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Public Witness Testimony of Linda Bleything

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Submitted to:

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

Addressing:

Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Head Start and Early Head Start
FY 2021 Appropriation

Dear Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Subcommittee,

On behalf of the Head Start community, thank you for the opportunity to submit a written testimony regarding funding for Head Start and Early Head Start (collectively referred to as “Head Start”) in Fiscal Year 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 tradition of strong bipartisan support for Head Start and its leadership on issues related to children and families. This Subcommittee has been a tremendous advocate for Head Start, Early Head Start, and other programs that give hard-working families and single parents sustained, unmatched support, providing the chance for

children not just to succeed in school but to thrive in life. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like to thank you for the immense amount of time and effort that you have put into ensuring that children and families' needs are met as the impact in local communities continues to take shape. To build on these critical successes, the National Head Start Association (NHSA) recommends \$11,369,445,000 in Head Start funding for Fiscal Year 2021.

I was able to finish my degree and begin teaching in preschool when the Community Action Partnership opened in my neighborhood in Iowa...I later became the program director at her current program 15 years ago. Everyone says, 'Head Start gets into your blood' which is true...I enjoy watching the families I work with grow.

At DCF, we employ a variety of teachers, nurses, managers, and mental health specialists. Every year, we're in fierce competition with our local school districts to keep our qualified, quality staff. Our staff are the engine of the work we're able to do. Many staff across early childhood are undervalued, coming from poverty and being left in poverty from unlivable wages. At my program, we've prioritized offering benefits to our staff to stay competitive, but supporting our workforce requires so much more.

We need to be able to compete with public schools where they can go to and make more. When Stephanie was introduced to our program....we were able to develop an apprenticeship program to help address the turnover issue we were having. We had to figure out how we could influence their own staff to stay at Head Start....We started using it as a career and professional development...A career ladder that teachers could use to grow within Head Start. If we can put people on a path to reach their career goals within Head Start they will stay. We are the first Head Start program to develop an apprenticeship program...and it wouldn't be possible without

cooperation from colleagues and other partners. Being very involved with our program and knowing the ins and outs of our families and staff is what allows them to be very engaged as well.

We have also changed their mental health practices in the last few years, changing the mindset we once had about children who have faced adverse childhood experiences...Worked to simply ask parents ‘How are you doing today?’...Provided parent and staff training, we work hard to make it not feel like a ‘training’...The ability of staff to work with other staff to support each other increases comradery. There is more than just going into a classroom and teaching, they are making a substantial impact on the children’s lives...They have the ability to work with smaller group sizes and really be intimate with children and families. The investment that Congress made in FY20 quality improvement funds for Head Start has energized my program.

As we watch our communities evolve around us due to COVID-19 Stay at Home orders....Now, more than ever, my community depends on our Head Start program for early childhood education-yes, but also so much more...Our work with *childhood trauma* was hit the hardest with changing in-person work with children to home-base. Staff went from seeing children everyday to trying to adjust to working from home... This is very traumatic for these children.

The work that our staff and families put in to ensure that children continue to receive the services our program provides remotely is all at once inspiring and heart-wrenching. We are operating completely remotely. Delivering prepared lunches and dinners to families...Our major area of need is technology...There are cases where families don’t have access or where staff

doesn't have access...We would love to be able to provide families with tablets and laptops for staff, but this will be useless without internet or reliable cell phone services for families and staff.

For staff, without internet access, they purchased hotspots

They purchased track phones for teachers, so they didn't have to use their personal cell phones to contact families. We provided some laptops and some brought home printers from their program.

We are just now getting the blunt of the virus, we will continue to rely on technology to reach children. Head Start is *the* option for many of our families so it is important we can continue to support them in this time of need.

In FY21, I ask that you remember the members of the early childhood workforce who are such strong pillars in our programs and our communities *who are able to step up during hard times*, the parents who thrive through Head Start, and the children who depend on Head Start's comprehensive services. I ask you to remember that trauma does not go away. Trauma is *increasing during this pandemic* in these communities that Head Start serves, and our efforts that increase as the incredible challenges faced by our communities also increase are not slowing down. I ask you to remember that the QIF that came in FY20 fuels this unending work, and I urge you to consider just how critically important it is that the sustainability of these services are critical for our children and families.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Linda Bleything