

Caring for the Forgotten Children

Head Start: Lewis County Program Serves Kids as Economy Takes Toll on Local Families

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Erin Snodgrass doesn't mind spending her Thursday afternoons in a room with 10 kids who just simply want to expend their energy.

On this day, 10 of her 3- to 4-year-old preschool children at Lewis County Head Start are amped — and they literally bounce off the walls as they dance to a silly song that teaches them how to dance with their left foot, then their right foot, then — freeze.

When it's all said and done, the kids go back to their seats where they learn how to spell their names, giving them an opportunity to relax and the adult staff a chance to simply catch their breath.

“At the end of the day, you feel like you gave so much that you just want to go home and relax it all off,” Snodgrass laughed. “We do it for the kids though, and we want to show them we care about them so much.”

Snodgrass is one of 48 staff members at Lewis County Head Start in Chehalis who work to provide developmental training, preschool education, meals and medical services to at-risk children in Lewis County.

It's a major labor of love to help take care of children four days a week for nearly four hours per day — and Snodgrass would definitely know, as her son Tommy, now 5 and a kindergartner at Onalaska Elementary School, went through Head Start in the 2009-10 school year.

“I've been here three weeks as a paid staff member and it means so much to help a program that helped my son when I couldn't,” Snodgrass said. “I want to give back however I can now.”

‘A Respite From

the Struggles of Life’

As it stands now, Lewis County Head Start is paid for through \$1.3 million in federal grants for 2010, thus rendering the program monetarily immune to state and local budget cuts — enabling staff to help underprivileged and at-risk children bridge what they call an important gap between home life in early developmental years and one's first year in kindergarten.

While 157 children and their families currently receive services and support from Head Start locally, around 200 other Lewis County children who have signed up aren't, as they sit on a waiting list waiting for slots to open.

That's a problem third-year Lewis County Head Start Director Debi Hood says won't go away anytime soon as local families continue to struggle through one of the worst economic times in American history.

“The economy here has taken its toll on so many families that some just can't provide a lot of essential services to their young children,” Hood said. “A lot of these kids are the ones society tends to forget because their parents are poor, homeless or a variety of other reasons we just might not know.”

A common misconception among many, Hood says, is that Head Start is simply a childcare facility. According to Hood, the local program offers education, exercise and medical testing for children whose families cannot afford them. The staff takes great pains to keep an upbeat, positive attitude among the children, as their time together serves as a respite from the struggles of life, says Hood.

“We want this to be as much of a home-style environment and as much of a positive atmosphere as we can make it,” Hood said. “Even the food we cook for the kids is just as if they would get it at home if their parents were to cook.”

From Chehalis to D.C.

As the economy grows worse, the need for Head Start grows greater, says Hood. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act infused an extra \$240,000 into Lewis County Head Start, enabling the program to reach 40 more children through the hiring of eight more staff members — but that support could go away if Congress doesn't act to extend those benefits during its next session.

That's why Tiffany Simkins, a Chehalis parent and member of the local Head Start Policy Council, traveled to Washington, D.C. last week, speaking with elected officials representing Washington state — Sen. Maria Cantwell, Sen. Patty Murray and staffers from the office of U.S. Rep. Brian Baird — and asking them to support extending the federal stimulus program for Head Start programs across the nation.

“Head Start was a lifeline for my kids and it is for thousands of kids nationwide,” Simkins said. “We have this money that has provided so much for so many children and their families, and it would be wrong to just yank that out from under them.”

Simkins said she received major support from Cantwell and Murray, who both assured her of their support for Head Start. Baird was not available at the time she had stopped through, but said his staff “responded favorably.”

“It's just my hope that the kids who need help the most continue to get it,” Simkins said.

That hope was echoed by Erin Snodgrass Thursday as her day came to an end. Walking back through the hallway after helping clean the children's play area, she shared her belief that giving kids the best care now will prove beneficial in the future.

“This is the population that will have to serve our communities someday,” Snodgrass said. “They have tremendous hearts, they have such a teachable way about them and they deserve the very best we can give them.”

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