

Head Start expands in Md. county where scandal flared two years ago

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September 12, 2018 at 12:01 a.m. EDT

Head Start classes are expanding in Prince George's County, more than two years after the public school system lost a multimillion-dollar federal grant for the early-education program amid reports of corporal punishment and humiliation of children.

Easterseals DC MD VA and the Lourie Center for Children's Social & Emotional Wellness announced Wednesday that they have received a combined \$33.5 million in federal grants to operate programs for 418 economically disadvantaged children a year. The grants will stretch over five years.

That's significantly fewer children than what the school system once served in Prince George's — 932 children in 2016 — but it is evidence of revival for a prominent program in a county with a large number of children living near the poverty line.

Leaders from the two nonprofits are working to roll out their programs, with two centers open last week and more expected soon. School system officials say they embrace the efforts and promised to provide classroom space and other resources.

"This is great for children and families in Prince George's County," said Monica Goldson, interim chief executive of the school district, who pledged to "do our best to help the new providers serve as many children as possible, as quickly as possible."

Though no longer operating Head Start, county school officials have expanded prekindergarten by 280 seats since 2016 and increased the program's full-day enrollment.

Designed to foster school readiness, Head Start enrolls children ages 3 to 5 and has a sister program, Early Head Start, for infants and toddlers. The programs are administered by the federal Administration for Children and Families, which awarded the grants.

Head Start aims to make children from low-income families ready for school by offering educational, nutritional, health and social services.

Easterseals received an \$18.6 million grant, not including start-up costs, to serve 218 children a year, and the Lourie Center drew a \$14.9 million grant to serve 200 children a year. Both organizations will enroll infants to 5-year-olds.

Federal officials said the grants include programs for infants and toddlers, which are significantly more expensive. But they said they expect the shift to give the most vulnerable and underserved children "the support they need to succeed

in school and in life.”

Easterseals officials said they will provide programs to children living in southern Prince George’s County. Centers in Hyattsville and Temple Hills are already serving children, and locations will be added in coming months, they said.

They said they plan to go beyond education to offer early-intervention evaluations, mental health support and other services. Classrooms will include children with disabilities, who could account for as much as 25 percent of enrollment.

“There is tremendous need for services in Prince George’s County, and this is a big step to begin serving a large number of families,” said Larry Bram, a senior vice president at Easterseals. “We believe we can help change lives — and earlier is better.”

Lourie’s programs under the new grant will serve children in the county’s northern and central areas. Classrooms are slated to open as early as next month in Riverdale Park and Adelphi, and home-based services will be provided for pregnant women and for children from birth to age 3. Lourie plans to enroll 12 children in a therapeutic nursery program that works with children who have experienced trauma or other emotional challenges.

The new efforts mark a rebound for Head Start in Prince George’s.

Federal officials cited a string of troubling incidents as they announced their intention to revoke the school system’s grant in August 2016. One involved a teacher forcing a 3-year-old who wet himself to mop his own urine in front of the class and texting a photo to his mother, describing the punishment and writing “LOL.”

In another incident, a teacher made two children hold heavy boxes over their heads for an extended period as punishment for playing during nap time. A 5-year-old wandered away from the program, unmonitored for 50 minutes.

Federal officials said at the time that school district leaders had not taken sufficient steps after problems were pointed out. Prince George’s relinquished a grant it had held for 50 years.

Afterward, temporary efforts were made to serve Head Start students. Federal officials brought in a nonprofit from Denver that provided interim services. County school officials also used more than \$5 million in school system money to operate an early-education program for children already enrolled in Head Start during the 2016-2017 school year.

Easterseals has a 70-year history in the Washington region of providing early care and education services to disadvantaged children, officials said. But this is the agency’s first foray into Head Start, so it has engaged Shine Early Learning, a nonprofit with Head Start expertise, to help.

Leaders at the Lourie Center, started in 1983, said their efforts would come in the spirit of founders Reginald S. Lourie, T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley Greenspan, experts in early-childhood development. It has been involved in Early Head Start in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties for more than 20 years.

The new grant would add greatly to the “continuity of care,” said Angela Card, director of Head Start for the Lourie Center. “We will be able to really support children, through pregnancy and from birth to 5.”
