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Head Start programs brace for cuts

Thousands of children will be dropped from program if sequestration cuts become reality

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Nancy Null dreads March 1.

Null, the director of the Office of Human Affairs Head Start programs in Newport News, Hampton and Southside cities, said automatic budget cuts, known as sequestration, that are slated to go into effect that day will lop more than 7 percent from the federal early childhood program's budget.

Null said sequestration would mean reducing enrollment in Newport News by about 10 percent, or 141 children, the equivalent of eight full classrooms. It would also eliminate 30 jobs.

"It's not going to be a cut and dried number," Null said. "All of our children would be affected."

In Williamsburg and James City County about 15 children would be dropped. Program director Jocelyn Henry-Whitehead is not sure how many jobs would be lost in the WJCC program, which serves 147 children and has almost 80 families on a waiting list.

In York County, Head Start Director Sheri Newcomb is not sure how many children will be affected in her county program, which serves 117 children in six locations, but said she will have to trim somewhere.

Across the state, more than 1,440 children will be cut from Head Start programs, said Maxine McKinney, Virginia Head Start Association executive director. She said the estimate of dropped students likely is low because programs will have to cut entire classrooms as they eliminate jobs. And almost every classroom in the state is full.

"How are you going to pick which child goes?" she asked.

War on Poverty roots

Head Start programs serve children up to age 5 from low-income families, providing a range of programs and support, from school readiness to health, social and nutrition. Established in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, most programs serve 3-5 year olds, but Early Head Start reaches down and serves children as young as six weeks.

Eligibility is based on income level and the programs are offered at no cost to the families. The program also serves preschool children with disabilities and provides after school programs. Nationwide, the program serves

more than 960,000 children, according to a report prepared by Sen. Tom Harkin for the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies.

The program, funded with grants through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is not exempt from the looming sequestration cuts, said Maxine McKinney, executive director of the Virginia Head Start Association. If Congress does not delay or abort sequestration, Virginia will lose more than \$9 million in federal Head Start funds, she said.

Null, in her office decorated with children's drawings and teddy bears, said the cuts would be devastating.

"I can't even imagine what the children would do during the day if they were not here," Null said.

Families cut from the program would have to join massive waiting lists. Null's program, which serves more than 1,400 students, has more than 880 families in Newport News and Hampton on waiting lists.

The Williamsburg-James City and the York programs have waiting lists as well. McKinney said there is such demand in some of the state's larger cities that waiting lists are in the thousands and capped. York's Newcomb said slots rarely open up. Space becomes available when families leave or children move on to kindergarten, but there are always more children eligible for services than there are spots in a classroom.

Bustling programs

Program sites open their doors as early as 7:30 a.m. and provide a range of class options through the day. Some children attend full-day programs, others attend half-day sessions. Head Start feeds them and provides support services for families and parenting classes for mothers and fathers. The Newport News program also has foster grandparents who volunteer in the classrooms and help teachers and teaching assistants.

On a recent rainy morning every classroom in the Head Start complex on Hampton Avenue bustled. Children ate cereal and milk while listening to Mary Poppins tunes. They practiced letter sounds. They worked at computers. They danced. They built block roads. They flocked to art tables to draw pictures of what they want to be when they grow up, using jumbo crayons on orange construction paper.

The classrooms, like public school kindergarten classrooms, are divided into activity centers. Education posters, alphabets, book covers and children's art cover the walls. Null said Head Start's curriculum is built on research, and the Virginia classes also use the state's preschool learning standards, which include literacy, math, science, social studies, physical and motor development and personal and social development. All Head Start teachers, like their public school counterparts, must have bachelor's degrees in early childhood education.

Beyond the education component, Null said, the program "serves the whole family," with health, dental, mental health, social and development services and referrals.

"Because of comprehensive services, it costs more to run," than a conventional preschool program, she said.

"Probably get a no"

McKinney said statewide, Head Start stands to lose more than \$9 million in federal funds. The most recent federal budget for the state was about \$115.7 million, which funded 68 programs and served almost 15,000 families, according to the association's annual report.

For Newport News and Hampton, the cut would slice about \$280,000 from the annual budget, based on the most recent annual report posted on the program's website.

Null said Head Start programs could turn to their localities and the state for help, "but we'd probably get a no." Williamsburg-James City County Community Action Agency executive director Reba Bolden agreed.

"Jurisdictions have told nonprofits that there is less local money available to support them," Bolden said. "The problems are increasing and the dollars are decreasing."

Null said program directors are waiting for instructions from the Department of Health and Human Services. If sequestration occurs, she hopes Head Start will be able to delay cuts for a few months.

"My hope is they would wait until the end of the school year," she said.

McKinney said administrators and staff across the state worry about both the children and their families.

"Parents who have no place to send their children may also lose their jobs," she said.

Both McKinney and Null noted President Barack Obama's focus on preschool education during his State of the Union Address, but the speech has not prompted Congress to exempt Head Start from the coming cuts.

"With all due respect, our politicians are not thinking this through," McKinney said. "They are not thinking of the human impact."

Head Start by the numbers

State

Federal funding: \$115.7 million.

Enrollment: 15,324

Jobs: 3,646

Estimated sequestration cut: \$9 million.

Number of children likely to be cut: 1,440

Potential job cuts: 300

Newport News and Hampton

Total federal funding: \$4 million

Students served: 1,414

Estimated number of jobs: 300

Estimated cut: \$280,000

Number of children facing cuts: 141

Potential jobs cut: 30

Number of families on waiting lists: 880

Williamsburg-James City County

Enrollment: 147

Jobs: 30

Number of children facing cuts: 14

Potential job cuts: 3

Number of families on waiting lists: 76

York County

Enrollment: 117

Number of families on waiting lists: 25-30

Sources: Virginia Head Start Association, Office of Human Affairs Head Start Program, Williamsburg James City County CAA Head Start

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