

Director Garvin Highlights Child Health and Safety Changes

Khari Garvin: Hello Head Start community, Khari Garvin here, the Director of the Office of Head Start. I am pleased to be here with you today and I want to focus on an issue of utmost importance for Head Start programs, taking a proactive approach to protecting the health and safety of children. Today I want to share with you a brief summary of important changes in the updated Head Start Program Performance Standards with respect to child health and safety.

These updates center on a few key areas, increasing a program's capacity to promote child health and safety, making clear, important changes to requirements in the standards of conduct and reporting incidents to the Office of Head Start. Let's begin with the standards focused on increasing a program's capacity to promote child health and safety.

In particular, the standards require that staff are trained annually on mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect. Here we are talking about understanding your state, local, and tribal laws related to child welfare reporting as required under federal legislation, such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, sometimes called CAPTA.

And we now require annual training on positive strategies to support social and emotional development as we know that most of the work to promote child safety happens in everyday interactions and relationships. The standards also clearly state who is responsible for following safety practices. In addition to staff and consultants, the updated standards also require contractors, with some exceptions, and volunteers to follow all safety practices.

What this means is that people in your programs who are working with children and or could have unsupervised access to children must report suspected or known child abuse and neglect to the appropriate state or tribal child protection authority. We think the inclusion of contractors and volunteers is essential since they need to understand how to safely interact with children in their roles as well as their responsibilities, if they witness unsafe practices in Head Start programs.

For contractors this requirement only applies to contractors or individuals on a contract whose activities involve contact with and or direct services to children and families. And any contractor who could have unsupervised access to children and families.

Now, I want to shift to important changes to requirements in the Standards of Conduct related to child maltreatment and endangerment of children. I know we receive a lot of comments on this, and we made changes to provide greater clarity. The goal with this set of requirements is to be clear about what behaviors we consider to be inappropriate when interacting with and caring for children.

The updated standards align with four major categories and definitions of child maltreatment, which include corporal punishment or physical abusive behavior defined as intentional use of

physical force that results in or has the potential to result in physical injury. Sexually abusive behavior, defined as any completed or attempted sexual act, sexual contact, or exploitation.

Emotionally harmful or abusive behavior, defined as behaviors that harm a child's self - worth or emotional well - being. And neglectful behavior, defined as the failure to meet a child's basic physical and emotional needs, including access to food, education, medical care, appropriate supervision by an adequate caregiver, and safe physical and emotional environments.

We include definitions and examples of each category in the standards, and we intend for the examples to clarify what each category means to offer concrete guideposts to Head Start programs. But these examples are not an exhaustive list. We also clarify that it is violations of this specific part of the Standards of Conduct that require an incident report to the Office of Head Start, as we had heard in the comments that this was unclear in the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM).

The third really important area to discuss is the requirements related to incidents that need to be reported to the Office of Head Start. The policy goal here is to clearly outline the expectations for reporting incidents to the Office of Head Start in a timely manner. To step back, the way I think of the incident reporting section of the standards is that it describes the who, the where, the what, and the when for reporting incidents to the Office of Head Start.

The updated standards require programs to report incidents to the Office of Head Start immediately, but no later than seven calendar days following the incident. This time frame is consistent with the information memorandum we issued, on this matter in September of 2022. The changes also clarify which significant incidents that affect children's health and safety are reportable to the Office of Head Start and they include those that occur in settings where Head Start services are provided.

And involves staff, contractors, or volunteers that participate in a Head Start program or classroom at least partially funded by Head Start regardless of whether the child involved receives Head Start services, or a child that participates in a classroom at least partially funded by Head Start. The updated standards add four types of reportable incidents to that list, including any maltreatment or endangerment of a child, which I mentioned previously when talking about the standards of conduct. Serious harm or injury resulting from a lack of preventative maintenance, serious harm, injury or endangerment resulting from a lack of supervision and any unauthorized release. Once again, this list of reportable incidents is intended to communicate clearly that programs do not need to report minor injuries that do not rise to the level specified here.

We know that this has been hard for programs to navigate, and we sought to provide more clarity through the updated standards, and we'll continue to provide more clarity through additional technical assistance in the coming months. The updated standards also clarify the requirement related to reporting classroom or center closures, and we clarify that ACF's definition of closures does not include scheduled holidays, scheduled breaks, or short - term

closures for inclement weather, and therefore do not, again I say do not, need to be reported to the Office of Head Start.

One final note is that the updated standards also require that a program's management system ensure that all staff are trained to implement the Office of Head Start reporting procedures for incidents. We hope that these updates help clarify something that has been confusing to many programs, but we recognize that this is just the starting point.

We look forward to continuing to support programs in this area. So long everyone.

Narrator: For more information on the final rule supporting the Head Start workforce and consistent quality programming please visit: <https://qrco.de/bfNqmQ>

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