



April 20, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

Congratulations on your appointment as the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services! The Head Start and Early Head Start community are thrilled with your appointment, and we look forward to a strong partnership over the coming years. We are thankful for the Biden Administration's strong prioritization of early childhood and the inclusion of a notable increase in funding for Head Start and Early Head Start in the fiscal year (FY) 2022 discretionary request earlier this month.

The National Head Start Association represents the one million children and families, 1,600 programs, and nearly 300,000 staff of the Head Start and Early Head Start community, ensuring that practitioners and families are heard in the halls of Congress and by the Administration and garnering increased support from decisionmakers. The Head Start community—which includes Head Start (children age 3-5), Early Head Start (pregnant women and children age 0-3), Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (children age 0-5), American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Early Head Start (0-3), and AIAN Head Start (3-5)—has delivered on our country's commitment to the American Dream for decades, empowering our youngest learners, nurturing individuals' possibilities, and contributing to more vibrant communities.

Mr. Secretary, today, we stand ready to partner with you as our country heals from the confluence of crises we currently face. We share the Biden-Harris Administration's goals of reducing child and intergenerational poverty, supporting child health and school readiness, strengthening families, and building greater racial equity. NHTSA believes we can accomplish these goals together through:

- Continuing to serve, excel, and learn during the COVID-19 recovery period, just as our community [acted boldly to serve children and families](#) and [set precedent for the safe delivery of in-person services](#) during year one of the pandemic;
- Improving the quality of Head Start and Early Head Start services, including through new congressional investments in trauma-informed care via expanded Quality Improvement Funding (QIF) and compensation for our workforce;
- Increasing the number of children served in Early Head Start and Head Start given the rapid brain development that occurs before age five and the life-changing opportunity afforded by access to high-quality early childhood care and education;
- Approaching the expansion of access to early childhood experiences through an equity lens;
- Strengthening collaboration with the child welfare sector and child care providers at the state and local level to ensure children receive the highest quality of services; and
- Modernizing eligibility guidelines and program delivery to ensure at-risk children and their families are not prevented from receiving services they need to thrive due to variations in local

and state prevailing wages and minimum wage laws or an incomplete conceptualization of risk and barriers to access.

A Shared Focus on Equity

Head Start, with its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, has a long-standing and ever-evolving focus on increasing equity. The program's impact on intergenerational poverty is well-studied, and Head Start's more than 35 million alumni are living proof of Head Start's reach and effectiveness. Today, Head Start is an anti-racist program specifically designed to expand opportunity for children and families from low-income backgrounds who are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Head Start and Early Head Start programs:

- Serve a racially diverse child and pregnant women population: Black or African-American (30%), White (44%), Biracial or Multi-Racial (10%), Asian (2%) American Indian/Alaska Native (4%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1%). Thirty-seven percent (37%) identify as being of Hispanic/ Latino origin ([Source](#))
- Prioritize services to children in foster care and experiencing homelessness
- Approach dual language learning as a strength while providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services and embracing linguistic diversity as an asset; 28% of children lived in homes where families' primary language was a language other than English ([Source](#))
- Address the devastating impacts of childhood trauma
- Prohibit expulsion, limit suspension, and focus on providing relevant behavioral interventions and supports to address implicit bias
- Engage parents as leaders, including through involvement in program governance, and offer them pathways to employment and career development within Head Start

Our community has the 55-year foundation and leadership to continue to be the bedrock of equity and anti-racism in early childhood.

Three Immediate Partnership Opportunities with HHS

We see clear opportunities to deepen our shared commitment to children and families from at-risk backgrounds through three immediate areas: 1) American Rescue Plan (ARP) implementation 2) a permanent, bold expansion of Head Start and Early Head Start, and 3) a reauthorization of the Head Start Act.

American Rescue Plan implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic and passage of the historic ARP represent an unprecedented opportunity to recommit our nation to the vital work of strengthening Head Start and Early Head Start to support our most at-risk children and families. We recommend that HHS:

- Dedicate discretionary resources through the ARP to identify more children with pandemic-related traumatic experiences and developmental delays, and direct state and local partners to prioritize their referral to Head Start and Early Head Start.
- Use ARP guidance on expanded child care funds to:
 - Explicitly clarify that Head Start and Early Head Start grantees are eligible for grants, workforce supports, and other funding necessary to aid their recovery.
 - Require states to develop ARP plans through their State Advisory Committees (SACs) or through another transparent and inclusive process that includes opportunities for robust parent and family input.
 - Encourage states to articulate how they plan to:
 - Address racial inequities in their early care and education systems;

- Partner with Head Start and Early Head Start systems in their state;
- Change policies to build more equity-driven systems in line with Head Start Program Performance Standards;
- Support Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships and expand high-quality infant and toddler care in-line with Early Head Start standards;
- Strengthen partnerships to extend the hours (duration) provided by Head Start to support working families;
- Support child development strategies in addition to child care activities;
- Expand states' use of contracts to stabilize child care providers and promote quality; and
- Build statewide mental health consultation systems to support all early childhood providers and staff.

Expansion of Head Start and Early Head Start

Any expansion of early childhood education services can and should begin with an expansion of Head Start and Early Head Start; any other approach would *decrease* equity in early childhood systems by not targeting the most vulnerable and most at-risk children and families with a program proven over 55 years to prepare children for success in school and in life. To that end, we recommend that HHS:

- Include Head Start and Early Head Start as the cornerstone of our nation's early childhood system in any proposal to expand access to early childhood programming, ensuring services reach more Black, Hispanic, indigenous, and immigrant children and their families prenatal to age five.
- Request funding from Congress for Head Start and Early Head Start sufficient to meet the above goal, including the funding necessary to recruit, train, and appropriately compensate teachers, program directors, and other support staff.
- Work through Office of Head Start Regional Offices and State Head Start Collaboration Offices to develop a pipeline of early childhood programs prepared to apply for and deliver Head Start and Early Head Start services over the next 10 years.

Head Start Act reauthorization

The Head Start Act was last reauthorized in 2007. It is long past time to reauthorize the Act, and it is a top priority of our community to do so in this Congress. In particular, our community sees urgent necessities to:

- Modernize eligibility requirements to ensure many children and families from at-risk backgrounds are not prevented from receiving services they need to thrive;
- Strengthen Head Start's legacy and ongoing focus on equity to continue serving as a leader and model for the early childhood and child development field;
- Redesign the training and technical assistance system in order to better support teachers and program leaders in efforts to continually improve their practice, including through a greater emphasis on the use of data and positive outliers identified through monitoring;
- Address the undervaluation of the Head Start workforce—including the inequities in teacher compensation and support that are rooted in historical racism— which creates a persistent workforce shortage; and
- Increase systems-level collaboration to remove state and local barriers to access to Head Start and Early Head Start for eligible families, strengthen public school-Head Start partnerships

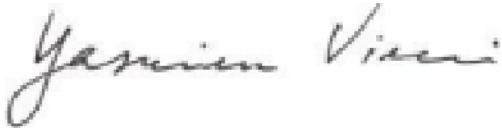
and child care alignment, expand parent voice and otherwise improve collaboration that supports the best interests of children, families and communities.

As a first step, we request a meeting with you and other HHS representatives involved in the oversight of Head Start to discuss the administration's vision for Head Start and how we may partner in furtherance of the Biden Administration priorities, including the families' economic mobility and the ARP, the physical and human capital infrastructure needs of the low-income neighborhoods Head Start serves, and an intentional drive toward a more equitable future.

Again, welcome to HHS and know that the Head Start community is an ally in the Biden Administration's vision for a more robust and equitable system of care and education for our youngest children and families.

We look forward to your response and ongoing partnership on behalf of Head Start's children and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Yasmina Vinci". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Yasmina Vinci

CC: Carmel Martin, Deputy Director for Economic Mobility, Domestic Policy Council
JooYuen Chang, Acting Assistant Secretary, Administration for Children and Families
Katie Hamm, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Development
Dr. Bernadine Futrell, Director, Office of Head Start