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Targeting Vulnerable Populations

Responding to the Needs of American Indian and Alaska Native Families

Overview

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Head Start programs are designed to increase access to early childhood education and developmental services for AI/AN children, who often live in remote tribal areas with few available resources. AI/AN Head Start programs also tailor their services to the cultural needs of AI/AN communities. Thus, AI/AN programs represent one of the most concrete examples of a Head Start program that targets a vulnerable population and promotes cultural awareness.

AI/AN Head Start programs target Native American and Alaskan Native children and are located on or near Indian reservations. As of 2011, AI/AN Head Start grantees, usually tribes or tribal organizations, were located in 26 states. Although these programs are geared towards AI/AN children and their service areas encompass tribal communities, the criteria for participation in AI/AN programs are not purely based on cultural and ethnic characteristics. Non-AI/AN children who are income-eligible and live within the service area may also participate, creating the potential for integration between AI/AN communities and communities outside reservations.¹ For example, 13% of children attending AI/AN Head Start programs were not American Indian or Alaska Natives in the 2010-2011 program year. Likewise, AI/AN children can participate in traditional Head Start programs: in 2011, approximately 17,500 American Indian or Alaska Native children participated in non-AI/AN Head Start programs (around two percent of cumulative enrollment in these programs).²

AI/AN programs can be a vital resource to Native American and Alaskan Native children who often live on or near Indian reservations, which can be isolated from early childhood education, health or other social services.³ For example, Native Americans frequently face difficulties accessing health services due to distance, unreliable transportation, and long waiting times at Indian Health Services-funded medical facilities.⁴ AI/AN Head Start programs can help promote equitable access to education, health and developmental services for these vulnerable children.

In addition, AI/AN programs were developed in recognition of “the significance of Native American customs and heritage to tribal members [which] necessitated different [program] practices and curricula.”⁵ One way that these programs incorporate cultural heritage is through “language preservation, revitalization and maintenance efforts targeted at native language in their programs based on decisions within each tribe or native community.”⁶ This cultural sensitivity is a defining aspect of AI/AN programs that helps Native American and Alaska Native families preserve their language and culture.

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Sources & notes:

- ¹ Early Head Start National Resource Center @ ZERO TO THREE. (2008). *Honoring cultural traditions: Early Head Start programs in American Indian and Alaska Native communities* (Technical Assistance Paper No. 12). Office of Head Start. Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/ta-system/teaching/eecd/Families-Parent%20Involvement/Support%20for%20Home%20Culture%20and%20Diversity/Honoring_Cultural_Traditions.pdf.
- ² Diversitydatakids.org's calculations using the 2010-2011 Head Start Program Information Report.
- ³ Early Head Start National Resource Center @ ZERO TO THREE, op cit.
- ⁴ United States Government Accountability Office. (2005). *Indian health service: Health care services are not always available to Native Americans* (GAO-05-789). Washington, D.C.: GAO.
- ⁵ Zigler, E. & Styfco, S.J. (2010). *The hidden history of Head Start*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 130.
- ⁶ *Early Head Start expansion pre-application webcast: Supplemental segment for American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) applicants* [Transcript]. (June 29, 2011). Office of Head Start. Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/resources/video/EHS_expansion_preapp_webcast/AmericanIndianA.htm/000009-American%20Indian%20Alaska%20Native_Supplemental%20Segment%20for%20American%20Indian%20Alaska%20Native%20AIAN.pdf.