



## **1302 Subpart A**

### **Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment and Attendance**

#### **1302.11 Determining Community Strengths, Needs and Resources**

The service delivery area for Van Buren County Head Start as defined in the refunding application process encompasses the entire county, to include the city of Spencer and all communities within the county. A comprehensive needs assessment for programmatic use regarding target population, program expansion, and site selection, program options and delivery of service delivery areas shall be complete and up-to-date yearly. Every five year grant period the program will conduct a community assessment.

#### **Eligibility:**

Eligibility is based on age, income and area served. The Van Buren County Head Start program determines eligibility at the time of application. In person and phone interviews are completed and all documents examined to determine eligibility and are maintained as part of the eligibility determination record as required by Head Start standards.

**Age eligibility:** Head Start standards state that a child must be at least 3 years of age or turn three years old by the date used to determine eligibility for public school (8/15 for the State of Tennessee) to be age eligible for Head Start. Age eligibility is verified by examining documents such as birth certificates- required by state licensing, passports, etc. The program does not require age verification documents to be collected by staff if doing so creates a barrier to the child's enrollment into the program. Children who turn three after the school cut-off date will be served after their third birthday only if there are no income eligible and age eligible children on the waiting list.

**Automatically eligibility** is granted, according to Head Start Performance Standards and the Head Start Reauthorization Act of 2008, to children in foster care and children from families experiencing homelessness (according to the definition in the McKinney- Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C11434a(2)). Families who meet the categorical eligibility requirements do not have to meet income guidelines. Verification, as outlined in the Head Start Performance Standards, is needed that they meet the automatic eligibility requirements.

**Income eligibility:** A child is income eligible if the family income is equal to or below the federal poverty guidelines or the family is eligible for public assistance (TANF or SSI). If a family is eligible for public assistance, verification is needed of the TANF or SSI benefits the family receives. In all other cases, a family's total gross income for the last 12 months or the last calendar year is used to determine income eligibility, whichever is a more accurate reflection of the family at the time of application. If a family can demonstrate a significant change in income from the last 12 months or last calendar year's income, staff may consider current family circumstances to determine eligibility.

**Over Income Placements:**

No more than 35% of enrollment slots will be made available to families who fall at above 130% eligibility guidelines. No more than 10% of enrollment slots are filled with children with income levels above the poverty guidelines. Before consideration is given to the preceding, Income eligible children are always given priority. These applicants are accepted on an individual basis based on need and allow the program to provide services to children with diagnosed disabilities, children affected by special circumstances and children referred by community partners. If a family is determined to be over income at the time of application but has a significant change in family income or circumstances during the program year, eligibility can be re-determined based on verification of the new circumstances and/or income.

**Eligibility duration:** If a child is determined eligible he or she will remain eligible through the end of the succeeding program year or until they become eligible for kindergarten. If a child is enrolled after his or her third birthday but was not three by the school cut-off date and returns for a third year in the Head Start program, a new application is completed and income eligibility is re-verified.

**Training:** All VBCHS staff, Policy Council and Governing Body will be trained annually on the Head Start standards as well as the program's procedures regarding eligibility determination and verification. All staff will receive training as part of their orientation into the program and within 90 days of hire. This training will include interviewing, completing an application, verifying, categorical and income eligibility, accurate eligibility record keeping and the consequences of intentionally violating federal and program policies and procedures. Strategies for treating families with dignity, respect, communication with families, and dealing with possible issues of domestic violence stigma, homelessness, and privacy.

**Violations of eligibility determination regulations:** VBCHS staff who intentionally violate Federal and program eligibility determination regulations will be subject to termination. Families or program participants intentionally providing or attempting to provide false information used to determine program eligibility may be subject to actions affecting their family's participation in the program.

**Recruitment:**

Recruitment is ongoing throughout the program year. Recruitment information is distributed throughout the community via flyers, mailings, attending community events, newspapers, public announcements, canvassing of neighborhoods, billboards and word-of-mouth. Applications are taken at office appointments, phone calls and home visits to best meet the needs of families while adhering to COVID Mitigation guidance. During recruitment conversations about COVID concerns are discussed with families and the steps that are being taken by the Head Start to provide children and families with a safe healthy learning environment. All efforts are made to actively locate and recruit children with disabilities and children among all cultural, language and economic groups through collaborations with agencies who support and provide services to these populations. At a minimum 10% of enrollment slots are provided to children with disabilities, in addition to slots reserved for children experiencing homelessness. Children in foster care and children from families experiencing homelessness (according to the definition in the McKinney- Vento Homeless Assistance Act) are given priority and systems are in place to aid this population during the enrollment process.

## **Selection:**

Selection is the formal process for considering all eligible applicants and selecting children and their families into the program. Head Start requires that programs select children and families who have the greatest need based on selection criteria. VBCHS creates and amends our selection criteria annually based on the performance standards, the community assessment, PIR and other program data, children eligible for services under IDEA should be prioritized. The program does not deny selection based on disability or chronic health condition or severity.

## **Waiting List:**

The FCPS develops and maintains a waiting list. The waiting list is updated throughout the year with ongoing recruitment and new applications. Openings are filled during the program year within 30 calendar days and according to the selection criteria and following the procedures outlined program policies. Applications are ranked according to need, according to the selection criteria.

## **Enrollment:**

**Process:** All Van Buren County Head Start applications will be completed during an in-person interview with the applicants family. Staff will go to the families' home or other place identified by the family if it is not possible or convenient for the family to come into the Head Start.

Enrollment is the official acceptance of a family by VBCHS and the completion of all procedures necessary for a child and family to begin receiving services. When accepted the participant's family receives a welcome letter with information about the start of the program year and any necessary health requirements. The participant is also given program contact information in case they have any additional questions. HDSS provides support to families to assist in obtaining all relevant health records to avoid any delay in the child's entry into the program. The education staff contacts families before the child's enrollment to schedule an initial home visit to start the process of building a relationship with the child and family and plan for the child's transition into the program. For late enrollees, staff will perform a home visit upon completion of assessments. No more than 3% of slots will be reserved for children experiencing homelessness as determined by the community assessment, and those vacancies can not remain vacant for more than 30 days. By requirements of Tennessee state licensing, all children must have a valid Immunization Certification and Physical on file before entry, with the exception of homeless children to exceed no more than 90 days. Parent participation in any program activity is voluntary and is not required as part of enrollment requirements.

## **Attendance:**

Attendance for VBCHS is tracked through the use of Childplus. The FCPS enters children's daily attendance into Childplus for tracking purposes. FCPS pulls Childplus attendance reports monthly and reports any attendance concerns. FCPS must document any absences in Childplus to accurately track attendance ensuring children's safety when they do not arrive at school following program policy, there are some circumstances when a child is not in attendance in the classroom but is still counted as attending for tracking purposes. This includes when a child is receiving required medical or dental care to meet their ESPDT. VBCHS staff encourage regular attendance through parent education on the value of consistency as it affects child learning and social-emotional development, emphasizing routines, developing patterns as part of school readiness goals and success later in life. Parents are asked to call the center if their child is going to be absent. Telephone contact is made with families by staff on each day of a child's absence. If

no contact is made with the family after 2 consecutive days absent, a home visit will be made. FCPS and Education staff work with families to identify and reduce barriers for regular attendance and form an Attendance Works Plan during orientation prior to the child's entry into the program. Implementation of the Attendance Works Plan is to have a plan of action to address issues concerning absences before/ or as they arise ie: sick child, transportation issues, scheduling of doctor appointments, and establishing routines to ensure the child is well rested and on time. Attendance works are designed to help parents track their children's attendance. VBCHS is committed to working with families to address specific and individual needs which may affect attendance. Re-engagement efforts will be made if a child ceases to attend. If the program's monthly average daily attendance rate falls below 85 percent, the FCPS will analyze the causes of absenteeism to identify any systemic issues that contribute to the program's absentee rate. Reasonable efforts will be made to assist homeless families with transportation and attendance needs.

**Expulsion and Suspension:**

The Head Start Program Performance Standards prohibit programs from expelling or un-enrolling children from Head Start because of a child's behavior. The Standards also require programs to prohibit or severely limit the use of suspension due to a child's behavior. VBCHS will partner with families, consult with specialists, help the child and family obtain additional services as appropriate, and take all possible steps to ensure the child's successful participation in the program but will take into consideration not to put other children and staff at risk.