

# Head Start Services for Farmworkers

March 28, 2000

## A. Background

Rural Opportunities, Inc. has provided head start services to families of migrant farmworkers since 1986. At the present time ROI operates 9 centers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Since its inception, our program has served 5,178 children of farmworkers. Congress has appropriately designed the farmworker head start program to address the needs of the agricultural employer, farmworkers, and especially the children. Unique program services and the farmworker head start program include full day educational care often beginning at 7 a.m. and running until 6 p.m. The program runs throughout times of peak labor in the agricultural industry. In addition, children as young as six weeks old are eligible for services. These program components are much different from the “regular head start program” which usually runs half day programs during the regular school calendar for children ages three to five.

In 1998 the Head Start Act added language that allows the provision of services to seasonal farmworkers. Previous to this time the program was designed to provide services only to agricultural workers who migrated from one state to another in order to find employment in the agricultural industry. Seasonal farmworkers and their families live year-round in one location and work seasonally in agriculture. Often migrant workers and their families “settle out” and continue working in agriculture. The head start needs of their children remain the same for many years as the family transitions from the rigors and challenges involved in migrating for employment to establishing roots in a permanent community.

Congress correctly concluded that children of seasonally employed agricultural workers have many of the same needs for head start services as those of children of migrant farmworkers. Unfortunately no additional funding was appropriated to actually deliver services to children of seasonally employed farmworkers. Our experience managing this program and, most importantly, listening to parents of children served, (and not served) has convinced ROI that the following changes should be made in the regulations and/or legislation governing this critical program.

## B. ROI’s Recommendations

*1) Ensuring the Appropriate Funding of Head Start Services for Children of Seasonal Farmworkers:*

Rural Opportunities, Inc. strongly urges Congress to earmark funding from the head start appropriation for services to seasonal farmworker families comparable to those offered in the current migrant head start program. Congress must direct H. H. S. to establish the criteria to adequately identify those seasonal farmworkers who are in most need for head start services and could benefit the most from enrolling in these programs.

## *2) Increase In Funding for Educational Enhancement of Classroom Teachers and Other Caregivers*

In 1997 the head start performance standards governing minimum requirements for qualifications of head start educators and caregivers was amended. These amendments included the requirements that staff must acquire at least an associates degree in a field related to preschool/childcare education. A phase in time was authorized for programs to upgrade veteran staff who presently are not required to have the new educational/training requirements. Many of the current employees of migrant head start programs do not meet the new educational requirements. These veteran staff members are eager to obtain these new skills and are enthusiastically involved in obtaining the appropriate classroom education and training.

Unfortunately it is extremely expensive to comply with these new educational requirements. Courses cost approximately \$400 each and often staff are required to take as many as 10 classes in order to meet the requirements of the new regulations. The salaries earned by most employees is not adequate enough for them to purchase their own education. H. H. S. has not authorized increased funding within our existing grants to financially support this educational qualification requirement.

### Recommendation:

Congress must appropriate adequate resources to support the cost of upgrading the skills of migrant head start classroom teachers and other caregivers so that they will meet the higher education requirements established in the 1997 amendments on head start performance standards.