



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

October 22, 2024

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra,

We write today to express our deep concern about the Administration's current process of determining deficiencies, conducting Risk Assessment Notification (RAN) reviews, and communicating back in a timely manner with Head Start grant recipients. The process, as applied by the Office of Head Start and the regional offices at this time, threatens to weaken and destabilize Head Start. We urge you to reform these practices immediately, before additional high-quality programs are forced to go through the arduous, distracting, and unfair process, as it currently exists. Further, we request a meeting with you for a more in-depth discussion on the matter.

As you know, Head Start is the only nationwide program which puts young children together with their families on the first step of the escalator out of poverty. It is not only the economists whose research found that Head Start disrupts generational poverty and improves health chances of Head Start children. Many Members of Congress, philanthropic, religious, military and education leaders, along with innumerable educators and medical practitioners, credit Head Start with putting children on the trajectory to success in school and in life. It would be a terrible mistake to allow inconsistent, untimely and sometimes incorrect bureaucratic interpretations of the statute, embodied in intransparent practices to be the beginning of the end of this long-standing national commitment.

We write to you as the Board of Directors for the National Head Start Association. We are a uniquely representative board of 50 individuals including four representatives - a director representative, a staff representative, a parent/caregiver representative, and a friend representative - from each of the 10 HHS regions, as well as from the migrant/seasonal and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) communities. Collectively, we speak on behalf of the entire Head Start and Early Head Start community, providing nearly 750,000 eligible children and families an opportunity to achieve success in school and in life in communities across the nation each and every single day.

Everyone in the Head Start community, in Congress, and in the administration wants to see child health and safety incidents prevented and addressed immediately so that no child is ever harmed within Head Start classrooms. We also believe that Head Start children and families and the



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American taxpayers deserve effective accountability systems that ensure eligible children and families receive the most reliable and high-quality services possible, no matter where they are in the country. Unfortunately, the current accountability system falls woefully short of providing transparent, timely, and equitable decisions, hurting Head Start grantees' ability to innovate, improve, and better serve children and families. This is most recently evidenced in the haphazard manner by which the administration has made deficiency determinations, engaged grant recipients in the RAN, and implemented the full enrollment initiative.

We strongly believe that the administration and our grant recipients have a common shared goal of providing the highest quality services possible to every single child and family that enters our doors. And, for programs with ongoing or systemic issues - we fully embrace a process that requires improvements, or if improvements are not made, removes them from the opportunity/responsibility to serve.

However, it is notable that so many programs of long-standing high quality have recently been caught up in these bureaucratic processes. We urge you to look at the data affirming that the vast majority of grant recipients who face competition for their grants as part of the Designation Renewal System (DRS) win their grants back. This demonstrates that the administration has created something with a very large unintended consequence - busy work. This busy work to recompetete or to have to engage in a constant process of reporting, waiting, and worrying if a deficiency will be given for an incident that has already been addressed, absolutely takes time, energy, and resources away from meeting the needs of children and families. Perhaps even worse, to a quality program caught up in these processes - it feels very much like they are fighting to survive in a system that is broken and doomed to fail. We ask that you do everything in your power to reduce the unproductive busy work and help us to retain our talented staff and leaders who are committed to success for children, for families, and for communities across this country.

The last several years have been particularly difficult to operate and work in Head Start agencies, due to the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent recovery, an unprecedented workforce crisis, and needs of children and families rising to a magnitude never before seen. The Head Start community needs a trusted partner in the administration who can help Head Start grant recipients continuously adapt to meet the changing needs of their communities. Instead, the Head Start community has lost trust in their administration partners due to busy work, confusing and seemingly inequitable administrative decisions, and unreliable and conflicting communication.

Again, we would like to request a meeting with you for a more in-depth discussion in order to begin rebuilding the trust that has been lost and the partnership children and families need us to rebuild. Please reach out to NHSA's Executive Director, Yasmina Vinci (617-599-0177 or yvinci@nhsa.org) in order to schedule that meeting.



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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Meredith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L'.

Linda Meredith, Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yasmina Vinci". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'Y'.

Yasmina Vinci, Executive Director

Board of Directors of the National Head Start Association