



NATIONAL INDIAN HEAD START DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION
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“FUNDING FOR QUALITY AND EXPANSION - FY 2010” HHS AND INDIAN HEAD START

**Written Testimony of
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Brief Introduction. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) with regard to the Department of Health and Human Services FY 2010 Budget. The Head Start/Early Head Start programs are extremely important to Indian country, providing critically important family and social services, as well being on the frontline in the preservation of tribal culture and language. Only about 16% of the age-eligible Indian child population is enrolled in Indian Head Start. Of the approximately 562 federally recognized Tribes, only 188 have Head Start programs funded through 154 grantees in 27 states. That means 374 Tribes do not have Head Start available for their age-eligible children. These programs employ approximately 6,627 individuals and 331 contracted people: 3,191 of these employees are either former or current Head Start/Early Head Start parents and 86 people under contract are either former or current parents. There were 34,901 volunteers, 22,942 of which are parents, working in the American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start programs.

For the last several years, until FY 2009, the President has proposed flat funding for Head Start. The effect of these proposals, once you factor in the effects of inflation running during this period between 2.5 and 3%, is that Head Start has had a purchase power cut of 12 – 15% since 2002, inflicting substantial damage on the program. NIHSDA is heartened to see that the President has proposed a \$149 million increase for FY 2009, but believe that this still falls short of the amount needed to match the current inflation rate and so is another cut. Although it falls short, the amount is sufficient to trigger the special expansion funds for Indian programs that Congress provided for in the Head Start Act reauthorization in order to redress HHS’ practice in recent years of diverting funds slated for Indian and other priority programs and using them for non-priority base funding. We request that there be transparency in the process whereby those special expansion dollars are quantified and distributed. At last years budget consultation, HHS leadership made a solemn and public promise to provide a written policy explanation for why HHS had been diverting funds out of the priority set-aside to non-priority programs. HHS broke that promise and never provided that explanation. With the reauthorization of the Head Start Act, the need for that explanation is lessened, nonetheless NIHSDA would like an explanation for why HHS broke its promise.



Identify top budget specific issues. NIHSDA's two top priorities are very simple. First, an overall increase in funding for Head Start that substantially exceeds the rate of inflation, so that the program achieves a real increase and, indeed, so that ground that has been lost due to several years of flat funding can be recovered. It is critically important that some of that funding be dedicated to quality improvement, not just expansion. Second, as increases are provided, NIHSDA would like transparency in the process whereby the amount and distribution of the special expansion funds for Indian Head Start are determined. Historically, HHS has not been forthcoming on how Indian Head Start is funded. Only through the reauthorization did Congress and the Head Start community learn that HHS diverted hundreds of millions of dollars out of the priority set-aside which is used to fund Indian Head Start, in order to expand funding for non-priority programs. In reaction to those revelations, Congress provided for special expansion funds for Indian Head Start.

NIHSDA would like to highlight that the Head Start Act reauthorization provided for additional tribal consultation, including with regard to program standards and with regard to addressing quality improvement and expansion.

Identify policy and legislative specific issues. Indian Head Start is the most important and successful Federal program focused on the dire circumstances faced by all too many Native children, principally by addressing health, education, family and community needs in a holistic manner that is akin to traditional Native learning styles and cultural practices. Indeed, Indian Head Start is on the frontline in the preservation of Native language and culture, which have proven to be key elements in Native student confidence and success in later years. **In making the policy and legislative actions needed to properly fund Indian Head Start, the following should be considered:**

- **Indian reservations suffer from depression-era economics, with terrible crime and health statistics to match.** The Indian reservation poverty rate is 31.2%, nearly three times the national average of 11.6%. The Indian reservation rate is comparable to the national rate at the height of the Great Depression. The Indian reservation unemployment rate is approximately 50%, ten times the national unemployment rate of 5.2% (and on some reservations the rate is 80-90%). When you consider that 31.2% of Indian families live in poverty and that high levels of poverty bring significant problems to reservations where few resources are available, a need arises for Head Start to address chronic community social issues.
- **Most Indian communities are remotely located** and there are no other resources besides Head Start to address the special needs of young Indian children who, on a daily basis, must deal with the conditions described above.
- **The synergistic confluence of all of these negative factors is overwhelming.** Indian Head Start may be the best Federal program in place that actually addresses the dire situation in much of Indian country, but more resources are needed.
- **The Federal Government has a Trust Responsibility to Indian Peoples, especially in the Education Area.** The Constitution of the United States, treaties, federal statutes, executive orders, Supreme Court doctrine and other agreements define the Federal government's trust obligation to protect the interests of Indian peoples, especially in the



- **When it came to Native issues, the Federal government historically has displayed a keen understanding of the central importance of our ancient ways, beliefs, culture and language to tribal unity and strength and for years made every effort to destroy those beliefs.** This effort to kill our minds and our spirits failed, but not without first doing great damage. Indian languages are in retreat. Native students perform far below their potential. Federal paternalism has created a crippling mentality for some in Indian country that is founded on poor self-esteem. Extraordinarily, the Native spirit has endured and, in recent years, grown stronger. Much of the harm inflicted upon Native peoples is being undone, to the extent it can be undone, by Native people themselves. *And yet the resources needed to complete this great task can only be found with the originator of the harm – the Federal Government.*
- **It is a mark of America’s unique character that the racist policies of the past have been replaced with more humane policies. For example, Title VII of the NCLB provides:** *“It is the policy of the United States to fulfill the Federal Government’s unique and continuing trust relationship with and responsibility to the Indian people for the education of Indian Children. The Federal Government will continue to work with local educational agencies, Indian tribes and organizations, postsecondary institutions, and other entities toward the goal of ensuring that programs that serve Indian children are of the highest quality and provide for not only the basic elementary and secondary educational needs, but also the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of these children.”* (NCLB, Section 7101)

Conclusion. NIHSDA looks forward to working closely with HHS. We share your commitment to making improvements in the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. We also share your commitment to improve OHS’s management and oversight responsibilities, thereby improving the overall quality of Head Start services. Due to the many unique needs of Indian country, and in the context of the Federal trust responsibility, we ask that you work closely with NIHSDA in identifying which changes in the budget and proposals DHHS will be making to the Head Start Act.