



Temporarily Repurposing Head Start and Early Head Start Centers Partnering to Support Emergency Child Care During the COVID-19 Crisis

The Office of Head Start (OHS) has received many inquiries about temporarily repurposing Head Start and Early Head Start centers closed due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) to provide child care primarily for children of medical staff and others engaged in responding to the COVID-19 emergency. Local Head Start programs have also been asked to offer staff to care for these children.

First, we want to acknowledge that Head Start programs have always been strong community partners, particularly when disaster strikes. One example, among many, is the critical role that programs played in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. COVID-19 challenges and threatens each individual and community in ways we have never experienced. Because of the unique nature of this threat, activities in which Head Start has willingly engaged may not always be applicable to this growing pandemic.

We expect Head Start programs, even during program closures, to continue to support enrolled children and families in creative and innovative ways. Services during closures include ensuring that enrolled children continue to receive nutritious meals, and that child development and learning experiences and family engagement continue, to the extent possible. We have already heard amazing examples of how programs are continuing to support their children and families in creative ways.

That said, we know many programs are being asked to do more—well beyond their Head Start responsibilities. To support them in their decision-making about taking on responsibilities beyond their Head Start population, we have developed a set of frequently asked questions, which address some regulatory issues, health and safety concerns, and matters of capacity and liability.

Q1: Can Head Start funds be used to support non-Head Start activities during a disaster or pandemic?

A1: No, OHS does not have regulatory or statutory flexibility to approve the use of Head Start funds for non-Head Start services. By law, Head Start funds can only be used to provide Head Start services to eligible children and families.

Q2: If the local Head Start program is closed, can the Head Start program use its facilities and staff to provide emergency child care for first responders' children?

A2: Head Start staff employed by grantees with closed centers should continue to be paid by Head Start. This continued employment is critical to programs' continuity of operations and ability to reopen for children as soon as it is safe to do so. To the extent possible, staff are expected to be engaged in supporting ongoing services to enrolled Head Start children and families. Just as schools are continuing to pay staff and do distance learning, and businesses are continuing with telework, Head Start programs are operating through similar accommodations. We

acknowledge that engagement will vary from staff to staff and program to program; however, OHS has directed grantees to continue to pay staff and cover their benefits while programs are closed.

If a grantee offers or directs Head Start staff to support emergency child care operations in its own facilities, Head Start dollars cannot be used for salaries or any other costs associated with the child care operation. Head Start staff may receive wages for hours worked in another child care program, but only if the work they do is outside of the time they are expected to be available to support ongoing services to Head Start children and families. For example, a Head Start teacher working a late afternoon or night shift in an emergency child care setting would be working outside of the normal time for Head Start services and, thus, would be able to pay from the child care organization for that time.

Q3: If the local Head Start facilities are closed, can facilities be leased to another entity with their own emergency child care providers to care for first responders' children?

A3: Yes, Head Start facilities could be used for childcare in the circumstance described in the question. However, no Head Start funds could be used in these arrangements. If a grantee temporarily leases Head Start space to another entity to offer child care to first responders, there are legal, fiscal, and logistical implications.

Head Start grantees must consider these issues carefully when making these decisions:

Legal implications: Head Start programs must ensure lease or use agreements with other child care providers using their buildings expressly allow for quick resumption of Head Start services when it is safe for Head Start staff and children to return to the facilities. Ensuring replacement of materials, and reimbursement of costs associated with damaged equipment should also be covered in the lease or use agreement. Grantees should not have to bear the burden of legal costs related to leases.

Fiscal implications: Since no Head Start funds can be used for non-Head Start services, Head Start programs must ensure that costs for rent, utilities, supplies, and any other costs of operating the temporary childcare program are covered by the lease or use agreement.

Practical implications: The Head Start facility may not have age-appropriate settings for the children who need care. For example, Head Start centers for preschool-aged children may not be age appropriate for infants, and they may not be age appropriate for older school-aged children. Early Head Start classrooms may not be appropriate for children other than infants and toddlers. Those considering these decisions may wish to take these factors into account.

It is also important that safety and infection control issues be considered. We refer those considering such arrangements to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance on child care facilities (forthcoming/currently in review).

Licensing implications: Many Head Start facilities are license-exempt. The licensing entity would need to determine whether a temporary child care program would need to be licensed. If so, the Head Start program should ensure that it would not lose its license-exempt status for the facility once Head Start resumes.

In some states, Head Start facilities are tax-exempt because the organizations operated as non-profits and services are free to participants. If a temporary child care provider operates as a for-profit entity, it must be clear that the tax-exempt status is not jeopardized.

Q4: What are some of the health and safety concerns related to this request?

A4: While Head Start programs have provided support to communities through many natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods, this situation is much different. Programs are not reacting in the aftermath of a disaster, but are trying to reduce the spread of a virus by limiting contact among people. That is the basis for schools and other community closures. We must all bear this distinction in mind as we work together to meet critical ongoing needs. We must also recognize that first responders, medical professionals and support staff, and certain other workers are vital to response, and many do need child care. Balancing these priorities is a critical challenge.

Finally, while grantees may choose to lease their space, they may also assume some oversight of the operation. If the grantee is engaged in any way in the oversight of operation, they are obligated to report to the local authorities any incidents of maltreatment, lack of supervision, or child abuse.

Sincerely,

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