

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 25, 2024

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Across the 574 federally recognized Tribal Nations, there are over 165,000 American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children under four years old.¹ Many of these children live in tribal communities that face significant disparities compared to the general population across numerous health and social indicators due to decades of underfunding for tribal programs. Both the Head Start and Early Head Start early childhood education programs support children from low-income families in reaching kindergarten healthy and ready to thrive. Research has found that AI/AN children who attend Tribally operated Head Start programs show progress in most areas of cognitive assessment and improvements in their social-emotional skills.² In total, there are approximately 44,000 AI/AN children served in both tribally operated and non-tribal Head Start programs.³

Despite these benefits, Head Start enrollment has been a national challenge, in part due to labor shortages among early childhood educators. On March 23, 2024, President Biden signed into law additional flexibility for Tribes to broaden Head Start eligibility for the purpose of supporting Head Start enrollment in tribal areas.⁴ Further, in recent years, the Office of Head Start has taken steps to support language revitalization, such as developing resources in support of Native languages. As such, we are requesting that GAO look into these matters and answer the following questions:

- What challenges do Head Start centers serving AI/AN children face in reaching full enrollment?
- How has the Department of Health and Human Service's efforts to achieve full enrollment supported Head Start centers that service AI/AN children?
- How do Head Start centers incorporate cultural engagement and native language revitalization into their work?

¹ Bipartisan Policy Center, *Data and Funding Gaps in Tribal Early Care and Education*, (Apr. 2021). Available online at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Data-and-Funding-Gaps-in-Tribal-Early-Care-and-Education.pdf>.

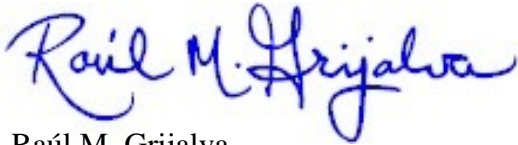
² Mathematica, *A Year in Region XI Head Start: Children's Growth and Development from the American Indian and Alaska Native Family and Child Experiences Survey 2015 (AI/AN FACES 2015)*, (Nov. 2018). Available online at: <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/a-year-in-region-xi-head-start-childrens-growth-and-development-from-the-american-indian-and-alaska>.

³ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services – Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, *American Indian and Alaska Native Programs*, (May 2024). Available online at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/programs/article/american-indian-alaska-native-programs>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services – Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, *New Eligibility Provisions for American Indian and Alaska Native Programs ACF-OHS-PI-24-03*, (May 2024). Available online at: [New Eligibility Provisions for American Indian and Alaska Native Programs | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.eclkc.gov/programs/article/new-eligibility-provisions-for-american-indian-and-alaska-native-programs).

If you have any questions or for periodic updates, please contact Qay-liwh Ammon with the House Committee on Natural Resources, Isabella Edo with Representative Jim McGovern, and Austin Yager with Representative Gabe Vasquez.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources



James P. McGovern
Ranking Member
House Committee on Rules



Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress