

**Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
Office of Head Start**

**Tribal Consultation – Geographic Regions 1-5
Summary Report
July 7, 2021**

Office of Head Start Representatives

- **Heather Wanderski**, Director of Program Operations
- **Todd Lertjuntharangool**, Regional Program Manager, Region XI American Indian Alaska Native (AIAN)
- **Trevondia Boykin**, Supervisory Program Specialist, Region XI AIAN
- **Delroy Grant**, Supervisor Program Specialist, Region XI AIAN

Greeting and Introductions

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations, welcomed attendees, and expressed her excitement to attend today's consultation as this is her very first Tribal Consultation. She brings greetings on behalf of Dr. Bernadine Futrell, Director of the Office of Head Start (OHS), who was unable to attend today's consultation.

Heather transitioned to Mr. Byron Ninham, Executive Director of Education at the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to facilitate the opening prayer.

Before turning the meeting over to Mr. Todd Lertjuntharangool, Heather recognized his hard work, thanked him for his service as a liaison, keeping her updated about what's happening and the things that can be done to make things better for the tribal programs.

Mr. Todd Lertjuntharangool welcomed and greeted the attendees. He gave a brief introduction, sharing his background and allowed the other members of the AIAN leadership team (Delroy Grant and Trevondia Boykin, Supervisory Program Specialists) to introduce themselves before transitioning to the OHS PowerPoint presentation.

OHS Overview and Updates

**Todd Lertjuntharangool, Regional Program Manager
OHS**

FY2020 Tribal Consultations

OHS scheduled four Virtual Tribal Consultations in 2020. We did have one that ended up getting canceled because the tribal leaders who were scheduled to attend could not make it. But, out of those consultations, the topics that we heard most about were internet broadband and technology accessibility for our programs, income eligibility, staffing, funding levels, and the need for support around facilities.

As we move into a second program year in this pandemic, we wanted to provide a summary of operations for our tribal Head Start and Early Head Start programs. The table shown on the screen shows the fluctuations in program operating status between September of 2020 and April of 2021. The table shows programs who reported that they were open and providing in-person services, open and providing both in person and virtual services, open and providing virtual/remote only, programs who reported that they

were closed, and also programs who had not reported. We ended in April with approximately 15% of our programs reporting that they were providing in-person services, 32% reported that they were providing a hybrid service, so in-person and virtual. 30% reported that they were providing virtual services, only. 2% have reported they were closed and we had, at the time of the capture this information, 21% had not yet reported their status for that month. So, as you can see, over the course of the last program year, operations really did fluctuate. Of course, a lot of that was driven by safety in the communities and the various upticks in coronavirus cases and things like that in the community.

FY21 Funding Update

For Fiscal Year 2021 OHS is projected to fund approximately \$302 million to our tribal Head Start and Early Head Start programs and that figure there does include the \$3.5 million increase we received for COLA, in fiscal year 2021. We do also fund \$4 million to Tribal Colleges and Universities and Head Start partnerships. Currently, we have six tribal colleges and universities that receive these grants. The goal of these grants is to increase the number of credentialed staff at tribal Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act and American Recovery Plan (ARP)

In 2021 OHS awarded \$6.5 million in Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) to tribal programs. Right now, we are projected to award tribal programs \$25.8 million from the American Recovery Plan (ARP). Most ARP awards were issued in early July.

Going back to 2020, OHS awarded tribal programs over \$19 million in CARES Act funding. Here you will see a spend plan that our grant recipients reported to us about how they actually utilize that funding. Most of that funding, approximately 28% went towards equipment and supplies needed to support remote delivery of program services. We were glad to see that a lot of our programs made big investments in terms of hardware and internet accessibility for their families and their staff. At the time this report was compiled, approximately 5% of grant recipients had not reported, so it does not reflect all grant recipients.

What have we been up to in 2021?

We definitely wanted to hear about your concerns and thoughts, in regard to programs moving forward and specifically, around the Program Instruction (PI) OHS issued on May 20, 2021. That PI communicated expectations and provided guidance on operating status and enrollment, specifically the expectation that programs begun to transition to move back toward approved program options, as health conditions in the community allow of course, and the communication that enrollment OHS will begin reviewing monthly enrollment and beginning in January of 2022, OHS will reinstate pre-pandemic practices for tracking and monitoring of enrollment. It also touched on virtual and remote services and clarified that those virtual services will not be considered as an approvable permanent operating option going forward but we encouraged programs to develop policies and procedures for how virtual services could be utilized in the event of emergencies or for weather-related closures. The PI also encouraged programs to initiate new, updated community assessments. As a result of the pandemic, so many factors of communities have changed and we believe new community assessments will be beneficial in identify the current needs of children and families in communities and ensuring program designs are aligned with current needs.

Head Start Forward Campaign

To support programs as they make plans for a transition back to approved program options, OHS implemented the Head Start Forward Campaign. OHS has scheduled a 5 session webinar series to cover various topics of returning to in-person services. These have been scheduled for June 1st, June 23rd, July 14th, August 4th, and August 25th. We encourage all of our programs around the country to register and tune in.

AIAN Director Committees

One additional thing we did want to share with tribal leadership is our work around developing what we've referred to as, AIAN Director Committees. Working in conjunction with the National Indian Head Start Director's Association (NIHSDA) board, we've come up with a plan to develop committees consisting of tribal Head Start directors and those committees will support three different activities for Region XI. The first is we're going to have 5 Directors who will sit on the Region XI Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Steering Committee. These 5 Directors will support OHS by providing input on various aspects of T/TA delivery, including things like materials and the content that's covered within those trainings. Next, we will develop a committee of 5 Directors to support our Annual Regional Needs Assessment. The Regional Needs Assessment is conducted annually to ensure our resources and efforts are targeted and allocated appropriately to meet the most urgent needs of our tribal programs. Lastly, a third committee will support our 2021 AIAN Conference Planning Committee, which we'll be facilitating in November. This committee will support efforts to ensure the sessions being facilitated are targeted, accurate, and relevant to what programs are actually experiencing on the ground. With this support, OHS is working to ensure all sessions offered at the conference are as beneficial and impactful to programs as possible.

2021 AIAN Conference

As stated above, on November 16th – 18th of 2021, OHS will facilitate our 2021 AIAN National Conference. This conference will be preceded by OHS's last tribal consultation session on November 15, 2021. The 2021 AIAN Conference will focus on the top priorities identified through the 2020 AIAN Regional Needs Assessment which include;

- 1.) **Governance/Program Design and Management** – This priorities was identified by the high number of monitoring findings in the previous monitoring season around lack of regular reporting to Governing bodies and a high number of tribal programs being under enrolled (*In February 2020, 1 month prior to the declaration of a national emergency due to the coronavirus, approximately 44% of tribal programs were at some point of the under enrollment process*)
- 2.) **Staffing** – This priority is focused on challenges experienced by grant recipients around recruiting and retaining staff, staff credentialing, and staff wages.
- 3.) **School Readiness** – This priority is focused on systems for staff ongoing professional development, strategic coaching systems to support ongoing development of staff, and ongoing improvements for teacher child interactions and child outcomes.
- 4.) **Fiscal** – This priority area was identified by monitoring findings around lack of fiscal systems and by a high number of programs closing fiscal years with large amounts of unobligated and unused funding.
- 5.) **Health, Disabilities, Mental Health** – This priority area was identified through the large number of monitoring findings around lack of health tracking systems, historical challenges many programs faced around services to children with disabilities, and challenges around securing the support of a licensed mental health professional to support children, families, and staff.

OHS also welcomes input from tribal leaders on ways we can work together to support tribal programs with overcoming some of these ongoing challenges. OHS encourages tribal leaders and tribal programs to register for this national conference. The registration website was opened on August 30th. A link where you can register is provided here – [Click here to register now!](#)

Resources

Lastly in terms of resources, I do want to again refer folks to Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website - <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/>. We do have a specific page for COVID-19. This page is updated regularly, and I do want to encourage folks to check this from time to time just to ensure that you have the most updated information, guidance, and support.

Additionally, OHS has provided the MyPeers platform as a way for programs to support one another directly. Learn more about how you can sign up and access this platform here - <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/mypeers-social-network-early-childhood-professionals>

Meaningful Consultation with Sovereign Nations

**Gil Vigil, Executive Director,
Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council, Inc.**

First of all, thank you for offering me the opportunity to give testimony on our historic programs. And I was talking about being there 12 years. I've been there double that, and maybe even triple that. I've been with Head Start for quite a while, since my children went to Head Start. And before that when my mother became a teacher aide, I think she started with, and eventually became the director of our historic program at Tesuque Pueblo. So I've been involved with Head Start as long as it's almost in existence, because Tesuque Pueblo, and Santo Domingo, and Acoma Pueblo, even before Head Start became a program, were pilot projects. And so we got our start longer before anybody else did. But anyway, just wanted to give you a little bit of history.

I've provided testimony for Head Start for quite a long time. One of my concerns is the income eligibility. As Todd mentioned, that was one of the things that was identified. We come from small communities. Our communities are very small. The income eligibility requirements, even though there's that over income part, that still doesn't meet our needs. First of all, Head Start works. Head Start works because a lot of young people's education started from Head Start. But like I said, we have small communities and education is important to us for all our kids.

My daughter, who went through Head Start, went and got her undergraduate in secondary education before pursuing her master's program in business administration at Harvard, and the same time, pursuing a legal doctoral degree at University of New Mexico. And she was successful in getting both of them. She got her start at Head Start. Some of our governors got their start at Head Start. My granddaughter just finished, and she went to Head Start. She went to University of Denver and got her associate's degree in business administration. But these are just examples within my own family.

The problem is, because of the income eligibility, many of our kids that are over income because their fathers and mothers have now pursued higher education, and now they have good jobs and they have income, and so their kids aren't eligible. And if the tribes doesn't have funds to support the Head Start program, many of those kids don't receive services. It took us out of poverty but by the same token, many of the people that are still in poverty, they need this help. And for tribal leaders, it's our responsibility to educate all of us, all our children, all of our kids. What's that quote they talk about, 'It takes a village to raise a child.'

I guess the only thing that maybe make that change is for Congress to change the law to do that. But I think we're in an Administration, maybe it's time that needs to happen. It may not totally the whole act, but to allow some kind of flexibilities, some kind of legislation that talks about allowing for funding to be made available to all children in the United States. Here in New Mexico, Governor Michelle Grisham has started an early child education care department, and they're doing a lot of work in zero to five. And so I think if we could create some flexibility. In fact, they just raised the, I think it was the... what is it called? The income index, where they're aligned along for a higher rate of where that more kids can be eligible for childcare or early childcare services in New Mexico.

And so the federal government might want to take an example of that and create something a higher level of income requirements so that more kids can be eligible.

And then with the Cares Act and with the Rescue Act now. The CARES Act did help a lot, especially in the technology, because many of our communities are in rural communities and didn't have the capacity

with technology being in their area. The CARES Act did help, but it also created problems because it was something that we were not used to. It was a different way of doing our schooling. And so when we went virtual, there were some... I guess at the beginning, we had some problems. But eventually, we were able to master it, but we still have these kind of problems, especially with the connections that we don't have.

So, that was another concern of ours. Staffing. Here at Eight Northern, we did what we called community asset mapping. And in our community asset mapping, one of the things that we found was, we needed capacity, not just in Head Start, but in all areas, all different disciplines of services that we provide for our people and our communities. And we want to educate our own people so that we can place them in a different position, and so capacity building is important. With Head Start staffing, the problem is the requirement of them getting their degrees and getting their education. And yet, we don't provide enough funding to support that. And so what happens is, many of the times, we lose our staff to school districts, or different places because they're paying them more than what we can pay. That needs to be looked at. We're requiring them to get the education, yet we're not giving them the salary that should commensurate with the position.

Facility has always been an issue for many of us. Many of our communities converted old buildings, old community day schools, went into portables to have their classrooms. And facilities is important, that we upgrade the facilities, because it's our children, our future that we're talking about here. And so facilities is important, that we upgrade our facilities also. I don't want to take too much time because I know there's other tribal leaders that want to provide testimony, but these are some of the areas of our concerns that I wanted to express to all of you. And I want to thank all of you. And yesterday, I was on a consultation for food distributions, and even there, I think what needs to happen is that we need to collaborate with the different agencies and departments, because for Head Start we're asked, and even our senior citizen program, we're asked to provide healthy meals of the healthy index meal. We have a food distribution program that we could get the healthy foods from, and yet we are not allowed to do that because they're saying you can't commingle federal dollars. But it doesn't make any sense because they receive the food. And we go down to the local supermarket, or restaurant, or supermarkets that we purchase our food. I would rather purchase our food from our own distributions programs because it is healthy foods that they're providing. And so that's another issue I have.

So maybe the different agencies and departments to collaborate, and network, and work together on how they can address our concerns and our needs, because we're doing this at the local level. I'm having my directors here at Eight Northern to get out of the silos that they're in and start collaborating and networking, because the people we serve are the same group of people in all the different programs that we serve. So again, thank you. I can really get winded too, but like I said, I want to give time for other tribal leaders. So this is my testimony. Thank you again for your time and allowing me to make my testimony. Thank you.

OHS Response

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations

OHS

I like how Mr. Vigil said, "Ann would tell me when it comes to income eligibility." I will echo what Ann said and that it truly does take an act of Congress for thinking about changes to income eligibility. I hear folks are saying that the over income flexibility just does not meet the needs of tribal communities and that I think advocacy for really changing those income eligibility requirements and things really would be taken up with congressional representatives, and that I think specifically I heard funding should be available for all tribal children and making that available. But again, I would also think about while it may not offer a tremendous amount of relief, but we do have the ability to enroll children between a 100 to 130% of the federal poverty guidelines as well, so that is an opportunity. But I certainly would just acknowledge that and wasn't sure if Todd had any other thoughts or comments on that particular one.

**Todd Lertjuntharangool, Regional Program Manager
OHS**

I think in hearing the common thread about income eligibility, the first thing that comes to mind is in working for Head Start, I do feel very proud that all the programs, not just tribal programs, but many communities on the country really feel like Head Start is that program that they want to deliver services to their kids and families, regardless of eligibility, regardless of income of the parents. So I think to me, that speaks volumes, and to me just being transparent, it speaks volumes and it's a great credit to our programs that Head Start is that premier program when it comes to early childhood development.

Additionally, again, as Heather said, the federal poverty guidelines and those thresholds are something that is set in legislation, but I do think that it certainly doesn't go unnoticed that Head Start is a program that really does try to tailor itself to meet the needs of the specific community, specifically around language and culture. Mr. Vigil, Dr. Vigil, thank you again, one, for you always being present at consultation to provide input, and I do understand also that even that 51% flexibility for our tribal programs and a lot of our smaller rural communities is still not enough to meet the needs of the children that are there in the community and that need Head Start services.

So I know that the Head Start act itself is a bit overdue in terms of re-authorization. We can't really speak on when that will happen and when Congress will take that legislative action to review federal poverty guidelines or review the Head Start Act, but I think it's fair to say that a lot of us are focused on when that next reauthorization may come.

Meaningful Consultation with Sovereign Nations

**Kirby Metoxen, Council Member
Oneida Nation**

I want to thank you for allowing us to speak at the virtual tribal consultation. I'm sitting here in place of Jennifer Webster, Councilwoman Jennifer Webster, who is the liaison and I'm an alternate liaison to our Oneida Head Start program. And so as elected official, I don't have all the expertise and know all of our Head Start programs, but we do have a Head Start staff, and we have an inter government affairs that is tasked with briefing us and educating us. So they put together a written comment for me to present here. So I will be reading this, as I don't have the expert know-all of what all the issues are, but it's regarding the income eligibility for Head Start. Income eligibility is a hindrance to many tribal Head Start programs, with many states implementing a 4K option in their educational systems that have no income limitation.

When tribal parents are over income, they may opt into local 4K programs, resulting in a loss of child participation in tribal Head Start. Limiting access to Head Start takes away the emphasis of cultural language programming for our children in their early years of development. We recommend that income limitations be eliminated from Head Start eligibility criteria. All American Indians, Alaska Native children should be categorically eligible in recognition of their increased vulnerability due to high rates of adverse childhood risk factors, health disparities, historical trauma, and damage to cultural identity. We also recommend that OHS not require redetermination of eligibility when a child transitions from early Head Start to Head Start. Then under the category of funding, we also have two recommendations for funding to ensure that the federal government meets its unique trust responsibilities to tribal nations and communities. OHS has mandated an increase in the number of duration, longer day classroom slots per Head Start program, without providing additional funding needed for this type of programming. While we agree that longer day classrooms lead to better educational success and outcomes, we also know that this leads to additional transportation, staffing, utilities, and food costs for the programs. We recommend that additional funding be provided to cover the cost of this mandate.

Tribal Head Start programs also need funding to maintain facilities. The Head Start grantees have reported the need for facility improvements that include both major and minor renovations, as well as the need for new construction. Often, there is a lack of alternate facilities in rural and remote areas, forcing grantees to spend significant portions of their budget to maintain environmentally safe facilities. Last

year, our program had to make unexpected equipment and building repairs at one of our older Head Start sites to ensure the safety of our children and staff.

We ask that OHS create a funding opportunity for renovations of construction of facilities. And that was a report written by our intergovernmental affairs working with our Oneida Head Start staff and some of the issues they have. And I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I may be exiting before the end of the meeting as I have another meeting, but thank you for allowing us this time. I was able to attend a in-person Head Start conference, probably in 18 or 19, and I believe it was in Albuquerque, when I was newly elected. So again, I want to thank you, and give time to other tribal councils. Thank you.

OHS Response

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations

OHS

I also think part of what I heard from Mr. Metoxen also talked about, I think interwoven with income eligibility was also, I think, a concern about 4k programs, particularly as it relates to 4k programs having an impact on enrollment of tribal programs and then, like you said, then they don't have that Head Start experience where we promote language, where we promote the culture and things and opportunities that are provided in Head Start programs that aren't provided in others. And so I recognize the concern. I do hear that and it's one that we take certainly very seriously.

I know that in particular, the President's plan does consider preschool at this point as part of the American Families Plan, wanting to be able to provide preschool services for all three and four year olds, so thinking about what that means and the mixed delivery system, but certainly Head Start will be a big player in that overall plan that is being considered by the President at this point. This would need to be worked out by Congress and what would that specifically look like but certainly I know the President would want this to be mixed delivery system with Head Start being at the forefront of that as well. So certainly, I think we'll see more to come as we continue to work out some of what that looks like. I don't think we know logistically what that would look like, but hoping that we can provide some additional support and resources for how locally our preschool programs and Head Start programs can work together on these types of things.

Todd Lertjuntharango, Regional Program Manager

OHS

I do think the other American Families Plan is something that I think a lot of people take an interest in and definitely should, so if folks do want to read up on it, I believe the proposal is on the White House website. It includes pretty significant increases to the field of early childhood including Head Start, child care, and also community colleges and access to higher education. So it's a very significant investment into education and infrastructure across the country.

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations

OHS

Agreed. I also think, and recognizing, I think I heard what Mr Vigil was saying earlier, too, about the CARES Act and thinking about how technology has changed a lot in the way that we do our work, but I also think, as he referenced that it has been a challenge with staying connected with families and really being able to provide that level of engagement and support that families need in this new way. I think that that's something I want to acknowledge and it's something that I think all of our programs have grappled with, particularly when it comes to remote and virtual service delivery. I do know that the folks from our national centers as well as our TA network have really tried to provide additional resources and supports for that. I would say that we definitely don't consider that to be a long-term solution because we know how important, like you were just saying, being able to have children together, to see the interaction, to see them dancing, I think that is something that is missed as an opportunity when we're only providing

services in a virtual or services in a remote way. So I want to acknowledge that concern and definitely say that we've tried to provide as best support as we can, but knowing that it's not a long-term solution at all by any stretch. We know where the value is and that's really with the in-person socializations and interactions.

Meaningful Consultation with Sovereign Nations

Melanie Benjamin, Council Member

Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe

Currently, we're attending a meeting on the boarding school issue here in the state of Minnesota at Mille Lacs, so there's discussion going on that as well. In terms of how we educate our children and how they've been educated in the past, and present, and how we look to educate our children on the future as well. And there's a lot of the issues that have been already brought up, that I think you're going to find common across the country in terms of broadband, eligibility, these Head Start programs that are in rural areas in the country that have all of those transportation issues.

And actually, when you're in a rural area as well, finding staff, which in turn... when you're rural, you don't have the housing ability to house people coming in from different areas. So I think a lot of those issues that have been presented are the same for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe as well. And I think one of my biggest concerns, and hopefully, as they're moving forward, that we can address the cultural needs of our youth and our young folks going forward. And each of the tribes have their own creation stories, their own ceremonies, and all of this knowledge that's within the language.

And that's why language revitalization is so important, because that provides the basis for us as Indian people or as the Mille Lacs Band, we call ourselves the Anishinaabe, the original people. Those teachings are so deep into our language, and that language revitalization has to be a top priority, or it is for the Mille Lacs Band, so we can prepare our youth, our Head Start. Our babies are Head Start, and as we're going up to the different levels of school, so they're prepared to have the good life.

So I don't want to necessarily repeat all of the other issues, but you'll find a commonality, I think, with all of these topics, and a lot of that additional issues when you're a rural community and all those aspects. Like I mentioned, transportation, housing, staffing issues, and broadband, all those issues that help us provide a good education opportunity for our children. So I'm just going to be short today. And I just wanted to at least mention those. And I know a lot of the tribal leaders will bring up a lot of unique situations, and you'll find that that's common across many of the tribes and the Head Start programs. Meegwetch. Thank you.

OHS Response

Todd Lertjuntharangool, Regional Program Manager

OHS

We heard from several folks about challenges around staffing, staffing retention in general, credentials and also salaries and so I wanted to, as best I can, provide some support and some response to that. Certainly I think it's a more difficult conversation to have across a broad group, because the factors that impact those challenges are different for every grant recipient and every grant recipient is in different place. Human resources itself is such an intentional part of any business, of any organization, any agency and I think staff retention is something that probably all organizations struggle with now, because it is such an intentional piece.

In terms of credentialing, the field of early childhood development has progressed so far in the last 10 years and even the last 5 years. What is required of those teachers and in those classrooms is so different, and myself having participated in trainings and exercises around things that teachers do in those classrooms, like scaffolding and curriculum fidelity, it really is mind boggling what is required of those individuals and what they need to know in order to help progress our children. I believe that tribal

children are entitled to this exact same amount of quality as any other children, regardless of where you come from, regardless of what your parent's income is. I'm always careful to consider a different requirement for tribal children or who will ultimately provide those services to tribal children. But I certainly do understand that rural locations and geographic isolation certainly play a factor in any program's ability to recruit and retain those individuals.

In regards to salaries, again, I think that's another area that the factors that impact that are different for every program, and so as best we can, we do try to work with individual programs to look at their program operations and see where and if there is room to navigate or maneuver within current funding levels. In a lot of cases, we have programs that are, you're fully enrolled, you're fully operational and there's really not much of any wiggle room. At that point is looking to point expansion or looking for additional funding opportunities to support program operations. We also work with some programs where we find that there is room to maneuver within existing budgets, and definitely that does require a lot of very tough decision-making, but I definitely encourage our programs, I encourage our Program Specialists and all the staff to really engage in that dialogue and be willing to explore where, if any, there is room to maneuver.

Heather did also mention the American Families Plan. Included in that Families Plan is language specifically around salaries and support to Head Start programs, childcare programs around staffing. And so again, I think we're excited to see that. We'll see it comes to fruition, but that's, I think, a conversation I encourage everybody to have with their Program Specialists to see if and where there is room to maneuver and make sure that we do compensate staff appropriately for the tremendous work that they do. And the huge demand that now falls upon them, who will end up with people who are in those classrooms.

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations OHS

I want to just chime in a little bit here, because I do know that there's been some conversations internally, and I'm hoping that folks can join us on the next Head Start Forward webinar, because specifically one of the policy questions that's being asked that I don't know if folks have been able to join, but we do have some policy questions as that are coming in all across the United States. One of them is talking about staffing challenges, and Ann is going to be talking a little bit more about this, but I want to recognize and acknowledge that staffing is not new. This is not a result of the pandemic.

And right now it's made even worse because I think nationally, we're going through a staffing crisis. I think a lot of companies, organizations, I think we're all struggling to find workforce. I think that our staffing issues are made even worse now as we are starting to see the challenges in filling vacancies and things even more so than what we did before the pandemic. But I wanted to just offer up, I think programs should be thinking about it from a two-prong approach. One, using one-time funds as a potential short-term solution, so we're really encouraging programs to be thinking about using one-time funds, either through the American Rescue Plan or other COVID related responses to support your recruitment.

Meaningful Consultation with Sovereign Nations

Bethann Basso, Head Start Director Aroostook Micmac Council

Greetings from Northern Maine. I'm Bethann Basso. I am the Director of Little Feathers Head Start, which is a Head Start for the Micmac Nation, which is formerly known as The Aroostook Band of Micmacs. We echo everything that everybody's saying, which is actually reassuring for me that the struggles that my staff are having, that our band is having, is very common across the board of the Native programs. We struggle greatly with retaining employees at the wages that we have. We lose a lot of

teachers that are certified with Bachelor's in Education to local schools, to other County Action Programs, simply because they can afford to pay the wages, they can afford to pay the benefits, the health insurances, the dental insurance, and their retirement, all of those things.

So that's a struggle. I heard one program mentioned transportation. Transportation is a huge road bump for us, no pun intended. It is hard when you're trying to serve a 15 mile radius from all around your program. So at any one point in time, we could have a bus that is trying to go 30 minutes in one direction, 60 minutes in an opposite direction, and when you only have one bus and you can only afford one bus driver and one bus monitor, it's tough to keep those little ones on less than that hour limitation that we have. We also face the income limitations. We would strongly advocate for if a child is Native, that they are accepted into the program regardless of their parents' income. So a lot of the things that have already been said, like I said, we face those as well.

I do want to point out that we were very fortunate due to the pandemic. We had zero cases of staff or students positive for COVID-19. That was a direct result of the hard work and the efforts of my staff going above and beyond with the daily health screenings, the cleaning of the center, ensuring students were wearing masks, that they were wearing masks, that items were not shared between students, sanitizing toys between use, everything that needed to be done. So I will say that my staff has some fears with going back to a full day program with full roster of students. They do have some concerns that it's going to be very difficult to maintain the same level of sanitation and safety expectations that we had. So that release of the 1,020 hours for 45% of your kids, that does cause some concern. But overall, again, I echo what the other representatives have said and I do appreciate the time for you listening and taking our thoughts into consideration

OHS Response

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations

OHS

Thank you Bethann. I actually want to just chime in a little bit here, because I do know that there's been some conversations internally, and I'm hoping that folks can join us on the next Head Start Forward webinar, because I think specifically one of the policy questions that's being asked that I don't know if folks have been able to join, but we do have some policy questions as that are coming in all across the United States. One of them is talking about staffing challenges, and we are planning, I know, particularly Anne is going to be talking a little bit more about this, but I want to recognize and acknowledge that staffing is not new. This is not a result of the pandemic. We've been dealing with this for quite some time and so I want to acknowledge that certainly, and know that it impacts high turnover rates, retention and all of those different things

And right now it's made even worse because I think nationally, we're going through a staffing crisis. I think a lot of companies, organizations, I think we're all struggling to find workforce. And so I think that our staffing issues are made even worse now as we are starting to see the challenges in filling vacancies and things even more so than what we did before the pandemic. But I wanted to just offer up, I think programs should be thinking about it from a two-prong approach. One, using one-time funds as a potential short-term solution, so we're really encouraging programs to be thinking about using one-time

funds, either through the American Rescue Plan or other COVID related responses to support your recruitment- COVID-related responses to support your recruitment and retention efforts. So, it could include hiring bonuses, hazard pay, return to work incentives. I think we talk about temporary raises in pay, retention bonuses, anything that you all can do to support your workforce I think is certainly allowable provided it's reasonable and provided you've got the policies and procedures to support it. So, I think, that said, we recognize and want you to be thinking about that as a short-term measure to help bring back your workforce or retain the workforce that you do have. But then, I also think, as Todd mentioned, there are I think individual differences in programs for why there's such an issue when it comes to

securing and retaining staff. But thinking about and identifying what those longer-term solutions might be, thinking about and reflecting on staff challenges.

And considering wage comparability, data from your community assessment, all of those things that would need to be thought about as a longer-term solution, because one-time use of funds as we know is one time. I mean, that's a short-term solution. It's not long-term, but certainly, as you think about and develop plans and engage with the regional office on what you should be thinking about or could be considering in that longer-term plan and solution for those staffing issues. So, certainly, everybody's got to think individual issues and challenges around that and so you'd have to probably develop your own unique plan to support. But anyway, I also see Mr. Vigil has his hand raised there. So just want to acknowledge and offer comment.

Great. Thanks. I think the last thing that I wanted to respond to, and I'm not sure, Todd, if you had others, is I appreciated the comment on the program collaboration within the government. I think that's something that we are constantly looking to try to improve. It's always nice to put a pin in it and acknowledge when we need to do more cross-collaboration and be thinking about how we work with our food and nutrition programs, how Head Start can work together, how we can work better with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). I think all of that is extremely important with the Office of Child Care, all of those different programs, and I think it's really a good reminder and something that we can always improve upon. It's something that we are definitely acknowledging and is something that we will continue to work on. So, I wanted to recognize and appreciate that comment.

**Gil Vigil, Executive Director
Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council, Inc.**

I think under the recovery act if I'm not mistaken, there were some funds made available to do exactly what you're saying. I think it was called essential personnel so that people that are essential, that are needed, you could pay them a little bit higher salary I think was the idea, but the problem would be the sustainability. We bring them on. If there are not additional funds, how do we carry that? And so that will be a concern. The other one was talking about childcare. When we did our community asset mapping, most of the communities develop their own plans and one of the things that came out of plans was early learning centers. Here in New Mexico, one of our Pueblo governors is pursuing that idea. But what he wants to do is to create an early learning center and use whatever funding that's made available through the state or with the federal government and maybe its own dollars. What they want to do is to use Early Head Start, Pre-K, kindergarten, and any other programs that are funds that are out there. The problem we're having is again, going back to co-mingling of federal funds. So, I think what needs to happen maybe a concept like that is looked at, and then to allow some flexibility, some way that the tribes are allowed to have the early learning center. Because like I said earlier, and others have said about language and culture being important at that early age, and today, not just the tribal culture, but some of the issues which are coming to the asset mapping also identify domestic violence, alcohol, drug abuse, all of these different things that are still happening in our communities.

So, we're trying to look at a holistic approach and try to address it from zero to a hundred. What do they call it? Cradle to burial or whatever they call that. We're looking to address all these issues. And what we're finding out is also because a lot of our kids that don't learn the language, they get frustrated.

They get frustrated because they can't speak the language when other people are speaking it. They don't understand what they're talking about. I think that creates some wanting to just do drugs and alcohol. So, these are the things that we're trying to address. So, maybe early learning centers that is funded with federal state dollars, but giving it some flexibility to allow for those fundings to happen. I agree with accountability, but I think if we work something out that can be done also.

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations

OHS

I will say, and maybe this is a conversation that Todd and the regional office can support, but I think when we're talking about mixed delivery sources that you mentioned like braided and blended funding is certainly something that is allowable, so if there's an opportunity to probably have an expanded conversation on what that looks like and how the region can be in support of that design delivery system, I think is really important.

Todd Lertjuntharangool, Regional Program Manager

OHS

Certainly. And I encourage any programs because we've done this in the past too, where we've worked on projects like facility projects with the Office of Child Care and sometimes with other agencies. If that's something that folks are considering, we're always more than happy to join bigger group discussions so that we can support grant recipients with developing applications and requests that are responsive to both agencies and allow those programs to be considered for funding. We do that the right way so that we cost allocate appropriately and there isn't co-mingling of those federal sources.

Heather Wanderski, Director of Program Operations

OHS

Absolutely. I also want to acknowledge, I think one of the big themes that I heard running through quite a number of the testimonies today was around facilities and infrastructure. When I say infrastructure, I think also of transportation and just not only our physical infrastructure or buildings, but I heard the need for new construction, but I also heard the need for minor and major renovations to existing facilities as well as transportation. So, our mobile infrastructure as you will. So, I do want to say, and I hope it's not premature, that we know because we've done a lot of studies and we're able to see, OHS can see, that quite a number of our facilities across the United States that have federal interest in them are ones that I think the majority of them were built in the seventies.

So, have been around for quite some time. We know that upkeep and maintenance is certainly something that is desperately needed. I want to say that it's something that we are certainly advocating for. OHS in ACF gets to put forward as part of HHS's proposal to the Office of Management and Budget and then ultimately to the President what we would like to see. We make proposals up on what we'd like to see in the president's budget and one of the most recent ones has been a need to support our infrastructure, both as far as facilities, as well as our buses because we know that it is something that is really, really important. And as you all raised, is something that is desperately needed. It is something that we are advocating for internally and trying to push because we know it is something that is certainly needed, but it's not something that has actually come to fruition yet.

I do want to just refer back and let folks know that if you do have aging infrastructure, if you do need additional one-time support, you always have the opportunity to submit an application for health and safety funding to be able to support those needs. I'm not sure, Todd, if you want to talk a little bit more about that, but certainly that is always an opportunity. It's not a guarantee of funds, but certainly, it is something that we do consider as we have some potential offsets that we recapture during the year, and if we have funds left over at the end of the fiscal year, we're able to support our tribes in being able to meet those needs.

Todd Lertjuntharangool, Regional Program Manager

OHS

Thank you so much, Heather. I think that this is a very important topic and it's one that I think has been consistent over the years in working with tribal communities. Coming from a tribal community myself as well, I do know that a lot of our programs are operating out of old Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) buildings that were built in the 40's, 50's, or 60's in some cases. We

certainly want to support those programs in providing a safe, nurturing environment to teach their children. We don't receive an appropriation from Congress specifically for facilities, but we oftentimes can maneuver to provide support to programs who submit requests through one time. One thing I also want to encourage programs to look at, and this goes back really just around program operations, where occasionally we do see programs that unfortunately end up finishing a year with significant amounts of unobligated funding.

I want to encourage programs with potential excess funding to consider re-budgeting those funds to do things like renovations or to do things facility-related to support improving and making those facilities safe. In some cases, I'll admit too that we've seen programs, unfortunately, end their year with unobligated balances that would be significant enough to probably have built those new facilities. I do want to encourage programs to closely monitor their budget throughout the year so that, if budgets do need to be modified, we can do that and support utilizing those unobligated funds.

When programs do finish the year with unobligated funding, those funds can sometimes be utilized for what we often refer to as one-time funds, where programs can come in and submit funding requests for those costs that are not normal operations and what we deem as one-time. I encourage programs as you identify those needs to work with your Program Specialist to generate those requests and get those in so that they can be moved forward for consideration. Ending the year with unobligated funds is something that we work to not do, but in more cases than I'd like to see, we do have it happen. Specifically during this past year. I think this past year was an anomaly and I think all of us were pivoting almost week to week as new information came out. So, that created a lot of challenges, I think, in terms of operating and managing budgets.

In the year prior to COVID, we did some of our own internal assessments and in fiscal year 2018, our region ended that year with approximately \$30 million of unobligated funding. We really encourage programs to monitor those budgets closely, and again, work with your Program Specialist and OHS.

Again, those factors are different for every community. In a lot of cases, there really is no room to maneuver within those budgets, but in a lot of cases, there are. So, wherever there is room to maneuver, we certainly want to do that and make sure that those funds do meet with their intention and get services out to as many kids and families as we can. I think that's one thing that I certainly want to make sure that I communicate, and however we can support tribal leadership with making sure those programs are doing just that, we certainly look for your input and your guidance on how we can do that.

Gil Vigil, Executive Director for Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council, Inc. provided the session's closing prayer.