



Dear Members of the Early Childhood Funding Commission:

The Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA) and the 55 Head Start/Early Head Start grantees across Illinois —representing over forty thousand children and families, 11,000 staff, and 176 programs —support the work of the Early Childhood Funding Commission to establish funding goals and a funding mechanisms that provides equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care services. We believe the federal investment of Head Start and Early Head Start services compliment the work of the Commission and provide an important component to the overall Illinois early childhood system.

For more than 55 years, Head Start has been our country’s tangible commitment to the American Dream. Through authentic partnerships with families and within communities, Head Start programs deliver critical nutrition, health, and mental health services to children, while building a strong foundation for school readiness and love of learning. All the while, programs support families in goal-setting, increasing their educational and career attainment, and achieving financial stability. With research-backed outcomes that demonstrate success, Head Start has delivered on our country’s commitment to the American Dream for decades, nurturing individuals’ possibilities. We stand ready to partner with the Governor and his administration as the Early Childhood Funding Commission recommendations roll forward.

Beginning with its inception during the civil rights movement and the Great Society of the 1960s, Head Start has a history of succeeding—and ensuring families have the resources and tools they need to succeed—in times of crisis. As we face a raging pandemic, devastating economic destabilization, and systemic and historic racism, Head Start continues to stand by families. While critical health screenings and assessments for children are being missed across Illinois, children in Head Start remain up to date, getting the medical care they need to ensure prevention and intervention to mitigate more costly, harmful issues later in life. When families suffering from lost wages turn to Head Start, programs support parents in navigating unemployment insurance, all the while ensuring their children are receiving the meals, diapers, formula, and care they need. As instances of domestic abuse and substance use disorder rise across Illinois, while reports of child abuse and neglect have plummeted, Head Start stepped up, supporting and visiting our families at their homes, protected by PPE. While communities are struggling to overcome systemic racism and the pain it has caused far too many residents, Head Start has continued to be a beacon of equity, ensuring that all vulnerable children, regardless of circumstances at birth, are equipped with the opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

We commend you for tackling early childhood funding and the need to identify a more effective and efficient way to fund early childhood programs. The need is great and we support any movement to enhance early childhood services in Illinois. During the system and policy work ahead we believe it's important to be aware of the critical federal investment in Head Start and Early Head Start. The federal investment of Head Start and Early Head Start in Illinois is \$402,983,457.00 and we serve the most vulnerable/at risk children in every county across Illinois. Head Start/Early Head Start services are provided by a wide variety of community organizations (Community Action Agencies, Public Schools, Health Departments, Mental Health agencies, local governments, etc.) who offer a two-generation program, serving both the child and the family. At Head Start/Early Head Start we're committed not just to the children we teach but to their parents too. Each program is locally designed based on community needs and follow the most stringent standards, more so than any other early childhood program. Comprehensive services, including critical health services, mental health services, intentional work with families, school readiness goals, and a research based curricula and assessment, are provided by credentialed staff.

### **Quick Facts About Head Start in Illinois:**

- ✓ Over 31,000 children served in Head Start.
- ✓ Over 11,000 children served in Early Head Start.
- ✓ 2,320 classrooms.
- ✓ 74% have income below 100% of the federal poverty level.
- ✓ 9% receive public assistance such as TANF and SSI.
- ✓ 3% are foster care children.
- ✓ 6% are homeless.
- ✓ 11 % are children with disabilities.
- ✓ 249,992 home visits were conducted last school year.
- ✓ 10,731 Head Start/Early Head Start jobs and over 30% were former parents.

As we invest and grow equitable early childhood services within Illinois the need to protect our federal Head Start/Early Head Start investment is critical. Protecting these Federal investments requires them to be leveraged in a strategic manner to avoid loss of Federal dollars to our state and to specific communities as the Commission's recommendations are moved forward. Efforts to coordinate local planning and leverage resources up to now in Illinois have fallen short in assuring that Federal Head Start funds available to a community were not put at risk. As state investments have increased Head Start services have decreased due to over reliance on competition, inadequate regulation, and infrastructure to support local collaboration and planning. The Head Start/Early Head Start workforce and funding challenges faced by these agencies who are doing their work under great challenges due to funding shortfalls require multiple funding streams and partnerships. Addressing these challenges creates burdens for providers who have to meet both Federal and often redundant or conflicting state agency regulations in order to acquire and maintain adequate funding.

Together, with state and federal dollars, we can reach more children. Please remember that Head Start stands by, prepared to step up on behalf of our shared commitment to children and families.

We have a deep appreciation for the work you have accomplished thus far and to the critical role that early childhood plays in Illinois' recovery. The Head Start community and IHSA look forward to working with you to meet the challenges ahead of us.

Sincerely,

Illinois Head Start Association