



## Congressional Office Meeting Talking Points

**Note: Your most important goal is to establish a relationship that will allow you to share additional information and encourage the Congressional office to reach out to you with questions in the future. Sharing information is important, but building the relationship is even more important. Relationship-building is often most successful when it takes place through a conversation that does not feel scripted. If you need these talking points in front of you, you are probably trying to squeeze too much into the discussion! You can always introduce a topic and you – or the DC team – can follow up with additional, detailed information.**

- **Explain what Head Start is:**
  - Education and early learning for children helps children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed! Explain what education programming looks like
  - Head Start allows thousands of parents to go to work every day and provides quality child care– often the only licensed program in many rural communities.
  - Science shows nutrition, health services are needed for children to be able to learn and grow - give examples of what that means in your program
  - Research shows family services that stabilize families, help parents get education, training, jobs are also critical for children’s development, learning, and later success in school - give examples of what that means in your program
  - Flexibility to adapt programs to family needs
  - Locally-designed to meet the needs of the community - Shared governance and decision making through parent and community input as members of the Policy Council
  - (Other initiatives you are proud of: fatherhood programs, nutrition initiatives, employment/job training/ apprenticeships, community partnerships)
  
- **Statistical information about your program**
  - Age of children you serve
  - Number of children you serve
  - Number of locations
  - Number of classrooms
  - Amount of federal funding brought to your community through Head Start grants
  - Importance of Head Start for working parents, economy
  
- **Head Start effectiveness**
  - How does your program show kids are arriving at kindergarten ready to succeed (or transitioning to Head Start from EHS ready to succeed)? (If you have any local anecdotes or statistics – such as facts about kindergarten readiness of your Head Start graduates compared to peer children who did not enroll in Head Start – share them.
  - Studies show that children who attend Head Start arrive at kindergarten better prepared to learn and succeed than their peers who weren’t able to go to Head Start, including a 7 - 13% rate of return on investments due to:

- Improved educational and career achievements;
- Better health outcomes;
- Reduced need for special education services; and
- Reduced involvement in the criminal justice system

## **Current Head Start Challenges**

*(Choose 2-3 that are the most significant for your program, and be ready to share stories or examples illustrating the challenges. Don't try to go through the whole laundry list – quality of the discussion, engaging and ensuring that the Congressional office appreciates the difficulties is more helpful than quantity and running through the whole list! As program staff give examples that are relevant to the program, your association leadership can offer additional examples from other programs in the Congressional district.)*

- **Funding:**
  - Head Start provides valuable early learning, nutrition, and health screenings to more than 28,000 IL children/families living in poverty and is both pro-work and pro-family. [Optional - include additional talking points about the impact of Head Start programs in your community]
  - We appreciate that the House Appropriations Committee's fiscal year 2026 proposal maintains funding for Head Start but it falls short of the Senate Appropriations Committee's proposal that includes an \$85 million increase over fiscal year 2025.
  - Without increased investments, programs face challenges to sustaining quality services for children and families. As the House and Senate negotiate the FY26 spending package, we urge Members of Congress to invest in programs like Head Start to ensure families and children have the opportunity to learn and thrive.
  - *Re: Government Shutdown:* Historically, there has been no funding disruption for grants that were already awarded during government shutdowns. However, we are concerned about continued access to Head Start funds should a government shutdown occur if the FY26 spending package is not passed by September 30. Earlier this year, many Head Start programs faced significant uncertainties and delays in accessing approved federal grant funds. We hope that you will be a strong voice for Head Start during this important time and ensure Head Start programs are able to remain open and able to access funding to provide critical services to children and families.
  
- **Staffing:** Head Start grants have not kept up with cost pressures, particularly the need to pay staff salaries that are competitive with what is paid by retail jobs or other employers. Everything from the cost of supplies to health insurance is increasing, and with flat funding that means we have to cut children to keep up. When we can't pay competitive wages to retain teachers, we have to close classrooms and that means children miss out and parents are scrambling for child care.

- **Delays in decision-making:**
  - REGIONAL OFFICE CLOSED: Head Start programs in IL used to be overseen, monitored and supported by a regional office in Chicago. Those staff knew our programs well, understood details of how programs in our communities operate, and were able to review requests and make decisions efficiently.
  - When the regional offices closed and staffing in the Office of Head Start was cut in half, the remaining regional offices were left to do more than twice the work. The regional offices are understaffed for the number and size of programs they support, is not familiar with our specific program details, and often cannot respond to questions or make decisions timely. (Give examples of how that has hurt your program or put it in jeopardy. For example, have you had a delayed approval of a change of scope application?)
  
- **Notice of award delays:**
  - Head Start is a five-year award, but the grant has to be renewed in each year as appropriations are made. Typically, grantees receive notice that the grant will renew about two months ahead of the start date. In the absence of assigned program specialists from April – July, some programs received no communications regarding their grant applications until days before the start date - many as late as the night before the grant was supposed to start. Due to the WARN Act and some union contracts, many programs have had to issue pink slips when the grant renewal notice was delayed. This instability makes it even more difficult for Head Start to hire and retain staff, keep classrooms open, and maintain full enrollment.

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#### **Other Resources:**

- See if your Member of Congress has expressed public support for Head Start (Spring 2025, compiled by the First Five Years Fund):
  - [Republican quotes of support for Head Start](#)
  - [Democratic quotes of support for Head Start](#)
- The One Big Beautiful Bill Act known as H.R. 1 includes historic cuts to health care and food assistance that would affect children and families including those who may be served by Head Start programs. It also would have significant impact on state budgets. In case helpful in engagements with Members of Congress on the issue, see below resource (from the Alliance for Early Success):
  - [The OBBB Act: State Level Advocacy Resources and Responses](#)