



NATIONAL MIGRANT & SEASONAL
HEAD START ASSOCIATION

September 15, 2023

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice-Chair
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Chair Murray, Chairwoman Granger, Vice Chair Collins, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

We write on behalf of the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association (NMSHSA) and the National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) to thank you for recognizing and supporting the work Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start programs do and to ask that you do what you can to ensure that the final FY 2024 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations adopts the text included in S. 2624 which would eliminate the eligibility barriers that prevent our programs from effectively serving the communities we are called to serve.

The NIHSDA and NMSHSDA have joined forces in making this request and securing the support of the Office of Head Start and congressional authorizers. While there is no cost associated with our request, its impact on the Tribal and farmworker communities we serve will be both immediate and substantial and will enable the MSHS and AIAN Head Start programs to serve more children and respond to the distinct needs of their communities.

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start was established in 1969 to provide Head Start services to agriculture-working families and 54 years later MSHS remains the only Head Start program with a parent work requirement. Currently, to qualify for MSHS a family must meet two eligibility criteria: at least 51% of their income must come from agricultural labor and their income must be at or below the federal poverty level (FPL). However, since FPL thresholds have not kept pace with wage increases in agricultural states, farmworker families are finding it increasingly difficult to qualify for MSHS services. There are few if any childcare options available to farmworker families who do not qualify for MSHS, leaving farmworker parents to choose between discontinuing work, forgoing a paycheck and putting time-sensitive harvests in jeopardy, or bringing children to the fields, where they would be exposed to dangerous circumstances. The legislative change included in S. 2624 would allow families

with at least one member employed in agriculture, as defined in the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Protection Act, to qualify for MSHS services and would eliminate the income test barrier while still requiring MSHS programs to serve the children most in need of MSHS services.

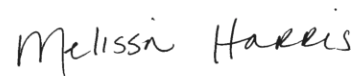
Since Head Start's inception, American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) Head Start has played a unique role in Native communities as the center for the preservation and revitalization of Native languages and cultures. The legislative change we are seeking would respect tribal sovereignty and allow Tribes to establish their own program composition criteria to meet the needs of their communities based on local circumstances and conditions. Although the Head Start Act allows some flexibility for Indian tribes operating Head Start programs, current law requires that all low-income children in the service area are served first to the detriment of AIAN children in some areas. This has resulted in low-income non-AIAN children filling a large portion of AIAN Head Start program slots or, for some programs, slots remain empty because Tribes and local businesses are paying wages that put AIAN families just above the federal low-income limits (though these wages are typically still far from what would be considered a comfortable household income). The existing rigid statutory eligibility policy does not take into consideration the devastating rates of adverse childhood experiences, alarming predisposition to negative health outcomes, high academic failure, and behavioral health problems in Native communities. Amending the Head Start Act as has been proposed would allow Tribes and AIAN Head Start programs to evaluate each child's program eligibility in a holistic manner, considering the needs of the child, their family, and their community.

We appreciate your attention to our request and hope you and your colleagues will support including the legislative language from the bill reported out of the Senate Appropriations Committee in the final FY 2024 labor-HHS bill.



Irma Morin
Board of Directors President
National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association

CEO, Community Council of Idaho
Caldwell, ID



Melissa Harris
Board of Directors President
National Indian Head Start Directors Association

Executive Program Director, ISWA Head Start
Rock Hill, SC

cc:

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin
The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
The Honorable Robert Aderholt