WEST HAVEN (May 30, 2013) – Urging parents and service providers to get the word out about the value of pre-school programs like Head Start, U.S. Cong. Rosa DeLauro, D-3, came to the West Haven Community House on May 29 and joined West Haven Mayor John Picard and local educators in decrying federal sequestration budget cuts.

The cuts are resulting in the elimination of 19 Head Start pre-school program slots and two teachers from the Head Start program in West Haven that is operated by the West Haven Community House, a private not-for-profit agency headquartered on Elm Street.

Cong. DeLauro came to the Community House and heard the stories of clients and staff who are being affected by the budget cuts.

They included one Head Start mother, Talticia Holguin, whose daughter Amaya, 4, has benefitted and looks forward to attending her class each day. “I’m glad my daughter is here,” she said. “Since she’s been in Head Start, she has been more outgoing and she learns a lot.”

Holguin continued, “I do the best I can. But I’m a parent, not a teacher and my daughter now has the advantage of being with a teacher instead of being bored at home. I know it’s good for her when she wakes up in the morning and asks me what day it is, and if it’s a weekday, she says, ‘Good, I have school today.’”

That latter comment prompted Mayor Picard to point out the child’s recognition of the Head Start program as “a school” and in a positive light. “I just came from a ceremony recognizing high school Advanced Placement (AP) honorees and my point is the more children who have the opportunities and options that pre-school gives them, the better.”
Mayor Picard refuted questions about the program’s effectiveness. “The data supports Head Start programs, and we need to use the data to prevent cuts to educational opportunities for young children. Head Start is part of the educational continuum and imagine what that effect is over time – education is building, from pre-school to elementary, to high school to college. There’s a cumulative effect but you only see that effect after a progression of time.”

Another client is Yolanda Torres, a local grandmother with one granddaughter and two other children in the Head Start program in West Haven who also serves on the Parents Advisory Board. “My granddaughter had a speech issue that has been worked on here,” and Torres praised the Community House staff for helping the family address the speech issue and only half-jokingly suggesting that due to the early start in pre-school for her granddaughter, “maybe by 16 she’ll be in college.”

One Head Start single mother who also holds down a job at the Community House is Arianis Marte, who works mornings at the Community House receptionist desk, using her bi-lingual talents in Spanish and English to accommodate the increasing number of Spanish speaking families enrolling their children in the Head Start program.

Marte also works some afternoons in the agency’s child care program, and also will be attending Gateway Community College to study nursing in January. Without the Head Start pre-school opportunity, Marte said she would have to become a stay-at-home mother, unable to work because she can’t afford child care.

“If my daughter gets pulled out of Head Start, what am I going to do?” she asked.

Reacting, Cong. DeLauro said, “These comments are all real. Our parents and grandparents here make great points.

“We have to get the word out now that this is not something that is happening five years down the road,” DeLauro said. “I strongly believe that when people hear these stories, they will react.”

The long-time Congresswoman from New Haven also noted that although she supports federal budget deficit reductions and acknowledged that the deficit is coming down partly
as a result of the newly enacted sequestration cuts, “there are ways to do this without affecting education.”

That position was strongly seconded by Mayor Picard, who said, “We can do things [budget cuts] better, and not by across-the-board cuts but the right way by sitting down and doing it right.”

DeLauro pointed a finger at members of Congress who believe that programs like Head Start do not work and are not worth federal expenditures.

“No [in Congress and elsewhere] would challenge the concept and effectiveness of Head Start. But I believe that Head Start has and continues to have the capacity to change the lives of young children – especially in these times of a tough economy for young families trying to stretch a dollar.

“Head Start is a child development program, not a child warehousing program” like some critics contend,” she continued.

“It’s time we slowed down the folks who are doing this and say to them that others deserve the same chance” as more affluent families who can afford it – which is to send their kids to pre-school.

“Instead of saying, ‘we cannot afford this,’ we need to instead say, ‘we cannot afford not to do this,’” DeLauro concluded.

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