

ACF Administration for Children and Families	U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	
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PROGRAM INSTRUCTION

TO: Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees and Delegate Agencies

SUBJECT: Office of Head Start (OHS) Expectations for Head Start Programs in Program Year (PY) 2021–2022

INSTRUCTION:

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Head Start programs — inclusive of Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start, and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership programs — have faced unprecedented challenges. Beginning in spring 2020 and throughout PY 2020–2021, all of our directors, staff, and families have demonstrated resiliency, innovation, and perseverance. To date, OHS has provided needed flexibilities and guidance that allowed programs to adapt services based on the changing health conditions in their communities. Now, as programs prepare for PY 2021–2022, OHS is providing updated guidance.

This Program Instruction (PI) outlines OHS’s expectations for Head Start programs to begin working toward full enrollment and providing in-person comprehensive services for all enrolled children, regardless of program option. The PI also addresses whether virtual or remote services are an allowable, long-term, locally designed option (LDO).

By *virtual*, OHS means services for children provided through technology. *Remote* refers to services provided via the delivery of supports and resources, such as educational materials or food boxes.

Operating Status and Enrollment

OHS expects Head Start programs to provide comprehensive services in their approved program options beginning in PY 2021–2022, to the extent possible, as local health conditions allow.

OHS acknowledges programs are in different stages of fully returning to in-person services. Many programs continued to provide in-person services for children and families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These programs are expected to continue serving children in person, as local health conditions allow.

Other Head Start programs have been alternating between in-person services, virtual or remote services, or some combination of the two, due to community health conditions. These programs are expected to move to in-person services, as local health conditions allow.

OHS expects programs to work toward full enrollment and full comprehensive services, contingent upon U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines and state and local health department guidance and in consideration of local school districts' decisions.

In September 2021, OHS will begin reviewing monthly enrollment in the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES) and discuss program plans for moving to full enrollment. Programs should build toward full enrollment and provide comprehensive services for all enrolled children as soon as possible. Programs must communicate with their Regional Office and be able to demonstrate why they are unable to be fully enrolled or serve children in person in their approved programs options. All programs must have plans in place that allow for adaptation to changing guidance and to changes in community conditions, which may affect achieving full enrollment or cause programs to temporarily suspend in-person services.

Beginning January 2022, OHS will reinstate pre-pandemic practices for tracking and monitoring enrollment. OHS will also resume evaluating which programs enter into the Full Enrollment Initiative in January 2022. All programs will start fresh, including those participating in the Full Enrollment Initiative prior to the pandemic. Reported enrollment in January 2022 is the first month of enrollment that OHS will evaluate for the under-enrollment process.

Virtual and Remote Services

Virtual and remote services for children are considered an interim strategy in the presence of an emergency or disaster and will not be approved as an LDO.

OHS has supported the implementation of virtual and remote services over the past 13 months. However, they are not an acceptable replacement for in-person comprehensive services. For PY 2021–2022, it is unallowable to have a program option run entirely by technology or delivering educational material, for example. OHS may still support some portion of services to continue remotely, as necessary.

OHS also recognizes that programs have discovered new virtual strategies for engaging families and reinforcing early learning and development at home. Innovations in virtual practice should be used as enhancements rather than substitutes for previously approved program options and service delivery.

Given their increased capacity to conduct virtual and remote services, programs may establish policies and procedures for temporary, weather-related virtual and remote services.

Head Start grantees have significant one-time funds and layered mitigation strategies available to support a return to in-person services. This includes access to the COVID-19 vaccine for adults.

Recruitment and Selection

As grantees look to summer programming and PY 2021–2022, OHS expects programs to prioritize recruiting eligible children and families.

Almost one third of children served in Head Start programs before the pandemic — approximately 250,000 — have not received any services to date.

The pandemic has created and exacerbated long-standing disparities and inequities for families who have been marginalized for decades. The number of children and families in poverty has grown significantly. All grantees should update their community assessments to guide their intensive recruitment efforts and to ensure they are reaching families most in need of services. If a program determines that their pre-pandemic approved program option will not meet the needs of the community, they must submit an updated community assessment and request approval for a change in scope.

Programs should also revisit their established selection criteria based on findings from their updated community assessment. As always, programs must include specific efforts to actively locate and recruit all eligible children and, in particular, those whose families are English language learners, experiencing homelessness, or affected by substance misuse, as well as children with disabilities and children in foster care.

The funds grantees have received from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Acts, as well from the American Rescue Plan, can and should be used to support enhanced community partnerships and related recruitment efforts. Per OHS guidance in [ACF-PI-HS-21-03 FY 2021 American Rescue Plan Funding Increase for Head Start Programs](#), grantees have flexibility to determine which one-time investments best support the needs of staff, children, and families, while adhering to federal, state, and local guidance. This includes using funds to purchase services, materials, and technology to ramp up recruitment efforts, as well as to provide vaccine outreach and support as one layer of mitigation and protection for staff, children, and families.

Program planning for a full return to in-person services should include new and returning families at every step. Clear communication with families and regular invitations for input ensure Head Start services are most responsive to families, children, and the community.

Additional Information

OHS will support grantees through webinars and guidance as programs continue and return fully to in-person services. Additional resources and information are available on the [Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#) website.

Please direct any questions regarding this PI to your Regional Office.

Thank you for your work on behalf of children and families.

/ Dr. Bernadine Futrell /

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