



National Indian Head Start Directors Association

*Standing Strong and preserving the identity
of AIAN children and families*

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November 17, 2025

Mary C. Jones
Certifying Officer
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
330 C St. SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Transmitted via email to infocollection@acf.hhs.gov

RE: Written Comments on the Proposed Information Collection Activity; Head Start Program Information Report

Dear Ms. Jones,

On behalf of the National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA), I write to submit this comment letter in response to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation's Proposed Information Collection Activity published in the Federal Register on September 17, 2025.¹ The Proposed Information Collection Activity proposes edits to the Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), Monthly Enrollment reporting instrument, and Center Locations and Contacts Instrument (Office of Management Budget (OMB) Control No. 0970-0427). NIHSDA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on both the proposed revisions to the 2026–2027 PIR and the proposed future information collections.

NIHSDA is a membership organization representing over 150 Tribal Head Start and Early Head Start programs across the United States, serving more than 20,000 Native children annually. NIHSDA generally supports the comments submitted by the National Head Start Association (NHSA) in response to this proposed information collection and incorporates NHSA's comments herein. However, while Indian Tribes and Tribal consortia operate Head Start programs in compliance with the Head Start Act and Office of Head Start regulations just like other Head Start grantees, unique considerations affect Tribal Head Start that ACF must incorporate into its information collections, as will be described in this comment letter.

¹ 90. Fed. Reg. 44,825 (Sept. 17, 2025).

Tribal governments that administer or delegate administration of Head Start programs possess Tribal sovereignty and a unique Nation-to-Nation relationship with the United States. Inherent in Tribal sovereignty is the principle that Tribal governments know best how to provide for the needs of their communities, and that as long as the Tribe is complying with all statutory, regulatory, and administrative requirements associated with a federal program, the Tribe should be given maximum flexibility to infuse culture, tradition, and local needs and services into program operations without having to provide extensive justification to the federal government. In addition, data collection in Indian Country, while critical to supporting robust and effective services to Tribal communities, must be conducted with care, respect, and in light of the historic harm of data exploitation by non-Tribal entities. This requires transparency on the part of the data collector about the purpose and use of the data being collected, as well as dialogue and Tribal consultation on information collections. This comment letter will further explain how these overall themes impact the proposed changes to the 2026–2027 PIR and future information collections, but NIHSDA urges ACF to incorporate these principles into its overall administration of Head Start.

I. Proposed Revisions to the 2026–2027 PIR

NIHSDA agrees with and incorporates NHSA's comments on the proposed revisions to the 2026–2027 PIR herein. In particular, NIHSDA agrees with NHSA's concern about the inclusion of the "Waiting List Total" field in monthly reporting. With no mechanism to provide context for waitlist number data, Tribal Head Start agencies fear that this data could be misinterpreted. Additionally, the data management systems that Tribal Head Start agencies use to complete the PIR, such as ChildPlus, do not track this data and would require reprogramming—an added cost and burden. NIHSDA also seeks transparency from the Office of Head Start about what this data will be used for and why ACF is proposing to add this data point to the PIR. As stated above, NIHSDA stands by the sovereignty-based principle that Tribal grantees of federal programs should only be required to report information necessary to comply with the authorizing statute, regulations, and administrative policies. Until ACF is able to provide an explanation about why this information is necessary to be collected and worth the additional burden on grantees, NIHSDA opposes the inclusion of the "Waiting List Total" field in the 2026–2027 PIR.

II. Proposed Future Information Collections for the PIR

NIHSDA once again agrees with and incorporates NHSA's comments on the proposed future information collections for the PIR, but takes the opportunity to provide additional insight about the unique reporting circumstances of Tribal Head Start agencies.

1. Child Turnover and Transition

NIHSDA opposes requiring Tribal Head Start grantees to track and report detailed data related to why children leave Head Start and where they receive services once they leave. In

addition to NHSA's concerns about the lack of consistency with which Head Start programs receive this information and the lack of utility of this data, NIHSDA members are concerned that this data collection could impinge on family privacy. Tribal communities are often small, remote, and struggle disproportionately with challenges such as poverty, housing and transportation insecurity, and poor health outcomes. Families may be reluctant to share sensitive reasons for leaving Head Start, which could include reasons like homelessness forcing the family to move out of the service area or lack of reliable transportation to transport children to Head Start facilities. Tribal Head Start programs wish to respect that privacy. In addition, Tribal Head Start programs possess limited staff capacity to follow up with families once they exit, which can be abrupt and sudden. With high rates of staff turnover and inconsistent data tracking practices, collecting child turnover and transition data would require substantial training and potentially even the hiring of additional staff.

Therefore, NIHSDA opposes the collection of detailed child turnover and transition data. As an alternative, NIHSDA suggests providing an option to report on child turnover and transition through narrative means and allowing Tribes to anonymize data such that the reasons for turnover and where the child transitions cannot be linked to a specific child or family. Once again, NIHSDA also encourages ACF to provide a transparent explanation for the purpose of this data collection.

2. Personnel Reporting

NIHSDA opposes the introduction of data collection on the three personnel categories "Labor," "Personnel Type," and "Personnel Content Area" as well as data collection on hours worked, staff turnover rates, salary information, and full-time and part-time staffing for each personnel category. NIHSDA members echo NHSA's concerns that personnel data is not tracked within existing Head Start data management systems, and the nuances of personnel data (such as positions with dual responsibilities or funded by multiple fund sources) are difficult to track in any data management system. Therefore, Tribes would have to expend significant resources to track and report such data in the PIR, and NIHSDA members have estimated that preparing systems to track this data would take at least 6 to 12 months. Additionally, providing this personnel data in the PIR would be duplicative of the cost allocation application that all Head Start grantees are required to submit.

Therefore, NIHSDA opposes the inclusion of this new data collection in the PIR. Rather, NIHSDA recommends that ACF provide Tribes the option to report on staffing data and challenges in a narrative form. NIHSDA again asks ACF to provide a transparent explanation for the purpose of this data collection and to conduct Tribal consultation on Tribal Head Start staffing needs and challenges. Tribal Head Start agencies are currently in a workforce crisis, with high turnover rates, inability to attract qualified applicants, and chronic vacancies significantly hampering Tribal Head Start programs from providing quality services to their communities. Factors such as the 42% wage gap between Head Start teachers and public school teachers, strict credentialing requirements for Head Start teachers, and remoteness contribute to the Tribal Head

Start workforce crisis. While data is necessary to address these challenges, data collection should be designed to address them and not be so burdensome as to take additional staff time away from providing services. ACF's resources would better be expended working with Tribal Head Start programs to address personnel challenges, rather than require burdensome personnel information collection for an unspecified purpose.

3. Transportation

NIHSDA opposes the inclusion of transportation data collection in the PIR and agrees with NHSA's comments on this proposal. The proposed information collection asks, "What information could be provided to the Office of Head Start within the PIR to identify potential ways to reduce the amount of distance a program needs to travel through better coordination with their state?" As separate and distinct sovereigns, Tribal Head Start agencies largely do not coordinate with states and thus would not benefit from better coordination. Additionally, the proposed transportation data collection would not account for the unique geographic challenges that affect transportation to and from Tribal Head Start programs. Many Tribes operate their programs in rural and remote areas, which may have unpaved roads, extreme weather, and limited transportation infrastructure. Tribes also struggle to attract drivers with commercial driver's licenses to offer consistent transportation to community members, and safety risks and vehicle maintenance challenges in remote areas make offering transportation very difficult. Therefore, collecting transportation data from Tribal Head Start programs would lack utility and not accurately depict the unique context giving rise to transportation challenges.

Like personnel, transportation poses challenges to Tribal Head Start programs, and ACF could certainly benefit from gathering data about these challenges to work with Tribes to find solutions. Proposing additional burdensome information collection that will not yield accurate conclusions and fails to capture important contextual information will not assist ACF or Tribes in addressing these challenges.

4. Funding Source and Cost Allocation Data

NIHSDA opposes the inclusion of detailed information collections regarding layered funding or the use of multiple funding sources to support Head Start and agrees with NHSA's comments on this proposal. Like NHSA stated, every Tribal Head Start program is unique and supplements Head Start services in a way that meets the unique needs of the community. The complexity and variety of layered funding models for Head Start programs throughout Indian Country would make reporting inconsistent and burdensome. Some NIHSDA members have stated that they would need to hire finance staff that solely focus on Head Start to report this data. As Tribal Head Start programs enter their third year of flat funding, this is not the time to add more burdens on Head Start administrators. Additionally, Tribes already provide cost allocation data in the annual grant application, making much of the sought information duplicative and doubling administrator workloads.

In addition, when a Tribe makes a decision to supplement Head Start services with non-Head Start funds, this decision is an act of Tribal sovereignty. It is a decision by a local government to respond to the specific needs of its community. Such decisions should be supported and encouraged by the federal government as trustee of Tribal interests, not placed under further scrutiny by requiring additional reporting. The Head Start Act allows grantees the flexibility to use layered funding to provide comprehensive services to community members. When Tribes exercise this authority, they do so in exercise of their fiduciary responsibilities to their communities and are subject to extensive oversight, including the single agency audit and existing Head Start fiscal reporting requirements. Therefore, NIHSDA opposes requiring Tribes to report on layered funding mechanisms or any fiscal information beyond what is required to determine compliance with the Head Start Act and applicable federal authorities. Rather, Tribes should be given the option to report such information in a narrative form.

NIHSDA also notes that requiring reporting by fund source would violate Public Law 102-477, as amended (PL 477) for Tribes that integrate Head Start into a PL 477 plan. The PL 477 law states,

Notwithstanding any other provision of law (including regulations and circulars of any agency . . .), an Indian tribe that has in place an approved [PL 477] plan shall not be required—

- (A) to maintain separate records that trace any service or activity conducted under the approved plan to the program for the funds were initially authorized or transferred;
- (B) to allocate expenditures among such a program; or
- (C) to audit expenditures by the original source of the program.

25 U.S.C. § 3413(a)(2). This provision makes explicitly clear that once a program is integrated into a PL 477 plan, the Tribe cannot be required to track services or activity based on fund source. Rather, PL 477 Tribes report on the comprehensive activities provided for in the plan as a whole.

5. IDEA Coordination

NIHSDA opposes the inclusion of data collections about why children do not receive evaluations or are found ineligible for an IEP or IFSP under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for the same reason as NHSA: delays and gaps in IDEA evaluations are largely beyond Tribal Head Start programs' control. The timelines and determinations for evaluations and eligibility are driven by Local Education Agencies (LEAs), not Head Start. Even when Tribal Head Start programs provide timely referrals, LEAs often do not complete evaluations before the end of the program year. Head Start programs can make recommendations and follow up with LEAs, but they cannot control the evaluation process or timelines, the screening tools used by LEAs, or the final eligibility determinations for IEPs or IFSPs. Therefore, LEAs should be responsible for reporting such information, not Head Start programs.

While NIHSDA agrees with NHSA's reason for opposing including this data collection in the PIR, NIHSDA does not agree with NHSA's alternative proposal that the Office of Head Start incorporate this data collection into FA1 and FA2 reviews. The purpose of the FA1 and FA2 reviews are to determine compliance with Head Start requirements, and because the results of IDEA referrals and evaluations are not within the control of Head Start programs, there is no compliance information to be gleaned from this data collection outside of the Head Start program timely referring children for evaluation. Therefore, NIHSDA does not agree with incorporating this data collection into FA1 and FA2 reviews and instead encourages the Office of Head Start to work with LEAs to obtain this information through other means.

6. Licensing and Definitions

NIHSDA opposes any requirement to enter the Head Start program's license identification number and expiration date on the Center Information reporting screen. In addition to being duplicative of other information collections, this requirement would pose a moderate burden for Tribal programs that are not state-licensed or are regulated under Tribal law. If ACF does go through with imposing this new requirement, NIHSDA proposes that ACF acknowledge Tribal regulatory authority by allowing an alternate field for "Tribal License/Approval." However, due to duplication and risk of error, NIHSDA opposes this new requirement altogether.

III. Conclusion

NIHSDA thanks ACF for the opportunity to provide input on proposed changes to the 2026–2027 PIR and future proposed information collections. While ACF considers the state of its reporting requirements on Tribal Head Start programs, NIHSDA encourages ACF to ensure that such requirements honor and respect Tribal sovereignty, impose the minimum administrative burden on Tribal Head Start programs to ensure compliance, and acknowledge the unique context in which Tribal Head Start programs operate.

Should you have any questions about this comment letter or would like to further discuss any of the issues addressed, please do not hesitate to contact Kristi Bentkowski at Kristi@threefeathersassoc.com.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrea Pesina".

Andrea Pesina
President
National Indian Head Start Directors Association