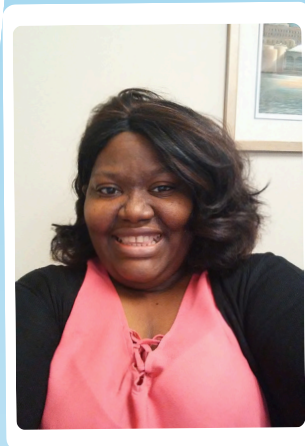


HEAD START



Stories from Wisconsin providers, educators and parents demonstrate the educational and developmental support Head Start provides for working families and communities



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HEAD START

Educational and Developmental Support for Working Families and Communities

Across the country, too many working parents are faced with an impossible choice: Put the majority of their paycheck toward child care, or leave the workforce entirely. Head Start tackles this challenge head on, providing a safe, healthy environment for young kids to develop and allowing parents to participate in the workforce.

In Wisconsin, Head Start serves over 16,000 families and employs over 4,300 people, making it among the top 100 employers in the Badger State. Head Start is a vital support system for working families and communities. Without it, thousands of parents would have to make difficult decisions between work and caring for their families.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration unexpectedly announced a temporary freeze on funding for Head Start programs nationwide, which put centers in incredibly difficult financial circumstances. Though Head Start grants are awarded on an annual basis, the funding remains in a payment management system, and directors have to draw down funds in real time throughout the year. When funding is unexpectedly frozen, it is impossible for directors to draw down funds to pay bills and their staff.

To make matters even more difficult, at the beginning of April the Trump Administration announced that regional Head Start offices in major cities across the country would be closing. This included the Chicago office, which supports Head Start programs in Wisconsin by answering programmatic questions, providing support and helping to resolve issues and emergencies. Additionally, regional offices assist with grant renewals, meaning there are many centers waiting in limbo to receive an update on their funding.

As we approach the 60th anniversary of Head Start, the Campaign for a Family Friendly Economy is sharing stories of parents and providers who have benefited from Head Start. These stories emphasize the need for the Trump administration and Republicans in Congress to ensure Head Start is fully funded and vital staff at regional offices are reinstated.



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JEN BAILEY

Twenty five years ago, when **Jen Bailey** graduated with a masters degree in social work, she took a job as a home visitor at an Early Head Start program in Wisconsin. Initially, she thought it would be a flexible job for a few years while she raised her own children. Little did Jen know that this would be the beginning of a passionate, fulfilling career.

“Once I got into the program and really saw the way Head Start supports families and the impact on childhood development, I ‘drank the Kool-Aid’ as they say, and became deeply invested,” Jen said.

Jen has spent all of her professional career working in some aspect with Head Start programs. Today, Jen serves as the executive director of Reach Dane, a child care center that provides Head Start and Early Head Start services to underserved families in Dane and Green counties in Wisconsin. Across their programs, Reach Dane serves approximately 800 children and employs 250 staff, making Reach Dane a critical part of the local and state economy.



UNCHARTED TERRITORY: FEDERAL FUNDING FROZEN

In the nine years that Jen has served as the executive director of Reach Dane, she’s never had an issue receiving funding from the federal government. That changed earlier this year when the Trump administration announced a temporary freeze of Head Start funding. Jen describes herself as a contingency planner, and especially in the years since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she *thought* she had planned for all possible scenarios.

“That experience changed forever the security I felt in our relationship with our federal Head Start program,” Jen said. “When you have a notice of an award that’s given to you with funding that has been allocated to your agency, awarded and approved by Congress, I never imagined that it was possible to literally turn off that money in the night.”

On the morning of the freeze, Jen received no official communication from the regional or federal Head Start agencies; she only received text messages from fellow Head Start directors who were having difficulty accessing funds. It quickly became clear that this was a national problem.

The freeze fell on a payroll week for Reach Dane, and since Jen had not yet submitted her request for that funding to be drawn down, she could not access the funds that had been allocated to the center. Jen ended up using a line of credit she had set up for emergencies through the bank to pay her staff.

Though a federal court ultimately intervened and lifted the freeze, Head Start programs were still unable to access funds for weeks. During this period, Jen also had to take a large amount of money out of her organization’s reserves.

“Had our reserve funding not been available, we would have needed to pause operations,” Jen said.

“*That experience changed forever the security I felt in our relationship with our federal Head Start program.*”



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REGIONAL OFFICE CLOSING

To make matters more uncertain, the closure of the Chicago regional office means Jen no longer has access to direct support for emergencies, grant renewals, or any other questions. Jen says that for new directors especially, the regional offices are critical for navigating a maze of regulations that is not always intuitive.

“The loss is devastating, particularly for new directors who need that ongoing support,” Jen said.

Reach Dane is also due to receive the second half of its annual funding in June. If this funding doesn't come on time, Jen anticipates it will be challenging to contact anyone as she has heard zero communication from the federal Head Start agency since the regional office closed.

“Not receiving the remaining grant dollars would be a very, very challenging situation for Reach Dane,” Jen emphasized. “Our Head Start base grant is our largest funding source and funds the wages for most of our staff.”



LOOKING AHEAD

After all of this uncertainty, Jen is concerned that federal funding for programs like hers is in jeopardy. Federal funding for Head Start contributes between 75 and 80 percent of Reach Dane's budget, and Jen is already planning for what she describes as a “patchwork quilt” of funding sources from the state and local governments, donors, and other grant sources in case that funding disappears. But funding for organizations like Reach Dane should be predictable and not something that needs to be sewn together.

“*Our parents have enough stress as it is. You can imagine the fear of not knowing if your child's child care center is going to be open.*”

Jen says that providers, teachers and parents have earned the predictability that Head Start programs deliver in their communities, and calls on the Trump administration and Wisconsin's Congressional delegation to leave funding for Head Start intact.

“Head Start is a huge investment in the future of our country,” she said. “The impact in the long run on having a healthy workforce and children who are succeeding in school – it's one of the best returns on investment that you can make. Our representatives need to leave the program intact.”



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CHARA TAYLOR

Chara Taylor has personal experience with nearly all aspects of Head Start programs. Chara attended Head Start as a kid, and four of her five children have gone through Head Start programs.



In 2012, Chara and her family moved from Chicago to Madison, and two years later, they began experiencing homelessness. Chara was connected with a local nonprofit, which helped her family find stable housing and receive information about programs they were eligible for. At the time, her three youngest kids were 1, 3 and 4 years old, and all would attend Head Start programs through Reach Dane over the next several years.

Chara's 3- and 4-year-old sons started at Reach Dane at the same time, and since they are so close in age, they were able to begin in the same classroom. This was especially helpful for her 3-year-old son, who at the time did not speak. After enrolling in Reach Dane, Chara was introduced to a social worker who helped put together the right plan for her son, and he soon began to blossom.

"My son went from not speaking to reading within six to seven months," Chara said. And though Chara would read with him at home a lot as well, Head Start certainly contributed to his development.

A few years later, when Chara's youngest daughter was old enough to attend child care at 3 years old, she was also in a Head Start program through Reach Dane. Chara says Reach Dane gave her youngest three kids the benefit of an extra year of education, preparing them to enter pre-kindergarten.

“*Head Start is a really good on-ramp into education, but it's not just day care,” Chara emphasized. “The kids are actually learning; there's a very serious educational component that is necessary for kids – especially children from financially disadvantaged families.”*

RE-ENTERING THE WORKFORCE

When Chara and her husband had children, they decided Chara would stay home to raise their kids during their early, formative years. Because of Reach Dane, Chara was able to begin her job search earlier than expected. Chara had been out of the workforce for nearly five years and she says it definitely would have been more difficult for her to find work if her gap in employment was closer to the six or seven years as she had initially planned.



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“Without having my kids in Head Start, it definitely would have made re-entering the workforce and pursuing a career more difficult. After being out of the workforce for a while, it is a tough transition coming back, and you almost have to find a company who is willing to overlook that gap when I was raising kids.”

Chara also noted that Reach Dane provided her family with the security of knowing her kids were in a safe place when she was working.

“Being able to find someone or somewhere we could trust with our children – at a stage in life when they cannot necessarily speak for themselves, was super important to me,” Chara said. “I was able to get back to work a little earlier because of the support system and program I trusted and believed in at Reach Dane.”

“MIND FOR SERVICE”

Beyond the benefit her kids received through Head Start, Chara says that she grew personally and professionally. Reach Dane has a Head Start Policy Council, which is made up of the parents of kids enrolled in programs, and she served on this while her kids were enrolled through Reach Dane. It was on this governing body that Chara says she “got the mind for service” and has since searched for ways to give back to the community. Today, Chara serves on the Board of Directors of Reach Dane.

“The mindset of advocacy is very important to Reach Dane and its community,” Chara said. “I would not be the advocate I am for my kids and my community today if I had not been supported through Head Start.”

“*I was able to get back to work a little earlier because of the support system and program I trusted and believed in at Reach Dane.*”

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF HEAD START

When Chara first learned about the federal funding freeze earlier this year, her reactions were fear and sadness.

“It is sad and scary to me that something so important to families is being threatened, all because it doesn’t fit in someone’s political agenda,” Chara said. “The upheaval that would come as a result of Head Start programs being eliminated is distressing.”

Chara wants the federal government to understand the critical role Head Start programs play in the lives of families like hers.

“*It would be so much of a disservice not only to families but to our society and economy at large to eliminate Head Start,” Chara said. “The government, especially Wisconsin’s congressional delegation, needs to keep this critical program intact and fully funded.*”



REP. LISA SUBECK

State Representative Lisa Subeck attributes her career in public policy and politics to her experience working in Head Start. After graduating from college, Rep. Subeck worked at various child care centers in Madison, but says the mission-driven focus that grounds Head Start led her to working in the program.



For over half a decade, Rep. Subeck worked at what is now known as Reach Dane in Madison. At first Rep. Subeck served as a program manager for Head Start, and then moved into a family advocate role in the Early Head Start program.

“In many ways the experience I had through Head Start helped shape everything up to where I am now,” Rep. Subeck said. “The opportunity to work with children and families in a program that focuses not only on child development but recognizes the whole child, the whole family, and the connection between what was happening at home and what was happening in the classroom is so unique and important. Head Start really opened my eyes into many of the challenges low-income and working families face.”

Rep. Subeck also emphasizes the parental engagement piece is a key aspect of the overall Head Start mission. As a staff representative on the Wisconsin Head Start Association Board, Rep. Subeck remembers leading advocacy days at the state capitol with families.

“The advocacy days helped make the connection of not only how important it is that kids receive the educational component of Head Start, but also that parents become advocates for their families,” Rep. Subeck said.

HELPING PARENTS PARTICIPATE IN THE WORKFORCE

Rep. Subeck said that another critical component of Head Start was helping to employ parents at the Head Start centers. Parents could be trained and given experience in a way that helped bolster their entry into the workforce. Additionally, when Rep. Subeck worked as a family advocate, she worked directly with new moms from the time they were pregnant until their kid turned 3 years old. Rep. Subeck would help the new moms find jobs or an educational program that worked for them.



Rep. Subeck also worked directly with families experiencing homelessness to ensure all of the kids could get to school and connect parents to housing, employment and other family services.

Across all of this work, “we looked at it as building on strengths,” Rep. Subeck said. “We determined where each individual’s skills were and how we could help them build on them for themselves and their families.”



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This model is transformative for so many families, and is what makes Head Start so unique in early childhood education.

“So many families in Head Start have a lot of barriers stacked against them, and simply having their kids enrolled in preschool is not enough,” Rep. Subeck said. “You have to change more than the educational piece to make an impact, and that’s something that is so unique to Head Start and what sets it apart from the rest of early childhood education.”

FROM HEAD START TO COMMUNITY LEADERS

Though Rep. Subeck has not worked in Head Start since the early 2000s, she says that today as a state representative she often is approached by families who have Head Start experiences. Rep. Subeck will also see news stories about community members doing great things, and she will recognize that individual from her Head Start days.

“That’s the impact that Head Start has. Kids’ and families’ futures are changed because of Head Start, and at the end of the day, that bodes well for our community,” said Rep. Subeck. “Families who once had great needs reach a point when they are self-sufficient and contributing to our community in incredibly positive ways.”

Additionally, Rep. Subeck says she still hears from teachers in the elementary schools about the difference Head Start makes in their classrooms.

In so many ways, Rep. Subeck said eliminating Head Start “would be devastating.” Wisconsin already has a child care crisis, and eliminating Head Start would exacerbate the problem for all families – not just those in Head Start.

“That’s the impact that Head Start has. Kids’ and families’ futures are changed because of Head Start, and at the end of the day, that bodes well for our community.”

“Cuts to Head Start would be devastating for children and families. We’re talking about the most vulnerable members of our community. And Head Start is a program that actually helps change their circumstances,” Rep. Subeck said. “The Trump administration and Wisconsin’s congressional delegation need to keep funding for Head Start intact.”



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BRENDA MATEO

When **Brenda Mateo** was 21, she was working for a furniture company in Arcadia, Wisconsin so that she could provide for her daughter who was just under 3 years old. Brenda's daughter was enrolled at an unlicensed child center that cost \$120 per week, and it was hard to make ends meet. Brenda did not want to work at the furniture company forever – she wanted to go to school to pursue a degree in education – but affording care for her daughter while at the same time attending school was out of the question.



A SUPPORT SYSTEM

As a single mom with little family around besides her sister, Brenda did not have a strong support system. That all changed when a Head Start program opened near her. She enrolled her daughter in Western Dairyland Head Start in 2022 and enrolled herself in school to earn her associate's degree. While Brenda had felt comfortable with her daughter at the unlicensed center, she saw a huge improvement in Ximena when she started attending Western Dairyland Head Start.

"Ximena's 3k teacher really taught her how to control her emotions, how to take turns and share because she did not have much socialization previously," Brenda said. "And as a young single parent, I felt I was still growing up and learning. Head Start was like having an extra parent; a support system."

Prior to enrolling her daughter in Head Start, Brenda said she felt "mom guilt" for not being able to give her daughter the developmental resources she needed. The teachers at Western Dairyland Head Start lifted that burden off of Brenda's shoulders.

"Money was still really tight, but I felt like I could breathe again," Brenda said. "Head Start was able to open the academic door for me, which at one point seemed impossible. I would not be where I am today without a support system like Head Start."

HEAD START AND ARCADIA'S COMMUNITY

Brenda has since earned her associate's degree in the foundations of teaching education – the first in her family to do so – and she now works as a family advocate for Western Dairyland Head Start. If funding for Head Start is cut, she is not sure what she will do. The employment opportunities in Arcadia are very limited and she does not want to go back to her previous job.

"I don't see myself happy anywhere else," Brenda said.

When funding for Head Start froze at the beginning of the year, Brenda and her colleagues were scared and in tears. Brenda is especially concerned about where the kids enrolled at Western Dairyland Head Start would go. She recalls when she and her sister attended Head Start as kids they would eat as much as they could because it was the one consistent place where they would be fed.

"Money was still really tight, but I felt like I could breathe again."



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“We’re the safe place for these children,” Brenda said. “This is where they can come to be nourished and feel loved.”

Eliminating or cutting Head Start would have consequences for Arcadia’s economy as well. More than 75 percent of the families at Western Dairyland Head Start have started jobs while their kids have been enrolled in the program. And with only one other licensed child care center in the area, many families are priced out of care, if they can even get on the waitlist at the center.

“I AM LIVING PROOF THAT HEAD START WORKS”

Brenda says that she is “living proof that Head Start works.” When Brenda was young, she was enrolled in Head Start. She says that though our parents are usually our first teachers, that was not her experience. The teachers at Head Start were her first teachers. Later in her life when she needed to be able to advance her career and family’s financial situation, enrolling her daughter in Head Start gave her the opportunity to do so.

Brenda wants the Trump administration and Congress to know that Head Start works – it enables people to participate in our workforce and get ahead.



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“If President Trump wants people to work and be lifted out of poverty, this is what this program is for,” Brenda emphasized. “Trump and Wisconsin’s Congressional delegation need to keep funding for Head Start in place for the health and future of our society.”

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JEANNE MYER

Jeanne Myer's Head Start roots run deep. For almost 27 years, Jeanne has worked in nearly all aspects of Head Start. After serving in the National Guard, she began working as a Head Start family service worker and then went back to school for early childhood education. Jeanne has since worked as a teacher for preschool-aged children, in home-based programs, with pregnant moms, and as a training and technical assistant in the Chicago regional Head Start office.



Today Jeanne serves as the executive director at Family Forum, which has seven Head Start centers across Price, Iron, Ashley, Bayfield and Douglas counties. She is the second person to hold this position – her father was the executive director for 50 years before her – and across all of the centers, Family Forum serves 390 kids and their families with a “head to toe” list of comprehensive services that includes education, nutrition and diet, mental health, and parent and family engagement.

“Head Start was founded in 1965 to give families a way to get ahead,” Jeanne said. “Families that cannot afford child care, or families that need to go to work that cannot find child care, need to have a safe, nurturing place for their children to go.”

FEDERAL FUNDING FREEZE

When the Trump administration froze federal funding for Head Start at the beginning of this year, Jeanne said it put everyone – families included – in a panic.

“When there is a funding freeze with really no clarification, it puts people in a really hard place. It puts a panic on us and it puts stress on the situation,” Jeanne said. “When staff are concerned because of the uncertainty and the possibility of losing their job, it causes unnecessary stress that reflects in our centers and down to our children.”

This stress is due in part to the nature of how Head Start programs are able to draw down their awarded grant funds. Jeanne said that though her payroll had just gone out, she still had to worry about the upcoming payroll, but everyone continued to work.

At this time, Jeanne was also concerned about paying contractors from last year who added an addition to a building to expand Head Start and Early Head Start programming. Prior to the addition, the building only served Head Start preschoolers. Now, it can serve Early Head Start infants and toddlers. Jeanne was approaching the deadline when the funds from last year’s grant could no longer be drawn down, so when the funding was unexpectedly frozen, she was not able to pay her contractor on time.

“When staff are concerned because of the uncertainty and the possibility of losing their job, it causes unnecessary stress that reflects in our centers and down to our children.”



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This also came at the time when the Chicago regional office was shut down, so the support she would normally receive from staff there was no longer available to her. Jeanne needed permission to draw down funds from the previous grant period, and could not get in contact with anyone. At the end of the day, Jeanne had to draw from the organization's reserves to pay the contractor.

"Not only did the funds freeze, the regional office closed, and I had my contractor calling me on a daily basis," Jeanne said. "I've never had contractors calling me like that."

HEAD START IS FOUNDATIONAL TO FAMILIES

Jeanne says that though she has seen changes in Head Start over the years, the uncertainty she feels now is different. Any additional changes or cuts to Head Start would be devastating.

"The impacts of Head Start really help set the foundations of what family means, and what hardworking citizenship means, and how we can work together as communities to grow our children," Jeanne said. "It takes a whole community to raise children, and when we dismantle some of these high quality programs, we're really dismantling the community we're living in."

Jeanne said that until she and other Head Start directors receive more clarification, they are in a "losing battle."



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“Head Start is about giving kids who are disadvantaged the support they need to grow and get ahead,” Jeanne emphasized. “The Trump administration and Wisconsin’s congressional delegation need to keep funding for Head Start intact for the health and future of our kids and our communities.”

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About the Campaign for a Family Friendly Economy

The Campaign for a Family Friendly Economy is fighting for a future where all people can afford to care for themselves and their loved ones. We do this by building political power to pass policies that lower costs for families, like paid family and medical leave, quality, affordable child care and elder care.



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