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EDUCATION FOCUS

Fiscal cliff looms for Head Start program

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With a deadline of Dec. 31 fast approaching, Kylee Allen watches the news for any word on the looming “fiscal cliff.”

That mix of automatic cuts and tax increases set to go into effect Dec. 31 could mean deep reductions to a program that has supported the single mother while raising her children and now allows her to give back in a job she loves.

Allen works as a Early Head Start Infant Toddler Specialist in Oak Harbor for Skagit/Islands Head Start, a free child development program for low-income families, plus homeless and foster children.

The Skagit program could lose support for about 37 children and face potential staff layoffs as a result of the cuts, said Mary Ellen Lykins, Head Start director for Skagit/Islands Head Start. A total of 451 families are served by nine centers in Skagit County, from Concrete to Burlington, and more in Island and San Juan counties.

Although it’s not totally clear how the potential cuts would play out, funding reductions could leave two classrooms empty at a larger center or close smaller centers, Lykins said. This would leave low-income families who rely on the service scrambling.

Head Start provides prenatal guidance, home visits, preschool programs, medical, mental health and dental care, as well as education for parents and connections to other resources.

The program also tracks the progress of the children in six categories, from literacy to social and emotional development.

“People know about the preschool component, but not necessarily all the other things,” Lykins said. “... The bottom goal of it all is that kids hit kindergarten ready.”

Reductions are nothing new to the program, which is supported by Skagit Valley College and federal dollars.

“At this point there’s no fat,” Lykins said. “It’s not going to be a factor of ‘Oh, well, buy fewer books.’ It will be closing centers.”

Seven years ago, Allen started with Head Start as a new single parent of three young children, ages 2 years and 3 and 9 months.

As she tried to piece her life together after suddenly becoming a single parent, Head Start employees came to do home visits, talking to her about parenting, patience, setting goals for her children and also for herself, academically and professionally.

Now working as an infant and toddler specialist and performing home visits herself, she’s also pursuing her associate degree in early learning after receiving a bachelor’s degree in finance.

Her daughter, now 10, will speak at a national Head Start conference about her experience in the program. She had struggled with speech delays early on, but began communicating when transferred to Head Start and a class of her peers.

“She was always a really shy girl, and she was starting to come out of her shell and was really confident in the things she did,” Allen said. “She became a leader.”

The program had a huge impact on her children, she said, but Allen also doesn’t know where she’d be without Head Start.

“They didn’t tell me what to do; they just gave me building blocks,” she said, adding that now she gives back what she got from the program.

Allen sees 12 families in their homes each week, spending 90 minutes with each family.

“I don’t want to lose my job, have my friends lose their jobs, and families lose a service valuable to them,” she said.

The ripple effect of cuts on children, families and staff would be tremendous, Lykins said.

With an estimated 8.2 percent cut to Head Start nationally, that’s a loss of about 1,400 children to the program statewide and 200 jobs, with a loss of 100,000 children across the country.

“If I move aside even from the faces of individual children and parents, there’s research” that shows children who receive high-quality early childhood educations go to college and graduate more frequently and are less likely to get into crime, Lykins said.

“You want to change the world, just start right here,” Lykins said, holding her hand at child-height above the floor. “Start with the babies.”

In advance of the Dec. 31 deadline, Lykins will bring staff together to prepare for the worst.

Otherwise, for those who are passionate about the program, there's little left to do other than watch and wait.

"I look in the news every day to see what conversations and talk were happening," Allen said. "I hope one day to look in the paper and see they reached a decision and I hope the decision they reach is fair for everyone."

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What is the 'fiscal cliff?'

It's a pairing of broad reductions to many kinds of government spending with expiring tax cuts, set to take effect on Dec. 31. Though the result is expected to lower the deficit, it is also thought that the result — cuts to federally funded programs and higher taxes — could send the economy back into a recession.

— Information from investopedia.com

Skagit/Islands Head Start provides...

Early Head Start:

To qualify, applicants must be pregnant or have a child ages birth to 30 months, and meet federal income guidelines. Services include weekly home visits focused on child development, toddler classes, parent/child socialization groups and inclusion services for children with special needs.

Preschool Head Start:

The child must be between 3 and 5 years old by Aug. 31 and the applicants must meet federal income guidelines. Homeless and foster children are automatically eligible for Head Start. Services include school readiness preschool classes four days per week, two meals a day for the preschoolers, integrated services for children with special needs and limited transportation.

— Information courtesy of Skagit/Islands Head Start