



**THE
DEPARTMENT
OF HUMAN
SERVICES**

**AVERIL E. GEORGE
COMMISSIONER**

**COMMITTEE ON
HEALTH, HOSPITALS
AND HUMAN
SERVICES**

Tuesday, 27 May 2025

**SENATOR RAY FONSECA
CHAIRMAN**

Testimony: Overview and Current Status of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services**Office of Head Start Program****Presented by Commissioner Averil George**

Good day, Honorable Senator Ray Fonseca, Chairman of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services; esteemed Committee members; other Senators present; colleagues; and the listening and viewing audience. I am Averil George, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (DHS). Accompanying me today are Assistant Commissioner Carla Benjamin and Head Start Administrator Masikia Lewis. I thank you for the opportunity to present an overview and current status of the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services' Office of Head Start Program.

The Virgin Islands Department of Human Services (VIDHS) Office of Head Start (OHS) has been the Head Start grantee for the United States Virgin Islands for more than fifty (50) years. As such, VIDHS administers the Head Start Program on a series of consecutive, competitive federal grants for which we must compete every five (5) years and for which we must apply for continuation of grant funds every year. Head Start promotes the school readiness of children from low-income families, who are three years old by December 31st and up to five years old at enrolment. The population of children served are children ages three to five years old. For a better understanding of the Head Start Program's fit in the early childhood education continuum of services -- the flow by chronological and service provision order is: Early Head Start, which is a completely different program run by Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands, serves pregnant women and children up to age 3 years old, VIDHS Head Start serves children ages 3 to 5 years old and then children older than 5 years old transition to Kindergarten, beginning elementary school.

Head Start literally gives program-eligible children, who might otherwise remain at home and unengaged, a “head start” in life by providing them with a high quality, comprehensive early childhood education. It simultaneously serves as an empowerment program for the family, involving parents and guardians in all aspects of the program, including governance. Head Start parents have a very significant role in determining program operations, via the Head Start Policy Council, a body consisting of parent representatives. Head Start parents that are employed are supported by safe, comprehensive early childhood education for their children and those wishing to enter the workforce may volunteer at the Head Start program where they can access training opportunities that can lead to gainful employment. Children enrolled in Head Start and their families can benefit from the programs focus on early learning, health, family well-being and wrap-around support.

The VIDHS Head Start program’s funded enrollment for the Territory is 794 students. The distribution of available based upon community needs assessment and availability of resources such as physical accommodations at the time of previous grants applications were 500 students in 25 classrooms on St. Croix, 274 children in 13 classrooms on St. Thomas and 20 children in 1 classroom on St. John. The current enrollment is 631 students (St. Croix: 370 children in 20 classrooms and St. Thomas/St. John: 261 children in 14 classrooms). The program is 20.5% below the funded enrollment. This has been an ongoing challenge for Head Start programs across the nation, since reopening from the COVID Pandemic.

By Head Start regulations, ten percent (10%) of Head Start enrollment is designated for children with special needs. Currently, there are 67 children enrolled with special needs as evidenced by Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) (14 children) or Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (53 children). There are 41 additional children that we suspect may have special needs. They are pending

evaluation by the Virgin Islands Department of Education. These children receive Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Resource Services as identified by their plans from service providers that visit our Head Start .

In a letter dated May 20, 2025, the Head Start Program was informed that as a result of prolonged under enrollment, the funded enrollment and grant funding will be reduced to 637 and \$8,304,673 respectively. The reduction is effective immediately, but the program has the option to appeal this decision and we plan to do so. However, in light of the current enrollment and vacancies, the negative impact of this reduction to the final year of our 5-year grant is expected to be minimal and we will be applying for a new grant in 2056. See the funding adjustment below:

Federal Enrollment Levels	Current	Revised	Effect
Head Start Preschool	794	637 (-157)	current enrollment 631
Federal Funding Levels			
Head Start Preschool PO	\$10,251,425	\$8,224,380	-\$2,027,045
Head Start Preschool TTA	\$100,083	\$80,293	-\$19,790
Total Funding	\$10,351,508	\$8,304,673	-\$2,046,835 = -19.77%

There are currently five Head Stat sites under construction with 1 (Cruz Bay Head Start just completed).

The status of all projects are as followed:

Projects	Work in Place (%)	Timeline
Cruz Bay	100%	Opening Sept. 2, 2025
Bolongo	64%	December 2025
Minnetta Mitchell	80%	August 31, 2025
Lindbergh	85%	August 31, 2025
Anna's Hope	75%	September 2025
Concordia	75%	September 2025

As these figures indicate, the revised enrollment and funding levels closely align with our current

enrollment trends. While this adjustment is significant on paper, its real-time operational impact is limited due to existing vacancies. It is important to underscore that we are not standing still in response to these changes. Rather, we are actively working to position the program for long-term stability and success—investing in our facilities, reinforcing our community partnerships, and preparing a strong application for the next five-year grant cycle.

In closing, the Virgin Islands Department of Human Services remains firmly committed to the mission and legacy of Head Start: to provide a high-quality, comprehensive early childhood education that supports not only the academic growth of children, but also their health, emotional development, and family well-being. For over five decades, this program has played a pivotal role in preparing the Territory's most vulnerable children for lifelong success, and it continues to serve as both a launching pad for our youngest learners and a cornerstone of empowerment for families.

With five new centers under construction—and the recent completion of the Cruz Bay site—we are not just responding to present needs, but building the future of early childhood education in the Virgin Islands. These efforts are anchored in our belief that every child deserves a strong start, and every family deserves meaningful support. We are committed to aligning our program with the evolving needs of Virgin Islands communities and to advocating for the resources and flexibility required to deliver on that promise. We thank this legislative body for its ongoing support, attention, and partnership. Your engagement is vital to the continued success of this program and to the future of the children and families we serve. I, along with my colleagues, am available to answer any questions you may have.