

Testimony of Anat Weisenfreund

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Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Policy
“The Federal Debt Limit and its Economic and Financial Consequences”

March 7, 2023

Chair Warren, Ranking Member Kennedy, and Members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Anat Weisenfreund and I am the Director of Head Start and Early Learning Programs at Community Action Pioneer Valley in Western Massachusetts. I am also the President of the Massachusetts Association for Infant Mental Health. For the past 30 years, I have worked to support the youngest children and their families in various clinical and leadership roles. I was asked to speak to this Committee today about the immense benefits Head Start brings to the children and families in our communities, the current funding challenges we face, and the significant impact of potential future funding cuts to our program.

For nearly sixty years, Head Start and Early Head Start have provided high quality early education and care and comprehensive support services for pregnant women, infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families in communities across the country. It is our charge to prioritize the participation of children and families with the lowest incomes and other risk factors such as homelessness, food insecurity, foster care, developmental disabilities and more. Head Start’s proven approach is to work in partnership with families, and to support the whole child and family: quality early education supports children’s school readiness and nutritious snacks, meals and transportation make that learning possible. We track children’s health and development by conducting screenings, and connect them to medical practices, dental homes, and other needed community resources. At the same time, staff work with families to become increasingly economically secure: Head Start Programs across the country provide crisis intervention, asset building services, housing assistance, and staff help parents to enroll in education and job training programs. The long-term positive impact of Head Start on children, families and future generations is well documented.

Head Start’s focus on the whole family is grounded in brain and developmental science: there is no doubt that experiences in the first five years of life are deeply impactful and shape who we become, and what we do as adults, and then again as parents, for the next generation. The pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott once famously said “there is no such thing as a baby – there is always a baby and someone.” This sums up the fact that all development for young children happens in the context of relationships, and that responsive, consistent relationships are an enormous protective factor for the youngest children. Head Start programs work in partnership with parents, strengthening relationships through engaging families in learning about child development and scaffolding parental competencies and confidence. Infants,

toddlers and preschoolers spend many hours in care and their relationships with their teachers – and their teacher’s relationships with their families, assume great importance as well. Research by Nobel laureate economist James Heckman confirms that the long-term effects of targeted, high-quality investments not only include lifelong academic, economic, and social gains for very poor children, but also better outcomes for their children and stronger families across multiple generations.

CAPV Head Start and Early Learning Programs – the program I lead - has provided Head Start and Child Care since 1966. Here in western Massachusetts, our service area spans nearly 1,600 square miles in the Pioneer Valley and includes three mostly rural and semi-rural counties from the border of Vermont to the border of Connecticut. We are funded to serve 120 infants and toddlers and 318 preschool children and do so in a variety of program models to meet each child and family’s unique needs, including center-based settings, home-based care, and family child care. We braid federal Head Start funds with Massachusetts childcare funds to provide eligible children with full day full year classrooms to allow their parents to work full-time. In the 2021-2022 program year, 55% of our Head Start children received a child care subsidy to provide full-day, full-year care for working parents and over 70% of the families that we serve are working, in job training, or in school. Like other Head Start Programs, our work is data driven and we closely track child and family outcomes. In our Program, year after year, the majority of children meet or exceed widely held academic expectations as they head to Kindergarten. Year after year, families, through their deep engagement with our staff and the services we offer, meet their goals and become more economically secure, more educated, and more knowledgeable and confident caregivers.

All of these critical services I have outlined are made possible by the dedication and hard work of the staff at our Head Start programs and Head Start staff across the country, many of whom are current and former Head Start parents. In our program, when fully staffed we employ 167 people as educators, family service workers, bus drivers, cooks, janitors, nurses, and more. In rural Western Massachusetts, we serve as a major provider of early education and care and are also a major employer.

The Head Start workforce and the early education field have faced decades of neglect and underfunding. Poverty level wages, compounded by the complexity and emotional strain of this most important work has made recruiting and retaining qualified early education professionals a challenge. The last years of the pandemic, coupled with rising inflation, have made a bad problem worse. Current levels of Head Start funding are inadequate to pay staff salaries that are competitive with their peers, and commensurate with their education and experience. In our program, almost 75% of the budget goes to salary and fringe, yet classroom teachers earn an average of only \$37,000 annually - about half that of their counterparts in public schools. In the 2021-2022 school year, out of 51 educator positions across our full-day, full year sites, 37% left during the course of the year and as of mid-August 2022, 33% of these positions were vacant. Our vacancies have remained that high or higher through November 2022, as we have been able to hire some educators but have simultaneously lost more staff. Currently, 8 of our 27 classrooms

and three (out of 7) home visiting caseloads are closed due to our inability to hire new staff. Nationally, early education and care staff are leaving their jobs in droves for higher paying and less stressful opportunities, and this is the result: almost one in five Head Start staff positions are currently vacant, resulting in 20% of classrooms not open.

What is the impact of staff vacancies and what does “turnover” really mean in early education and care settings? Staff vacancies directly impact our ability to serve children and families. Even when we are fully staffed, the program I lead is only funded to serve approximately 8% of age and income eligible pregnant women, infants and toddlers, and approximately 25% of age and income eligible preschoolers in our communities. When we cannot adequately recruit or retain staff, we limit access even further. And what about the central importance of responsive, consistent relationships in early development? Fundamentally what “turnover” means for young children is the severing of bonds, again and again, creating significant disruptions to their emotional well-being and their school readiness. For children who may have already suffered multiple breaks in attachment in their young lives, the sudden loss of their teacher may be especially damaging. “Turnover” also impacts families, who have entrusted their child to the care of another: sudden and repeated losses create distrust and disengagement. And for staff, the repeated loss of their colleagues and teams represents not only the stressors of now being spread way, way too thin, but is deeply demoralizing. And this in turn threatens quality, emotionally responsive care: we all know that highly stressed, spread too thin, demoralized teachers are less able to fully engage with the emotional needs of children. These stressors compound the main stressor of not making a fair wage, causing yet more “turnover.”

Current federal funding levels for Head Start and child care have left us with a broken system in which we cannot retain or recruit qualified staff and unable to meet the needs of eligible children and families in our community. And now we hear talk of further, dramatic cuts. Even modest reductions would be devastating to those who rely on Head Start, setting back measurable, national gains in school readiness, undercutting communities just beginning to rebound from the pandemic. According to the National Head Start Association, even a year-long continuing resolution for FY24 – when factoring in today’s inflation rate of 6.4% – would result in over 49,000 fewer children served and significant job losses.

On May 18th, 1965, in his remarks on “Project Head Start,” President Lyndon B Johnson said: “I believe that this is one of the most constructive, and one of the most sensible, and also one of the most exciting programs that this Nation has ever undertaken.” Chair Warren, Ranking Member Kennedy, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of our most vulnerable young children and their families, we need you and we rely on your unwavering commitment: please ensure that we have sufficient funds to continue this most important work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to serve as a resource to the Committee on these important issues and I would be pleased to take any of your questions.