



## Head Start Stands by Children and Families During COVID-19

The at-risk children and families that Head Start serves across the United States have been deeply impacted by the COVID-19 public health crisis. In response, Head Start programs are rising to the challenge, adapting so they can continue to safely meet the critical education, health, and nutrition needs of their communities.

While the vast majority of Head Start programs have temporarily shut their doors due to the health risks posed by the crisis, [all staff remain employed](#) in order to continue providing critical services to children and families remotely. The Office of Head Start has given individual programs flexibility in making their own operational decisions based on the needs of their communities, under the general guidance that they must continue serving families.

Since early March, NHSA has been collecting firsthand information from Head Start programs nationwide about how they are responding to the challenges posed by COVID-19 in their communities. Through more than 800 stories, hundreds of survey responses, and countless virtual conversations, Head Start staff and parents have shared valuable insight into how their programs are adapting to continue serving children and families during this crisis.

**Head Start is still supporting the education, nutrition, and health needs of America's most vulnerable children and families.** Despite unprecedented disruption, Head Start programs moved quickly to meet the basic needs of children and families (see sidebar), while simultaneously finding ways to remotely provide social-emotional support and distance learning opportunities.

**Head Start moved quickly to cover the basic needs of children and families.**

77% of programs report that they are providing food, 69% diapers and wipes, and 52% baby formula.

"We've been in communication with families, inquiring about their basic needs, employment situations, physical and mental health. Our family service workers are in regular communication with families to assess those needs and make referrals for various resources..."

— Program director, PA

**What's next?** Investment in expanding the workforce's access to technology and addressing child mental health and social-emotional well-being will be essential in mitigating the damage caused by this crisis and creating a more resilient future for Head Start children and families.

**Challenge:** The need for greater access to trauma, grief, and mental health care and resources has never been greater. The at-risk families Head Start serves—those who are already confronting destabilizing challenges—are now facing job loss and uncertainty, physical illness, isolation, and loss of critical services. Needs brought on by COVID-19 are compounding the well-documented needs related to childhood trauma that already existed in the Head Start community.

**Solution:** Expand access to trauma, grief, and mental health care and resources for Head Start children, families, and staff. In fiscal year (FY)2020, Congress made an initial commitment of \$250 million for Head Start to provide an extra layer of care—including proven interventions—in response to rising trauma in children. Now it's time to build on that foundation.

**Challenge:** Access to technology is more critical than ever. Among the at-risk Head Start population, lack of access to basic technology, such as computers and broadband, threatens to widen gaps in remote service delivery, leaving many of our most vulnerable children unable to receive services and at greater risk of falling farther behind their peers.

**Solution:** Close the technological gap so all children and families can access the services they need to learn and grow. Access to the Internet and appropriate technological hardware and software are necessary for children to be able to access virtual circle time with their teachers and classmates, one-on-one time with program staff, and tele-health services. Providing under-resourced staff with technology needed to perform remotely would yield exponential positive effects for the families with whom they remain in contact.

72%

of programs said they have connected children and families with disability or mental health staff since stay-at-home orders began.

60%

of families lack access to a computer for remote learning and engagement.

28%

of Head Start staff also lack access.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned life upside down, especially for children and families from at-risk backgrounds who were struggling with stability before the virus created another level of crisis in their lives. Head Start has been turning crises into opportunities for 55 years, and during this latest challenge, continues to be a beacon of hope in communities nationwide.

However, the survey also shed light on areas where Head Start is in need of more support from policymakers and elected leaders. As the voice of the Head Start community, NHSA is advocating for solutions that will close these gaps. As we move into the next phase of the COVID-19 crisis, investment in expanding the workforce's access to technology and addressing child mental health and social-emotional well-being will be essential in mitigating the damage caused by this crisis and creating a more resilient future for our most vulnerable children and families.