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Public Witness Testimony of Sharon Scott-Chandler
Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer
Action for Boston Community Development
178 Tremont Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02111

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 and Early Head Start FY 2023 Appropriations

Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Sharon Scott-Chandler, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD). I oversee ABCD's wide array of human services and anti-poverty programs, including our Head Start and Early Head Start programs which support 2,400 of the most vulnerable and under-resourced children and their families annually. Thank you for this opportunity to share my perspective on the need for the \$14.4 billion in Head Start funding for fiscal year 2023, as recommended by the National Head Start Association (NHSA).

Every day, ABCD works diligently to build early learners across Boston, while at the same time supporting families facing financial hardships and afflicted by poverty, homelessness, addiction, depression, and economic uncertainty. We partner with child care providers under the Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership to expand services. As such, we are able offer families who are seeking employment the ability to access full day, full year programming, and the options for public pre-K partnership classrooms we deliver in partnership with our local public schools.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has laid bare a crisis that Head Start program managers had previously been able to juggle. Simply put, because of underinvested workforce issues, the pandemic and its protocols, and the rising impact of inflation, we now struggle to meet the overwhelming needs of Greater Boston's most vulnerable children and their families.

We urge you to take immediate action to help address the spiraling labor crisis challenging Head Start and its communities. And it is indeed a crisis. When we are unable to serve hundreds of children on our waitlist because we have twenty classrooms closed due to lack of staff, the situation cannot be classified as anything less.

During the pandemic, we were able to stay open and quickly adapt to offer remote and hybrid learning and emergency support services – thanks to federal relief funding – but families were severely and disproportionately impacted by the pandemic: COVID-19 cases were among the highest in our state; lives were lost; jobs were lost; with resulting stress further affecting our community's health and well-being.

Since returning fully to in-person services last year, we've needed to provide additional support for the increase in children's behavioral health issues and speech and language delays. Many children we serve were at home for months or years without socialization before coming to us. Others continue to be traumatized by circumstances exacerbated by the pandemic.

The pandemic also took a toll on staff, most of whom are part of the hardest hit communities. Staff are exhausted physically and emotionally as they continue to teach our children and hold it together for families. Program directors and other staff help keep classrooms open when their co-workers are sick, must quarantine, or go on family leave.

In the 57 years ABCD has been operating a Head Start program, we've never encountered the workforce dynamics that exist today. The entire early childhood field competes for a much smaller pool of applicants, as teachers choose alternatives that better support the financial wellbeing of their own families, including even jobs in fast food, retail, or service sector that pay more, offer greater benefits, and require less credentialing and fewer responsibilities. It seems that when one is hired, two others resign. Salary remains the critical issue. More resources for compensation would allow us to offer competitive salaries for comparable qualifications.

What is true in Massachusetts is also true for the Head Start community nationwide. At a recent NHSA conference, more than nine hundred 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 jobs. Closures translate to thousands of children not receiving the comprehensive educational and social emotional support desperately needed to develop critical skills and be ready for kindergarten – skills that COVID-19 has already weakened for so many. It also means unemployment or missed wages for families struggling to survive. For wage-based employees – often only a day's pay away from homelessness or the ability to purchase groceries – missing one day can be a huge setback.

Conditions are dire. In the survey, 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 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.”

With all this in mind, the National Head Start Association is recommending funding of \$14.4 billion for FY23, including three sizable, but necessary, increases to renew this critical program.

1. **COLA increase of \$596 million** – Head Start’s cost of living adjustment for FY22 was just 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 farther behind private sector employers of every kind. These funds would provide a COLA of 5.4%, an impactful increase despite being well below inflation.

2. **\$2.5 billion in annual workforce compensation** – Research has clearly shown that 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 that record of success. Head Start employees at all levels are entitled to a living wage and we urge including this level of funding for Head Start workforce compensation realignment. This is a critical first step to addressing the

chronic issues that stand in the way of children from being prepared for success in school and their parents' ability to fully participate in the workforce.

3. **\$262 million for QIF trauma-informed care** – In the aforementioned survey, 56% of respondents indicated pay was the leading cause of employee loss, with the second being “work conditions.” 26% of respondents indicated pandemic-related and overworked stress and children presenting with complex behavioral and social challenges are making for an overwhelming work environment. We agree. Head Start staff need additional resources, training, and counseling support to be able to lead children through this incredibly difficult period. Congress has recognized this and funded some minimal QIF trauma-informed care, but so much more is necessary to bring wholeness to children and wellness to their families.

Head Start is a lifeline for children and families. And our teachers, classroom aides, bus drivers, and support staff deserve to earn a living wage. Please take time to talk with Head Start leaders in your communities – and visit programs. I’m quite certain you will immediately hear the daily struggle to keep and retain quality staff and the desperate need for change.

I want to close by saying how much ABCD appreciates the years of bi-partisan Congressional support of Head Start, and the long-standing early childhood leadership of our own representative and member of this subcommittee, Assistant Speaker Katherine Clark.

We hope that you will make an immediate and significant investment in the compensation of our Head Start workforce nationwide so that we can continue to serve the most vulnerable children and their families. Thank you for your time and consideration.