

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
COMMERCE
HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

February 6, 2025

The Honorable Dorothy A. Fink, M.D.
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Tala Hooban
Acting Director of the Office of Head Start
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
330 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Acting Secretary Fink and Acting Director Hooban:

I write to you out of concern for what is happening at Head Start programs in Wisconsin during the first few weeks of the Trump Administration. After the Administration ordered a pause on federal grants and loans, half of Wisconsin Head Start programs were locked out of systems they use to pay staff and keep operations running. A Head Start Center in Waukesha closed last week and left more than 250 families without childcare. Head Start programs in Wisconsin are continuing to have problems accessing their funds, which raises continued uncertainty about their ability to keep their doors open. This is unacceptable and requires your immediate attention.

There has been a long bipartisan history of providing federal funding for Head Start. For Fiscal Year 2024, as Chair of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations subcommittee, I was proud to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to provide \$12.3 billion for Head Start in the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 which was signed into law by President Biden on March 23, 2024. This carefully negotiated and bipartisan appropriation was a \$275 million increase over Fiscal Year 2023 levels, which was celebrated in both red and blue states.

Despite this history of strong bipartisan support and a clear Congressional directive, on January 28th President Trump's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released a memorandum (M-25-13) ordering a halt to all federal grants and loans. This memo caused widespread chaos and confusion across the federal government and impacted every state in our nation. While I understand the Trump Administration sought to clarify that they did not intend for Head Start to

be included in the funding freeze, the reality for Head Start across the country and in Wisconsin was an inability to access funding that had already been approved by Congress.

In the wake of this chaos, I met with and heard from Head Start programs across Wisconsin about the devastating impact the unlawful federal funding freeze had on their individual programs and in our communities. About half of the Head Start programs in Wisconsin experienced prolonged issues in accessing their funds. When attempting to draw down these federal dollars, these programs were met with only a response that the funding was ‘pending.’

Head Start is a critical lifeline for families. Disruptions in services impact entire communities – from the children who are unable to be in the classroom, to the parents who are unable to work due to the lack of child care, and Head Start professionals who love their jobs but are unable to be in their classrooms. I am also deeply concerned about the impact this chaos will have on the recruitment and retention of staff at Head Start centers. Head Start programs have continued to endure staffing shortfalls which has resulted in a reduction in slots for children and the number of families being served. Disruption and uncertainty only serve to compound staffing recruitment challenges.

The years before a child reaches kindergarten are among the most critical in their life. Research has shown participating in early childhood education programs helps better prepare children for their future and can result in better grades, higher school completion rates, reduction in the criminal justice system, and greater economic self-sufficiency as adults. This is why programs like Head Start enjoy broad bipartisan support and are so critical in ensuring that our youngest children will be prepared to succeed later in their educational careers. We know these long-term benefits make early childhood education programs a cost-effective way to strengthen society as a whole.

It is clear that funding issues persisted even after the Administration attempted to backtrack on the OMB memo and clarify that it did not apply to Head Start programs and following federal court orders that blocked the implementation of the memo. I am still hearing from Head Start grantees in Wisconsin who are continuing to have problems accessing their funds. I request your immediate attention to resolve any outstanding issues for Head Start payment systems.

Additionally, I ask you to provide the following:

- A full accounting of the directives your department and agency received from the Trump Administration regarding the initial freeze of federal funds in M-25-13 OMB memo.
- A full accounting of the directives received from the Trump Administration regarding the disbursement of federal funds after the clarification that the freeze did not apply to Head Start programs and after federal court orders were issued blocking implementation of the M-25-13 OMB memo.
- The number of Head Start grantees who were unable to access or experienced difficulties in accessing the Payment Management System on or after January 28 and the dates in which they were unable to access the system.

- Detail the reasons as to why these users were unable to access the Payment Management System.
- Information on what resources you need, funding or otherwise, to ensure these issues do not happen in the future.

I thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tammy Baldwin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "T" and "B".

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator