

Mass. Head Start programs face closures as government shutdown drags on

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BOSTON (WHDH) - As the federal government shutdown stretches on, thousands of children in Massachusetts could lose access to early childhood care if federal funding for

Six programs, including those in Lowell, New Bedford, and Western Massachusetts, were scheduled to receive their annual federal funds on November 1. If the shutdown continues, that money will not be disbursed.

The state is advancing grants to help affected programs stay afloat, but according to the Massachusetts Head Start Association (MHSA), Brockton's Self Help Head Start program is still slated to shut down on Monday. MHSA said the remaining five programs will stay open as long as they can.

"We made these funds available in advance to cover a few weeks of programs, but Brockton assessed there might be a risk, whereas other programs may see the opportunity within their own financial assessment to be able to stay open for a few more weeks," said Amy Kershaw, the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. "They cannot fill the gap caused by the government not stepping in with the committed funds."

Federal dollars make up at least 80 percent of each program's budget. Leaders in early childhood education are warning about learning setbacks if Head Start agencies are forced to close.

"Children out of care means learning environments will be disrupted," said Michelle Haimowitz, MHSA's Executive Director. "It's going to mean those parents are out of work or putting their children in unsafe care environments so that they can keep their jobs."

Head Start provides early learning for 10,000 young children across 28 agencies in Massachusetts, serving children from birth until the age of five. The program primarily supports low-income families, those experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care. It also provides nutrition, health, and mental health services to children and caregivers.

In New Bedford, PACE Head Start said it can only remain open for a few more weeks without federal funding. Starting Monday, the program will suspend transportation services, impacting 60 percent of enrolled children.

"That's going to have an impact on our children's attendance," said Jill Fox, Director of PACE Head Start. "It may pose some hardships for families getting their children to school."

In Lowell, Community Teamwork's Head Start program is increasing class sizes to reduce building space costs. The program is operating on a month to month basis, and said the air of uncertainty is weighing heavily on staff and families.

"When you realize that funding could dry up, it's very frightening for staff—will they have a

There's a lot of concern around what their child's care is going to look like and how it will impact their job."

With funding for food stamps also set to freeze, program leaders warn that closing more Head Start agencies would stretch families even thinner during the holiday season.

"All of us are very worried. We've never faced a shutdown that's lasted this long, happening when our funding is impacted," Fox said. "Going into November and December around the holidays, our families need the extra support because of those extra expenses in their budget."

Advocates for early childhood education are urging the federal government to reopen immediately to support families in need.

"The shutdown needs to end. We need federal funds to Head Start, and we need them now," said Haimowitz. "Programs cannot stay open indefinitely without federal funds. We need children in school, we need teachers employed, and we need parents at work."

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