

# Head Start gets grant designation

Money will fund  
ESC program's  
operations for 5 years

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A program that provided comprehensive services to 960 children from low-income families last year has qualified for a grant award that doesn't require competing against other local agencies for funds.

The Economic Security Corporation of Southwest Area's Head Start program was recently notified its program is eligible for a noncompetitive grant award that will fund operations for five years.

The agency serves more than 1,000 children in Jasper, Newton, McDonald and Barton counties annually at no cost to parents. It operates on a \$7 million budget with 260 employees. More than 10,650 low-income individuals and 4,460 families benefited from the area ESC's services last year, according to the organization's annual impact report.

Leisa Harner, operations and development director for Head Start/Early Head Start, said the designation is a testament to the staff and leadership.

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The program recently completed both its federal monitoring and financial audit with no findings or hiccups.

“You don’t want to have to re-compete,” Harner said. “You want to have the best high-quality program, and every time you have a review, you want to pass with flying colors. Another example is our audit. Our agency hasn’t had a finding on their audit in over 30 years, and because it’s so responsible with government funds, that helps us as well. It’s not just our program but the agency that contributes to the quality.”

Throughout the pandemic, Head Start families have been struggling with unemployment, food and clothing. Harner reported a 25% increase in applications for assistance in all three of those categories. The COVID-19 crisis is also affecting children’s mental health.

“The highest need, and this is probably about 50% more than last year, is the need for mental health services,” Harner said. “We partner with College Skyline Counseling Services, and we make referrals to them, and we’ve seen a huge number of referrals to them because families are experiencing depression, anxiety, domestic violence. and unfortunately, we’ve had an increase in child abuse and neglect as well.”

Head Start is a federal program for pre-K children ages 3 to 5. Early Head Start is a federal program that provides comprehensive services to promote family and child development for prenatal moms and children from birth to 3 years old. Grants are administered by the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services.

## RENEWAL SYSTEM

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services established the Designation Renewal System to hold Head Start and Early Head

Start agencies accountable for high quality and comprehensive services, meeting program and financial requirements.

Harner said it’s rare for an agency to receive a noncompetitive grant because of all the hoops involved.

“It’s a long list of programs that re-compete, and it makes you feel good to know that your staff cares as much as you do about the families and making sure there’s high-quality services,” she said.

The Head Start program was designed to help break the cycle of poverty, providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs.

Harner said on average, individuals usually pay \$200 to \$225 per week for child care, but the ESC program is offered at no cost.

“When people come to review us, they can see that the program is making a difference,” she said. “I think everybody’s on the same page about wanting to keep our grant, and not having to re-compete is a blessing.”

Researchers from Washington University in St. Louis, the University of North Texas, the University of Melbourne and the Maryland Population Research Center studied a decade’s worth of U.S. data around the 2007-2009 Great Recession and published their findings in the journal *Family Relations* in December.

The study suggested that states with higher levels of Head Start enrollment experienced less poverty growth among families with children during the Great Recession. Harner said Head Start not only takes care of children but also allows families time to focus on their own needs such as employment or education.

“Everybody needs stability and predictable routines in their lives,” Harner said. “We provide a safe, nurturing, reliable place for children where they can learn and receive quality educational services. and I think any parent, regardless if you’re low income, middle or high, you want that for your child.”