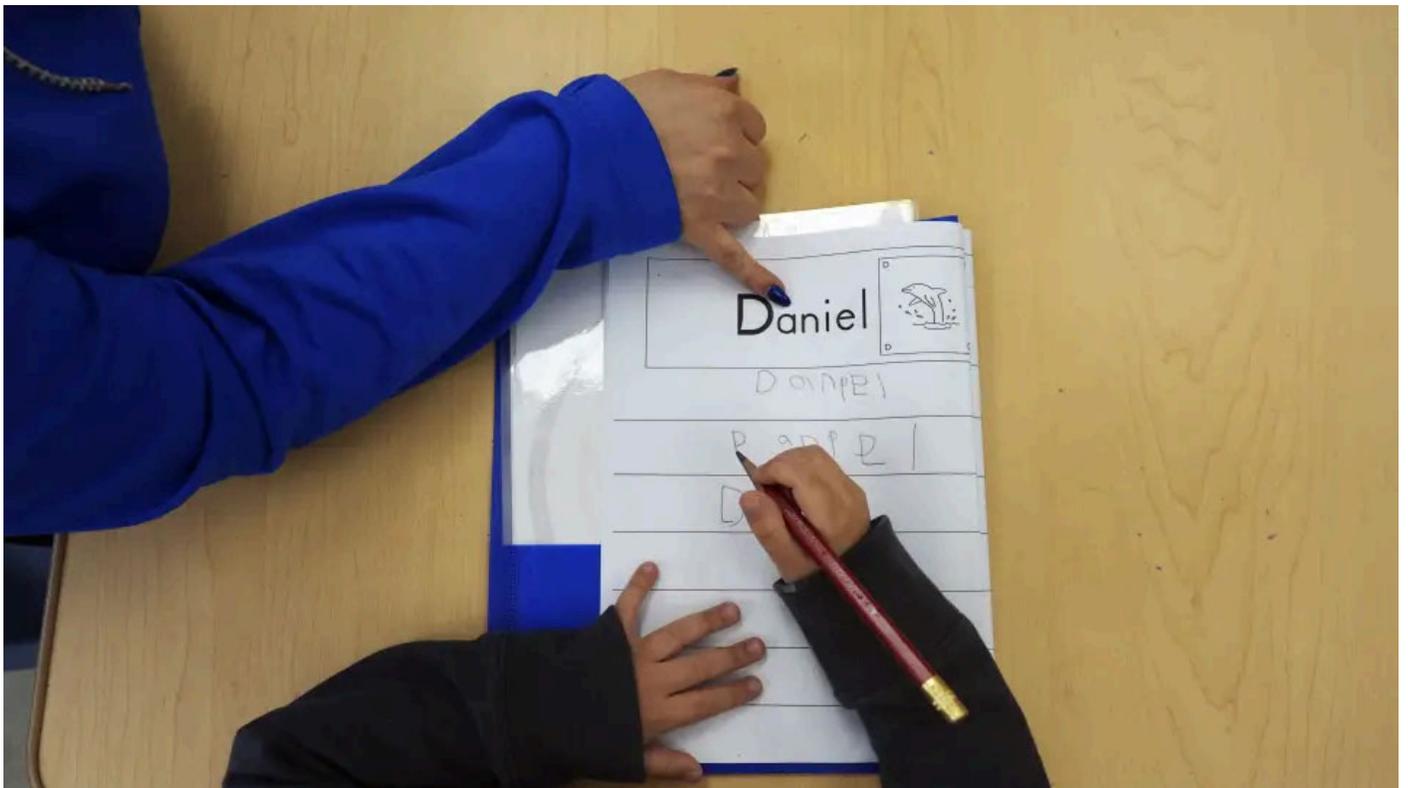


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With 'a few weeks' of funding from the state, almost all Mass. Head Start programs staying open

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A Head Start teaching assistant helps a student practice writing his name in this 2025 file photo in Miami.

Rebecca Blackwell/AP / AP



By **Hannah Reale**

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Most of Massachusetts' Head Start programs are afloat for now, even as funding for some runs out Nov. 1 under the prolonged government shutdown.

But at least one program in southeastern Massachusetts is temporarily closing its doors, furloughing over 200 staffers and leaving nearly 700 kids without a place to learn and eat.

“The 3- and 4-year-olds are really on the front line here in every respect,” John Carlson, who runs four Brockton-area centers through Self Help Inc., told GBH News. “We’re not trying to leave the parents out in the cold. But I guess the bottom line is, we’re doing the best we can under the circumstances.”

Head Start is a federally funded initiative that dates back 60 years. It’s designed to provide free early education — plus health care and meals — to the youngest children from the nation’s poorest families. The programs serve hundreds of thousands of kids each year.

Three key safety-net programs — Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for food, LIHEAP for fuel and heating assistance, and some Head Start facilities — were all set to lose funding starting Nov. 1 under the shutdown. Two federal court rulings issued Friday mean the Trump administration must fund SNAP **at least temporarily**. And with leftover funds from last year, Massachusetts residents who can’t pay heating bills can still get help in Massachusetts **for now**.

The funding loss is set to cause problems for more than 130 Head Start programs in dozens of states, affecting roughly 65,000 children and 22,000 staff per a breakdown **from the National Head Start Association**. Each program is making its own decisions on **just how long it can stay open**.

Massachusetts' Department of Early Education and Care announced Friday that it would be advancing grants to those facilities that were supposed to be slowly paid out into next summer. It’s still a small pool of money, designed as a stopgap to help the programs through the next few weeks.

“This is really a short-term bridge fix for these programs in the hopes that we can keep them open for a few weeks — keep the kids learning, keep the educators employed, keep their families going to work — while hopefully the federal government gets back to work,” Early Education and Care Commissioner Amy Kershaw told GBH News.

More than 11,000 children rely on Head Start programs in Massachusetts. Out of those 11,000, about 2,800 attend programs that are losing their federal funding on Nov. 1.

Program leaders worry the federal government won't pay back what their programs spend after their agreements with the government formally expire Nov. 1. And Carlson thinks it would put his program at risk to accept the state's money.

Kershaw said the department respects the business decisions each program has to make, while noting that they're “extremely concerned about the disruption for the children and families for the programs that may close.”

Some programs are taking smaller steps to cut costs. Starting next week, PACE, Inc., will put a pause on offering transportation to Head Start families, says CEO Pam Kuechler. PACE, Inc. cares for about 200 kids in the New Bedford area through Head Start.

“We're providing everything that's necessary to keep the program running,” Kuechler said. “We're going to watch to see where the trend goes ... with the hope that, when the government does reopen, we will have access to the funds that we should have received as of November 1.”

In Lowell, program heads say they're trying to stay open and keep everything running for their 550 Head Start students — while planning for several scenarios depending on when the government reopens.

“The impacts of [closing] would be — could be — catastrophic,” said Carl Howell, CEO of Community Teamwork, Inc. “We're working through contingency planning as we speak, trying to figure out how we can ensure classrooms stay open. And there's minimal impact to the hundreds of children that we serve through this

Howell's confident that his program can last through the end of November.

Six of the 28 Head Start programs in Massachusetts will lose federal funding on Nov. 1 as their agreements for their grants expire. If the government is still shut down a month from now, another three programs will lose their federal funding. Kershaw said that same state funding will be made available to those programs.

Diane Adame contributed reporting.



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