children and their families, shut down for a week and laid off staff due to the funding freeze.⁶

On April 1st, you abruptly closed⁷ five of the ten regional offices that help local grantees administer Head Start programs in 22 states⁸. This left hundreds of programs without dedicated points of contact to address mission critical issues like approving grant renewals and modifications, investigating child health and safety incidents, and providing training and technical assistance to ensure high-quality services for children. While some grantees were assigned a new program specialist, we understand many have not been receiving responses to their inquiries. This is on top of the estimated 97 Office of Head Start central office staff that were terminated due to their probationary status and the recent reduction in force. You promised "radical transparency" as Secretary, yet it is unclear how these actions will improve Head Start programs, and you and your staff refuse to respond to basic inquiries and requests for information.

On March 14th, 2025, the Office of Head Start (OHS) [notified all Head Start programs](#) that "the use of federal funding for any training and technical assistance or other program expenditures that promote or take part in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives" will not be approved and that any questions should be directed to regional offices. Programs have not received any guidance for what would be considered "DEI" but this policy is potentially in direct conflict with statutory and regulatory program requirements, such as providing culturally and linguistically appropriate instructional services for English learners. Many programs cannot direct questions to regional staff, as half of regional offices were abruptly closed, and as unprecedented actions are being taken to delay and withhold funding, Head Start programs have been intentionally left with little to no guidance.

Head Start programs are now arbitrarily required to provide justifications for each draw down of funds that is necessary to operate their programs, despite already receiving a federal grant award for these purposes. As of April 14th, Head Start programs have reportedly received correspondence from an email address "defendthespend@hhs.gov" requiring programs to submit a "specific description of why the funds are necessary and why they are aligned to the award"

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/08/nx-s1-5290249/stress-and-uncertainty-at-head-start-and-clinics-as-federal-health-funding-system-sputters>

⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/head-start-blackouts-trump-6e7655e56c0b451092411e7fdd1def2e>

⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/head-start-office-closures-hhs-trump-00b1a6b33ef918cb66e59b7ffb07ac13>

⁸ This action left programs in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Jersey, New York, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington without dedicated regional staff.

before programs can have funding disbursed. It has been reported that political appointees must sign off on every draw down of funds.⁹ This creates an illusion of improving oversight but only serves to add unnecessary red tape by requiring the manual sign off on hundreds of thousands of individual actions annually across the Department based on two to three sentence justifications. Already some grantees have reported delays in receiving funds, and have reported that furloughs or closures are imminent if funds are not released. For an administration that purports to value local autonomy and efficiency in federally funded programs, your actions have achieved the exact opposite.

Finally, Head Start grantees are still waiting on payments and grant renewals from the Office of Head Start, including programs whose grants end on April 30th, 2025. These notices should have gone out by now, yet we are concerned to hear programs report they have received little to no correspondence regarding their grant renewals. Additionally, because we started fiscal year 2025 under a short-term continuing resolution, as is usual, some grantees have only received partial funding for the first few months of the year. But with a full year funding bill in place, these grantees should have received full funding by now, yet some are reporting that they have not received the full amount of their grants and will run out of funds this month or next. On Wednesday, April 16th, the delays in Head Start funding led to the closure of Head Start centers serving more than 400 children in Sunnyside, Washington.¹⁰

The Administration has a legal and moral obligation to disburse Head Start funds to programs and to uphold the program's promise to provide high-quality early education services to low income children and families across this country. The fiscal year 2025 appropriations act provided \$12.3 billion for Head Start, the same as the fiscal year 2024 level. The Head Start Act includes an explicit formula for how appropriated funds should be allocated. There is no justifiable reason for the delay in funding we have seen over the last two months, and you have refused to offer any kind of explanation. However, this week leaked fiscal year 2026 budget documents indicated the Office of Management and Budget was directing the Department, consistent with the Administration's proposal to eliminate Head Start in fiscal year 2026, to "ensure to the extent allowable FY2025 funds are available to close out the program." If this explains any of the delay in awarding fiscal year 2025 funding, we want to be clear, no funds were provided in fiscal year 2025 to "close out the program," and it would be wholly unacceptable and likely illegal if the Department tries to carry out this directive.

Finally, the leaked budget documents provided a justification, albeit brief, for eliminating Head Start in fiscal year 2026 that makes this Administration's priorities clear and puts the Department's actions over the last several months in context. The Administration argues that eliminating Head Start, "is consistent with the Administration's goals of returning education to the States and increasing parental choice." It is shocking to see an argument that eliminating a program that provides comprehensive early childhood care and education to 800,000 children and their families would *increase* parental choice. It is particularly concerning to see that argument in the context of the significant delay in awarding fiscal year 2025 appropriated funds and what that indicates about the intent behind the Department's actions. We believe it is

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/17/doge-trump-grants-hhs-nih-backlog/>

¹⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/head-start-funding-preschool-child-care-closures-1f92fa98f320c7c14db63e69b986d11d>

obvious that eliminating Head Start would be detrimental to hundreds of thousands of children and families. Similarly, we believe it is obvious that delaying funding like we have seen over the last two months, forcing Head Start programs to close, and leaving families to scramble to find quality, affordable alternatives puts the education and well-being of some of the most vulnerable young children in America at risk. In our view, that is unacceptable.

Therefore, we urge you to immediately reinstate fired staff across all Offices of Head Start, and cease all actions to delay the awarding and disbursement of funding to Head Start programs across this country.

Please provide us with a written response to the questions below no later than 10 days from receipt:

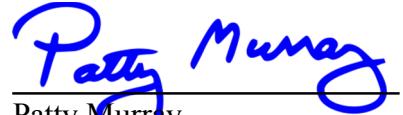
1. Will you reinstate the staff who administer Head Start programs and reopen the closed regional offices responsible for overseeing Head Start programs in 22 states?
 - a) When is HHS going to share information on the reorganization plan for the consolidation of the regional offices?
 - b) Please provide the contact information for each program specialist designated to the 22 states who lost their regional office.
 - c) Who is responsible for ensuring there are no delays or lapses in funding, nor any disruptions to Head Start program operations now that these states do not have a regional office?
2. How many employees at the Offices of Head Start have been terminated, including the five regional offices and the central office?
 - a) Which officials at HHS were involved in the staffing reduction decisions for OHS and what planning, if any, was undertaken prior to these reductions? Please describe the events that unfolded and name each office that was involved in the decision. Further, please name the official(s) who approved the staffing reductions.
3. Can you confirm that the Administration will distribute all Head Start funds appropriated by Congress to Head Start programs in FY 25, as required by the Head Start Act?
4. Please provide a list of all grantees with 5-year Head Start grant renewals that start between now and the end of the fiscal year: May 1st, June 1st, July 1st, August 1st, and September 1st.
 - a) Will any funding be delayed for grantees that are due to receive their annual funding on May 1st or beyond?
5. Why are funding awards delayed for grantees that received partial awards during the first continuing resolution for FY25?
 - a) When can HHS guarantee that all funds will be awarded for partially funded Head Start programs?
6. What is the “Tier 2” department for review that is delaying drawn down for Head Start programs in the Payment Management System?
 - a) When should programs expect to receive their funds?
 - b) Please provide all communication that went to Head Start grantees on the new review process.
7. What guidance and clarifications have been provided to Head Start grantees on DEI expenditures?

- a) How is HHS evaluating Head Start programs' expenditures and grant awards for DEI?
- b) What justifications are being used to prohibit DEI?

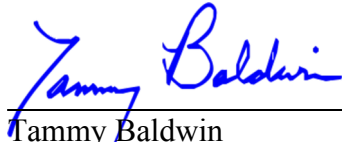
Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Health, Education, Labor,
and Pensions



Patty Murray
United States Senator
Vice Chair, Senate
Committee on Appropriations



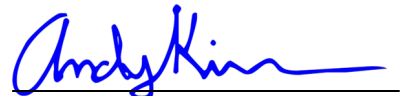
Tammy Baldwin
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee
on Labor, Health and Human
Services, Education, and
Related Agencies



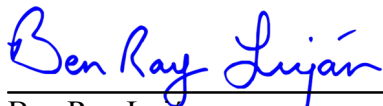
Jack Reed
United States Senator



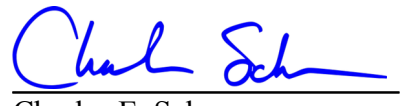
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Andy Kim
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator



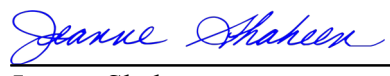
Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



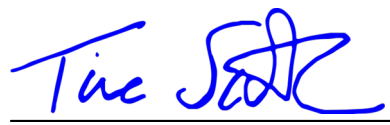
Ruben Gallego
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
U.S. Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator



John Fetterman
United States Senator



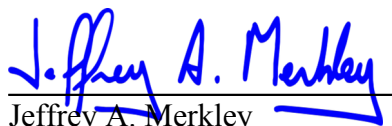
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator




Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator





Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

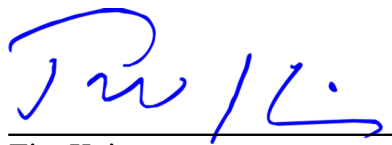

Mark Kelly
United States Senator

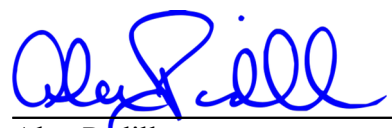

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

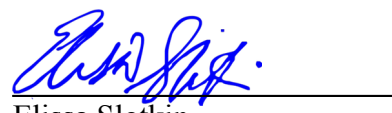

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

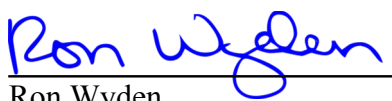

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

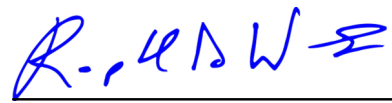

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

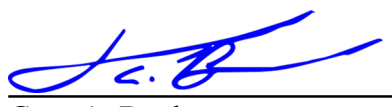

Alex Padilla
United States Senator

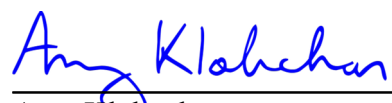

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

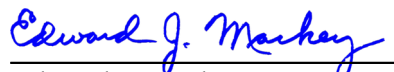

Elissa Slotkin
United States Senator

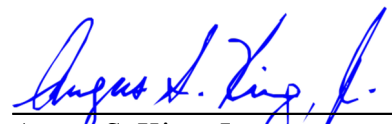

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

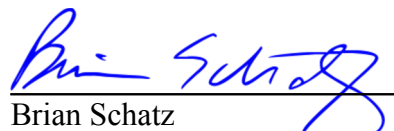

Raphael Warnock
United States Senator


Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator


Brian Schatz
United States Senator


Martin Heinrich
United States Senator


Angela Alsobrooks
United States Senator


Mark R. Warner
United States Senator