



ADVOCACY TOOLKIT



FOR PROGRAM & STAFF

Head Start changes lives – and real stories from programs and staff are the most powerful way to show why it matters.

When you speak up, decision makers listen. This toolkit is designed to make speaking up easier for everyone working in a Head Start or Early Head Start program.

How to Use This Toolkit

Follow your program's policy and stay compliant. Every voice counts, even if you don't know everything about federal policies.

Use the tools that feel most helpful to you! This toolkit includes:

- Fill-in-the-blank templates
- Quick ways to speak up
- Options for sharing online or in person

You already make a difference. Use your voice to make an even bigger one.

ADVOCACY & LOBBYING

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING?



Advocacy is the act of supporting a cause or proposal

- Sharing your story
- Raising awareness
- Educating others - like your community or lawmakers about why Head Start matters.



Lobbying is attempting to influence a legislator about specific legislation or funding requests.

- Asking for a yes/no vote
- Talking about specific laws or funding



These are educational, personal, and awareness-raising actions that do not ask for a specific vote or funding amount:

- A parent shares how Head Start helped their child.
- A teacher posts on social media about their classroom.
- A director gives a tour and talks about the program.
- A staff member encourages families to tell their stories.



These are actions that support or oppose specific legislation or funding decisions:

- Asking a lawmaker to vote for a Head Start bill.
- Opposing a bill that cuts early childhood funding.
- Testifying for a specific funding amount.
- Calling Congress to support a reauthorization bill.

❓ Can I use Head Start funds to lobby?.

✗ No. You can't use Head Start money to ask for votes, funding, or contracts at the state or federal level.

❓ Can I use private donations to lobby?

✓ Yes. You can use fundraising dollars to pay for lobbying.

❓ Can I use Head Start funds to advocate?

✓ Yes. Advocacy is allowed. You can educate, inform, and tell the Head Start story.

❓ What can I do on the clock?

✓ Educate legislators; Share program impact; Speak to the big picture; Connect with hearts and minds; Just don't ask for a vote or money

❓ What about off the clock?

✓ Yes, you can lobby—on your own time. Just make sure - You're not on the clock; You don't use work email; You don't charge your time to federal funds

❓ Can other nonprofits use our space for nonpartisan voter registration?

✓ Yes. That's allowed by law.

❓ Can I testify at a public hearing with Head Start funds?

✓ Yes. If you're invited to speak, it's allowed—just make sure to get the invite from the committee.

Center Directors

- Share information with staff and parents
- Initiate site visits
- Reach out to government officials and teachers
- Lobby or fund raise for lobbying, if possible

Teachers, Home Visitors, etc.

- Share information with legislators
- Include officials in programmed communication lists
- Tell their stories

Parents/Policy Council

- Call, write and post on social media to inform officials about their lives
- Set up a volunteer advocacy committee (But do not solicit lobbying at Policy Council meetings)

SUPPORT HEAD START

WE NEED YOUR VOICE NOW

Decisions are being made in Washington that could determine whether Head Start continues serving children and families across Illinois.

What is Head Start?

Head Start is a community-based, comprehensive federal early childhood program that promotes the school readiness of children ages birth to five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social and emotional development and supporting families in their self-sufficiency goals.

What Does Head Start Do?

Head Start provides more than 28,000 Illinois children with early learning, health, and nutrition screenings. Provide more than 26,000 families with support services in all 102 Illinois counties.

Head Start employs almost 9,000 Illinoisans serving these children and families.



28,000+
Children Served



26,000+
Families Supported



9,000+
Illinois Jobs

Smart Investment, Strong Returns

For every \$1 invested in Head Start, taxpayers see up to a \$9 return; it greatly improves the likelihood of financial self-sufficiency in adulthood (UCLA Research Brief).

Creates Local Jobs, Stimulates Economies

Funds go straight to communities to support local agencies and staff who understand their children, families & communities.

Better Start, Better Outcomes, Long Term Gains

Head Start children are more likely to graduate, less likely to be held back in school, and more likely to avoid crime - good for families and for the United States!

Stronger Families & Communities

Head Start helps families build strong foundations by supporting children's development and empowering parents to pursue work, education, and stability.

Stronger Families = Stronger Communities!

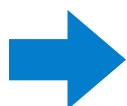
SUPPORT HEAD START

WHAT WE CAN DO TOGETHER

SPEAK UP

Share why Head Start matters to your community. Your story can help inform decision-makers about the real-life impact of these services.

Scan any one or better yet, all of the QR Codes to send a message



NATIONAL
HEAD START
ASSOCIATION



FIRST FIVE
YEARS FUND



CHILD CARE
AWARE

SIGN YOUR NAME



Are you a Head Start parent or alumni? You can share your story to help show why Head Start matters. Scan the QR Code to participate.

GIVE A DOLLAR

Support the Illinois Head Start Association Dollar per Child campaign so they can continue to lead the charge to Protect Head Start!



GET INVOLVED LOCALLY



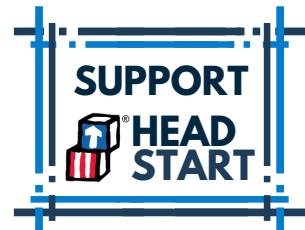
Contact your local Head Start program and ask how you can help. Scan the QR Code and find your nearest Head Start location.



Sign up for IHSA Newsletter -
<https://forms.gle/GYBnLEgrP3EJFjt7>

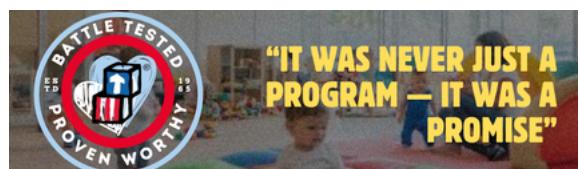
SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

Post a Support Head Start yard or window sign to raise awareness about the program.



Like and follow Illinois Head Start Association on Facebook and Instagram.

Post the Head Start profile picture and banner on your social media pages. Use the hashtag #SupportHeadStart.



Illinois Head Start Association

4.2025



TEMPLATES

FOR REACHING OUT TO ELECTED OFFICIALS, PARTNERS, AND MEDIA





TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL – PROGRAM INTRODUCTION & VISIT INVITE

Subject: Visit [Program Name] – See Head Start in Action

Dear [Representative/Senator/Mayor Last Name],

My name is [Your Name], and I work at [Program Name], a Head Start program serving children and families here in [City/County]. We help families build a strong foundation through early learning, health screenings, and support services from pregnancy through age five.

Right now, we serve [Number] children and families in your district and employ [Number] local staff. We'd love to invite you to visit our program—either in person or virtually—to see what Head Start looks like in our community.

Our doors are open, and we're proud to show the good work happening every day. Please let us know if you'd like to schedule a visit.

Thank you for all you do to support children and families.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Program Name]
[Phone/Email]



TO CONGRESS MEMBERS: INTRODUCTION + PROGRAM IMPACT

Subject: Head Start in [District/Community] – Local Impact

Dear [Representative/Senator Last Name],

My name is [Your Name], and I'm with [Program Name], a Head Start and/or Early Head Start program serving children and families in [Community/County]. I'm reaching out to share how our program is helping children get ready for school and life—while supporting families and building stronger communities.

Each year, we serve [Number] children and families, employ [Number] local staff, and partner with [Local Schools/Organizations] to deliver comprehensive early learning, health, and family support services.

We know you hear from many organizations—but we hope you'll keep Head Start on your radar. The need in our community is real, and the results are clear. We're proud of our work and grateful for the support that makes it possible.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if you'd like more information about our program or its impact.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Program Name]
[City, State, ZIP]
[Email / Phone]



TO A CONGRESS MEMBERS: INVITATION TO VISIT PROGRAM

Subject: You're Invited – Come See Head Start in Action

Dear [Senator/Representative Last Name],

As a leader at [Program Name] in [City/County], I'd like to invite you to visit our Head Start program to see firsthand how we serve children and families in your district.

We currently serve [Number] families and employ [Number] dedicated early childhood professionals. On any given day, you'll see joyful learning, family engagement, and health services in action—all built around each child's development and each family's goals.

A short visit could be in person or virtual—whatever works best for your schedule. We would be honored to host you.

Thank you for your service and your commitment to Illinois families.

Warm regards,
[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Program Name]
[Phone / Email]



TO A CONGRESS MEMBERS: FOLLOW-UP OR THANK YOU AFTER CONGRESSIONAL VISIT OR MEETING

Subject: Thank You for Supporting Head Start

Dear *[Senator/Representative Last Name]*,

Thank you for taking the time to *[visit our program / meet with us / hear from families]* at *[Program Name]*. Your interest and support mean a great deal to our staff, our families, and our community.

As you saw during your visit, Head Start is about more than early education. It's about whole-child, whole-family support—from health screenings and nutrition to parent engagement and community connection.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if we can be a resource or provide additional information in the future. We look forward to staying in touch.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Program Name]
[City, ZIP]
[Email / Phone]



TO A LOCAL NEWSPAPER OR MEDIA OUTLET – SHARE THE IMPACT

Subject: Local Program Highlight – Head Start Works

To the Editor,

I'm writing to share the impact of our local Head Start program here in *[Community Name]*. At *[Program Name]*, we serve *[Number]* children and families and employ *[Number]* staff—all working to support early learning, health, and family success.

Head Start makes a difference every day. We see children grow in confidence, families get the support they need, and staff build lasting relationships in the community.

We'd love to see more stories about programs like ours that help young children and families thrive. If you'd like to learn more, we're happy to share facts, stories, and even host a visit.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Program Name]



TO A COMMUNITY PARTNER OR SCHOOL – STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONSHIP

Subject: Thank You for Partnering with Head Start

Hi *[Name or Title]*,

I just wanted to say thank you for partnering with *[Program Name]*. Whether we've worked together on transition planning, shared training, referrals, or something else—you've been a valuable part of our efforts to support families in *[Community Name]*.

As a Head Start program, we serve *[Number]* families and rely on strong partnerships to meet their needs. If there's anything we can do to strengthen our collaboration, we're always open to ideas.

Looking forward to staying connected.

Best,

*[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Program Name]*



FILL-IN-THE-BLANK STORY LETTER – HEAD START STAFF

“Why I Work in Head Start”

Dear [Senator/Representative Last Name],

My name is _____ and I work as a _____
(e.g., teacher, family advocate, home visitor) at _____
(program name).

I've worked in Head Start for _____ years, and I do this work because:

(Example: “I believe every child deserves a strong start,” or “I see the impact on families every day.”)

One moment I'll never forget was when:

(Example: A family made progress, a child hit a milestone, a parent got a job, etc.)

Our program supports about _____ children and families in [City/County]. We provide more than early learning—we help connect families to health care, food, housing, and resources that set them up for long-term success.

I hope you'll continue to support Head Start. It matters—to the families we serve, and to those of us doing this work every day.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Program Name]
[City / ZIP]



MAKE THE CALL: HEAD START ADVOCACY PHONE SCRIPT

Sometimes the fastest way to make your voice heard is simply by picking up the phone. A brief, well-focused call can leave a lasting impression on your elected officials. Use the script in the next page to guide your conversation.

Keep it short, keep it real, and keep it polite. Phone calls may take just a few minutes, but they're a powerful way to show lawmakers that Head Start matters in our communities.

BEFORE YOU CALL

- Find the correct office number for your U.S. Representative or Senator (or local official).
- Have a pen and paper (or your letter template) ready.
- Write down a one-sentence story or fact you'll share.

QUICK TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL CALL

- Keep it under 2 minutes.
- Speak clearly and smile—it comes through on the phone. Use your own words to keep it natural.
- Write down the staffer's name who you spoke with for follow-up.
- Send a thank-you email later if you get their contact info.
- Feel free to tailor this script for events (like Advocacy Day) or one-off calls. Every call helps keep Head Start visible—and valued.



MAKE THE CALL: HEAD START ADVOCACY PHONE SCRIPT

1. GREETING & INTRODUCTION

You: *"Hello, my name is [Your Name], and I'm a [Head Start staff member] in [City or District]. May I please speak with the person who handles early childhood or education policy?"*

(If you reach voicemail, leave a brief message with your name and number and say you'll follow up by email. If transferred or put on hold, repeat your intro when the staffer answers.)

2. STATE YOUR PURPOSE

You: *"I'm calling today because I'd like to share how Head Start is serving families in our community and offer to be a resource on early childhood programs."*

3. SHARE YOUR QUICK STORY OR KEY FACT

You: *"Here's one example of why Head Start matters to me: [Briefly share your 1-2 sentence personal story or fact, e.g. "At [Program Name], we serve [Number] children and families each year. Here's one story that shows what we do: 'Last month, we helped [Family or Child First Name] get connected to health services they couldn't otherwise access. That support helped their child stay healthy and focus on learning."]*"

4. THE ASK

You: *"Could you please share these stories and program details with [Representative/Senator Last Name] so they're aware of the real work happening locally? I'm also happy to send a brief program fact sheet for your office"*

(Be specific: one clear, single ask. ● Reminder: Do not ask for specific funding levels or support for a particular bill—this call is about informing, not lobbying.)

5. OFFER TO FOLLOW UP

You: *"I'm happy to send more information or invite you to visit our Head Start program here in [City]. What's the best email address to reach [Representative/Senator Last Name]'s office?"*

6. THANK YOU & CLOSE

You: *"Thank you for your time today. I really appreciate anything [Representative/Senator Last Name] can do to support Head Start. Have a great day!"*



SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS TO SHARE

Head Start doesn't need to shout—it just needs to be seen. These share-ready campaigns let you tell the truth about Head Start with bold, simple visuals and strong messages.





SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS TO SHARE

Head Start doesn't need to shout—it just needs to be seen.

These share-ready campaigns let you tell the truth about Head Start with bold, simple visuals and strong messages.

Celebrate the legacy. Share the impact. Speak the truth. Head Start isn't a trend. It's a promise that's stood the test of time—and it works.

IHSA's Social Card series campaigns includes ready-to-share cards that highlight why Head Start matters and how it changes lives. Staff, parents, and community supporters can all use them to speak up online.

How to Use the Cards

- Download any image that speaks to you.
- Post it with your own story or use one of the suggested sample captions provided.
- Tag your elected officials or program page.
- Use these hashtags: #BattleTestedProvenWorthy #HeadStartWorks #IHSAAdvocates

As a staff member:

"I've seen the difference Head Start makes every day. These cards help explain what words can't. #HeadStartWorks"





🛡 BATTLE TESTED – PROVEN WORTHY

This campaign reminds the public—and decision-makers—that Head Start has always delivered. It's not new. It's not political. It's proven.

- Visuals showing Head Start's long-term outcomes
- Posts that explain what Head Start actually does
- Use it to celebrate, educate, and push back against misinformation

🛠 "WHAT HEAD START REALLY DOES..."

Countering Misinformation: Know the Facts – These are calm, clear, fact-checked posts to help set the record straight—especially in response to misleading claims.

Use these cards to correct myths and highlight facts about:

- What Head Start is (and isn't)
- Who Head Start serves
- How it's funded
- What the outcomes really are

❤️ "MY HEAD START STORY"

This is our most powerful tool: real people sharing real stories. Parents, staff, alumni—anyone whose life has been shaped by Head Start can tell their story. Stories are collected in:

- Fill-in-the-blank templates
- Social post prompts

Tips for Sharing

- Use a campaign hashtag
- Tag your local officials, program, or IHSA
- Keep it real and keep it brief—your voice matters
- Share one card, one quote, or one photo at a time
- Hashtags: #HeadStartWorks #SupportHeadStart #HeadStartMatters

SCAN TO BROWSE AND DOWNLOAD SOCIAL MEDIA CARDS. USE THEM TO SPEAK UP, SHARE YOUR STORY, AND SHOW WHAT HEAD START REALLY DOES.



TOOLKIT DISCLAIMER & PRIVACY

Purpose & Use

These resources are provided by the Illinois Head Start Association for informational and educational purposes only. They are not legal or professional advice. Users should adapt templates, materials, and scripts to their own needs and consult legal or compliance experts if necessary.

Nonpartisan Guidance

All materials are designed for informing and educating—not lobbying. Do not use these resources to endorse, oppose, or request specific funding levels for legislation or candidates. Stick to sharing factual program details and personal stories.

Privacy & Confidentiality

Protect staff and family privacy. Do not include sensitive personal data (full names, contact information, medical or financial details) without explicit permission. When sharing program outcomes or anecdotes, keep identifiers to a minimum or use anonymized examples.

Adapt & Brand

Feel free to customize templates with your program's logo, local data, and preferred wording. Ensure core messages remain accurate, respectful, and nonpartisan.

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