

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

August 13, 2021

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

Dr. Bernadine Futrell, Ph.D.
Director
Office of Head Start
Administration for Children and Families
330 C Street SW
4th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Director Futrell:

We are writing to express our concerns and request action by the Office of Head Start (OHS) to mitigate the harm to low-income children in Chicago following the recent re-competition of the new Head Start/Early Head Start awards.

The nature of the re-competition coupled with the dual health and economic crises resulted in a substantial reduction in the number of slots throughout Chicago at a time when the need is higher than ever. This caused an inequitable distribution of slots throughout the Chicago service areas that left an unacceptable lack of coverage for many communities, failed to adequately account for unique cultural and linguistic needs in certain communities, and created tremendous uncertainty for local organizations and families who were hard-hit by the pandemic. Given the tremendous harm and disruption to vulnerable communities, we ask that you use your current fiscal and administrative flexibilities during the pandemic to maintain financial support for the Head Start slots being lost as a result of the re-competition decisions. Using these flexibilities, our hope is that OHS or the Department of Health and Human Services will identify possible funding sources from set-asides in the Head Start Act, one-time funding from COVID supplementals and the American Rescue Plan Act, as well as basic transfer authorities to maintain the lost slots needed for Head Start services in the Chicago area.

We appreciate the time and attention that your staff have given our offices over the last few weeks to better understand the decision-making process and find realistic solutions, where possible, to the many issues caused by this situation. They have been responsive to our questions and many of the needs of our stakeholders. However, we believe OHS must restore the slots to mitigate the likely harm to thousands of vulnerable children and review the process that led us here. We understand the re-competition parameters are not designed to consider the local community needs as a whole but rely on individual applicants to frame their ability to meet a community's needs. However, given that the re-competition occurred during a pandemic that exacted a devastating health and economic toll on low-income families and communities of color, the substantial need for comprehensive services to help vulnerable children thrive in the midst of the pandemic, and the tremendous need for quality child care so that families can return to work, we believe OHS should have considered the community impact from the re-competition before finalizing the grantees. Of particular concern is the decision to maintain the total amount of funding yet eliminate over 3,000 slots, a decision that appears to disproportionately affect vulnerable, low-income, minority communities struggling during the pandemic. Further, following the re-competition process, OHS failed to provide adequate time, guidance and attention to affected Head Start/Early Head Start providers, which has caused significant confusion and frustration for hundreds of Illinois families.

Following nearly six months of consideration, OHS publicly announced the results of the re-competition process in several stages between June 22nd and July 1st. The City of Chicago, which saw a significant

reduction in its funding, and five organizations – Carole Robertson Center for Learning, Henry Booth House, Easter Seals Metropolitan Chicago, Inc., Start Early (formerly Ounce of Prevention) and Chicago Commons Association – were tasked with stewarding over \$150 million per year in taxpayer dollars to manage 4,681 Head Start slots and 3,171 Early Head Start slots for a project performance period that began on July 1st.

While the awarded organizations may have been ready to prepare their Head Start and Early Head Start sites on this timeline, many organizations who had faithfully served their communities for years as Head Start and Early Head Start providers under the City of Chicago’s “super-grant” umbrella were left in the lurch. That says nothing of the hundreds of families who learned that their local providers would no longer be in a position to offer Head Start/Early Head Start and were given no instruction on how to identify a new, local site. Our offices received numerous frantic calls from providers and families scrambling to understand the situation and where they could enroll their children for the quickly approaching school year.

We appreciate your response to our requests to extend the City of Chicago’s grant through September 30th, for the purpose of transitioning services and closeout activities. This will allow the City of Chicago and the Head Start Regional Office more time to work directly with enrolled families to determine the best placement for each child. However, we must acknowledge the necessity of granting this extension is evidence in itself of procedural flaws.

Despite the progress that has been made extending the transition timeline, more action is required to protect the thousands of children and families affected by the re-competition. We can appreciate that system-wide changes like this are difficult and are rarely without flaws. However, it is incredibly frustrating to see decisions that impact so many children and concern so much money be rolled out with so little clarity and attention to the families they impact during a period of global crisis.

Understanding our shared goal is to support young children prepare for and succeed in school through the Head Start and Early Head Start programs, we request the following:

1. The use of existing administrative flexibilities and funding sources to restore the lost slots and coverage for affected neighborhoods to promote equity and mitigate harm related to the extenuating circumstances of a pandemic.
2. Clear communication to the families and organizations to understand the current situations.
3. A review and a follow up report on the re-compete process and implementation in Chicago.
4. An update on the number of children successfully transitioned from sites without federal funding to new Head Start/Early Head Start sites.
5. An explanation on the decision to offer no Head Start or Early Head Start coverage in the neighborhoods of: Clearing, Hermosa, Irving Park, McKinley park, North Park, West Elston, West Ridge.
6. OHS convene a meeting of the six grantees chosen under the re-compete and the former subgrantees of the City of Chicago’s supergrant to identify gaps in services and solutions to those gaps.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs are a vital resource for families throughout Chicago and this country, especially as we continue to face a pandemic and its concomitant economic, education, health, and mental health crises. Ensuring that low-income families have access to appropriate comprehensive early education services is critical to the development of our youth. The breakdown in communication and coverage that is currently impacting many of our constituents is a cause for great concern. We appreciate the efforts that you and your staff have already made to help address this situation, and we look forward to your continued attention.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request. If you have any questions about this congressional oversight inquiry, please contact Chanel Bankston-Carter in Senator Duckworth's office at Chanel_Bankston-Carter@duckworth.senate.gov

Sincerely,



Senator Tammy Duckworth

United States Senator



Senator Richard J. Durbin

United States Senator



Rep. Mike Quigley

Member of Congress



Rep. Danny L. Davis

Member of Congress



Rep. Jesús G. "Chuy" García

Member of Congress



Rep. Robin L. Kelly

Member of Congress



Rep. Bobby L. Rush

Member of Congress



Rep. Jan Schakowsky

Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marie Newman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Rep. Marie Newman

Member of Congress