

CATEGORICAL ELIGIBILITY FOR TRIBAL HEAD START PROGRAMS

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Executive Summary

Established in 1965, American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start is the largest federally funded early childhood program for AIAN children and families. AIAN Head Start and Early Head Start (HS/EHS) programs serve 22,000 AIAN children (ages 0-5) living in Tribal communities and some urban areas.¹ Eligibility for these programs is primarily based on income, serving families who live below 100% of the federal poverty level. This requirement is restrictive and excludes more than half (58%) of AIAN children living in Tribal communities.

In Tribal communities across the U.S., only 1 in 5 AIAN children under age 5 are enrolled in AIAN HS/EHS programs.¹⁻² Education is a federal trust responsibility. Equitable policy changes, such as categorical eligibility, are needed to ensure all AIAN children living in Tribal communities are eligible for and benefit from culturally relevant early childhood education and family services through Tribally operated HS/EHS programs.

Key Points

AIAN HS/EHS programs serve more than 22,000 AIAN children (0-5 years) living in Tribal communities and some urban areas.

Only 167 (about 30%) of 574 federally recognized tribes receive funding to operate AIAN HS/EHS programs.

42% of AIAN children living in Tribal communities live in households below 100% of the federal poverty level.

Of all AIAN children under age 5 who live in Tribal communities, only 1 in 5 (20%) are enrolled in AIAN HS/EHS programs.

More than half (58%) of AIAN children under age 5 living in Tribal communities are not income eligible for HS/EHS due to restrictive requirements.

AIAN HS/EHS programs are uniquely positioned to support families with young children in Tribal communities.

Education is a federal trust and treaty responsibility and equitable policies are needed to ensure AIAN children can benefit from culturally relevant early childhood education and services.

All AIAN children should be categorically eligible to attend Tribally operated HS/EHS programs.

The Issue

AIAN HS/EHS is among the most important and successful federally funded programs that provides early childhood education, health screenings, parenting education, and community support to AIAN children and families. Currently, AIAN HS/EHS programs serve about 22,000 infants and children in 153 programs across 26 states, and only 85 percent are AIAN children due to stagnant federal poverty guidelines and restrictive eligibility requirements.¹ There are over 85,000 AIAN children in Tribal communities that are not being served by AIAN HS/EHS programs, despite being the very children they were created to benefit. These children are being denied the educational, cultural, and linguistic repatriation that AIAN HS/EHS was specifically designed to provide.

Many AIAN children and families who live in Tribal communities have shared experiences of intergenerational trauma and persistent economic, health, social, and educational inequities.³⁻⁵ A growing body of research links these inequities and trauma to centuries of colonization, assimilation, and structural violence.⁶⁻¹¹

Categorical eligibility currently exists in HS/EHS for other at-risk children, such as those experiencing homelessness or in the foster care system. AIAN children are developmentally vulnerable similar to other categorically eligible children and experience some of the highest rates of all adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) indicators: physical, sexual and emotional abuse, intimate partner violence, household substance abuse, household mental illness, parental separation/divorce, and an incarcerated household member or members.¹³

They also suffer from high rates of health disparities such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome – five times the national rate; postneonatal deaths – twice the US all-races rate; early childhood caries (tooth decay) – three times the rate of non-Natives; and are twice as likely to be overweight and three times as likely to be obese.³ In school year 2018-2019 the percentage of children and youth served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was highest for AIANs at 18 percent.



Only 1 in 5 AIAN children under age 5 living in Tribal communities are enrolled in AIAN Head Start and Early Head Start programs.^{1,2}

Native people experience historical trauma due to their violent colonization which has resulted in a damaged cultural identity. The religious indoctrination, cultural intolerance, seizure of Tribal land and property, as well as the removal of Native children from their languages, religions, cultures, families, and communities has resulted in poor overall physical, mental, and behavioral health in Native populations. This trauma is continued in the present due to substantial and significant personal experiences of discrimination. This discrimination is institutional in the form of unequal pay or consideration for promotion, hiring discrimination, or when interacting with the police or courts. It is also experienced individually in the form of racial or ethnic slurs, insensitive or offensive comments, or violence or harassment because they are Native.

AIAN HS/EHS programs provide valuable services in Tribal communities that are often rural, experience high rates of poverty and trauma,^{3,5,7} have limited or non-existent transportation networks, and limited financial and qualified personnel resources. AIAN HS/EHS programs address these challenges through providing a vibrant and safe learning environment - inclusive of education, health, language, and culture - for AIAN children, families, and communities.

About half (49%) of income eligible AIAN children living in Tribal communities are enrolled in AIAN HS/EHS, and only 1 in 3 tribes (167 of 574 federally recognized tribes) have federal funding to operate AIAN HS/EHS programs.^{1,2}

“Families don’t just become healthy and stable when their income surpasses the Federal Poverty Level. In fact, they are still very much low income even at 200% of the FPL... and have generations of poverty and trauma to overcome. The family that succeeds in breaking over the FPL is still struggling, maybe even more so because they no longer qualify for other supports. Because of our positive reputation in the community, these parents trust us with challenges that they typically won’t share with our social services departments. This allows us to address their needs, ranging from behavioral problems, mental health needs, parenting and more.”

Angie Blackwell, Head Start Director
Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Indians

Policy Recommendation

Strengthening and expanding these programs are paramount to AIAN HS/EHS's continued success in meeting the needs of AIAN children, families, and communities. Because of strict income eligibility guidelines, more than half (58%) of Native children living in Tribal communities are denied the opportunities that the AIAN HS/EHS program was created to provide.

AIAN children should be categorically eligible to attend Tribally operated Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Among AIAN children under age 5 who live in Tribal communities, only 42% are in families that are income eligible for HS/EHS programs.² Head Start's income-based guidelines are outdated, fail to align with federal programs that support low income families, and are not responsive to low income AIAN families who fall at or above the federal poverty guidelines. They are also at odds with the fundamental principle that tribes have sovereignty over the education of their members, which the U.S. recognizes as part of the Nation-to-Nation relationship.

AIAN children should be categorically eligible to attend Tribally operated HS/EHS programs to combat these severe and systemic conditions that affect all Native youth. Families that fall above outdated poverty guidelines should not be excluded from the opportunity to reclaim their cultural identity and language. AIAN children that live in the same communities suffer the same effects of historical and intergenerational trauma, ACE indicators, health disparities, and harm to their cultural identities; yet, they are denied the opportunities that the AIAN HS/EHS program was made to provide simply because they do not meet arbitrary poverty guidelines – guidelines that are themselves culturally insensitive and imposed from the outside on Tribal communities.

Head Start Director Jeanie Kent of the Confederated Tribe of the Colville Reservation shares, "Although wages are going up, generational trauma has not gone away... Families still need support in all areas. We are in a unique position to include lots of language and culture to our children... to make sure that we are serving the unique needs of our communities."

AIAN HS/EHS programs are uniquely positioned to support families with young children in Tribal communities. HS/EHS programs offer a unique array of comprehensive services to children and families that



provide support and early intervention, as well as being vital to Tribal efforts to preserve Native language and culture. AIAN Head Start helps fulfill the federal government's trust responsibility to AIAN tribes and villages, heal historic injustice and empower Tribal communities with its holistic, culturally-tailored and multi-generational approach to early childhood education. HS/EHS programs honor the rich cultural heritage of our AIAN children, families, and communities. Based on the needs of local communities, programs offer traditional language and cultural practices to provide high-quality services to young children and their families. The restoration of and reconnection with their indigenous identities is a key element in Native student confidence and success in later years.

Establishing categorical eligibility for AIAN children is consistent with the spirit and intent of AIAN HS/EHS. More importantly, it is an investment in education - one of the most compelling and important social determinants of health.¹²

"[Education] is a trust responsibility of the federal government to the tribes that is outlined in the individual treaties... it is critically important that AIAN children attend 0-5 services in the program that offers connections to their sense of belonging to a culture that has been in existence for thousands of years."

**Jacki Haight, Head Start/Early Head Start Director
Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe**

Proposed Language: Notwithstanding any other provision of law, any Alaskan Native or American Indian child, as defined at 45 CFR 1336.10, under the compulsory school age, shall be eligible for Indian Head Start.

References

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45 CFR 1336.10 of the Native American Programs Act:

Alaskan Native means a person who is an Alaskan Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut, or any combination thereof. The term also includes any person who is regarded as an Alaskan Native by the Alaskan Native Village or group of which he or she claims to be a member and whose father or mother is (or, if deceased, was) regarded as an Alaskan Native by an Alaskan Native Village or group. The term includes any Alaskan Native as so defined, either or both of whose adoptive parents are not Alaskan Natives.

American Indian or Indian means any individual who is a member or a descendant of a member of a North American tribe, band, Pueblo or other organized group of native people who are indigenous to the Continental United States, or who otherwise have a special relationship with the United States or a State through treaty, agreement, or some other form of recognition. This includes any individual who claims to be an Indian and who is regarded as such by the Indian tribe, group, band, or community of which he or she claims to be a member.



Written by: Kristi Bentkowski, senior manager for the National Indian Head Start Directors Association, and Chelsea Wesner, doctoral student and research assistant at the University of Colorado School of Public Health's Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health.

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