

Prepared Statement of Yvette Sanchez, Executive Director, the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association

Thank you Chairman Kildee, Ranking Member Castle and honorable members of the Early Childhood and Secondary Education Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit testimony and contribute to this hearing on Head Start as you begin the reauthorization process.

It is critical that an open discussion take place regarding the changes that are being proposed for Head Start Reauthorization and that particular attention be paid to some of our nation's most vulnerable children. I submit this testimony on behalf of the 28 Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs that are members of the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association and the parents and children they serve.

Our message to you regarding reauthorization of Head Start is threefold. First, we urge you to consider the unique nature of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs and ensure that the federal branch office is preserved and strengthened. Secondly, as you authorize new program and teacher requirements we urge you recognize and consider the challenges faced by Migrant and Seasonal Head Start due to the rural and seasonal nature of our programs, the mobility of the families we serve, and the large number of infants and toddlers served. And thirdly, we urge you to ensure that the legislation devotes additional resources to Migrant and Seasonal Head Start in order to address the documented funding shortfall that prevents more than 80% of the eligible children from receiving services through our programs.

Background on Migrant and Seasonal Head Start

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers work in various sectors of our nation's agriculture industry—from harvesting to sorting to processing to everything in between. It is hard work and it takes special skills. Most families earn less than \$10,000/year (Department of Labor Report to Congress, December 2000) and do not have health benefits.

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs serve nearly 37,000 migrant children and nearly 2,500 seasonal children annually, operating in 40 states in every region of the country. Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs were the first Head Start programs to serve infants and toddlers. Today, two-thirds of the children in the program are infants and toddlers.

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start was a response to the needs of farmworker families. In most states, local childcare resources are not available when migrants come into a community, especially for infants and toddlers. When resources are not available, parents have no choice but to take their children to the fields where they are exposed to pesticides, hazardous equipment, extreme heat and other health dangers.

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start is Successful

In serving a unique population, the children served in MSHS leave our programs with literacy skills in both English and Spanish. Programs work closely with the parents of each child so that they are better able to support their children's educational goals. MSHS not only prepares parents to support their children in being successful in school, but also provides educational and job-training opportunities for parents as well. As parent Asuncion Garay Diaz comments, "Every day the kids show us how well they are being trained for the future, how they are being taught to read and how to be safe and respectful. They are being prepared for when they go to public school and that's where our children really show the difference because they are so much better prepared for that."

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start is Unique

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start is very different from other programs. Because of the nature of farm labor, children need full day services—often from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and often 6 days a week. In many states, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs operate from May to October, rather than the typical school year schedule, and of course, many of the families and children are on the move for much of the year and need services at different times, in different states and locations.

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start is an important resource for families. It is also an important asset for the agricultural industry. Like all American families, farmworker families continue to work hard for one primary reason: to give their children a better life. However, while farmworkers work nearly round the clock during peak harvest seasons, many times they do not have a clean, safe place for their children so that children are often left in the care of older siblings, or worse, are taken to the fields. This is a situation that neither farmworkers nor growers want—having children in the fields is not safe and hinders work productivity. Migrant and Sea-

sonal Head Start provides services for children of farmworkers, keeping them out of the fields and harm's way.

Funding is Needed

The National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association (NMSHSA) is an association of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Directors, staff, parents, and friends that meet regularly to discuss issues and concerns unique to Migrant and Seasonal Head Start children and their families. The NMSHSA and its membership are committed to excellence in early childhood education for all children with a particular focus on addressing the unique barriers that farmworker families face in accessing the highest quality education programs for their children.

In order to ensure that the quality of the Head Start Program is preserved and that children of migrant and seasonal farmworker families can access Head Start services at the same rate as other Head Start eligible children, the NMSHSA endorses the following principals related to Head Start reauthorization:

1. The Federal Programs Branch for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) must be maintained to ensure that the unique nature of MSHS Programs and the families and children served are properly and adequately addressed.

2. Until the underlying Head Start statute is amended to guarantee that no less than 5% of the annual Head Start appropriation be directed to MSHS Programs, the NMSHSA is reluctant to support authorizing new program authority that would draw funds from the already overextended annual Head Start appropriation.

3. The NMSHSA believes that parent involvement is crucial to the success of Head Start and supports maintaining the current governance structure which ensures parent involvement in policy formation and decision making.

4. The NMSHSA supports accountability and the re-competition of Head Start grantees that have been determined to have unresolved deficiencies.

5. Pending a review by the National Academy of Sciences, the NMSHSA believes the National Reporting System (NRS) test should be suspended.

The NMSHSA recommends that the following changes be made to the Head Start statute in order to strengthen the MSHS Program and ensure that a greater number of migrant and seasonal children can access quality MSHS programs.

1. Include language in the statute to guarantee that no less than 5 percent of the annual Head Start appropriation is set aside for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs. According to a 2001 Head Start Study, (Descriptive Study of Seasonal Farmworker Families—September 2001) which was requested as part of the 1998 Head Start Reauthorization bill, only 19% of eligible migrant and seasonal children are served through existing MSHS Programs. By comparison, Regional Head Start programs serve approximately 60% of their eligible population. Since the HHS study was released in 2001, funding for MSHS as a percentage of the overall Head Start appropriation has not increased. In fact, at no point in the last ten years has MSHS secured more than 4% of the annual Head Start appropriation.

2. Include a provision requiring the Secretary to work with the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start community to develop a system to adequately account for the number of seasonal and migrant children that are eligible for Head Start, determine how many of these children receive services, and identify the barriers that prevent eligible children from accessing services. In addition, the Secretary must be called upon to develop a system through which MSHS programs can effectively work with children and their families to track health records and educational documents as a child moves from state to state. The Department of Health and Human Services currently has no systems in place to assess the demand for MSHS services or to effectively track the medical and educational records of a child. Other than the 2001 study referenced above, the Department has not collected data on the demand and availability of Head Start services for migrant and seasonal families. We recommend that language be included in the 2007 Head Start reauthorization bill requiring the Secretary of HHS to work with MSHS providers as well consult with the Department of Agriculture (land grant universities), the Department of Labor, the Bureau of Migrant Health, and the Department of Education about putting systems in place for collecting and reporting data on farmworkers and their families.

3. Any new teacher qualification requirements added to the statute must take into account the challenges that MSHS programs face in securing and retaining teachers with degrees due to the seasonal and rural nature of the programs, large numbers of infant and toddler teachers needed, necessity for bilingual/culturally competent staff, and the limited access to quality coursework offered by institutions of higher education. Therefore, any new bill that requires teachers or aides to secure college degrees must also provide a renewable waiver for Head Start programs, like MSHS, that can document efforts to meet all compliance requirements and identify the bar-

riers faced in doing so. In order to secure a waiver, a program should also be required to provide a plan and a timeline for moving into compliance.

As the current Administration has committed itself to leave no child behind, we are also asking that funding be made available to ensure that commitment. Based on a 2001 Head Start Study, (Descriptive Study of Seasonal Farmworker Families—September 2001) only 19% of the eligible migrant and seasonal children in our country were being served. This compares to a 60% national rate of participation. The families who put food on the tables of America and their children are one of the most vulnerable populations in the country. We are committed to providing these children and families a strong foundation for learning. To do so, funding must be made available beyond the current levels to ensure services for these children.

As the Executive Director of the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association I would be happy to provide additional information to the Subcommittee on the MSHS programs and the families we serve.
