

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 14, 2022

Xavier Becerra  
Secretary of Health and Human Services  
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS)  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

We write to ask the Department of Health and Human Services to expand access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education by using your existing authority to ensure that more young children and families are eligible for Head Start programs.

For more than 55 years, Head Start programs across the country have provided vital early childhood education to children from low-income households. Additionally, Head Start programs provide wraparound support to parents and entire families, including health, wellness, and nutrition services. However, many families who could benefit from Head Start's vital services earn slightly above the federal poverty level (FPL) and may be ineligible.

Currently, families are eligible for Head Start programs when they meet up to 100 percent of the Department FPL, and 35 percent of slots can be designated for children and families earning up to 130 percent of the FPL. The FPL is equivalent to \$27,750 for a family of four.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Section 645 [42 U.S.C. 9840] of the Head Start Act makes children eligible when their families receive certain public assistance, as defined by the Department.<sup>2</sup> Under current Head Start requirements, this so-called "categorical eligibility" applies to families that receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), but does not include other public assistance programs used by some of our country's most high-need families.<sup>3</sup>

We ask the Department to expand Head Start's public assistance categorical eligibility to include children in families that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs. Adding SNAP and WIC will also underscore the critical links between nutrition support and early childhood education, and help connect pregnant WIC recipients to Early Head Start services at a critical and vulnerable juncture in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> "HHS Poverty Guidelines for 2022," Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. January 12, 2022. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>

<sup>2</sup> "Sec. 645 Participation in Head Start Programs." Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/head-start-act/sec-645-participation-head-start-programs>

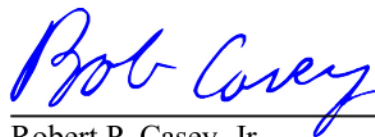
<sup>3</sup> "Poverty Guidelines and Determining Eligibility for Participation in Head Start Programs." Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. February 8, 2022. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/eligibility-ersea/article/poverty-guidelines-determining-eligibility-participation-head-start-programs>

We hope that the Department will make this change so that more high-need families and their young children can more easily access critical Head Start programs across the country. Thank you for your consideration.

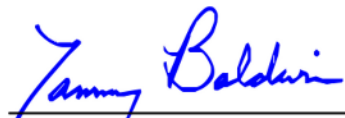
Sincerely,



Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator



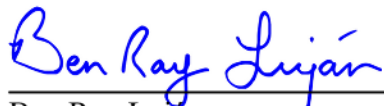
Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
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