Identifying and Responding to Community Needs in Migrant and Seasonal Head Start

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Like all Head Start programs, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs are designed to provide services tailored to meet community needs and are required to complete a community assessment at least once over their five-year grant period. The community assessment allows MSHS programs to identify community needs, strengths, and gaps in services. MSHS programs annually review and, as needed, update the community assessment to reflect any significant changes in community demographics, needs, and resources that have implications for program design and service delivery.[1] Assessing needs requires a nuanced understanding of the families MSHS programs serve and the factors shaping those families' lives. In this brief, we describe findings from qualitative interviews with MSHS staff from four programs, along with reviews of those programs' community assessments, and interviews with other experts from the MSHS community. The findings describe these programs' experiences related to

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[1] The community assessment is required as part of the Head Start Program Performance Standards: 45 CFR Chapter XIII, US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Head Start (OHS), August 2024, https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/performance-standards-final.pdf; and in accordance with the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (see "Head Start Act," HHS, ACF, OHS, accessed May 16, 2025, https://www.headstart.gov/policy/head-start-act).

assessing community needs, changes in community needs they have experienced in recent years, and how programs adjust services to meet those needs.

MSHS was founded in 1969 to meet the unique needs of farmworker families with young children. MSHS is distinct from Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start in several key ways. MSHS programs serve age-eligible children who have at least one family member whose income comes primarily from agricultural employment, regardless of total family income.[2] MSHS provides services to children from birth through age 5 and expectant mothers. In contrast, Head Start Preschool serves preschool-age children separately from infants, toddlers, and expectant mothers who receive services through Early Head Start. MSHS programs must ensure their design and operations deliver high-quality services tailored to the unique needs of the age mix of children they serve. This requires programs to engage in strategic planning and careful development and implementation of new processes. For example, serving more infants and toddlers may necessitate renovations to facilities; the hiring of new staff with the specific qualifications and competencies necessary to serve infants, toddlers, and their families; and the purchasing of new supplies or curricula, among other changes (Stepleton et al. 2024). MSHS programs may also make other unique programmatic adjustments to better serve their communities' needs, such as operating on shorter program years aligned with agricultural seasons, having more flexible hours such as opening earlier and closing later than traditional Head Start programs, and offering services on weekends. Box 1 provides additional context about the MSHS program.

BOX 1

Additional Context on Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS)

- About 300 MSHS centers currently exist. They are operated by 25 programs across 38 states.

- MSHS programs serve migrant farmworker families (those who moved multiple times within the past two years) and seasonal farmworker families (those who have not changed their residence multiple times within the past two years).

- Little research exists on how MSHS community needs shift due to factors like recent economic conditions, federal and state policy, and the early care and education ecosystem.

Source: "Find a Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Center," Health Resources and Services Administration, accessed January 8, 2025, https://data.hrsa.gov/hdslocator.

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[2] The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 (Pub. L. No. 118-47, 138 Stat. 460, Mar. 23, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/118/plaws/publ47/PLAW-118publ47.pdf) expanded eligibility for MSHS to any child who has at least one family member employed in agriculture, as defined in Section 3 of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (29 USC § 1802, 2009, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2009-title29/html/USCODE-2009-title29-chap20.htm), regardless of total family income. Some study participants expressed that this change to enrollment eligibility will likely lead to increased enrollment in MSHS programs, because more families are now eligible for services. However, because of the timing of data collection, it was too soon for programs in our study to have experienced any changes.

Research Questions and Methodology

This brief presents findings about how MSHS programs assess community needs, how community needs have changed, and how program staff tailor services to accommodate shifting community needs. Specifically, the team addressed the following research questions:

1. How do MSHS programs assess community needs broadly? How do programs assess needs related to the age mix of children they are prepared to serve?

2. What changes in community needs are MSHS programs experiencing?

3. How do MSHS programs adjust to meet shifting community needs, including regarding the age mix of children they are prepared to serve?

We led an in-depth qualitative study of four MSHS programs to answer these research questions. We identified programs that vary across dimensions such as geography and size, where size is defined as the number of enrolled children and the size of the service area. From each of the four programs, we reviewed program-level documents and interviewed one director and another program decisionmaker who played a role in developing the community assessment. In addition, we interviewed two regional staff of the Office of Head Start, two training and technical assistance providers, and two other leaders who work with many MSHS programs.

We held virtual one-on-one interviews between August and October 2024. We recorded and transcribed the interviews and conducted qualitative coding and analysis to identify key themes and trends across the interviews. Findings from this study represent the particular experiences and perspectives of the small sample who participated and thus may not be representative of all MSHS programs. This brief details the findings from our analysis.

How Do MSHS Programs Assess Community Needs Broadly? How Do Programs Assess Needs Related to the Age Mix of Children They Are Prepared to Serve?

Sources of Information Used to Assess Community Needs

MSHS programs use a variety of data sources to understand the needs of families they serve and make informed decisions. Staff from participating MSHS programs described how they evaluate community needs by gathering a mix of data about the community of agricultural workers they serve and the factors that may affect their need for MSHS services. Study participants described data in two ways: whether the data were formal or informal and whether the data were internal to the program versus external. The data types are defined in table 1, along with examples study participants shared about specific data sources.

TABLE 1

Examples of Information Collected to Assess Community Needs, Organized by Data Types

	Formal (information about a specific population gathered through systematic and structured data collection)	**Informal** (information gathered through less structured, conversational, or observational methods)
Internal (information gathered from those enrolled in the MSHS program, including internal program data)	▪ **Parent surveys.** Surveys conducted by staff at MSHS programs to capture information such as the unmet needs of families, plans for future enrollment, and travel plans for migrant families ▪ **Head Start PIR.** Data on current and past enrollment of families in the program ▪ **Staff and center director surveys.** Surveys of staff and leadership at MSHS programs capturing their perceptions of the community, including their needs, where families reside, trends in agricultural work, and other topics ▪ **Program data systems.** Administrative data, including enrollment records and historical data of where families were working ▪ **Waitlist data.** Lists of interested and eligible families, providing information on unmet need for services and trends about need for services over time	▪ **Conversations with families.** Informal input from families about their needs and plans shared with program staff, including in parent conferences and listening sessions ▪ **Conversations with staff.** Informal narrative information from staff about trends and needs they are witnessing, particularly from family-facing staff like family health coordinators ▪ **Policy council meetings.** Informal narrative information shared by parents serving on the program's policy council, on topics including families' unmet needs and work hours
External (information gathered from outside the program to provide a broader perspective on community needs and trends and to contextualize findings within the larger environment)	▪ **Surveys of agricultural employers.** Surveys on information such as crop seasons, types of agricultural work, hours of operations, hiring of H-2A workers,[a] and unmet needs of workers ▪ **US Department of Agriculture data.** Datasets about the number of farms in the service area ▪ **Census data:** Datasets about the number and age distribution data of children in poverty and in the service area ▪ **PIR data for other programs.** Enrollment and demographic data providing broader context about MSHS or HS populations and changes over time ▪ **National Agricultural Worker Survey at the US Department of Labor.** Datasets about farmworker populations and demographics, including in the MSHS program's service areas ▪ **KIDS COUNT Data Center from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.** Dataset about local demographics of children, including age mix and migrating families. ▪ **United Nations Immigration and Migration data.** Datasets about migration patterns ▪ **Local school district data.** Datasets about enrollment and demographics of primary-school-age children ▪ **WIC data.** Datasets about the number and demographics of young children from families with low incomes in the service area ▪ **Community health data.** Information from community health centers about birth rates in the service area	▪ **Conversations with employers.** Informal narrative information about topics such as employees' family size and composition, potentially eligible families, and crop seasons ▪ **State and national trends.** Informal trend information, including the impact of climate change on agricultural production and the number of H-2A workers in a local community from news articles, local news, one-pagers, etc. ▪ **Conversations with school districts.** Conversations about the availability of early care and education for children from birth to age 5 ▪ **Canvassing within the local community.** Conversations about unmet community needs and potentially eligible families ▪ **Conversations with community partners.** Conversations with community organizations such as WIC offices and health and religious organizations about topics like the age mix of children in the community, availability of child care services, and number of potentially eligible families

Source: Authors' analysis of interviews with program staff and other MSHS leaders.

Information Used to Assess the Age Mix of Children in Need of Services

Study participants reported using a mix of data sources to understand the age mix of children who need MSHS services in their communities. Program staff reported using internal data, including both formal data like the ages of children on their waitlist and informal sources like learning parents in their program are expecting a new child or not planning to return the following year. Program staff also mentioned that they used external data on the age mix of children, including formal sources like hospital data from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children on the number of newborns and informal sources like conversations with community members about the lack of high-quality care for infants and toddlers in a service area.

Challenges Related to Assessing Community Needs

Study participants described key challenges to accurately and efficiently assessing community needs:

- **Limited internal capacity.** Some program staff, particularly from smaller programs or those expanding into new service areas, reported facing challenges in gathering and analyzing data for their community assessments. In some cases, they relied on external consultants. However, one staff member who had worked with consultants reported that consultants often lack the same deep level of understanding that program staff embedded in the community have and described how this may limit the accuracy and relevance of the data collected.

- **Building trust in the community.** Some program staff emphasized the importance of building trust among agricultural employers, the agricultural worker community, and enrolled families to identify eligible families and understand the range of unmet needs these families are experiencing. Some study participants noted building this trust takes time and can be challenging because of historical distrust of external organizations, making people hesitant to share personal information with MSHS programs. As one staff member explained, building rapport with families takes time:

  We have to develop those relationships with them, right? But building a relationship takes time. So, we try to earn their trust so that they can come to us, but once [we earn their] trust, they are really good about sharing…so that we can help them get the resources that they need.

- **Uncertain data predictions.** Many study participants, including staff from all programs, noted that predicting trends for upcoming program years, such as the specific age breakdown of children, remains a persistent challenge. In these instances, some study participants reported relying on historical trends and past data to predict future needs.

- **Limited formal data.** Some study participants shared that formal data about agricultural workers and their families are often outdated or unavailable. For example, some study participants mentioned that agricultural employers, while a critical source of information about eligible MSHS families, rarely collect detailed data on workers' family sizes.

Facilitators Related to Assessing Community Needs

Study participants also described facilitators to accurately and effectively assessing community needs. These included the following:

- **Having a designated team lead community assessment.** Some program staff reported that designating one person or team to lead the community assessment could increase efficiency and streamline data collection efforts. They noted that a designated person or team helps ensure clear accountability and foster consistency in data collection and analysis across program sites. Some program staff described how having experienced staff who are familiar with the process and aware of trends in community needs is also beneficial.

- **Strong employer relationships.** Some study participants reported developing relationships with agricultural employers is key to gaining deeper insights into community needs. By maintaining regular communication with employers through meetings, surveys, and collaborative initiatives, program staff reported they could better identify trends, gather accurate data, and understand the local agricultural worker community.

- **Trust-building with families.** Some study participants shared that trust-building with families is critical to successful data collection and community assessment efforts. MSHS families may be hesitant to share personal information; however, program staff, including family-facing staff and leadership, can overcome these challenges by developing rapport with families. Building trusting relationships with families makes them feel more comfortable sharing their needs and other important information.

- **Innovative strategies.** Program staff shared some examples of innovative strategies used to assess community needs, such as

  » developing a smartphone application that serves as a database for local agricultural employers and types of agricultural work in the communities served, to streamline data collection, and
  » conducting quarterly data study sessions across sites to identify outstanding needs.

What Changes in Community Needs Are MSHS Programs Experiencing?

All study participants emphasized that MSHS communities experience many changes, so community needs fluctuate frequently. Some explained these unique circumstances are part of the motivation for

the MSHS programs' existence. The changes the study participants described fall into two categories: factors that change regularly and longer-term shifts in community needs.

Factors That Fluctuate Regularly

Some program staff noted specific community needs they expect to shift from year to year and during a given program year. They cited weather patterns, shifts in agricultural work (e.g., crop selection, seasonal productivity), regular fluctuations in the number of migrant families working in agriculture, and changes in household composition as drivers of the community's changing needs. These, in turn, may affect enrollment numbers each year, the age mix of children in a program, the support service needs of families, and the daily working hours and seasonal working periods of families. Study participants shared that adapting to these needs is part of the MSHS program model. One program staff member said,

> It's true of all Migrant Seasonal Head Start programs; we're always having to change and react and move the funding to where the greatest need is. The change is constant.

Study participants shared several examples of needs that fluctuate often:

- **Enrollment numbers.** Study participants reported that agricultural work is variable. They noted changes like certain crops requiring more or fewer workers, shifts in the time of year when workers are needed, and the opening or closing of agricultural businesses. These fluctuations, study participants noted, change the number of families eligible for MSHS services in any program year. MSHS leadership uses the community assessment and annual updates to plan for these changes.

- **Age mix of enrolled children.** Study participants explained that even though MSHS is designed to serve children from birth through age 5, different ages require different resources, staff training, and staff-to-child ratios in the classrooms, therefore requiring planning. Some program staff described frequently needing to convert preschool classrooms into infant and toddler classrooms or vice versa, depending on the age mix of the children. Some program staff explained that they try to anticipate the age mix of children before the program year but later need to adjust during the year based on the actual ages of the enrolled children.

- **Agricultural workers' schedules.** All study participants expressed that employers' decisions about the types of crops grown and seasonal weather patterns have implications for the months agricultural workers work at a given location and their schedules during a given week.

- **Ratio of migrant families compared with seasonal families.** All study participants expressed that the numbers of migrant families who travel for work and seasonal families who stay in a given location shift from year to year and during the program year. Because of this, staff from all participating programs shared the importance of regular communication with agricultural employers and families about when they will need MSHS services.

- **Unmet needs and needs for support services.** Program staff shared that they continuously learn of the unmet needs of enrolled families. Some program staff noted that they assess families' needs for support services throughout the year, as needs related to health care, immigration, food, and transportation can change frequently. One program staff member shared that staff primarily learn of these support service needs through informal, internal data sources like conversations with staff and families. As noted earlier, trust and rapport influence families' willingness to disclose their needs. One respondent shared that families are more likely to share sensitive needs later in the program year than at the onset, once they have formed relationships with program staff.

Longer-Term Trends across MSHS Programs

Study participants shared several trends in community needs they have noticed over the past several years, including shifts in types of agricultural work in their areas, availability of public preschool, prevalence of temporary agricultural workers, and program staffing needs:

- **All study participants mentioned that programs serve fewer migrant families and more seasonal families than they did in the past.** Study participants noted this as a major shift within MSHS populations. Some pointed to national and local political climates related to immigration as a driver of this change. Others noted a pattern where families remain in one location while one parent travels for agricultural work, changing their designation from migrant to seasonal.

- **The expansion of public preschool programs affects the age mix of children, enrollment, and staffing for MSHS programs, according to study participants.** The increase in publicly funded, free, or low-cost preschool is changing the early care and education sector landscape in many states and localities. Program staff across many programs reported an increased need for infant and toddler care and a decreased need for care for preschool-age children. Some program staff also reported challenges recruiting and retaining staff because public programs offer higher wages.

- **Study participants shared that some agricultural employers shift to hiring H-2A visa workers rather than migrant or seasonal workers with families.** The H-2A program provides temporary work visas to non-Americans to work in agricultural jobs. Some study participants shared that, unlike workers in families who historically have used MSHS, H-2A workers are predominantly men who do not reside with their families. As a result, parents with families may look for work in other geographic locations or industries, reducing the size of the population that would otherwise enroll in MSHS programs.

- **Similar to trends in Head Start and the broader early care and education sector, most study participants reported difficulties with staffing.** Some study participants shared that staffing MSHS programs brings additional challenges as staff need to be bilingual, understand the cultures of migrant and seasonal families, and be willing to work seasonally.

- **Technology modernization in agricultural work is changing the labor market, requiring fewer agricultural workers, according to participants.** Some study participants shared that agricultural employers increasingly rely on machines and thus need fewer workers. They explained that this also leads to families who would have sought out MSHS services finding nonagricultural employment, making them ineligible for the program.

- **Participants noted demographic shifts are occurring among agricultural workers and their families.** Although, historically, MSHS families have tended to be from Spanish-speaking heritages, some study participants noted that there are more families who speak languages other than Spanish, notably Haitian families speaking Haitian Creole. One participant also noted that children enrolled in MSHS are increasingly born in the US.

- **Mental health needs have increased across the board, according to participants.** After the pandemic, some program staff noticed increased mental health needs among parents, children, and staff. One participant noted there are more "active supervision issues" among students, which has required additional training for staff so they are prepared to manage these issues in the classroom, including training on how to manage staff members' own mental health and stress.

- **Families need support services related to transportation and housing.** Some program staff observed that families are increasingly struggling to find reliable transportation and housing.

How Do MSHS Programs Adjust to Meet Shifting Community Needs, Including Regarding the Age Mix of Children They Are Prepared to Serve?

Study participants from all programs shared processes for assessing community needs annually and planning for the five-year grant period. They used this information for strategic planning and budgeting. Although it is difficult to predict all needs given the frequent fluctuations in MSHS families' circumstances, program staff shared that the more accurate their assessment of community needs is, the better they can plan for programmatic adjustments in the short and long terms. One training and technical assistance provider described this idea as follows:

> We recommend that everything we do is proactive—that's the purpose of using and working with data and making strategic approaches based on the analysis of data. The Head Start [Program] Performance Standards are written in a way to allow us to course correct if the data shifts. During the year, we have ongoing monitoring protocols in almost everything, and [we're] constantly collecting data to alert and predict shifts so we can be prepared. However, it all depends; it does not mean that we will meet that change immediately. It may take weeks, it may take months, it depends on what it is.

Program staff tracked factors such as staffing, the age mix of children, the availability of public preschool options, and weather patterns to predict and plan for program changes at the site level and across the program.

Shorter-Term Adjustments

Most study participants described how leadership and staff at MSHS programs are used to constant change and that adapting is a central part of their program model. Program staff anticipated the need to make ongoing changes throughout every program year to meet their families' needs. They reported doing the following:

- **Communicating with families to inform scheduling decisions.** Staff at all programs communicated with families regularly to understand agricultural workers' schedules and track changes during the program year, and one program staff member noted they have regular communication with employers as well. Program staff adapted center and classroom schedules to meet families' needs. For example, centers would open earlier or later in the year to align with the growing seasons of particular crops (which may change yearly based on weather patterns) or shift opening and closing hours to accommodate farming schedules.

- **Building community partnerships to support families.** Staff from all programs also mentioned consistent efforts to build and sustain connections in their communities to refer families to support services. Program staff identified or developed new community partnerships based on enrolled families' specific needs. Box 2 includes examples of support service needs study participants shared.

BOX 2

Reported Support Service Needs for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Families

- Health care, including mental health care
- Food assistance
- Education services, such as GED programs
- Transportation

Source: Authors' analysis of interviews with program staff and other Migrant and Seasonal Head Start leaders.

- **Gathering information before each program year to predict the age mix of children.** Some program staff noted that they survey their enrolled families at the end of the program year to ask them if they plan to return the following year and use that information to plan for the number of classrooms by age group for the upcoming year. Study participants described varying levels of effort to adjust classrooms to serve different age groups. For example,

outfitting infant and toddler classrooms can be more intensive, as they require cribs and changing tables, refrigerators in the classroom, and different safety considerations. The layout of the physical space and whether the program already has furniture and other classroom materials can make it easier or harder to switch a classroom between age groups. One respondent shared that many MSHS programs design the physical spaces of their classrooms so they can be easily converted from preschool to infant and toddler or vice versa. Another respondent decided which classrooms to open first based on the age mix of children and the staff available rather than converting classrooms from one age group to another.

Longer-Term Adjustments

Program staff also examined trends in community needs over time and used that information to inform their strategic planning over the five-year grant period. Program staff reported that these adjustments, such as opening or closing a center and investing in infrastructure, required more resources and time to plan for.

Program staff shared examples of longer-term adjustments based on trends in community needs:

- **Opening or closing a center location.** Some program staff decided to open or close a center or build partnerships with additional family child care providers based on enrollment trends. Factors like an increase in the number of H-2A workers in an area reduced the number of families who needed MSHS services.

- **Expanding transportation services.** Study participants shared that changes to transportation services tend to require an investment in resources and involve many steps. Staff from one program shared that it takes about a year to get a bus customized to fit the program's needs, and buses require frequent maintenance. Another program staff member shared that they were struggling to hire bus drivers with a commercial driver's license (an expensive training that takes two years to complete), so they purchased microbuses instead of full-size buses. The microbuses are less expensive, and any staff with a standard driver's license and safety training can drive them.

- **Program changes based on trends in the age mix of children.** Study participants noted that certain adjustments based on trends in the age mix of children take more time to implement. Staff from one program decided to extend their program year for infants and toddlers because families needed care, and there was a lack of alternative options in the community for younger age groups. Meanwhile, they served preschoolers only during the summer, when the local Head Start and public preschools were closed. In another case, a program needed more substantial facility upgrades to convert preschool classrooms to infant and toddler classrooms, so they applied for supplemental funding from the Office of Head Start. One participant noted that if programs experience a trend toward serving more infants and toddlers instead of preschool-age children, staff may submit a change-of-scope request to the Office of Head Start regional

office to reduce overall enrollment slots because of the lower staff-to-child ratios for younger children.

Examples of How Programs Responded to Shifts in Community Needs

Making decisions about adjusting program services based on ever-changing and overlapping community needs is complicated. MSHS programs rely on various types of data to assess their needs, and leaders make decisions on how to best address the needs of their community using the resources they have. Table 2 presents several examples that study participants shared of how changes in community context led to shifting needs, what data sources programs used to identify and assess the related community needs, and what strategies were used to adjust to meet dynamic community needs.

TABLE 2

Example Trajectories of MSHS Community Needs and Program Adjustments

Changing community context	Information programs use to identify and assess related needs	Examples of program strategies to tailor services to meet needs
• Changes in immigration patterns because of global factors or national policy shifts may change the demographics of MSHS communities. • This may lead to a wider array of languages spoken by families and a different demographic makeup of families in a program. Families may speak a different language than the current MSHS program staff.	• PIR data • Conversations with families • Agricultural data	• Prioritizing hiring staff who understand the context and speak the families' languages in the program, including both teachers and support staff (e.g., hiring staff who can cook food that reflects what children eat at home) • Building pipelines of new staff who speak the language or understand the needs of newer families from a particular demographic group—for example, by recruiting and training parents as teachers, or by developing or strengthening partnerships with local community colleges • Engaging external experts to provide training and resources to staff
• Changes in migration patterns because of fear of illness during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, national and state immigration policies, increases in the number of H-2A workers, and family decisions to stay in one area rather than migrate • This may lead MSHS programs to enroll more seasonal families and fewer migrant families.	• Family input (e.g., waitlist data, policy council meetings, conversations with parents) • Conversations with agricultural employers • Information about state and national trends (e.g., news articles, documentation of policy changes)	• Discussing temporary (via memo requesting a change midyear) or permanent (through an application) changes with the Office of Head Start, to increase the number of enrollment slots for seasonal families and decrease the number of slots for migrant families • Opening or closing center locations based on migration and enrollment trends in a specific community
• Increases in the availability of public preschool and insufficient supply of quality and affordable infant and toddler care (especially care that is tailored to and meets the unique schedule needs of agricultural workers) may change the age mix of children served by MSHS programs. • MSHS families may choose to enroll their preschool-age children in public preschool options but continue to need care over the summer or during extended hours and need care for infants and toddlers throughout the growing season.	• Data from the MSHS program's waitlists • WIC data on the number of infants and toddlers from families with low incomes • Enrollment data • Family surveys	• Adjustments to be able to serve more infants and toddlers, such as training or hiring staff to work with infants and toddlers, hiring more staff to meet the lower ratios required for infants and toddlers, or making updates to facilities to convert preschool classrooms to infant and toddler classrooms • Creating different program years for infants and toddlers and preschool-age children: serving preschool children during the summer, while public preschool options are not in session, but maintaining a longer program year for infants and toddlers

Source: Interviews with program staff and other MSHS leaders.

Notes: MSHS = Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, PIR = Program Information Report, WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Challenges Related to Tailoring Services to Meet Community Needs

Study participants shared several challenges to adjusting program services to meet community needs:

- **Limited external support services are available for agricultural worker families.** Although all program staff shared that they support families in accessing external supports for needs like health care, housing, and food, some staff mentioned that available social services are limited. This was particularly true in rural areas and/or for certain subpopulations in the communities.

- **Resources are limited for MSHS programs.** Program staff noted that they sometimes must make difficult decisions about prioritizing certain program adjustments over others based on their finite resources in terms of funding and capacity.

- **Staffing shortages are common for MSHS programs.** Most study participants identified staffing as a major challenge for program operations. If a program is understaffed, it can be more difficult to adapt quickly when there are changes in community need. In addition, one program staff member shared that finding qualified staff who speak the languages and understand the culture of the families served can be difficult, particularly when they experience demographic shifts that bring families from different cultures.

Facilitators Related to Tailoring Services to Meet Community Needs

Study participants also noted several facilitators to adjusting program services to meet community needs:

- **Program leaders and governing agencies work as a team.** Some program staff shared that support from the management team and policy council helped program leaders make sound decisions about program adjustments based on community needs. One staff member described an annual resource allocation meeting with representatives from the leadership team, policy council, and board. This meeting is an opportunity to present and analyze information about community needs and make decisions about how to adjust services accordingly.

- **Well-defined processes for sharing information on community needs allow data collection to flow from the local level to program leaders.** Some program staff shared the value of having set processes for making decisions about tailoring services, such as standing meetings with delegates or center staff to review formal and informal community-needs data. These systems facilitate data-driven decisionmaking.

- **Serving the birth-through-age-5 continuum allows programs to be nimble and responsive to the families who enroll each program year.** MSHS programs do not need to go through a formal approval process to change the number of preschool-age children compared with infants and toddlers they serve, which one program staff member thought enabled them to make frequent adjustments as needed.

Conclusion

Assessing community needs through formal community assessment and on an ongoing basis is an integral part of all Head Start programs and a requirement of the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

The findings from this study show that assessing community needs regularly and holistically is a necessary and central part of the MSHS program model. Program staff gather data from various sources and prioritize family engagement and community partnerships at the local level. Staff at all levels play a role in assessing community needs, particularly building relationships with families and agricultural employers. Program staff consider many data sources to assess short- and long-term needs and adapt services to meet those needs. Program staff also highlighted processes for gathering input from specific centers to make decisions about tailoring services.

Similarities and differences exist in how MSHS programs assess and respond to community needs compared with Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start. All Head Start program decisionmakers rely on many types of data to get a full picture of their community needs, but MSHS programs tend to rely on informal data sources because fewer formal data sources with detailed and current information about local agricultural worker families are available. Some contextual factors affect both Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start as well as MSHS, such as the increase in publicly funded preschool programs, a lack of affordable and accessible infant and toddler care, and challenges in hiring and retaining qualified staff. However, MSHS programs also manage unique contextual factors associated with agricultural work, such as weather, migration patterns, and agricultural programs like H-2A. Because so many fluctuations in the community needs of MSHS families are expected, these programs have more flexibility to make rapid changes without formal approval from the Office of Head Start.

To conclude, we identify several ideas for building on this study's findings. First, future research could gather input from agricultural worker families directly to understand their perspectives on how community needs have shifted and MSHS programs' responsiveness to those shifts. In addition, collecting representative data from all MSHS programs about assessing community needs could provide useful information about whether the trends we identified reflect the entire population.

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