

April 9, 2025

Public Witness Testimony of Jennifer Carroll
Assistant Director of Children's Services
Community Action Partnership of North Alabama (CAPNA)
1909 Central Parkway, Southwest, Decatur, Alabama, 35601

Submitted to:
Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations

Addressing:
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start
Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations

Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Jennifer Carroll, Assistant Director of Children's Services at the Community Action Partnership of North Alabama (CAPNA) in Decatur, Alabama. As you know, Head Start provides children from disadvantaged backgrounds with the opportunity to enter school ready to learn while also helping set their families on a path to achieving economic mobility and self-sufficiency. Thank you for this opportunity to share my perspective on the critical value and importance of Head Start and the need for an investment in Head Start of \$14.91 billion in Fiscal Year 2026, as recommended by the National Head Start Association (NHSA), to support the country's most vulnerable children, their families, and the communities in which they operate.

Head Start has effectively implemented a multi-generation "whole child, whole family" model. The children attending Head Start – those living in poverty, in foster care, or experiencing homelessness, the children of seasonal farm workers, American Indian and Alaska Native children, and others known to be at-risk due to life circumstances – benefit from comprehensive education, health, and nutrition services. And it's not just the children. Their parents and caregivers also benefit greatly from Head Start services, such as employment, housing, and educational support. In other words, Head Start is a lifeline for families seeking to achieve the American dream.

Before I share some additional background on the Head Start program in my community, CAPNA, let me discuss the benefits of the Head Start model – a comprehensive approach to prepare children and their families for success through four critical components: education, health, parental engagement and support, and local design.

Leaning on decades of science, Head Start assists children in building the brain connections and self-confidence necessary for success in kindergarten and beyond. Knowing that children must be healthy to succeed, Head Start ensures they receive physical and mental health services and necessary referrals, plus balanced meals and a nutritious snack daily. Respecting the choices and responsibilities parents have in the upbringing of their children, parents play a central role in the decisions about how each program spends money, what children do in their classrooms, and how

they work with community partners. Finally, acknowledging that each community has different strengths, resources, and challenges – and reflecting the unique federal to local funding of Head Start – each program is locally designed to reflect those unique traditions, priorities, and cultures.

The Head Start model has proven remarkably successful. Research shows that Head Start alumni are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in, and graduate from college; and are less likely to smoke or experience poor health, live in poverty, or need public assistance as an adult. And Head Start parents and caregivers, having benefited from goal-setting, parenting training, and experiencing real engagement, are more likely to join the workforce or stay employed, setting them and their families on a path of economic self-reliance.

In Fiscal Year 2024, Head Start served over 750,000 children and their families nationwide. In that time, Head Start staff – which total over a quarter million nationwide – conducted over 3.9 million home visits to families, ensured that over 685,000 children received preventative dental care, helped over 570,000 children stay up-to-date on early and periodic diagnostic and treatment screenings, and conducted over 390,000 behavioral screenings for newly enrolled children.

CAPNA's Head Start program is a fiscally responsible, pro-family, and pro-workforce solution that improves child and family outcomes, supports work, reduces dependency, and stimulates the local economy. We believe that Head Start is a smart, bipartisan investment that promotes work, strengthens families, and prepares children for lifelong success. With your continued support, we can ensure every child has a strong start and every parent has a positive pathway forward.

Last year, CAPNA served 1,515 families, 806 of which were led by single mothers. Our enrollment included 1,633 children – 1,275 in Head Start Preschool and 358 in Early Head Start. We also worked with 36 pregnant women. At least one parent in 875 of those families is currently employed, in job training, or enrolled in school. 220 of those parents gained employment, entered job training, or enrolled in school during the year. And 623 fathers actively participated in their child's development – strengthening family engagement.

In serving those children and families, CAPNA embraces all the components of the Head Start model I mentioned earlier – education, health, parental engagement and support, and local design. In the health component, for example, we utilize a curriculum that aligns well with Head Start's mission to promote healthy development in young children and their families. This evidence-informed nutrition and wellness program emphasizes hands-on experiences and family engagement – core components of Head Start's holistic approach.

This curriculum emphasizes using more fruits, vegetables, and other whole foods, helping to build lifelong healthy nutrition habits. By integrating the curriculum into our Head Start classrooms, CAPNA enhances children's food literacy, encourages adventurous eating, and supports the development of long-term healthy eating habits. The curriculum also empowers families with practical cooking, shopping, and nutrition education tools, reinforcing Head Start's goal of strengthening the caregiver-to-school connection and improving overall family well-being.

CAPNA has 426 Head Start employees and invested over \$32 million across 15 counties in North Alabama last year – over \$24 million in wages and benefits. CAPNA also partners with public school systems, Early Intervention, child care providers, private entities, and fellow nonprofit organizations to deliver high-quality, comprehensive services to our children, families, and communities. And our procurement activity directly supports over 130 local businesses, including food suppliers, caterers, maintenance and fuel vendors, mental health professionals, educational and school supply companies, facilities contractors, and local tradespeople.

Unlike some federal government grants or contracts, in the Head Start program, this economic impact at the local level is guaranteed. The grant funds awarded to CAPNA for our 39 Head Start centers are all spent in the 15 counties we serve in North Alabama. Imagine this economic impact being repeated in counties served by the other 17,672 Head Start centers across the country.

But I wouldn't be seated before you today if everything was perfect. While CAPNA, all the other Head Start grant recipients, the children in our programs, their families, and the communities we serve are all deeply grateful and appreciative of the funds Congress has appropriated to Head Start, I am here to detail our request for funding in Fiscal Year 2026.

The workforce crisis that has challenged Head Start programs nationwide is stabilizing. A survey, conducted by the National Head Start Association in November 2024, found nine percent of staff positions currently vacant, down from 19% in February 2023. Nonetheless, these workforce improvements remain precarious. Low compensation remains the primary reason for staff vacancies, forcing programs to balance salary improvements with cuts elsewhere. A lack of staff closes some classrooms, while others are open but just barely – a sick teacher can mean the difference between a classroom being open or closed, and children and families having the care and education they are counting on. A lack of qualified job candidates to fill vacancies places current staff under greater stress.

While our workforce situation has markedly improved, with early childhood education ranking in the bottom 10% of all professions in terms of compensation, it remains difficult to recruit and retain staff. With that in mind, we are recommending a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) of 3.2% for Head Start in Fiscal Year 2026. This is our top priority. I am going to discuss our request to fund other demonstrated needs but, since this COLA would equal \$390 million in this difficult budget year, I want to be clear that this is most critical to our programs and to the children, families, and communities we serve.

The vast majority of Head Start grant funds go to staff salaries and benefits – although those benefits are often quite limited. Quality Improvement Funds are statutorily designated to allow programs to address critical local needs as identified by those programs in partnership with the Office of Head Start. Based on demonstrated need, they can be used for items such as enhancing mental health services for children, families, and staff, lead abatement, and providing the training necessary for staff to support and individualize services to children with special needs, including those who have experienced opioid addiction or adverse childhood experiences. We recommend additional Quality Improvement Funds in Fiscal Year 2026 to allow programs to address critical local needs.

The percentage of teachers in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) programs with the access and resources to receive their bachelor's degree lags significantly behind Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees nationwide. The Tribal Colleges and Universities–Head Start Partnership Program helps expand the number of teachers from AI/AN communities to address the growing need for Head Start services, and we recommend additional funding in Fiscal Year 2026 to expand the program.

While some programs are struggling to hire staff and reopen temporarily closed classrooms, many Head Start programs are fully staffed and completely open, but with hundreds of children on wait lists. That's because Head Start serves just a fraction of those eligible – Head Start reaches only 26% and Early Head Start reaches only 13% of eligible children. At CAPNA, for example, we have a waitlist of over 1,300 eligible children – 725 for Head Start and 594 for Early Head Start – indicating significant demand for the services we offer, far exceeding what we can provide. Nationwide, the waitlist is estimated to exceed 170,000. Many fully-staffed, fully-enrolled programs have lengthy waitlists and are looking to expand. Indeed, fewer than 15% of programs that applied for Head Start expansion grants in 2024 received funding, again demonstrating that a significant need for expansion remains.

To provide a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment for children and staff some aging Head Start facilities and infrastructure need federal investment for high-quality repairs and improvements. In its Fiscal Year 2015 Head Start Facilities Report, the Office of Head Start projected that “7,857 centers will need to be rebuilt, renovated, or undergo outstanding maintenance and repair at a cost of \$3,839,941,250” With inflation having increased that cost to an estimated nearly \$5 billion, Head Start programs need funding beyond what they receive in normal Head Start grants to repair, renovate, rebuild, or replace facilities.

As I noted earlier NHSA recommends, and CAPNA endorses, Fiscal Year 2026 funding of \$14.91 billion for Head Start. This investment would, as outlined above, provide a cost of living adjustment; allow programs to address critical local needs; and expand recruitment and development of staff for AI/AN programs. In addition, it would fund the demonstrated need for expansion of Head Start and facilities improvement through separate competitive grant programs to be administered by the Office of Head Start. But, again, a 3.2% COLA – requiring a funding increase of \$390 million – is the most critical need and our primary request for Head Start in Fiscal Year 2026 on behalf of the children, families, and communities we serve.

Since its inception, every President and Congress, regardless of party, has committed to the vulnerable children and families Head Start assists because Head Start is proven to get results. Putting children and families on the path to success in school, in work, and in life will undoubtedly brighten the future of our nation.

As you evaluate Fiscal Year 2026 funding requests, I hope you will make an immediate and significant investment in Head Start so that we can continue to serve the children and their families who need it most, ultimately leading to greater prosperity for future generations. Thank you for your consideration of this critical request.