



Targeting Vulnerable Populations

Responding to the Needs Of Migrant and Seasonal Worker Families

Overview

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs are a clear example of an equity-focused practice of targeting a population that faces systematic barriers to accessing services. The Migrant Head Start program was created in 1969, recognizing that some of the neediest children live in migrant farmworker families who work nontraditional hours or move too frequently to participate in traditional Head Start programs. Moreover, the children of these workers are often exposed to low family wages, substandard living conditions, and severe health risks.¹ The MSHS program was created and tailored specifically to that population's needs and circumstances in an effort to reduce barriers to participation and improve [school readiness](#). In 1998, seasonal farmworker families were also designated as eligible despite their residential stability, given that they face many of the same farmwork-related challenges as migrant workers, including part-year work.² The program was hence renamed "Migrant and Seasonal Head Start."

Structural differences

MSHS programs are uniquely structured to address the residential mobility of the families they serve. There are two types of programs: home-based programs and upstream programs.

Home-based programs provide services to seasonal and migrant farmworker families while they are located in what these families consider to be their permanent home, between agricultural cycles. These programs operate for six to nine months, usually from September to May, and tend to be located in the South of the United States.³

Upstream programs provide services to migrant families *while* they migrate north and mid-west in pursuit of short-term agricultural work.⁴ These programs operate from four weeks up to seven months, usually during the summer.⁵

There is a much greater range of program operating periods for MSHS than for traditional Head Start: MSHS programs operate anywhere from one to nine months, depending on migration patterns. In addition, MSHS programs "tailor their hours around peak harvest seasons" and tend to operate longer hours and weeks (eight to fourteen hours a day, five to seven days a week) in response to farmworker families' extended work schedules.⁶ These unique operating schedules create special challenges for these programs, such as higher staff turnover due to short and unpredictable work seasons, unpredictable hours, and a reliance on seasonal teaching staff.⁷

Service modification

Although there are no legally dictated differences in MSHS service components as compared to traditional Head Start programs, there are many in-practice differences. Unlike traditional Head Start, MSHS enrollment is open

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and continuous as families follow the crop harvesting schedules. Also, MSHS often provides transportation for children to and from programs.⁸ Due to the large number of Hispanic participants in MSHS, these programs often have a bilingual or multicultural curriculum. MSHS participants often experience more serious health issues than other Head Start participants due to exposure to pesticides and infectious diseases, poor sanitation, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, and lack of continuity with primary care providers.⁹ As a result, many of the services that MSHS programs provide (especially upstream programs) are focused on medical care, emergency food and temporary housing.¹⁰

Sources & notes:

- ¹ National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Collaboration Office. (2009). *The invisible children of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States: An examination of existing pre-k partnerships* (1st ed). Washington, D.C.: Academy for Educational Development. Retrieved from http://www.ece.aed.org/publications/nms/InvisibleChildren_2.18.09.pdf.
- ² *Briefing paper for Obama transition team: Migrant and Seasonal Head Start*. (2008). Washington, D.C.: National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association. Retrieved from http://otrans.3cdn.net/2e2111d7814cf00205_tim6iidas.pdf.
- ³ Kloosterman, V.I., Skiffington, S., Sanchez, Y., & Kiron, E. (2003). *Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and child care partnerships: A report from the field*. Waltham, MA: Education Development Center.
- ⁴ Ibid; *Briefing paper for Obama transition team*, op. cit.
- ⁵ Kloosterman, *op. cit.*; Nogales, R., Paulsell, D., & Tarullo, L. (2007). *Implementation of the national reporting system in Migrant/ Seasonal Head Start Programs: Year two update (Final Report)*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
- ⁶ National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Collaboration Office, op. cit.
- ⁷ Ibid; Kloosterman, op.cit.; *Briefing paper for Obama transition team*, op. cit.
- ⁸ *Briefing paper for Obama transition team*, op. cit.
- ⁹ Kloosterman, op.cit.; Nogales, op. cit.; National MSHS Collaboration Office, op.cit.; *Briefing paper for Obama transition team*, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Nogales, op. cit.