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LOCAL

Government shutdown threatens RI Head Start programs. Why funding is in danger.

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Key Points AI-assisted summary

- A government shutdown threatens federal funding for childcare programs that provide nutritious meals to low-income children.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program, which reimburses food costs, cannot disburse funds during the shutdown.
- Some childcare providers are creating contingency plans, such as using cash reserves or lines of credit, to avoid temporary closure.

As the government shutdown drags on, the stakes are high for two overlapping groups – children vulnerable to food insecurity and childcare programs that rely on federal reimbursements.

Serving roughly 750,000 low-income children throughout the United States, Head Start emerged in the 1960s as a federally funded program that partners with community groups to offer free school preparedness services to families with infants, toddlers and preschool-age children.

Whether they operate out of a center, a home daycare or a school, all Head Start providers agree to serve the kids in their care nutritious meals and snacks every day.

The federal Child and Adult Care Food Program regulates nutritional guidelines and reimburses food costs on a monthly basis. Although it isn't a dollar-for-dollar match, it covers a substantial portion, and the meals are a lifeline for many families – especially with SNAP benefits set to end on Nov. 1 – explained Kristen Greene, vice president of the Head Start operations at East Bay Community Action Program.

The Food Program's reimbursements for last month come in at the end of October, but once November rolls around, the agency can't disburse any additional money because of the government shutdown. Greene and many of her colleagues are unsure what they'll do if those funds are delayed.

"There are a lot of families and children that count on us for food on a daily basis," she said. "CACFP is essential reimbursement. Without that funding, we don't have another option. We are in the same place as the families, looking at how to fill that gap."

How do meals at Head Start locations work now?

As of May, there were 864 childcare providers operating in Rhode Island, and 31% of them received Child and Adult Care Food Program reimbursements. Allocations vary, but since Head Start serves families that qualify as low income, those providers receive the maximum reimbursement rate.

Children's Friend operates seven Head Start centers around Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls. During the school year, the organization spends about $100,000 per month on food for more than 900 children.

"Right now, we're operating as we usually would, although obviously we are aware of the rumors and uncertainty, and we're making lots of contingency plans related to the shutdown and the chaos," said David Caprio, the group's CEO.

Caprio explained that they buy catered meals and plan to submit a reimbursement claim within the first or second week of November, just as they always do. In a typical month, the payment gets sent a few weeks later.

Kids who spend the whole day in a Head Start classroom are fed breakfast, a snack and lunch/supper. The federal Food Program asks its participants to follow USDA guidelines for children and infants by prioritizing fruits and vegetables, nutrient-dense foods and whole grains while limiting added sugar and saturated fat.

The Woonsocket Head Start Child Development Association Inc. cooks meals in-house for almost 350 children, and in September it spent $38,000 on food. Mary Varr, the organization's executive director, said the menu rotates, and they try to pick food that kids from their community enjoy.

"Nutrition is extremely important, especially in a young child's brain development," she noted.

A standard breakfast includes cereal, fresh fruit and milk, but sometimes they mix it up with muffins or scrambled eggs. The kids love veggies and dip during snack time, and meatballs are popular during lunch, said Varr.

The Woonsocket-based program has a nurse who checks the children's height, weight, body mass index (BMI) and other health metrics.

"At the beginning of the year, many of our children are in the overweight or obese category or have what is considered a high BMI," said Varr, explaining the impact that nutrition and exercise has on kids. "By the end of the year – their BMIs are significantly different. If they were in the overweight category, they have a healthy weight. Even if they were underweight before they came in, our dietitian works with them on a plan for the family, and we help get these children and their families on the right nutritional track."

Some families grappling with food insecurity don't live close to full-service grocery stores or places where you can buy fresh produce, or they have physical barriers, such as transportation issues. Another common problem – particularly in urban areas with a higher concentration of low-income residents – is when the main options are fast food or

convenience stores. A lack of parks or green space can also be a challenge in low-income communities that limits children's ability to exercise.

How will Head Start locations bridge the gap?

Separate from CACFP, federal Head Start grants are disbursed annually and help the programs pay for building costs, staffing, food that isn't covered by CACFP and other expenses.

According to the National Head Start Association, grants will expire for 134 programs around the country on Oct. 31, and they won't receive any additional federal funding until the government reopens. Among them is Comprehensive Community Action Program, which runs three Head Start centers around Cranston, serving 150 children.

"We're trying to access some funds so that we can remain open for as long as we possibly can," said Christopher Mansfield, CCAP's president.

CCAP started reviewing its finances several months ago when the potential of a government shutdown first arose, and the organization hopes to keep their programs afloat until the shutdown ends.

"We're looking at it week-by-week in terms of how long we think we can last before we might have to make a decision to close our Head Start program temporarily," said Mansfield.

Children's Friend has also been prepping for the uncertainty.

"Can we borrow money against a line of credit? Do we have cash reserves that we can dip into?" said Caprio, listing some of the plans they've been discussing. "Kids in our childcare are from birth to age 5, so these are our youngest and most vulnerable. We want to make sure they're taken care of."

CACFP reimbursements are dispersed through the Rhode Island Department of Education, which Varr said has been in touch with Head Start leaders about trying to shore up funding

alternatives.

When asked about the impending disruptions, U.S. Rep. Seth Magaziner suggested that childcare providers could try tapping into some of the state efforts that are redirecting money to support food pantries and SNAP recipients.

“Look, I’m not qualified to give you advice specifically on your organization’s finances, but whatever flexibility you can find, whatever help you can appeal to, do it now,” he said.

Magaziner added that he thinks it's overwhelmingly likely that there will be bipartisan support to compensate the programs for any lapsed funding once the government reopens.

However, with President Donald Trump’s threats to block back pay for furloughed government employees, not everyone is so certain.

“We’re not sure if after [Nov.] 1 that any of the dollars we use will be reimbursed,” said Mansfield. “We might not be able to recoup those dollars spent to run our Head Start program while we were still in the shutdown.”