



National Indian Head Start Directors Association

*Standing Strong and preserving the identity  
of AIAN children and families*

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# Strengthening AIAN Head Start Programs: Key Recommendations for Tribal Leaders' Consultation with the Office of Head Start

*Addressing Workforce Shortages, Facilities, Culturally Appropriate Instruction, and Collaborative Efforts*

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## **ECE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN AIAN HEAD START PROGRAMS**

**Funding and Compensation Challenges:** NIHSDA understands that the Office of Head Start does not have the authority to appropriate funding. Therefore, it is impractical for OHS to mandate minimum staff wages as proposed in the recent Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM). The compensation packages for Tribal Head Start staff are often part of a broader, tribe-wide package and do not exist in isolation. Imposing wage mandates without additional funding support could strain Tribal resources and create financial imbalances within Tribal operations.

**Enhancing Hiring and Professional Development:** Instead of mandating wage standards, OHS should focus on providing a more transparent and uniform waiver process for programs to hire staff who do not meet the degree requirements. This process should include guidelines for supporting these staff members' professional development to ensure they can meet the program's educational standards over time. By creating a clear pathway for hiring and developing staff, OHS can help AIAN Head Start programs address immediate workforce needs while investing in the long-term growth and qualifications of their employees.

**Exceptions for Tribal Language and Culture Bearers:** Given the unique cultural context of AIAN Head Start programs, OHS should allow exceptions to the standard teacher degree requirements for individuals who are Tribal language and culture bearers. These individuals play a crucial role in preserving and imparting cultural heritage and linguistic traditions to young children. Recognizing their contributions and providing pathways for their inclusion in Head Start programs, even if they do not meet conventional educational qualifications, is essential. This flexibility would enable AIAN Head Start programs to incorporate culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate education, fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

## **AIAN HEAD START FACILITIES**

**Comprehensive Facilities Report:** According to the Head Start Act, Section 650(b), OHS is mandated by Congress to conduct a report every five years on the condition, location, and ownership of facilities used or available for use by Indian Head Start agencies. The last report, conducted in 2020, covered only 295 out of 530 AIAN facilities (and did not address facilities available to be used). This survey's limited scope, conducted via an optional questionnaire sent to Head Start directors who are not facilities experts, highlights the need for a more robust approach. NIHSDA urges OHS to conduct a more comprehensive, in-depth, and professional survey for the next report. This would involve engaging facilities experts to assess all AIAN Head Start facilities thoroughly, including those available for future use, ensuring that the data collected is accurate and representative of the actual and potential facility conditions.

**Inclusion of Facilities Experts in Region XI TTA:** To further support AIAN Head Start programs, OHS should incorporate a specific facilities expert within the Region XI Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) contractor team. This expert would provide specialized assistance to programs in facilities planning and the funding application process. Their expertise would help programs navigate the complexities of the application process and facilities management, including compliance with safety regulations, maintenance, renovations, and expansions. By having access to a dedicated facilities expert, AIAN Head Start programs can ensure that their physical environments are conducive to learning and development, addressing any infrastructure challenges promptly and effectively.

## **ENHANCING CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT IN AIAN HEAD START PROGRAMS**

**Support for Curriculum and Assessment Development:** OHS has provided the "Making It Work" process, which helps programs integrate cultural practices into their current curricula and align them with the Early Learning Outcomes Framework. However, meaningful implementation of this process requires substantial resources, including staff time, involvement of community and Tribal leaders/elders, and expertise in early childhood development and curriculum design. Partnering with colleges or universities could also enhance these efforts, providing additional expertise and resources. To facilitate this, it would be beneficial if programs could access available one-time funding to support the development and implementation of culturally and linguistically appropriate curricula and assessments. This funding could cover costs related to community consultations, staff training, and partnerships with higher education institutions.

**Continued Support for AIAN-led CLASS Reviews:** OHS should continue to support AIAN Head Start programs in conducting their own Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) reviews. This practice allows programs to tailor the assessment process to their specific cultural contexts. However, consideration must be given to the financial and logistical challenges associated with this approach. The cost of reliability training for staff to conduct CLASS reviews can be significant, particularly in light of the high rate of staff turnover commonly experienced in these programs. To address this, OHS could explore providing additional funding or resources to offset the costs of training and retraining staff. This support would ensure that programs can maintain high standards of assessment without incurring prohibitive expenses.

## **STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL AI/AN HEAD START COLLABORATION OFFICE**

The National American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) plays a critical role in facilitating partnerships between Head Start agencies and various state entities that provide essential services to low-income children and their families. However, there are unique challenges and needs specific to the AI/AN Head Start programs that require additional support and resources. Here are key points and recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the National AI/AN HSCO:

**Unique Challenges of the National AI/AN HSCO Director:** Unlike state-specific Head Start Collaboration Offices, where directors work with entities within a single state, the National AI/AN Head Start Collaboration Office director must coordinate efforts across 26 different states. This expansive scope significantly increases the complexity of their role. Managing relationships, understanding diverse state regulations, and addressing the varying needs of AI/AN communities across such a broad geographic area require substantial effort and resources. To address these challenges, it is crucial to provide the National AI/AN HSCO director with additional support, including increased staffing, funding, and access to specialized training. These resources would enable the director to more effectively manage partnerships and advocate for the needs of AI/AN Head Start programs.

**Enhancing Collaboration for Disabilities Services:** AI/AN Head Start programs often face difficulties in accessing disabilities services for their children, which are typically provided through state and local education agencies. More targeted support is needed to assist these programs in building and maintaining effective collaborations with these agencies. This includes providing technical assistance, guidance on navigating state-specific regulations, and facilitating communication between AI/AN Head Start programs and service providers. By strengthening these collaborations, AI/AN Head Start programs can ensure that children with disabilities receive the necessary support and services to thrive in their educational environments.