



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

December 5, 2012

The Honorable John Kline  
Chairman  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

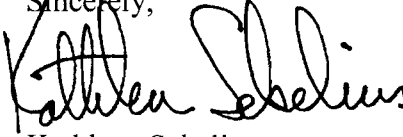
Thank you for your letter regarding the Head Start Designation Renewal System (DRS). I appreciate your leadership and interest in ensuring that this important new system is a success.

As you know, transparency in DRS was a priority in the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, and a strong theme and recommendation in the congressionally mandated *Report of the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Re-designation of Head Start Grantees*. Transparency, fairness, and clarity were also guiding principles for my Department as staff developed the proposed and final rules on the DRS.

Since the final rule was published, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has engaged in a series of practices to ensure full transparency in the process. The ACF Office of Head Start made an early commitment to post all information about DRS on its public website, the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/dr>. Information posted on this website included the list of Head Start grantees designated to compete, the link to forecasted grant opportunities, and the most recent ACF policy decisions affecting competition. In addition, all proposed grant funding opportunities ACF planned to issue as a result of the implementation of DRS were made public in January on the HHS Grants Forecast website at [www.acf.hhs.gov/hhsgrantsforecast](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/hhsgrantsforecast).

Enclosed are responses to your specific information requests. I hope this information is helpful to you. Again, I appreciate your ongoing commitment to the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. I will also provide this response to Senator Lamar Alexander, who co-signed your letter. Please contact me if you have further thoughts or concerns.

Sincerely,

  
Kathleen Sebelius

Enclosure

Department of Health and Human Services  
Responses to Designation Renewal System Information Request

- 1) The number of applications received for the Designation Renewal System (DRS) competitions, including applicant names and if they are the incumbent or delegate:

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) received over 500 applications in response to the DRS competitions for Head Start and Early Head Start grant funds. The number provided represents two groups of competitions that closed in July and August of this year.

In accordance with 45 CFR Part 1302, "Policies and Procedures for Selection, Initial Funding, and Refunding of Head Start Grantees, and for Selection of Replacement Grantees," ACF's Office of Head Start (OHS) has historically competed Head Start grants in communities where a Head Start grantee has relinquished their grant or whose grant has been terminated by ACF, OHS. Competitions for Early Head Start funding are also conducted at the community level, but under the Head Start Act organizations from outside the community are eligible for such competitions. The established OHS procedure for competing discretionary grant funds follows ACF grants policy.

Process for Application Review

A panel of impartial, non-Federal reviewers reads each application and documents their summary assessment as evaluated against the published evaluation criteria in the funding opportunity announcement (FOA). The resulting document of "panel comments" is a detailed narrative of an applicant's strengths and weaknesses in response to each section of the FOA:

- Demonstration of Need for Child Development and Health Services: Location, Population, and Service Delivery Options
- Achieving Early Learning and Development Outcomes to Promote School Readiness for Children
- Past Performance
- Staffing and Supporting a Strong Early Learning Workforce
- Organizational Capacity and Governance
- Budget and Budget Justification

Review panels are currently evaluating applications submitted for the first and second competitions, July and August respectively. Therefore, their summary panel comments, overall score, and ranking are currently unavailable.

- 2) Background of the grant reviewers:

In February 2012, OHS engaged in a large scale outreach campaign to recruit highly qualified applicants to serve as non-federal panel reviewers for the 2012 discretionary grant review season. The following qualifications were specified on the recruitment flyer and required of each applicant:

Applicants must demonstrate expertise and experience in early childhood education and family support services or related fields. Applicants are also needed with expertise in fiscal and organizational operations. All applicants must demonstrate abilities in the following areas:

- Strong communication skills: fluent English writing, listening, and speaking skills
- Analytical/critical thinking skills: provide thoughtful and objective evaluations based on established criteria
- Organizational and time management skills to adhere to deadlines
- Self-motivated and self-reliant to work effectively in a virtual environment
- Ability to collaborate in a virtual team environment, including across different time zones
- Familiar with diverse populations who might reflect the Head Start community
- For reviews requiring bilingual skills: abilities listed above, plus strong communication skills in Spanish

OHS committed to recruiting a diverse group of reviewers. Individuals who served on Head Start monitoring reviews or on panels for HHS or Department of Education grants were encouraged to apply. Familiarity with Head Start and/or previous experience as a grant reviewer is useful, but not required. Head Start or Early Head Start grantee staff and current Training/Technical Assistance providers were not eligible to apply. OHS applied conflict of interest procedures that prohibited anyone with a financial interest in an applicant or who had ever participated in a monitoring review of an applicant to review applications for that applicant.

In response to the OHS reviewer recruitment campaign, more than 1,300 individuals submitted resumes, two professional references, and a writing sample. All applicants were screened through a three-tier vetting process including an in-depth review of their application and resume, writing sample, reference check, and finally the applicant's successful completion of federally conducted OHS Grant Reviewer Training. As a result, a cadre of approximately 460 qualified non-federal reviewers has been selected.

- 3) How the DRS grantee selection process differs from the Race to the Top selection process, including the release of applicant and reviewer information:

ACF follows the policy of the Awarding Agency Grants Administration Manual (AAGAM) issued by the Department of Health and Human Services. There are significant differences between a state-level competition and local competition; however, we are committed to a transparent process. When the OHS review process is complete, we will release the name of the awarded applicants, and an abstract of their application.

- 4) Steps ACF has taken to ensure fairness in submission, review, and scoring:

The major steps ACF has taken to ensure fairness include: the FOA, applicant support website, and robust reviewer training.

ACF uses its FOA as the primary method for ensuring fairness in the submission and review of applications. An FOA is a formal published announcement of the availability of federal funding under one or more federal financial assistance programs. The announcement invites applications and provides information related to the funding opportunity, such as eligibility and evaluation criteria, funding preferences or priorities, how to obtain application materials, and the submission deadline.

Additionally, OHS established an interactive applicant support website, <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/grants> that offers a robust collection of resources intended to support organizations in gaining a deeper understanding of the Head Start and Early Head Start programs, FOA, and evaluation criteria. The following information is included in every FOA:

*“The Office of Head Start (OHS) strongly encourages entities interested in applying for this Head Start grant opportunity to visit <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/grants>.*

*A profile of current grantee services, equipment and inventory can also be found through this website. Head Start is a Federal program with important regulations that grantees must meet. At the applicant support website, applicants can familiarize themselves with these requirements. Finally, the website includes helpful tips for applying via Grants.gov. All interested applicants are reminded to frequently refer back to this funding opportunity announcement when preparing their application. Prospective applicants will also have the opportunity to send questions to OHS by email through the website listed above. A summary of the questions and OHS responses will be posted for public view on the applicant support website as soon as they become available.*

*Interested applicants may also contact the OHS Operations Center at (866) 796-1591 or TTY: 711 if they have additional questions.”*

Finally, all grant reviewers were required to attend a mandatory 2 ½ days of intensive training designed to deepen their understanding of Head Start, Early Head Start, FOA evaluation criteria, the scoring guide, panel reviewer roles and responsibilities, and use of the Application Review Module to submit a real time writing sample. Additionally, federal staff observed the performance of participants during the training to support the final selection of reviewers.