

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 31, 2025

The Honorable Dorothy A. Fink, M.D.
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Captain Tala Hooban
Acting Director of the Office of Head Start
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
330 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Acting Secretary Dr. Fink and Acting Director Captain Hooban:

We are writing today to raise ongoing, urgent concerns experienced by Head Start programs in our states and across the country. These concerns include (1) a lack of clarity on the status of renewals and notice of awards in the February 1st grant cycle, (2) delays in processing reimbursements through the Payment Management System (PMS), and (3) a lack of clear communication with grantees throughout this confusing time.

We request your immediate action and assurance on the following:

- All requests for disbursements of funds submitted through PMS to be promptly processed to allow all Head Start programs to draw down federal funds;
- Programs on the February 1st grant cycle will be notified of their renewal or notice of award before the deadline to ensure no lapse in funding or program operations; and
- Transparent and consistent communication with Head Start programs to address the ongoing challenges.

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has provided critical early childhood education and comprehensive services to nearly 40 million low-income young children and their families in communities across the nation. Today, Head Start programs are supported by 250,000 staff to serve nearly 800,000 children across the nation.¹ Head Start's comprehensive services ensure children receive age-appropriate health care, dental care, immunizations, and health insurance, and they provide referrals to other critical services for parents, such as job training, adult education, nutrition services, and housing support. For the last several years, Congress has worked in a bipartisan manner to recognize this longstanding federal program's important work by providing increased appropriations.

¹ <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2023>

Since the morning of Tuesday, January 28th, the Head Start community has faced immense uncertainty and disruptions by the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) memo (M-25-13), directing federal agencies to "temporarily pause all activities related to obligation or disbursement of all federal financial assistance." While the Trump Administration later clarified that Head Start would not be the target of the funding freeze², many Head Start programs across the country were unable to access the PMS to draw down federal funds. PMS was reinstated, but programs across the country have not had funding disbursed in a timely manner.

Head Start programs cannot pay their teachers and staff and continue normal operations without the assurances of payment processing and notices of grant renewals and awards. This will impact children, families, and communities across the country, particularly the rural communities where these programs represent a large share of the child care options.

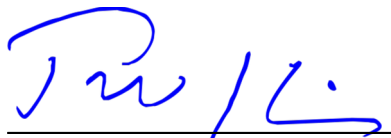
Even if this issue extends beyond the Office of Head Start, we urge you to do everything in your power to ensure these programs receive transparent and frequent communication on the progress of their funds being released. Head Start programs operate on razor-thin margins and cannot survive without timely intervention. Children, families, employees, and educators all depend on these critical federal funds.

Once these issues are resolved, we request you provide responses to the following questions:

1. What factors contributed to delayed disbursements to Head Start programs through the Payment Management System? What steps will be taken to ensure such delays will not occur in the future?
2. How many Head Start programs were impacted by this delay and what were the immediate consequences on operations and services for children and families?
3. What factors led to the lack of communication about grant renewals and awards for the February 1st cycle? What steps will be taken to ensure timely notices in the future?

We thank you for your quick attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/omb-q-a-regarding-memorandum-m-25-13/>



Tina Smith
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



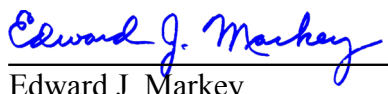
Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



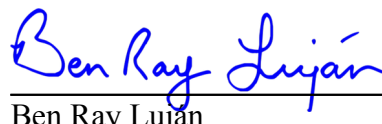
Bernard Sanders
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Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



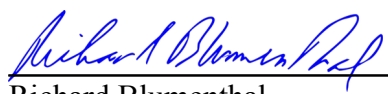
Alex Padilla
United States Senator



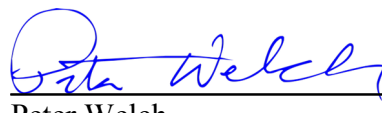
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



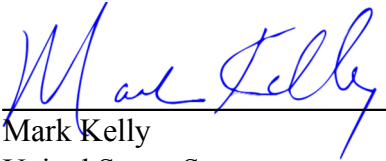
Catherine Cortez Masto
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Richard Blumenthal
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Peter Welch
United States Senator



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
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Jacky Rosen
U.S. Senator



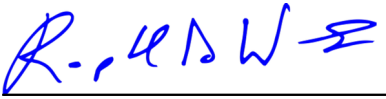
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Ruben Gallego
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



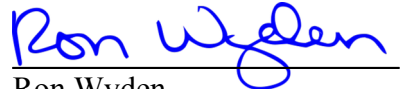
Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Elissa Slotkin
United States Senator



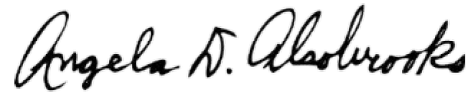
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



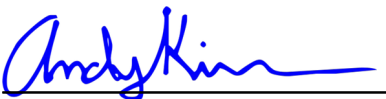
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Angela D. Alsobrooks
United States Senator



Andy Kim
United States Senator

