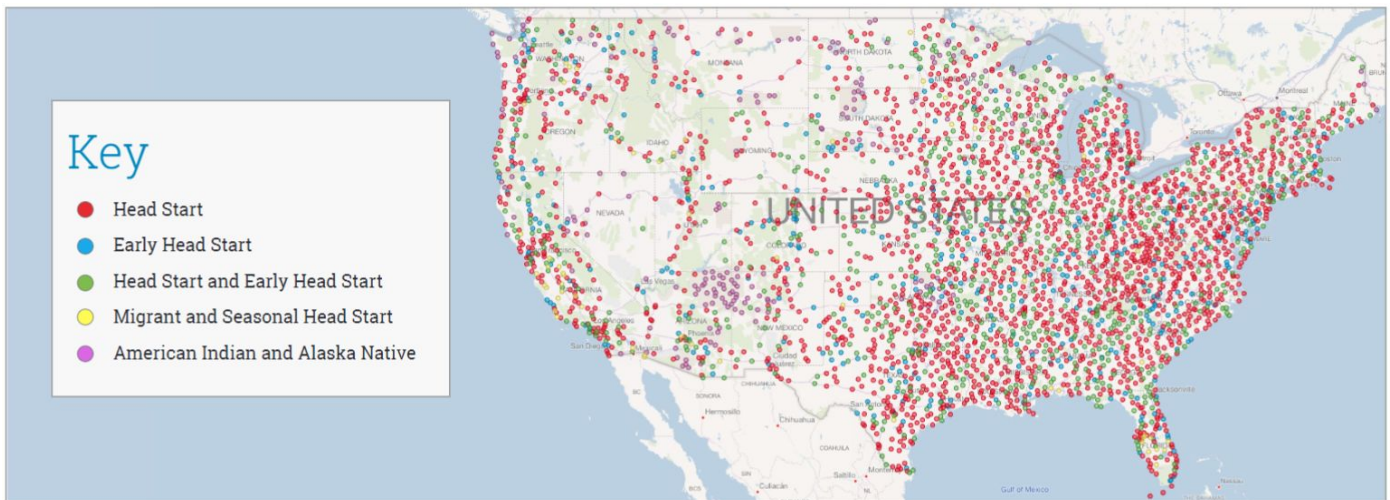




Head Start Helps

Responding, Innovating, and Advocating for State and Local Needs in the Wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic



Head Start's 1,800 locally-based programs serve more than one million eligible children and their families from at-risk backgrounds in all 50 states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

As the coronavirus pandemic evolves, Head Start's priorities are to:

1. **Respond immediately** to ensure children and families from at-risk backgrounds continue to get the critical stabilizing support they need.
2. **Innovate our service delivery** to provide school readiness, health, and family support services in new ways during this crisis and as communities recover.
3. **Advocate for child care programs, schools, and other partners** to ensure young children, families, and the early childhood workforce receive expanded investments and necessary support services.

1. Head Start Responds

During this crisis, most Head Start and Early Head Start facilities are closed due to state and local orders. However, thanks to [ongoing federal support and flexibility from the federal Office of Head Start](#), local programs continue to serve their communities in some or all of the following ways:

- **Some Head Start programs are [serving children of essential workers](#)**, in areas where this is possible and in partnership with local community leaders.
- **All Head Start programs are operating** and [working quickly to provide remote learning opportunities and ongoing family support](#), including addressing food insecurity; letting families know of additional flexibility in Medicaid, unemployment benefits, and other supports; and sharing educational information about coronavirus and staying healthy during this crisis.
- **Head Start programs are [providing staff with the flexibility to work for other programs outside of their regular work schedules](#)**, recognizing the critical partnerships they have with state-funded pre-K, child care, and other early childhood systems.
- **Head Start teachers are undertaking [professional development to increase their credentialing, skills, and readiness to meet the emerging needs of families](#)** and children with trauma.
- **Head Start programs are extending their facilities, where possible, and expertise to partners**, including mental health consultation and family engagement supports. [See licensing agreement](#).
- **Head Start programs are [addressing food insecurity](#)**, delivering food to families and taking advantage of flexibility around the Child and Adult Care Food Program to offer congregate feeding.

“Our families are experiencing stress and anxiety due to the coronavirus. Our program is supplying daily meals, not only for the enrolled student, but for the family as a whole on a drive-by basis. Also, during the pick up of meals to families, we offer take home activities for the children. We are also supplying our Early Head Start families with diapers and pull-ups to take home.”

- Claudia Arrieta, Early Head Start School Readiness Coach, Region 19 Head Start, El Paso, TX

Take Action With Us:

Use [this locator tool to find local Head Start programs](#) with which to partner.

2. Head Start Innovates

Summer Learning Partnerships with Head Start

Through recent congressional and administration support, Head Start programs are planning to be providing supplemental summer learning and family support programs.

These summer learning opportunities will be critical to address the ongoing hardship families face and to ensure young children experiencing increases in poverty and potential trauma are ready for kindergarten, fed, and safe during the summer months.

Grants will be made to Head Start grantees considered “most ready” to operate these programs.

“I think there will be a greater need for mental health services. If we can get children into programs over the summer months, that will help many families as we climb back into life.”

- Kathy Parson, Executive Director, Benton Franklin Head Start, Richland, WA

Take Action With Us:

Governors, state agencies, and partners interested in working with their state’s Head Start community to explore this funding opportunity are encouraged to [reach out directly to the Office of Head Start](#) and also partner with their state or regional Head Start Association. For assistance in connecting with a state or regional Head Start association, contact NHTA Director of State Affairs, Kent Mitchell, at kmitchell@nhsa.org.

States are further encouraged to build on federal requirements for Head Start-public school partnerships by expanding formal collaboration requirements and opportunities. See *this recent toolkit from NHTA and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#)*.

3. Head Start Advocates

An Agenda for Governors, State Agencies, and State Lawmakers to Support At-Risk Families

Advocacy for children and families from at-risk backgrounds is key to Head Start’s strength. As a community, Head Start listens to our families and the staff that support them when creating strategies to secure funding, policy and program changes that result in better support for young children and families and greater equity.

Based on direct input from the Head Start community, NHSA encourages state policymakers to prioritize the following immediate, emerging and recovery and resilience priorities to support children and families from at-risk backgrounds.



Every child in a Head Start classroom is fed each day, and for some it may be the only meal they eat that day. Across the country, programs like [Promise Early Education](#) are continuing to ensure that the children they serve are provided with the same high-quality, nutritious meals they receive when centers are open.

Immediate Priorities

Immediately invest in child care programs, which are essential community supports, including small business investment. Child care programs are partners and peers to Head Start, as they often serve similar families and face similar challenges. To ensure the network of care for children remains intact through this crisis, all efforts should be made to keep child care programs from closing their doors permanently due to the impact of this disaster. States can start by ensuring that all child care subsidies continue to be paid—regardless of whether a center is open or temporarily closed and whether a parent is still working or newly unemployed. Expanded small business loans and other supports will also be critical in this period of financial uncertainty for programs. *Please see other [critical child care recommendations](#) supported by NHTA and [small business loan information](#) from the First Five Years Fund.*

“I believe that families are going to be hit harder in the weeks to come with extra food and utility costs due to having more members home and for longer periods of time than the usual.”

Family Service Worker, West Virginia

Expand early childhood access to all “essential” workers, our most vulnerable children, and grandparents taking care of young children. Millions of parents of young children are considered “essential” personnel. These parents are health workers and emergency personnel, but also are parents who work at grocery stores, maintain the nation’s infrastructure, and support the food supply chain. As early childhood programs reopen their classroom doors, access should be prioritized for the children of these families, children who are at-risk (e.g. children with disabilities, in foster care or homeless), and children being cared for by grandparents or other elderly relatives who face additional physical and financial burdens.

Offer hazard pay to any early childhood worker caring for children of essential workers. Early childhood workers are often themselves parents to young children. Right now, many are risking their well-being to care for the children of other essential workers and they should receive hazard pay—higher compensation—for their public service.

Immediately invest in expanded child abuse and domestic violence prevention strategies, to prevent an upsurge in abuse cases and family dislocation. To prevent child abuse and domestic violence during quarantine, community-level plans led by social workers, case workers, and community partners—especially proven whole-family intervention models like Head Start—should be created and funded.

Provide flexible funding to early childhood and home visiting programs to support the purchase of food, diapers, formula, and other essential needs for pregnant women, children, and families. Families are struggling with basic needs. Additional resources for essential supplies are critical inputs into their proper growth and development. Early childhood and home visiting programs are trusted by families and among the most efficient ways to deliver support for basic needs.

Take full advantage of flexibility in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and expanded SNAP benefits to address food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has offered significant flexibility to facilitate the distribution of food through early childhood programs and to allow states to expand SNAP. All states should take advantage of this and streamline the approval process for programs to participate.

Make immediate equity investments in technology in early childhood programs, personal family technology and internet access to close the digital and resource gaps that lead to inequities in remote learning. Early childhood programs need new technologies to meet rising demands. Young children in poverty often lack access to personal technology and families often face strict limits on data. Investments in programs and family data plans, phones, computers, and other personal technology are necessary to facilitate remote learning equity. States should also invest now to close digital and resource gaps in libraries and other community spaces to help address this crisis in the medium- and long-term.

Expand community outreach to at-risk families about new flexibilities in Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and other safety net programs. New federal policies offer additional flexibilities to maintain and expand health and income support. These flexibilities are critical to ensuring more families do not lose these life-saving supports and families that need them anew can access them. Expanded education and outreach are needed to ensure families know and access these benefits including in Spanish and a myriad of other languages. Targeted, community-level outreach and education is especially critical for families with young children, who are living with elevated levels of stress.

Expand state-level income and rental housing supports that help families weather economic dislocation. Federal stimulus checks will help low-income families, but additional state-level income support will be critical. Each state and community is facing unique economic circumstances and state policy allows for a more tailored economic policy response. Rental support will especially be needed as bills come due.

Expand virtual mental health and substance use support within communities and within early childhood settings, while promoting parity in treatment in health systems. Adult and childhood trauma will rise given the unprecedented spike in unemployment, social isolation, food insecurity, health concerns, and other traumatic experiences. Young children are among the most vulnerable, but also among those most capable of recovery if given access to treatment. Expanded screenings, hotline support, new grant programs, and pay parity for substance use and mental health are needed to address rising needs.

Emerging Priorities

Expand summer learning and family support initiatives, as well as kindergarten transition activities, through formal public school and Head Start partnerships. The federal government's recent commitment to invest in Head Start summer learning will reach only a fraction of vulnerable children and transitions to kindergarten have been disrupted for most children. Head Start and public school partnerships, as well as transition support for pre-K-aged children, are especially needed in the coming summer months. States can build on federal requirements and target high-need populations.

As soon as safe and feasible, reopen parks, playgrounds and other physical activity spaces as community hubs. Children learn through play. They achieve wellness through play. They recover through play. As soon as safe and feasible from a public health perspective, parks, playgrounds and other public spaces should be reopened and invested in as family and community hubs. This is one of the most cost-effective and scalable early childhood and family wellness interventions available.

Expand coordinated (and tele and web) enrollment into Head Start, state pre-K and child care to ensure vulnerable children get access to the right setting. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, families are generally less accessible to early childhood program outreach efforts. Disruptions to enrollment processes for Head Start, child care, and state pre-K programs means families will be less informed and more challenging to enroll. State investments in coordinated enrollment, including via phone and web tools, and waivers of signature and income and employment verification, will be essential. Related Preschool Development Grant (PDG) work in states should be accelerated or expanded.

Invest in trauma, grief, and infant and toddler mental health resources, training and support for early childhood staff. Children are dealing with increased anxiety and fear that will need to be addressed when programs reopen. Expanded state investments in infant, toddler and early childhood mental health consultants and resources will be invaluable to all parts of state early childhood systems as we move forward in a time of uncertainty to support overwhelmed teachers, staff, children, and families.

"There will be major heightened reports of trauma from children upon return. Money will need to be devoted to training of trauma and helping children acclimate to their environment again."

- Shana Shippee, lead teacher, Berkshire County Head Start, North Adams, MA

Recovery and Resilience Priorities

Invest in state funding for Head Start and Early Head Start. Fourteen states currently invest directly in Head Start and/or Early Head Start to serve more families and children from birth through age five from at-risk backgrounds. Collectively, these states invest over \$400 million each budget cycle. [Learn more about this growing trend in a recent NHSA issue brief.](#) Expanded access to Head Start will be critical as early childhood systems recover. Head Start programs are federally-funded, resilient, and ready to serve.

Expand early childhood workforce compensation, benefits, and scholarship support. Already living on the economic margins, half of the nation’s early childhood educators are expected to face unemployment due to this crisis. Staff recruitment and retention was already a challenge for early childhood programs. As the early childhood system recovers, invest in teachers and staff through enhanced pay in state pre-K programs, enhanced child care subsidy tied to staff training and compensation, educational scholarships, and other policy options.

Clarify early education policies during emergencies, with a focus on supporting at-risk children and families. This will not be the last pandemic or health emergency to disrupt early childhood education. Fortunately, this crisis is yielding lessons. States should codify the best lessons, including the need to pay early childhood staff and programs during emergencies, invest in health and wellness practices in programs, have plans in place to care for large numbers of essential workers and ensure supports for our most at-risk and vulnerable families through Head Start and a network of other community partners.

“Head Start is an amazing program; some of us have been here for 18 years. I just hope that staff continues to be able to stay on and be here for the children when they return. The continuity is so important with the children at this young age and when you add the stress of the epidemic to it all, they need some ‘normalcy’ when they return.”

- Janet Dunbar,
Early Head Start
teacher, Backer
Center, Punta
Gorda, FL

Take Action With Us:

State policymakers—governors, state agency leads, and state policymakers—should review these priorities, enact those changes that buttress their state’s at-risk families and partner with community-embedded Head Start programs on implementation.

Agenda for State Leaders to Support At-Risk Families

Immediate Priorities

- Immediately invest in child care programs, which are essential community supports, including small business investment.
- Expand early childhood access to all “essential” workers, our most vulnerable children, and grandparents taking care of young children.
- Offer hazard pay to any early childhood worker caring for children of essential workers.
- Immediately invest in expanded child abuse and domestic violence prevention strategies, to prevent an upsurge in abuse cases and family dislocation.
- Provide flexible funding to early childhood and home visiting programs to support the purchase of food, diapers, formula, and other essential needs for pregnant women, children, and families.
- Take full advantage of flexibility in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and expanded SNAP benefits to address food insecurity.
- Make immediate equity investments in technology in early childhood programs, personal family technology, and internet access to close the digital and resource gaps that lead to inequities in remote learning.
- Expand community outreach to at-risk families about new flexibilities in Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and other safety net programs.
- Expand state-level income and rental housing supports that help families weather economic dislocation.
- Expand virtual mental health and substance use support within communities and within early childhood settings, while promoting parity in treatment in health systems.

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Recovery & Resilience Priorities

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