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Outside Witness Testimony of Vicki Lowry  
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Submitted to:  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies  
Senate Committee on Appropriations

Addressing:  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children, Families, and Communities, Office of Head Start  
Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations

Chair Capito, Ranking Member Baldwin, and Members of the Subcommittee – especially Sen. Rounds from the great state of South Dakota! – I am Vicki Lowry, Head Start Director for Youth & Family Services (YFS) in Rapid City, South Dakota. Head Start<sup>1</sup> is a launchpad for future leaders and strong communities. We prepare children to succeed in school, provide affordable child care so that parents can focus on their education and careers, and catalyze growth in rural, urban, and suburban communities throughout the U.S.

Children attending Head Start – those living in poverty, in foster care, or experiencing homelessness, the children of seasonal farm workers, American Indian and Alaska Native children, and others known to be at-risk due to life circumstances – benefit from the comprehensive education, health, and nutrition services we provide. Head Start parents also benefit greatly from our services, including employment, housing, and educational support. In other words, Head Start is a lifeline for families seeking to achieve the American dream.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide my perspective on the critical value of Head Start, and share the recommendations of the National Head Start Association (NHSA) outlining the need for additional investment in Head Start in Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) to ensure that every child, regardless of zip code or circumstance, has the opportunity to succeed. Before I share additional background on the Head Start program in my community, let me discuss the benefits of the Head Start model – a comprehensive approach to prepare children and families for success through four critical components: education, health, parental engagement and support, and local design.

Leaning on decades of science, Head Start assists children in building the brain connections and self-confidence necessary for success in kindergarten and beyond. Knowing that children must be healthy in order to achieve success, Head Start ensures they receive physical and mental health services and necessary referrals, plus balanced meals and a nutritious snack daily. Respecting the choices and responsibilities they have in the upbringing of their children, parents play a central role in the decisions about how each program spends money, what children do in

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<sup>1</sup> Head Start includes all of the following: Head Start Preschool, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start, and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership programs.

their classrooms, and how they work with community partners. Finally, acknowledging that each community has different strengths, resources, and challenges – and reflecting the federal-to-local funding of Head Start – each program is locally designed to reflect those unique traditions, priorities, and cultures.

The Head Start model has proven remarkably successful. Research shows that Head Start alumni are more likely to graduate from high school, and enroll in and graduate from college; they are also less likely to experience poor health, live in poverty, or need public assistance as adults. And Head Start parents, having benefited from goal-setting, parenting training, and experiencing real engagement, are more likely to join the workforce or stay employed, setting them and their families on a path of economic self-reliance.

In 2024, Head Start served over 700,000 children and their families nationwide. In that time, Head Start staff – who total over 200,000 nationwide – conducted over 3.9 million home visits to families, ensured that over 685,000 children received preventative dental care, helped over 570,000 children stay up-to-date on early and periodic diagnostic and treatment screenings, and conducted over 390,000 behavioral screenings for newly enrolled children.

Our vision is that children in western South Dakota will develop healthy bodies, inquiring minds, wholesome relationships, compassionate hearts, creative spirits, the conviction to stand up for themselves and others, and the courage to build a better society. With that as our goal, YFS Head Start currently serves 325 children in Head Start Preschool and 168 in Early Head Start in seven counties in western South Dakota. We do this through two Head Start Preschool centers, one center that serves both Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start, and six home-based centers. And we do so with a staff of approximately 140 and an annual grant of approximately \$8 million.

Unlike some federal government grants or contracts, the impact of which may be felt across many states or even internationally, the economic impact of the YFS Head Start grant is felt almost entirely locally. The funds we receive for our three Head Start centers and six home-based centers are all spent in the seven counties we serve in South Dakota. This local economic impact is also repeated in the counties served by the other 17,708 Head Start centers across the country.

The YFS Head Start program improves child and family outcomes, supports work, reduces dependency, and stimulates the local economy. We believe that Head Start is a smart, bipartisan investment that promotes work, strengthens families, and prepares children for lifelong success. With your continued support, we can ensure every child has a strong start and every parent has a positive pathway forward.

In serving those children and families, YFS Head Start embraces all four components of the Head Start model I mentioned earlier – education, health, parental engagement and support, and local design. Let me go into detail on just one of those components – health – and share some details on the nutrition program we operate, which aligns well with Head Start's mission to promote healthy development in children and families.

YFS Head Start emphasizes using more fruits and vegetables – including those grown on site – to help build lifelong healthy nutrition habits. By integrating this into our Head Start classrooms,

YFS Head Start serves fresh produce each day of the week, enhances children's food literacy, encourages adventurous eating, and supports the development of long-term healthy eating habits. It also empowers families with practical cooking, shopping, and nutrition education tools, further reinforcing Head Start's goal of strengthening the school-to-home connection and improving overall family well-being.

During the past year, YFS Nutrition Services provided or oversaw the provision of 624,410 total meals and snacks to children. YFS cooks prepared and served food at our two Rapid City Head Start Preschool sites and delivered prepared meals to children enrolled in other YFS programs, including the Douglas School Head Start site. We have incorporated homegrown, fresh produce into our nutrition program, growing and serving over 860 pounds of vegetables and nearly 250 pounds of fruit (including melons), as well as numerous herbs. We also purchase locally grown sweet corn to be husked and eaten by the children – a favorite for many of them.

But I would not have submitted this testimony if everything were perfect. While YFS Head Start, all other Head Start grant recipients, the children in our programs, their families, and the communities we serve are all deeply grateful and appreciative of the funds Congress has appropriated to Head Start, let me detail our request for funding in FY26.

The workforce crisis that has challenged Head Start nationwide is stabilizing. A survey, conducted by NHSA in late 2024, found nine percent of staff positions were vacant, down from 19% in February 2023. Currently, YFS Head Start has 10% of staff positions vacant. Low compensation remains the primary reason for these vacancies, and there are numerous instances where Head Start staff are paid so poorly that their children are eligible for the services we are providing. That is not sustainable. A lack of staff closes some classrooms, while others are open but just barely – a sick teacher can mean the difference between a classroom being open or closed, and children and families having the care and education they are counting on. And a lack of qualified job candidates to fill vacancies places current staff under greater stress.

Our workforce situation has improved, but early childhood education remains in the bottom 10% of all professions in terms of compensation, so it remains difficult to recruit and retain staff. The FY26 budget request submitted by the White House keeps Head Start funding at the same level for a third consecutive year. That is also not sustainable, and NHSA recommends a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) of 3.2%, totaling \$390 million, for Head Start in FY26. Before I outline our request to address other demonstrated needs, let me emphasize that this COLA is our most critical need for Head Start and the children, families, and communities we serve.

The vast majority of Head Start grant funds go to staff salaries and benefits, although those benefits are often quite limited. Quality Improvement Funds are statutorily designated to allow programs to address critical local needs as identified by those programs in partnership with the Office of Head Start. Based on demonstrated need, Quality Improvement Funds can be used for items such as enhancing mental health services for children, families, and staff, lead abatement, and providing the training necessary for staff to support and individualize services to children with special needs, including those who have experienced opioid addiction or adverse childhood experiences. An additional \$459 million in Quality Improvement Funds is requested in FY26 to allow programs to address critical local needs.

The percentage of teachers in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) programs with access and resources necessary to receive their bachelor's degree lags significantly behind Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees nationwide. The Tribal Colleges and Universities–Head Start Partnership Program helps expand the number of teachers from AI/AN communities to address the growing need for Head Start services, and we recommend additional funding in FY26 to expand the program.

While some Head Start programs, including YFS Head Start, are struggling to fill open staff positions and need to be stabilized, many are fully staffed but with lengthy waitlists. Indeed, YFS Head Start has a waitlist of over 190 children, and the nationwide waitlist is estimated to exceed 170,000. That's because, given current funding, Head Start serves just a fraction of those eligible – Head Start Preschool reaches only 26% and Early Head Start reaches only 13% of eligible children. And when program expansion funding was most recently appropriated, in FY23, fewer than 15% of programs that applied for expansion grants received funding, demonstrating that a significant appetite and need for expansion remains. With that in mind, NHSA recommends a competitive grant program for additional expansion for stable programs – those fully staffed and enrolled.

Finally, to provide a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment for children and staff, some aging Head Start facilities and infrastructure need federal investment for high-quality repairs and improvements. In its Fiscal Year 2015 Head Start Facilities Report, the Office of Head Start projected that “7,857 centers will need to be rebuilt, renovated, or undergo outstanding maintenance and repair at a cost of \$3,839,941,250” With inflation having increased that cost to an estimated nearly \$5 billion, Head Start programs need funding beyond what they receive in normal Head Start grants to repair, renovate, rebuild, or replace facilities.

In summary, NHSA recommends, and YFS Head Start endorses, FY26 funding of \$14.91 billion for Head Start. This investment would provide a COLA, allow programs to address critical local needs, and expand recruitment and development of staff for AI/AN programs. In addition, this funding would go toward targeted expansion of Head Start and facilities improvement through separate competitive grant programs to be administered by the Office of Head Start.

Again, a 3.2% COLA – requiring additional funding of \$390 million – is the most critical need and our primary request for FY26 on behalf of the children, families, and communities we serve.

Since its inception, more than 40 million children have benefited from Head Start. Every President and Congress, regardless of party, has committed to the children and families Head Start assists because the program is proven to get results. As you evaluate FY26 funding requests, I hope you will make an immediate and significant investment in Head Start so that we can continue to serve the children and their families who need it most. That would be good for all of us, because strong families and strong communities power our nation.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical request for the children, families, and communities of Head Start, both in western South Dakota and across the country.