

**Testimony offered by Sarah M. Greene
Chief Executive Officer of the National Head Start Association
before the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight
Subcommittee on Human Resources
February 19, 1998
Norwalk, Connecticut**

I. Greetings and Introduction

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the committee, representatives of the fine state of Connecticut, fellow witnesses, honored guests.

My name is Sarah Greene and I am the Chief Executive Officer for the National Head Start Association. It is indeed an honor and a pleasure for me to come before you today to testify on a topic as vital to the success of so many low income children and families, and as dear to me personally, as Early Head Start. I commend you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for demonstrating the foresight and commitment necessary to begin field hearings on this very important topic. In recognition of the Committee's schedule and in the interest of preserving time for additional testimony and follow-up questions, I will limit my oral testimony to a few brief remarks. I would ask that the Committee accept my detailed written testimony for the record.

II. Background

I come before the committee today to share some of my experiences gained through twenty-nine years of work with the Head Start program. I began as a Head Start teacher, then was promoted to director of a program, later became Executive Director of a Community Action Agency and Head Start Program, was selected as National Conference Chairperson, was elected President of the National Head Start Association and finally was appointed CEO for NHSA. My tenure with Head Start has given me an appreciation for the program gained from a variety of perspectives.

As CEO for the National Head Start Association, I speak today on behalf of over 800,000 children and their families, 150,000 staff, and nearly 2,200 Head Start programs across the country, including the 143 Early Head Start programs and the 22,000 families they currently serve. For those of you not familiar with the association, NHSA is the private, nonprofit membership organization that advocates for Head Start and supports all members of the Head Start community. The Association provides support for the Head Start family by advocating for provisions in law which will provide high quality services to children and their families, by providing extensive training and professional development services to all Head Start staff, and by developing and disseminating research, information and resources that impact child and family-oriented legislation and Head Start program delivery. Like the Head Start program, NHSA has a long and respected history of speaking for the interests of low-income children and families.

III. Head Start's History Serving Infants and Toddlers

We are all here today because we are interested in improving services to the very youngest members of our society. This has been an interest of Head Start since its inception.

Though Early Head Start came into being only recently, with the 1994 reauthorization of Head Start, the 1994 change in law merely formalized and extended services which the program was already providing to infants and toddlers and their families. Head Start has a long and rich history of working with infants and toddlers in Comprehensive Child Development Programs, Parent Child Centers, Migrant, and locally-designed Head Start programs. Head Start, it should be pointed out, recognized the benefits of providing services for infants and toddlers long before such thinking recently became popular. Over the years, programs have creatively integrated services for infants and toddlers into their daily routines. Today, we have a wonderfully promising Early Head Start program based on a sound body of research and developed by a bipartisan panel. The problem is that it is available to only a very few individuals.

IV. NHSA's Position - Head Start as Seamless Birth to Compulsory School Age Program

The National Head Start Association has pushed for many years to expand Head Start services to more children from birth to three years of age. Though estimates vary, it is clear that presently only a fraction of the children and families eligible to receive Early Head Start services are being served. What is clear is that a quality early childhood development experience is invaluable in terms of the child's ability later to become a productive member of society. Similarly, quality family development services are of inestimable value, especially in today's post-welfare reform environment, in preparing parents to return to or enter the workforce. Head Start is unique in its ability to provide services to both children and their families. It is high time that we took seriously the task of providing these services to infants and toddlers on a national level.

Therefore, NHSA is requesting two things of this Congress.

1. **Expand Early Head Start to allow each and every Head Start program which can demonstrate a community need and which has the ability to grow to serve infants and toddlers to serve that population.**
2. **Make Head Start a seamless birth to compulsory school age program; and**

There is no logic in applying arbitrary set-aside allowances to the Early Head Start program. The existing 5% EHS set-aside has served the purpose of allowing the program to be successfully demonstrated. But the time for demonstration is over and the time for expansion is here. From now on, the 5% allowance should serve as a minimum level for EHS funding. Beyond that, program growth should be limited only by the need for services to infants and toddlers in each community.

Additionally, there is no justification for separating Early Head Start and "regular" Head Start. This separation only adds complexity to service delivery and complicates transition efforts. If we make Head Start a seamless program, children and families initially, then society as a whole, will reap the rewards. This change is entirely in keeping with the revised performance standards released recently by the Head Start Bureau.

Is it strange to suggest that Early Head Start should be grown in such a potentially dramatic fashion? The Head Start community thinks not. While NHSA recognizes that growing the program beyond the existing 5%, or even beyond the 10% which has been suggested by some members of Congress, will require additional funding, research clearly and repeatedly demonstrates that money invested now in quality early childhood and family programs will pay large returns in future spending.

V. The Need for Additional Research

Since the early 1980s, NHSA has supported comprehensive research on the impact of Head Start. On numerous occasions, Congress has authorized funds for this purpose, only to fail to appropriate them. NHSA welcomes and demands additional research examining the impacts of Early Head Start (and Head Start) on low-income families and their children. At the same time, the Association cautions Congress not to delay expanding services to infants and toddlers simply to wait for Early Head Start-specific research. Longitudinal studies, by definition, take years and decades to complete. If we wait until Early Head Start studies are published before we grow the program, we will deny perhaps two more generations of low-income families and their children Head Start services. This simply is unfair. It is also unnecessary.

There is already a wealth of information pointing to tremendous benefits gained, by both families and the community at large, through providing quality early childhood and family development programs like Head Start. True, these studies were not all done using Head Start programs, but there is no reason to doubt that, given high quality, Head Start programs would achieve the same results.

If Early Head Start is already accountable to the same (and in some cases more stringent) standards as regular Head Start and if the programs are reviewed according to the same process, what possible justification could be given for waiting until further research is completed before expanding the Early Head Start program?

VI. Role of the Federal Government

The federal government has a huge responsibility in addressing the needs of low-income families and their children in the post welfare reform environment. Growth of Early Head Start, enough to serve each community's needs, should be encouraged in both law and practice. This will give low-income families the training and support they need to enter the workforce and at the same time provide for the educational, health, nutritional and social development needs of their children. Federal oversight must ensure that growth of the Early Head Start program occurs at a reasonable rate in order that quality is not adversely impacted. In addition, the federal government must continue efforts to convince states to work with Head Start - partner with the program to provide full-day, full-year services and employ Head Start as the model after which other early childhood programs are designed.

Recognizing the need for expansion of services to infants and toddlers, acknowledging the fact that services to infants and toddlers are more costly than services to older children, and understanding the research which clearly demonstrates that money invested in quality early child development programs today will result in tremendous savings in years to come, Congress must boldly move to fund Head Start at a level which will ensure high quality expansion. Providing quality early care for our nation's children is not an effort which can be done "on the cheap". Head Start, including services to infants and toddlers, must be funded at levels sufficient to ensure continuing high quality training and technical assistance, monitoring, and oversight. These quality assurances must be funded at the regional level as well as the federal level.

Head Start performance standards, licensing requirements and numerous other regulations have been developed over thirty plus years of history. They ensure a high quality program, but only if appropriate funding and oversight are provided. A quality program means that

low-income families and their children will adapt more easily and successfully into society. The first step in the process is for this Committee and others with jurisdiction over the Head Start program in both the House and the Senate to amend the Head Start Act to allow all Head Start programs to begin serving infants and toddlers. In an era of reduced federal spending, decisions to increase funding to Head Start to continue growing the program will be difficult if we look only at short term benefits. But if Congress focuses on the future, the answer is clear - Head Start funding must be increased to ensure continuing, high quality expansion.

VII. Conclusion

In closing, a genuine commitment to Early Head Start means that it will be necessary to provide ample staff at the Head Start Bureau and in regional offices throughout the country to handle growth and monitoring of the program. Additional spending will be required at the local level for facilities, staff, staff training, and other costs. We must keep in mind that the cost of serving each EHS child is higher than it is for an older child enrolled in regular Head Start. Clearly, we are talking real investment here. But let's ask ourselves three questions.

- Given what we already know about the importance of the early years, can we afford to do nothing?
- Knowing that an investment in children is an investment in the future, can we say no to those children currently unable to receive Head Start or Early Head Start services?
- Can we, as an enlightened nation, continue to talk about the importance of children without adequately funding those services proven to make a difference?

I leave the Committee to ponder these three questions.

Again, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of Early Head Start and I make myself available to the Committee now and at any time in the future to answer questions on this or any other matter.