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**Public Witness Testimony of Rekah Strong**

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**Submitted to:**

Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
House Committee on Appropriations

**Addressing:**

Department of Health and Human Services,  
Administration for Children and Families,  
Head Start FY21 Appropriation

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee,

On behalf of the Head Start community, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding funding for Head Start and Early Head Start (collectively referred to as “Head Start”) in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021. For 55 years, Head Start has provided early learning opportunities for our country’s most vulnerable children and comprehensive support to families that address long-term economic stability and better health prospects, ultimately mitigating the devastating impacts that poverty can have on the future success of young children. As a community, we are grateful for the Subcommittee’s strong bipartisan support for Head Start and its leadership on issues related to children and families. This Subcommittee is a tremendous advocate for Head Start, Early Head Start, and other programs that give hard-working families sustained, unmatched support, providing the chance for children not just to succeed in school but to thrive in life. To build on these critical successes, the National Head Start Association (NHSA) recommends \$11,369,445,000 in Head Start funding for FY21.

I grew up in poverty with a single mother who put her education and her dreams of

becoming a teacher aside to support my brother and me, knowing she was making an investment in our future. She was our rock, and I know her sacrifices and her values of early learning, education, and community laid the foundation for my brother and me to be successful.

We depended on subsidized housing, but we were also part of a strong community that cared for its own. Some peers ended up on paths that led to drugs and gangs; statistically, that was the path expected for my brother and me. But with my mother's values instilled in us and a community wrapped around us, I found a different path. Today, I serve as executive director of Educational Opportunities for Children and Families (EOCF) in southwest Washington state, and for two years, I have worked to build that sense of community for our program's families.

In my childhood, and in the face of the crack epidemic, communities had extensive built-in systems of support. Now, with our social fabric seemingly deteriorating, we face the challenges of the opioid epidemic without most of that support. More than ever, my community depends on Head Start—for early childhood education, yes—but also for *so much more*.

A parent in our program shared with me that Head Start *is* her community. Partnering with parents—and often grandparents or other caregivers—is what sets Head Start apart. Head Start's multi-generational approach breaks the cycle of poverty. Parents join our community, and we partner with them to recognize individual needs and goals, connect them to resources to advance their education and careers, and encourage them to be leaders for themselves, as well as for other Head Start families. For example, when our program recognized the innate leadership skills of one of our parents—a single mom—we worked with her to empower those skills. She served on our program's Policy Council, informing critical program governance decisions, and now serves on the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP state board. While her child received high-quality care and education during the day, she got a new job, then a

promotion, and now she is about to complete her bachelor's degree in human resources. The impact Head Start has on families through empowering parents cannot be overstated.

As Vancouver, Washington has changed, our most vulnerable families have been pushed farther into rural areas, and more families are experiencing homelessness. The effort families put in, simply to attend our program, is all at once inspiring and heart-wrenching. Transportation has become our most common, pressing need for families. We travel farther to our families, with our buses going to the outskirts of town to pick children up from campers and tents. One family, determined to find their way to our program each day, requested support to purchase a wagon; others request new tires or gas cards. These are the stark realities of operating in a childcare desert. Head Start is *the* option for many of our families, so it must continue to be the best one.

We, as a community, rely on our Head Start staff to support the needs of our children and families. At EOCF, we employ 280 people—teachers, nurses, managers, and mental health specialists. Every year, we face competition from local school districts who seek to hire our qualified, high-quality staff. Our staff is the engine behind the work we do, but despite the highly skilled work they do, so many early childhood educators are left in poverty, often relying on public assistance themselves because of unlivable wages.

At my program, we prioritize offering benefits to stay competitive with the local school districts, but supporting our workforce requires so much more. Many of our staff attended Head Start at one time and have the same lived experience as the families we serve, which is a great strength. They have the compassion and deep understanding of the challenges our families navigate but often carry the weight of trauma and adverse childhood experiences themselves. In order to provide excellent care and education to our children, our staff need support too. This Subcommittee's faithful support, year-in and year-out, of an annual cost-of-living adjustment has

been a critical part of that support. For FY21, the Head Start community is seeking an increase of \$235.9 million to backstop programs against rising costs. It starts with compensation and benefits, of course, but we need to go beyond that in supporting their health and wellness.

Before Head Start, I worked in child welfare for many years, and when it comes to trauma, I see challenges faced by our Head Start children that I have never seen in all my years in child welfare. I think about one of our families: The mother was experiencing homelessness, suffering from addiction, and was giving her young children alcohol in their bottles. The three-year-old child was left to parent her one-year-old sibling. Their teeth were decaying and needed to be pulled. They had both been diagnosed with diabetes. That little girl came to us at three years old with no ability to communicate. She received priority enrollment because she and her siblings became a ward of the court and were placed in foster care.

When she first came to our program, it was hard to know what success would look like for her. Just six months later, she was using hand signals to communicate her needs and interact with her peers. She was receiving nutritious meals and getting the medical attention she needed. With support from our medical team, our mental health team, and of course the teachers in the classroom, she made monumental progress. She is now in the care of a stable family and connects with her peers and the adults in our program. Head Start supports children and their families, helping them heal and succeed beyond the traumas they have experienced. Each child's story is incredible in its own way as we help all children reach their individual potentials.

Unfortunately, so many children face similar challenges, not only in Vancouver, but also in Head Start programs in every community across the country. The investment that Congress made in FY20 Head Start Quality Improvement Funds to better address trauma has energized my community. This funding acknowledges the challenges we face every day and propels us to keep

going. It will enable us to purchase two new buses to reach children in our highest-need area, offer additional one-on-one support for children with increased behavioral needs, add additional mental health support staff, expand the hours provided to 40 additional children, and provide high-quality care and multi-generational services to our working families. Congress, your support in FY21 of \$520 million in Quality Improvement Funds, specific to addressing surging childhood trauma, would extend this lasting impact for so many children.

Nationwide, there are roughly 1,600 Head Start grantees serving more than one million children and pregnant mothers each year and a workforce of more than 270,000 Head Start staff partnering with those children and families. In FY21, I ask that you keep these precious faces in mind—the children who depend on Head Start’s comprehensive services, the parents who thrive thanks to support from Head Start, and the members of the early childhood workforce who are such strong pillars in our programs and our communities, and I ask you to remember that trauma does not go away, that the rate of trauma is not decreasing in the communities that Head Start serves, and that the incredible challenges our communities face are not slowing down. Our efforts to address trauma must not slow down either. I ask you to remember that the Quality Improvement Funds that came in FY20 fuel this unending work and have exponential impacts throughout my community, and finally, I urge you to consider just how important it is to sustain these critical services for our children and families.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Rekah Strong