

Millions face loss of day care and food as shutdown drags on

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Millions of children attending preschool as part of the federally funded Head Start program will have nowhere to go as the program runs out of funds while the government shutdown continues. Millions of other women and children are also expected to lose valuable nutritional and other health services as federal funds for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program run out.

Due to the complicated way Head Start and WIC are administered and funded, the programs did not immediately stop on October 1 with the government shutdown. But many states have already curtailed both programs, and advocates for women and children say the programs will run out of funding nationwide in the coming weeks as the federal shutdown continues.

On Monday, parents of thousands of children had to scramble for child care as Head Start programs in Georgia, Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, South Carolina and Missouri were closed after they were no longer able to access their funding because of the federal shutdown. The centers were reopened on Tuesday after a billionaire couple donated \$10 million to the programs.

National Head Start Association executive director Yasmina Vinci called the donation from Laura and John Arnold selfless, but warned that a real solution is needed.

“The bottom line, however, is that angel investors like the Arnolds cannot possibly offer a sustainable solution to the funding crisis threatening thousands of our poorest children,” Vinci said in a statement. “Our elected officials simply must find a fiscal solution that protects, preserves and promotes the promise that quality early learning opportunities like Head Start offer to nearly one million at-risk children each year.”

Head Start primarily provides preschool programs for

children ages three to five from low-income families. Since its founding in 1965 as part of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society campaign, it has served 30 million children. In 2007, the program was expanded to include homeless children.

In addition to preschool, the program also funds health and dental care and provides counselors and advocates for families.

Next to poverty, access to quality preschool and education is considered by experts to be a prime factor in determining a child’s later success in life. Head Start has never received the funding level that it needs to provide preschool to the millions of children living in poverty throughout the country, let alone make preschool and kindergarten a standard for all children.

Head Start, which is funded by less than \$8 billion annually, was hit hard by the sequester cuts, and 57,000 children were cut from the program as schools reopened this fall. Millions of eligible children are placed on waiting lists, some for years, and many never receive access to the program. In addition to providing preschool, most parents of children in the program depend upon it for child care so that they can go to work or school.

William Bevacqua is director of Action for Bridgeport Community Development, which runs the Head Start programs for 1,200 children in Bridgeport, Connecticut, that were closed on Monday. He told the local public radio station:

“Virtually all of the children in Head Start are children of working parents. And these are parents who are working in jobs that are not high-paying jobs. By the nature of the Head Start program, their eligibility is determined on their income. So these are folks who do not make a lot of money. They live from paycheck to paycheck, and they don’t have the capability to obtain

private child care services in the event that the Head Start program isn't available to them. So they're in a serious dilemma when we tell them that we can't accept their children."

In addition, the Bridgeport program had to send layoff notices to its 313 staff members. Advocates for Head Start also point out that the programs are often the only places children receive consistent breakfast and lunch. If they are closed, many parents will be forced to choose between leaving their child in unhealthy and unsafe conditions, or staying home and risk losing their jobs.

A software "glitch" in a computer program forced 13 Head Start programs in the Chicago area to shut down for a day because there were no federal workers available to fix it.

Woman, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Some 9 million women and their children are threatened to lose benefits under the federally funded Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, commonly known as WIC.

The program provides vouchers for healthy foods and infant formula as well as breastfeeding support and other necessities at clinics nationwide to low-income women who are pregnant or with children who are under five and are at risk for malnutrition.

Just prior to the government shutdown on October 1, the Department of Agriculture, which runs the program, was able to release some extra funding, which it is hoped will keep the program running until the end of the month. But several states have already stopped processing new applicants, and if the government shutdown continues, workers will soon be laid off.

Massively underfunded at just \$7 billion a year, millions of eligible women and their children are not able to obtain benefits; those who do usually run out of their benefits long before the end of the month. Already this year, WIC was cut nearly 5 percent as a result of the sequester and other cuts made by Congress and approved by the Obama administration.

The cuts in WIC are especially hurtful, taking place at the same time as the main federal food program,

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), better known as food stamps, is being drastically cut. Even if the federal shutdown ends, extra funding for food stamps approved in 2009 runs out November 1 and everyone receiving SNAP will see their benefits cut. A family of four, for example, will lose \$36 a month, or the equivalent of 11 meals a month.

On top of this, Congress is seeking to cut \$40 billion over the next 10 years from the program. Already grossly inadequate, food stamps provide a maximum of only \$2.30 per meal. At today's prices, a person would be hard pressed to buy inexpensive starches on that amount, let alone healthy foods such as vegetables, proteins, fruits, and dairy products.

At best, food stamps last a family two weeks, making it impossible for families to feed themselves for the month. For the balance of the month, families must rely upon food pantries and soup kitchens for meals, or do without.

While the Obama administration and Congress posture over who is to blame for the federal shutdown, both Democrats and Republicans agree that social programs that benefit the working class and poor will have to be drastically cut.

A few days' spending on the military, or on interest payments to the banks, is greater than the entire yearly allotment to both Head Start and WIC. Both programs together amount to less than a fraction of the \$85 billion monthly being given by the Federal Reserve to the Wall Street bondholders and brokerage houses. Yet both Obama and Congress agree that there is no money to continue these vital programs for working class and low-income women and children.



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