

# HEAD START AND EARLY HEAD START

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programs that deliver comprehensive early learning, health, nutrition, and family support services to children birth through age five and pregnant women who are living in poverty. Early Head Start serves pregnant women and children birth to age three, while Head Start serves children ages three through five.

## CREATION OF PROGRAMS

Head Start was created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Since its founding, the program has served 37 million children and families. Recognizing the profound benefits of Head Start and the important role of prenatal experiences, as well as those in the first three years of life, Early Head Start was established during the 1994 reauthorization of Head Start to serve pregnant women and children during a critical development period when interventions are most effective.

## HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Today, there are 1,600 local Head Start programs and 1,700 local Early Head Start programs operating across America, in every state and territory in the country. Head Start and Early Head Start have the flexibility to customize services and programs to meet the needs of every community, while providing a continuum of high-quality early learning and comprehensive support services that meet common quality criteria outlined in the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). Local flexibility also allows many programs to combine federal, state, local, and even private funding for preschool, child care, or other early care and education services to maximize the impact of available funds.

## AT A GLANCE

### CREATED:

Head Start: 1965

Early Head Start: 1994

### WHO THIS PROGRAM SERVES:

Early Head Start: Prenatal to age three

Head Start: Ages three through five

Children whose family income is below the federal poverty guidelines (\$31,200 for a family of four<sup>1</sup>), those receiving TANF, SNAP, or SSI, or who are foster children or experiencing homelessness.

### NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED IN THE 2022-2023 PROGRAM YEAR:

Early Head Start:<sup>2</sup> 221,306

Head Start:<sup>3</sup> 540,784

### ADMINISTRATION OF PROGRAM:

The Department of Health and Human Services awards grants directly to public or private non-profit organizations, including, community-based and faith-based organizations, or for-profit agencies within a community.

### DELIVERY METHOD:

Early Head Start and Head Start are designed to meet community needs and can be center-based, family child care, in-home, or an approved locally-designed variation.

### FY2024 FEDERAL FUNDING:

\$12,271,820,000 total funding for Head Start and Early Head Start.

## PROVEN TRACK RECORD

Decades of research shows that participation in Head Start and Early Head Start has both short- and long-term positive effects for participating children and their families.

- Children who attend Head Start demonstrate academic and social progress and are more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- Adults who attended Head Start as children are more likely to graduate high school and are better prepared to be parents to their own children.
- Parents whose children attend Head Start are more likely to advance their own education compared to parents of similar children who are not enrolled in Head Start.

## INCREASING ACCESS FOR ELIGIBLE FAMILIES

Despite the well-documented benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start and the ever-growing bipartisan support for the program among lawmakers in Congress, current funding is insufficient to provide access to all eligible children. In fact, prior to the pandemic, **only 36% of eligible three- to five-year-olds had access to Head Start and just 11% of children eligible for Early Head Start were served by the program.**

This gap has existed for years. In 2013 Congress and HHS created the [Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships \(EHS-CCP\)](#) program to help. EHS-CCP is a competitive federal grant program that allows Early Head Start grantees to partner with local child care providers—both center-based and home-based providers—who serve children receiving subsidies in order to improve quality of care and provide wraparound services. Still, the need far outweighs the supply, and many infants and toddlers from low-income families lack access to high-quality child care and comprehensive development supports.

## CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT

Thanks to the longstanding bipartisan support for Head Start among lawmakers on Capitol Hill, there have been successful efforts to strengthen the program. Congress' bipartisan Head Start Act of 2007 included policies designed to strengthen teaching in Head Start programs and improve coordination between Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and child protective services.

Additionally, in 2016, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) revised the HSPPS to further support high-quality early learning and comprehensive services by emphasizing performance and ongoing improvement, rather than compliance, and incorporating recent research on effective early learning, child development, and family engagement.

Congress has the ability to improve Head Start through a robust reauthorization. Head Start was last reauthorized 17 years ago in 2007, and both the early learning landscape and the needs of families and communities have changed significantly since then. Therefore, there are significant opportunities to update and improve Head Start's design to expand access to more children, align state and local early care and education systems to the Head Start model, and fund adequate implementation efforts.

### References:

1. Office of the Assistant for Planning and Evaluation, "[Poverty Guidelines](#)"
2. Office of Head Start, "[2022-2023 Early Head Start Services Snapshot](#)"
3. Office of Head Start, "[2022-2023 Head Start Services Snapshot](#)"

