

Vaccinating Head Start Staff: A Letter from the Director

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By Dr. Bernadine Futrell

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Dear Head Start and Early Head Start staff,

I am writing you to share an [important announcement](#) from the Biden administration introducing a new requirement for Head Start programs. All Head Start employees must be vaccinated against COVID-19. This step is essential as we work together to build back out of this pandemic and move toward fully in-person services.

The past 19 months have been difficult, and you, the Head Start workforce, have navigated them with strength. I am grateful to each and every one of you. Your leadership, commitment, and the work that you do every single day to support infants, toddlers, preschool-aged children, and their families has been and continues to be invaluable.

Health and safety have always been core components of the Head Start program. Taking this step of getting vaccinated by January 2022 is another way to make sure our children, families, and colleagues remain safe. A vaccinated workforce is a key component to building the Head Start program back and preparing for stronger, more vibrant opportunities ahead. The U.S Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has initiated rulemaking to implement this policy for Head Start programs.

The available COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. They prevent death and the most severe forms of the disease and keep those around us safe. Our Head Start children are not yet eligible for the vaccine. This means it's even more important that adults who partner with

families are fully vaccinated and the environments where children learn are safe and healthy. If you have questions about the COVID-19 vaccine, I encourage you to talk to your doctor, pharmacist, or local health officials. You can learn more about the vaccines from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). Find a COVID-19 vaccination center near you at www.vaccines.gov.

Mitigating Risk

Vaccination is a foundational part of the CDC-recommended, layered COVID-19 prevention strategies which help protect children and adults who are not fully vaccinated. Layered mitigation strategies include vaccines, masking, health screenings, physical distancing, ventilation, hand hygiene, and cleaning.

Effective July 20, 2021, HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra renewed his determination that a public emergency exists nationwide as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the initial declaration of the public health emergency in March 2020, it has been renewed every 90 days. The pandemic continues, and the presence of the Delta variant has increased anxiety.

Fortunately, we have more knowledge and tools available to us since the public emergency was first declared in March 2020. We have the COVID-19 vaccine, which is the safest and most effective way to protect individuals and the people they live and work with from getting COVID-19. We also understand the importance of layered mitigation strategies. Moreover, we have 19 months of experience, as exemplified by Head Start and Early Head Start programs during our fifth Head Start Forward webinar. [A Showcase of Grantee Best Practices on In-person Services](#) highlights successful experiences and strategies for serving children in person during the pandemic.

Moving Toward Providing Fully-In Person Services

As you continue the critical work you do each day, please be reminded of the guidance the Office of Head Start (OHS) has issued as part of the [Head Start Forward campaign](#).

The Head Start Forward campaign was developed in real-time to give programs clarity and guidance in a timely manner so they could plan and make decisions, while ensuring local health conditions remain the primary decision-making factor. Materials include on-demand webinars, guidance, and other resources OHS has developed to address areas of immediate concern to programs. They focus on eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment, and attendance (ERSEA), mental health and staff wellness, health and safety considerations, and equity.

- OHS's expectation for the fall is that **programs are working toward full enrollment and fully in-person comprehensive services, contingent upon the CDC, state, and local health department guidance, and in consideration of local school districts' decisions.** Programs should review available guidance and continue working with their Health Services Advisory Committee (HSACs), mental health, and child care health consultants. Keep your community conditions in mind to make decisions that best support the safety of staff, children, and families.
- **The use of virtual and remote delivery of program services for children, while not a permanent program option, is an interim service delivery strategy** programs may use during an emergency or disaster. During the ramp-up period, programs have increased flexibility that extends through December 31, 2021. During this time, programs may deliver virtual or remote services to some enrolled children and families, if local health conditions necessitate or if the program is meeting individualized needs. This includes options such as providing a combination of in-person and virtual services for individual children, if necessary, to meet health and safety guidelines. Programs are reminded that they must communicate with their Regional Office about the continued use of virtual or remote services for enrolled children during fall of 2021.
- **The "full enrollment" process will continue to be suspended through the end of calendar year 2021.** OHS expects all programs to work toward full enrollment and full comprehensive services, contingent upon CDC, state, and local health department guidance, and in consideration of local school district decisions. In September 2021, OHS will begin reviewing monthly enrollment in the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES) and discuss program plans for moving to full enrollment.
- Programs **should not request a temporary enrollment reduction if they are unable to serve their full enrollment in the fall.** Programs do not need to request a temporary enrollment reduction if they are providing a combination of in-person and virtual services to children during the ramp-up period in fall of 2021.

We at OHS will continue working with the CDC to monitor conditions throughout the fall and will update expectations as necessary.

I thank you in advance Head Start family, for making this commitment and for answering the call to lead, as you have many times before. During this challenging time, I encourage you to think about sustainable ways of prioritizing your health and wellness and that of your team. Keep yourself strong and healthy so you can do what Head Start does best: engage, nurture, teach, and support children and families face-to-face. Sleeve up and mask up, Head Start family, as it's the best way we can care for and protect each other.

We are in this together and we are stronger together. Thank you for your work on behalf of children and families.

/ Dr. Bernadine Futrell /

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