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Head Start Funding Slashed in USVI Amid Enrollment Drop, DHS Plans Appeal

The Virgin Islands' Head Start program will see its funding cut to \$8.3 million due to falling enrollment. With numbers 20.5% below capacity, DHS Commissioner Averil George says the department plans to appeal the decision before the June 19 deadline.

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Funding for Head Start in the Virgin Islands has been cut by over \$2 million due to under-enrollment in the program, lawmakers on the Committee on Health, Hospitals, and Human Services learned on Tuesday. “The funded enrollment and grant funding will be reduced to 637 and \$8,304,673 respectively,” said Department of Human Services Commissioner Averil George.

Prior to the reduction, Head Start was funded based on a count of 794 students. Current enrollment, however, is 631 students, 20.5% below the funded capacity. “This has been an ongoing challenge for Head Start programs across the nation since reopening from the COVID pandemic,” Ms. George noted.

“The reduction is effective immediately but the program has the option to appeal this decision, and we plan to do so,” Ms. George explained. The appeal is due by June 19th.

Head Start “promotes the school readiness of children from low-income families.” It “gives program-eligible children who might otherwise remain at home and unengaged, a head start in life by providing them with a high-quality, comprehensive early childhood education,” explained Ms. George. VIDHS has been the territory’s Head Start grantee for over fifty years. The department is expected to apply for “competitive federal grants every five years.”

Currently, VIDHS is in its final year of the grant, and it is due to reapply in 2026. Therefore, “the negative impact of this reduction on the final year of our five-year grant is expected to be minimal,” Ms. George says.

Notwithstanding the minimal impact, “we are not standing still in response to these changes,” George added. “Rather, we are actively working to position the program for long-term stability and success.” She clarified that “this funding was cut based on enrollment, not what is happening on the national level.”

Despite waning numbers, which are also the result of an exodus of families after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, VIDHS is working diligently to reopen several Head Start facilities that required renovation. The Cruz Bay Head Start is 100% complete with 17 students awaiting its September 2nd reopening. The facility in Bolongo is 64% complete and set to open in December. August and September opening dates have been set for others like the Head Start facility in Concordia and Lindberg Bay.

VIDHS is also challenged with mounting vacancies within the Head Start program. According to the program’s administrator, Masikia Lewis, there is a need for 7 assistant teachers and 4 teachers. Several are federally funded. Senator Marvin Blyden wanted to know what is being done to “assure that we onboard individuals for those vacancies.”

The department continues to advertise roles, and while some applications have been received, “applicants [have] to be vetted by the Head Start regional board,” Ms. George explained.

Regarding increasing enrollment numbers, Senator Kurt Violet offered a suggestion, noting that children from families receiving SNAP and TANF benefits are eligible for Head Start. He asked, “Is it mandated by Human Services that they must enroll in the Head Start program?” Ms. Lewis responded, “There's no mandate that they must enroll in any of the pre-K programs, specifically Head Start.”

“I think it would be wise for us to look at making sure that those students who are receiving SNAP and TANF, that we're able to provide them with that early childhood education,” recommended Violet.

VIDHS continues public outreach. “We also go on radio shows. We do our social media blasts, but the team's presence at every event for the community has been tremendous,” said Commissioner George.

