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Summer Head Start Program Employees Have Yet to be Paid; D.H.S. Calls Delay Unacceptable But Provides No Timeframe for Payment

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Preparing a daycare facility in the Covid-19 era before children return to class. By. GETTY IMAGES

Head Start teachers and support staff who worked through the summer in a federally-funded program that sought to enhance the skills of children transitioning from Head Start to Kindergarten, as well as children with disabilities, have not been paid, the V.I. Dept. of Human Services, which runs the Head Start program locally, confirmed to the Consortium after teachers contacted the publication.

At least one educator who worked the summer program expressed extreme frustration, stating that the Covid-19 pandemic had stressed her finances and that she needed every dollar to stay afloat.

The program in question was developed as a support to children transitioning from Head Start to Kindergarten who, because of the pandemic, were at home and could not interact physically.

D.H.S. said it saw the program as an "enrichment opportunity for the VI" separate from the regular Head Start Program grant. "The differences in funding types presented multiple unforeseen challenges to disbursement of timely payments," D.H.S. said.

The funds from the federal government have already been provided. It is the local government's process that has lagged behind and bottlenecked the process, leaving employees without pay for months.

D.H.S. Commissioner Kimberly Causey-Gomez sympathized with the employees and criticized the government process as unacceptable. The commissioner's comments indicate that D.H.S. had done its part, but other arms of government have so far failed to do the necessary work to compensate the employees.

"When learned of the lag in timely payments, D.H.S. began immediately working across agencies to resolve. We feel the frustration of our employees. This cumbersome process is not acceptable," Ms. Causey-Gomez said. "We are working diligently with our government infrastructure and processes so that the money may be drawn and paid out in a manner that does not result in errors involving the regular salary and deductions of these particular staff."

The commissioner said the department remains "extremely grateful for the caring Head Start staff who always go above and beyond for the benefit of children and families enrolled in our Program." She also reiterated that the summer program "was a new aspect to the VI Head Start Program due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, something we had not done before and therefore infrastructure for timely processing had to be built and continues to be built."

Even so, the commissioner did not provide a timeframe for payment, but said D.H.S. would not rest until the matter is resolved. "DHS remains deeply committed to the Head Start students, families and staff and will continue to problem solve until successful resolution is made in the matter," the department said in a statement to the Consortium.

The VI Head Start program has been providing comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children ages three to five and families since 1966. D.H.S. said Head Start services and resources are designed to foster stable family relationships, enhance children's physical and emotional well-being, and establish an environment to develop strong cognitive skills. The transition from preschool to elementary school imposes diverse developmental challenges that include requiring the children to engage successfully with their peers outside the family network, adjust to the space of a classroom, and meet the expectations the school setting provides.