



June 10, 2026

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services
200 Independence Ave SW Washington,
DC 20201

Ms. Megan Campbell
Supervisory Child Care Program
Specialist Office of Child Care,
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services
200 Independence Ave SW Washington,
DC 20201

RE: Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Program Access (RIN) 0970-AD21

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

As members of the Democratic Women's Caucus, we write in strong opposition to the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) proposed rule, (RIN) 0970-AD21, "Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Program Access," which would repeal the higher wages and improved benefits established for Head Start staff in 2024.¹ Given that childcare and preschool providers often earn poverty-level wages,² these proposed cuts will further worsen the program's staffing challenges and deteriorate workers' quality of life. Without an adequate workforce, Head Start cannot continue to provide low-income families with accessible education, care, and social services. **Proposed rule (RIN) 0980-AD21 would be a devastating blow to an already failing care infrastructure and it would weaken the economic stability of women, families, and care workers alike amidst the Republican affordability crisis.** Instead, we urge the Department to prioritize funding for Head Start staff to bolster wages and benefits for the care workforce.

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2024). *Supporting the Head Start workforce and consistent quality programming*. *Federal Register*, 89(161), 67720–67805. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/08/21/2024-18279/supporting-the-head-start-workforce-and-consistent-quality-programming>

2 NPR. (2024, October 22). *These teachers often live in poverty. A pay raise could help—but there's a cost*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/22/nx-s1-5144162/biden-preschool-head-start-teacher-poverty>.

Childcare is an essential, high-demand service that is increasingly inaccessible for many families. Childcare programs are experiencing widespread closures across the country, hindering families' ability to achieve financial security and fully participate in the economy. Nationwide 14.8 million children under age 5 may need childcare. Yet, only 10.8 million formal spots exist.³ Since its founding, Head Start has tried to fill that gap, serving around 40 million children and their families.⁴ However, Head Start remains underfunded and unable to fully meet the growing need. These factors made the lack of access to affordable childcare the leading reason women left the workforce in 2025.⁵ When women and caregivers leave the workforce, it costs the economy \$172 billion in lost earnings annually.⁶ Proposed rule (RIN) 0980-AD21 will further limit the number of formal childcare spots and add to economic losses as women continue to be pushed out of the workforce.

As the costs of housing, groceries, and healthcare continue to skyrocket due to the Republican affordability crisis, proposed rule (RIN) 0980-AD21 will also push childcare workers out of the workforce—disproportionately impacting women, who make up nearly the entire Head Start teaching workforce.⁷ This proposed rule will lower their already low-wages and rip away their healthcare. They will be forced to find better paying jobs outside of Head Start to keep up with rising costs, which will worsen the workforce shortage and leave families with less or no options at all.⁸

Specifically, proposed rule (RIN) 0970-AD21 would overturn the HHS 2024 final rule, *Supporting the Head Start Workforce and Consistent Quality Programming*, which improved wage and benefit requirements for the Head Start workforce. These improvements included an updated pay scale for all staff and higher salaries that were comparable to preschool teachers and sufficient to cover basic costs of living by 2031.

3 Bipartisan Policy Center. (2026, February 5). *National and state child care data overview*. _
<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/article/state-child-care-data-2025-update>

4 National Head Start Association. (2026). *2026 State & national fact sheets*. National Head Start Association.
<https://nhsa.org/resource/state-national-fact-sheets/>.

5 Liu, J. (2026, February 2). *Women say caregiving and child care costs are the no. 1 reason they quit the workforce last year, according to New Data*. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/02/02/catalyst-data-caregiving-is-no-1-reason-women-left-workforce-in-2025.html>.

6 Gibbs, H., & Peeks, C. (2026, April 29). *America's licensed child care deserts*. Center for American Progress.
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-licensed-child-care-deserts/>.

7 Sullivan, E. T. (2022, May 18). *"We're sounding the alarm bells": Head start report underscores workforce crisis*. EdSurge. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2022-05-18-we-re-sounding-the-alarm-bells-head-start-report-underscores-workforce-crisis>.

8 Andara, K., Khalique, A., Natalie Baker, Estep, S., Murphy, N., & Thyagarajan, A. (2026, January 20). *A year in review: How the trump administration's economic policies made life less affordable for Americans* - Center for American Progress. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/a-year-in-review-how-the-trump-administrations-economic-policies-made-life-less-affordable-for-americans/>.

The new regulations also expanded benefits including healthcare coverage and paid leave.⁹ These policies were crucial steps toward strengthening our childcare workforce.

This proposed rule is the latest in a series of attacks by this administration on our nation's childcare infrastructure. Under the Trump administration, the U.S. childcare infrastructure has suffered from billions of dollars in funding delays under the Trump administration in 2025.¹⁰ In May, your Department finalized the proposed rule *Restoring Flexibility in the Child Care and Development Fund* (CCDF) (RIN 0970-AD20), which overturned critical protections to keep childcare costs affordable for families.¹¹ In January, Trump ordered the freeze—currently being disputed in the courts—of \$10 billion in federal child care and family assistance funding for California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York as the administration sends officials to investigate unsubstantiated claims of fraud.¹² We refuse to stand by while your Department rips childcare and early childhood education away from women and families.

Proposed rule (RIN) 0970-AD21 does nothing to support working women, families, childcare workers, or early childhood education teachers. Rather, it will worsen our country's failing childcare infrastructure, push women out of the workforce, and cost our economy billions. We remain committed to building an affordable future for all women and families, where childcare is not financially detrimental. That is why we strongly oppose proposed rule (RIN) 0970-AD20 and demand your Department prioritize funding for Head Start.

Sincerely,

9 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2026). *Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Program Access: Proposed rule, RIN 0970-AD21* (Proposed May 12, 2026).

<https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2026-09383.pdf>.

10 Romm, T. (2025, July 23). *Trump administration illegally withheld head start funds, watchdog finds* - *The New York Times*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/23/us/politics/trump-head-start-government-accountability-office.html>.

11 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2026). *Restoring flexibility in the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)*. *Federal Register*, 91(90).

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/05/12/2026-09382/restoring-flexibility-in-the-child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf>

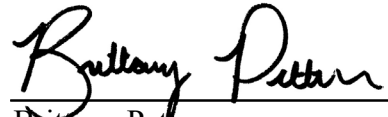
12 Reuters. (2026, January 7). *Trump freezes over \$10 billion in childcare, family assistance funds to 5 U.S. states*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-administration-freezes-some-child-care-funds-five-states-2026-01-07/>



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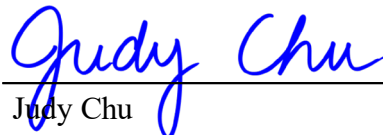
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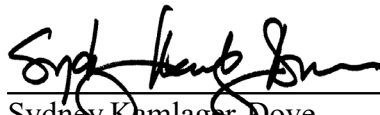
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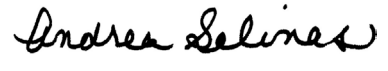
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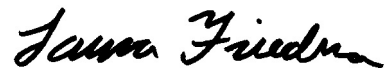
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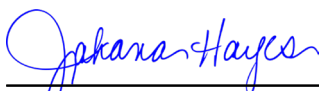
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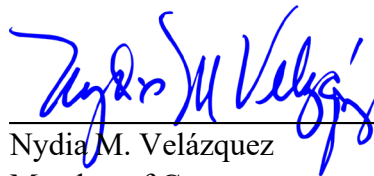
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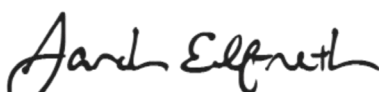
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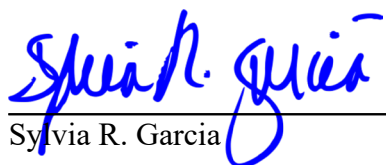
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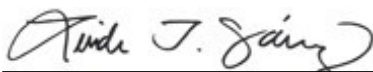
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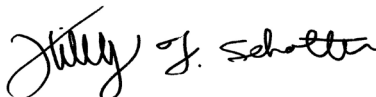
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