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Public Witness Testimony of Lori Milam  
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Submitted to:  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and 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 2023 Appropriations

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

On behalf of the Head Start community nationwide, thank you for this opportunity to share views and perspectives on Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) funding for Head Start. For five years, I have had the distinct pleasure of serving as the executive director of the West Virginia Head Start Association representing 21 programs from the Cheat River to the coal fields. Every day, we diligently work to build early learners and support West Virginia families facing financial hardships and generational poverty who are too often stung by addiction, depression, and economic uncertainty.

While I am extremely proud of how our programs in the Mountain State have weathered a global pandemic, COVID-19 has laid bare a crisis that Head Start program managers had previously been able to sweep under the rug or gloss over: our neglected and underinvested workforce. In the shadow of conflicting and confusing COVID-19 protocols and the rising impact of inflation, Head Start staff are struggling to meet the needs of West Virginia's most vulnerable children and their families and we need your help. We urge you to take immediate action to help address the spiraling labor situation crippling Head Start and Early Head Start.

At the present time, we have 143 staff openings in West Virginia—significantly higher than normal for this point in the program year. Most of those openings are due to the staffs' ability to easily find higher wages elsewhere. Local boards of education, which pay more, are regularly recruiting our staff for other positions—bus drivers, teachers' aides, and lead teachers—in the state pre-K or K-12 public school system. Private sector employers are also drawing away both potential and current employees. For example, Sheetz currently pays \$15 per hour with a \$3,000 sign-on bonus and Wal-Mart's starting wage is also \$15 per hour.

In West Virginia, the minimum wage is \$8.75. That is the typical starting wage for Head Start staff. Full-time employment at \$8.75 per hour is well below the federal poverty line, which means many Head Start staff are earning an income so low that their children qualify for Head Start services. With this in mind, it is not surprising workers are choosing other options that better support the wellbeing of their own families.

What is true for West Virginia is also true for Head Start programs nationwide. At a recent National Head Start Association conference, more than 900 staff were surveyed on current workforce conditions. The results were startling: an average of 35% of classrooms have been closed this school year and 90% of programs had to close a classroom permanently or temporarily due to staffing considerations. Of the programs surveyed, 30% was the average number of open and unfilled job slots at local Head Start programs. Closures translate to thousands of children left at home with an older sibling, a relative, or a neighbor while a mom or dad goes to work or school. For wage-based employees, missing one day can be a huge setback—often only a day’s pay away from homelessness or the ability to purchase groceries. For children, closed or suspended Head Start classrooms translate into critical learning loss in educational basics and missed critical social skills—skills that COVID-19 has already weakened for so many young children.

Conditions are dire. In the survey comments, one respondent wrote: “We are struggling because we can’t get people to apply for teacher positions. We can’t compete with pay with our local school districts. Children’s behaviors have escalated so much and we need so much behavioral support. Staff are getting punched, bit, and kicked by students on a daily basis. We NEED to take care of our staff. Staff are doing two and three jobs to cover for being so short staffed. We need help!!!”

We need help. We need **your** help.

Head Start programs need dedicated assistance in paying staff a living wage and competing in an increasingly challenging job market. Adequate compensation reduces turnover and stabilizes programs.

But the impact is far greater, given “turnover disrupts child-teacher relationships, which are crucial to children’s developmental outcomes,” according to a [recent report](#) from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. The report notes: “Head Start participants found that kids who experienced higher teacher turnover during the school year had smaller gains in vocabulary and literacy and higher levels of parent-reported behavior problems than peers who had more continuity with their caregivers (Markowitz [2019](#)).

With that in mind, the National Head Start Association (NHSA) is recommending an FY23 LHHS-Education Appropriations funding level of \$14.4 billion for Head Start to help do just that. This includes three sizable, but necessary increases to rescue this critical federal-local program.

- 1) **\$596 million cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase:** Rising inflation is an additional stress point on our workforce and the families we serve. Head Start’s cost of living adjustment for FY22 was 2.3% or approximately one-third the rate of inflation. This is not an aberration; historically, salary increases have either been just at inflation (when it is low) or below it (when inflation is high, like this year) resulting in a cumulative and chronic underpayment that leaves the Head Start workforce further behind private sector employers of every kind. The FY23 recommended COLA at a 5.4% increase would be an honest, responsible increase even though it is well-below year-over-year inflationary levels.
  
- 2) **\$2.5 billion in annual workforce compensation:** Under current pay constraints, Head Start and Early Head Start can’t compete. Notably, the five West Virginia Head Start grantees that are school boards report no vacant positions likely due to the higher wages they are able to pay. In other words, the workforce crisis facing early childhood education is clearly a solvable problem. Research has clearly shown experienced, well-trained staff are key to achieving the positive outcomes which Head Start has demonstrated over the decades; however, the constant churn of teachers and staff due to low wages—in addition to the significant vacancy rate—threatens Head Start’s record of success. We urge you to take the necessary action to press for passage of \$2.5 billion per year in Head Start workforce compensation realignment. This is a critical first step to addressing the chronic issues that stand in the way of parents’ ability to fully participate in the workforce and children from being prepared for success in school.
  
- 3) **\$262 million for quality improvement funding (QIF) trauma-informed care:** In the aforementioned survey, 56% of respondents indicated pay was the leading cause of employee loss. The second highest was work conditions, with 26% of respondents indicating both pandemic-related stress and burnout, combined with children presenting complex behavioral and social challenges, create an overwhelming work environment. We agree. Head Start staff need additional resources, training, and counseling support to lead classrooms and children through this incredibly difficult season. We are thankful that Congress has recognized and funded QIF trauma-informed care and welcome this support. Much more needs to be done to support the wholeness and wellness to the children and families we serve as well as the Head Start workforce.

In the weeks ahead, the Head Start community would appreciate Congress’s full embrace of the NHTSA FY23 Recommendation of \$14.4 billion and joining in on a singular focus of addressing Head Start workforce issues too long brushed aside. Our teachers, classroom aides, bus drivers, and support staff deserve to earn a living wage. Please take time this month to talk with local Head Start leaders in your community. I am quite sure you will immediately hear the daily struggle to keep and retain quality staff and the desperate need for change. Thank you for your consideration.