

Head Start: Illinois

Head Start is a federally-funded and locally-delivered program that provides early learning, health, and nutrition services to children from the lowest income families. The program is comprised of Early Head Start, which supports infants, toddlers under age three, pregnant women, and their families, and Head Start Preschool, which serves children ages three to five.

Children are eligible if:

- Their family income is below the federal poverty line (\$27,320 for a family of three),
- They are in foster care, or
- They are experiencing homelessness.

Services are provided to families at no cost. While free or low-cost preschool is available in many states, Early Head Start is often the only source of free early learning services for children under three.

COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES

When children enter Head Start, they get more than a classroom. They find healthy meals, medical screening and services, and a community that helps them build social skills and manage their emotions and behavior.

Head Start pairs high-quality early learning with comprehensive services that support a child's health and development while helping families build stability and self-sufficiency. This approach addresses the full range of factors that influence child and family well-being and creates the conditions for long-term success.

Head Start's wraparound services remove logistical hurdles allowing parents to earn a living or finish their education. This is particularly true in rural communities, where a lack of child care options, transportation, and other factors often create additional barriers for parents. In fact, in small towns, Head Start may be the only option for licensed child care.

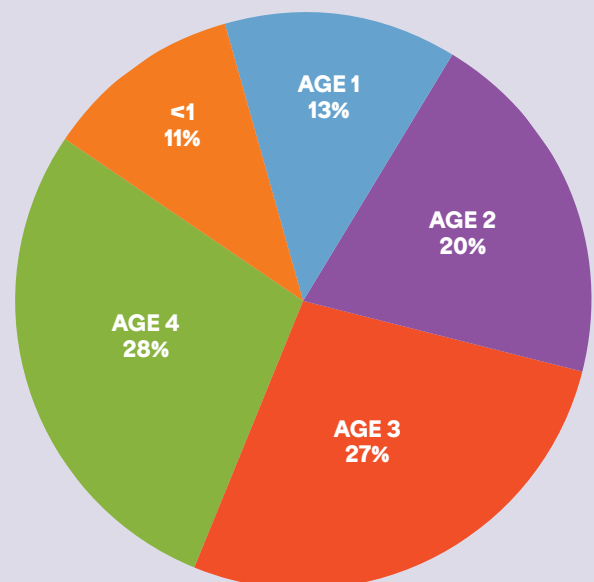
Without Head Start, nearly **650,000 low-income children** and families across the country would lose child care, early learning, and health and nutrition support, putting a greater strain on local communities.

ILLINOIS AT-A-GLANCE

STATE STATISTICS	
\$469.6M	FY2025 Funding ¹
443	Program Sites ²
63	Grantees ³
ENROLLED/ELIGIBLE	
Total	
27,496	Children Enrolled ⁴
131,258	Eligible Children ⁵
Early Head Start (0-2)	
11,343	Children Enrolled ⁶
17%	Eligible Served ⁷
Head Start (3-5)	
16,153	Children Enrolled ⁸
25%	Eligible Served ⁹
CHILD CARE GAP ¹⁰	
217,287	Children Without Child Care*
Without Head Start, the Gap Increases By:	
13%	Statewide
12%	In Urban Areas
14%	In Rural Areas
PARENTS ¹¹	
68%	Head Start Parents Employed, Attending School, Job Training

**Due to a shortage of accessible slots, known as "child care gap"*

ENROLLMENT BY AGE IN ILLINOIS¹²



POPULATIONS SERVED

Head Start serves children from the lowest-income households, children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care. The program offers comprehensive early learning and family supports to those most removed from opportunity to help them succeed in school and in life.

Head Start plays a vital role in helping families access services for infants and toddlers with disabilities. Alongside robust developmental screenings, programs are required to reserve at least 10% of enrollment for children eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Head Start is often where families learn a child is not meeting key developmental milestones, and, in some areas, is the only provider able to serve children with developmental delays and disabilities.

IN ILLINOIS:	TOTAL SERVED	EARLY HEAD START AGES 0-2	HEAD START AGES 3-5
ELIGIBLE FOR IDEA ¹³	4,125	1,802	2,323
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS ¹⁴	2,069	772	1,297
FOSTER CARE ¹⁵	914	317	597
AMERICAN INDIAN & ALASKA NATIVE ¹⁶	--	--	--
MIGRANT & SEASONAL HEAD START ¹⁷	351	195	156

LOCAL DESIGN & IMPACT

Head Start funds go directly to local grantees who operate programs in rural, urban, and suburban communities in a variety of settings, including centers, family child care, churches, and schools.

PERCENT OF CHILD CARE PROVIDED BY HEAD START IN ILLINOIS¹⁸

URBAN	RURAL
8%	5%



BREAKDOWN OF PROVIDER TYPES IN ILLINOIS¹⁹

	EARLY HEAD START	HEAD START
CENTER-BASED	65%	97%
HOME-BASED	32%	2%
FAMILY CHILD CARE	2%	1%
LOCALLY DESIGNED	0%	0%

Each program relies on input from parents and community members to ensure services are tailored and effective. In addition to employing Head Start staff, programs partner with local businesses and schools for everything from purchasing food and supplies to supporting the transition to kindergarten.

In **Illinois**, Head Start programs:

- Employ **9,235** staff, including teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors.²⁰
- Have **588** partnerships to serve children with disabilities.²¹
- Have **439** partnerships to support the transition to kindergarten.²²

LEARN MORE:

[Head Start and Early Head Start: An Overview](#)
[Head Start: Comprehensive Services](#)
[Head Start: Populations Served](#)

QUESTIONS? CONTACT:

Policy: Amanda Guarino, aguarino@ffyf.org

Legislation: Sarah Rubinfeld, srubinfeld@ffyf.org

Press: Christy Felling, cfelling@ffyf.org



Scan or click the QR code for full references and links.