

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 11, 2026

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

RE: RIN number 0970-AD21

Dear Secretary Kennedy,

We write in opposition to the proposed rule, “Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Program Access,”¹ which rolls back provisions that would have raised most Head Start teacher pay by \$10,000 per year and required basic benefits for full-time Head Start staff, among other policy improvements.² This proposed rule will come at the expense of over 250,000 dedicated Head Start educators and staff and jeopardize Head Start services for the nearly 716,000 children and their families.³ As the Trump Administration continues to attack and undermine Head Start, we reject any policies that further destabilize the already fragile Head Start workforce and put services in jeopardy for low-income children and families.

For over 60 years, Head Start has provided young children with high quality early education, health and dental care, and healthy meals, while their families access referrals for job training, adult education, nutrition services, and housing. In rural communities, Head Start programs are often the only licensed child care option for working-class families.⁴ At a time when child care is increasingly unaffordable, working families rely on Head Start programs and their staff for affordable, high quality child care.

Despite Head Start’s essential role, early educators and staff receive poverty-level wages and programs face operating challenges related to the recruitment and retention of educators and staff. In 2024, the median annual salary for a Head Start preschool educator was \$42,308, and the median annual salary for an Early Head Start educator was \$36,575.⁵ During the 2023–2024 program year, the program experienced a staff turnover rate of 15 percent, making it difficult for some programs to maximize enrollment.⁶ Head Start programs reported three primary reasons for staff vacancies: chronically low compensation (71 percent), challenging classroom conditions (59 percent), and other opportunities with higher compensation (41 percent).⁷ As of November 2024, staff vacancies drove 71 percent of Head Start classroom closures.⁸ It is abundantly clear that there must be decisive action and funding to fairly compensate and support the Head Start workforce.

Unfortunately, the proposed regulations eliminate requirements for Head Start programs to raise wages, which will only worsen the conditions for the Head Start workforce and limit the program’s capacity to serve young children and their

¹ Restoring Flexibility To Support Head Start Program Access, 91 Fed. Reg. 25,842 (May 12, 2026) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pt. 1302).

² Kara Arundel, *HHS seeks to undo Biden-era Head Start Reforms*, K-12 Dive, May 19, 2026, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/trump-administration-seeks-to-undo-head-start-reforms/820410/>.

³ U.S. Dep’t of Health and Hum. Svcs., Admin. for Child. & Fams., *Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2024*, <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2024> (last updated Aug. 14, 2025).

⁴ Casey Peeks & Allie Schneider, *5 Things to Know About Head Start*, Ctr. For Am. Prog. (Apr. 16, 2025), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/5-things-to-know-about-head-start/>.

⁵ U.S. Dep’t of Health and Hum. Svcs., Admin. for Child. & Fams., *Head Start Investments by State*, <https://headstart.gov/archive/program-data/article/head-start-investments-state> (last updated: Apr. 1, 2026).

⁶ *U.S. Dep’t of Health and Hum. Svcs.*, *supra* note 3.

⁷ National Head State Association, *An Update on Head Start’s Ongoing Workforce Challenges*, (Jan. 2025), <https://nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/OngoingWorkforceChallengesJan2025.pdf>.

⁸ *Id.*

families. The proposed rule rolls back requirements for meaningful wage standards for staff. These include: providing education staff with wages comparable to public preschool teachers; promoting wage comparability across Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start staff; developing or updating a pay scale for all staff; and providing all staff with a salary sufficient to cover basic costs of living. Together, these wage regulations were estimated to increase most Head Start educators' annual pay by \$10,000 and set a path for all program staff to be paid a living wage.⁹

Head Start preschool teachers often earn less than similarly qualified preschool educators, which makes it more difficult for Head Start programs to attract and retain staff who are essential for early childhood development and success.¹⁰ Without pay parity and higher compensation, Head Start will continue to face challenges finding and retaining qualified staff and offering consistent, high-quality services for young children.

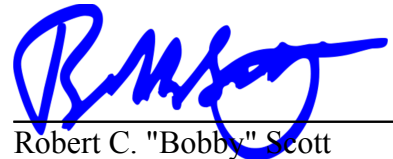
The proposed rule also removes requirements for Head Start programs to: provide full-time staff with health care coverage, paid leave, and behavioral health services; facilitate access to health care coverage for part-time staff; and facilitate access to certain other eligible benefits. In 2019, only 27 percent of early childhood education workers in center-based settings had health insurance through their employer, compared to nearly all K-12 educators having employer-sponsored coverage.¹¹ As of October 2022, only an estimated 29 percent of Head Start staff across 11 states and the District of Columbia were covered by enacted paid family leave laws.¹² Strengthening benefits packages is critical to improving staff well-being, recruitment, and retention. Competitive and basic benefits are essential for the Head Start workforce, who otherwise might leave for jobs with benefits or leave the early childhood field entirely.

At a time when we should be strengthening our support for the Head Start workforce, this proposal could lead to higher staffing shortages or turnover that undermines Head Start's ability to fulfill its mission in the future. We urge you to withdraw the proposed rule and instead pursue policies to provide fair compensation and benefits to the qualified, dedicated Head Start workforce who are essential to providing high-quality education and comprehensive services for young children and their families.

Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee on
Health, Education, Labor, and
Pensions



Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee on
Education and Workforce



Ritchie Torres
Member of Congress



Nancy Pelosi
Member of Congress

⁹ Kara Arundel, *Most Head Start teachers to see \$10,000 salary jump under new HHS rule*, K-12 Dive (Aug. 19, 2024) <https://www.k12dive.com/news/head-start-teachers-salary-benefits-rule-preschool/724536/>.

¹⁰ U.S. Dep't of Health and Hum. Svcs., *supra* note 5; U.S. Dep't of Lab., Bur. of Lab. Stats., Occupational Outlook Handbook: Preschool Teachers, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm> (last updated Aug. 28, 2025).

¹¹ Supporting the Head Start Workforce and Consistent Quality Programming, 88 Fed. Reg. 80,818 (No. 20, 2023) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pts. 1301-1305).

¹² *Id.*



Wesley Bell
Member of Congress



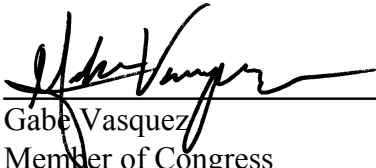
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



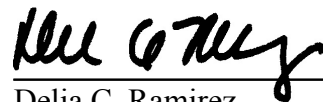
Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress



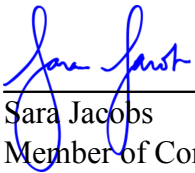
Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress



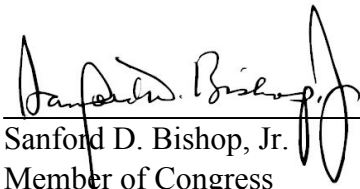
Delia C. Ramirez
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Sara Jacobs
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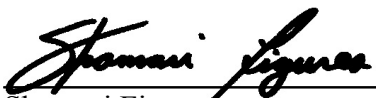
Frederica S. Wilson
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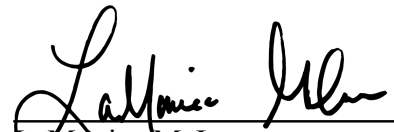
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Member of Congress



André Carson
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Shomari Figures
Member of Congress



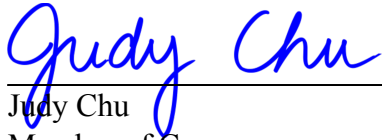
LaMonica McIver
Member of Congress



Doris Matsui
Member of Congress



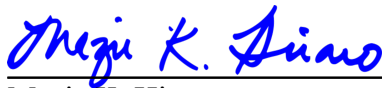
Pramila Jayapal
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Judy Chu
Member of Congress



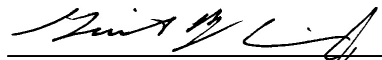
Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



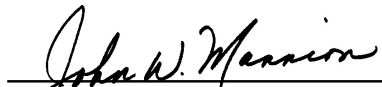
Mazie K. Hirono
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Gilbert Ray Cisneros, Jr.
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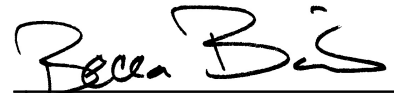
Richard J. Durbin
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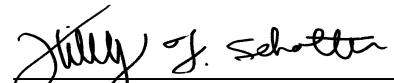
Chris Pappas
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Becca Balint
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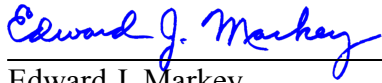
Hillary J. Scholten
Member of Congress



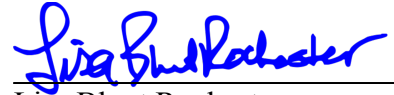
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Adenita S. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



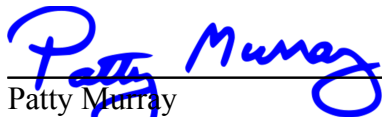
Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Senator



Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



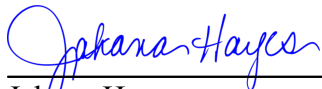
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



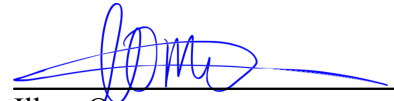
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Paul Tonko
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Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress



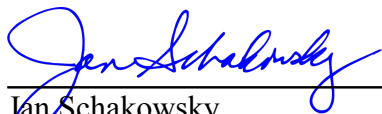
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Charles E. Schumer
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Angie Craig
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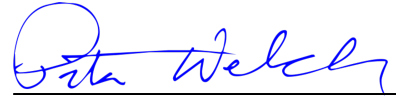
Andy Kim
United States Senator



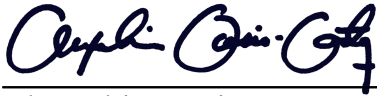
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress



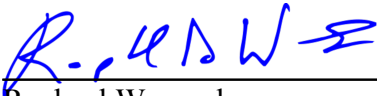
Peter Welch
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



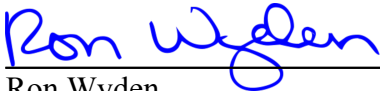
Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress




Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



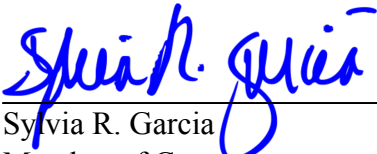
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Ron Wyden
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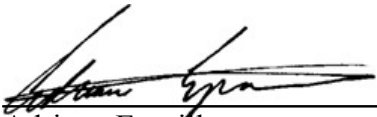
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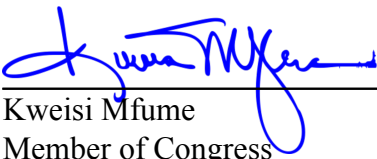
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Kweisi Mfume
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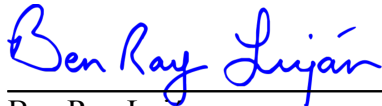
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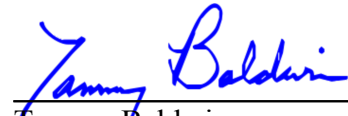
Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress



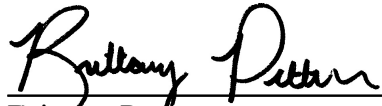
Summer L. Lee
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Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



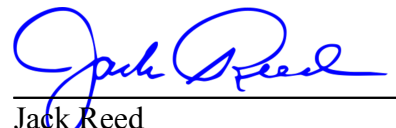
Brittany Petersen
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Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Robin L. Kelly
Member of Congress



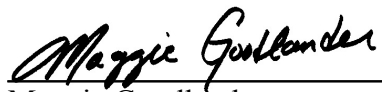
Jack Reed
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Martin Heinrich
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Gabe Amo
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Maggie Goodlander
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