Pre-school provider community reacts negatively to the Head Start pre-school program budget cuts

West Haven Community House will be losing 19 Head Start slots

WEST HAVEN (May 21, 2013) – When the West Haven Community House’s new fiscal year begins on July 1, 2013, a total of 19 Head Start pre-school program slots for at-risk children ages 3- and 4-years-old and two teacher positions from the Head Start program will be eliminated.

According to Abel Padro, Head Start program director at the Community House, the most recent figures indicate that Connecticut in total is losing about $3 million in funding affecting 430 Head Start and toddler program slots as a result of the federal sequestration budget cuts, “with probably more to come.”

The Community House’s Head Start program currently operates nine classrooms at its Elm Street location serving 163 at-risk city pre-school children ages 3- and 4-years-old.

The West Haven program has been licensed by the state of Connecticut and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children for more than 25 years and offers full-day, full-year programs on a sliding scale fee basis for the children of parents who are working or going to school.
Padro made his remarks at a public meeting held at the Community House on May 29 attended by Head Start program parents, board, administrative and teaching staff, as well as U.S. Cong. Rosa DeLauro, West Haven Mayor John Picard, West Haven Schools Pre-School Supervisor Judith Antignani and other providers including Jean Vitale, coordinator of the West Haven Family Resource Center.

Nationally, Cong. DeLauro said, sequestration cuts will result in 700,000 children denied Head Start opportunities in their respective communities.

Local reaction was universally negative. Antignani noted, “We work intricately with the Head Start program in making sure as many at-risk children as possible get a good start in preparing for kindergarten and in receiving the services they need” including health, dental and nutritional support.

Regarding the elimination of 19 Head Start pre-school slots and two teachers from the Head Start program in West Haven, longtime Community House employee Viola Waldo, Family Services Manager, said, “It’s unfortunate because that is 19 children who won’t benefit from the Head Start experience.”

Jay Brennan, a Community House board member and retired teacher and school principal, said she’s seen it all too often – how children get behind early in their education and never catch up. “I’ve seen kids struggle in kindergarten and then go into first grade without strong fundamentals,” a situation that can snowball so that by high school, “some may give up and drop out.

“When I think of these 19 kids being cut out of the Head Start program, I think of 19 additional struggling students who may remain behind, possibly for the rest of their lives,” Brennan said.

Antignani, Padro and Waldo were among those who pointed out the many social benefits that pre-schools gain when exposed to a quality program. “When a child joins Head Start,
their whole family joins Head Start,” Waldo noted, adding that families receive other services including diapers, food, books, and many families, and that learning often extends into the home, especially those where English is spoken as a second language.

Antignani said, “I remain concerned about the loss of social and emotional development for these children.” The state tends to emphasize the “educational piece” of pre-school, she said, “but we also see that the kids without a pre-school experience lack critical social and emotional skills.”

Cong. DeLauro added that her own granddaughter has had a positive overall emotional change since attending pre-school. “She was once very disruptive, but has gotten so much better,” DeLauro noted.

Brennan noted that middle and upper class resident may not realize how critical the need is, especially for poor, young families.

“Along CT’s affluent ‘Gold Coast,’ all is well,” Brennan said. “But then you get to Bridgeport, New Haven, Waterbury” and other distressed regions and “you suddenly realize that life isn’t so wonderful for many.” Head Start remains a means to help many of these families, she said.

Padro added that “building relationships” is also strategically important. “If we start chopping the program here and cutting it there, we then lose the opportunity to build positive relationships with the child and the family.”

Vitale agreed, noting the importance of “building relationships with parents, some of whom may not have had good experiences themselves in school.” Building these relationships with parents during the two years of their child’s pre-school experience “can help offset their own less than positive experiences,” thus having a great impact on the entire family going forward, Vitale said.

It is feared that in addition to the cuts currently paring the Head Start program, another round of cuts in 2014 will require similar paring of services, officials and providers agreed.

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