Head Start Adjusts to Cuts

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After Northern Panhandle Head Start in Moundsville experienced a 5.27 percent funding cut at the beginning of July, the program and its families have made necessary changes and are looking toward the future of the program.

As a result of the federal sequestration budget cuts, the center has eliminated 37 preschool slots at the program's Fourth Street facility and has relocated the Early Head Start classroom from the Marshall County Day Care facility to the center to reduce money spent on rented facilities.

"A lot of our families in our program suffered," Jackie Bell, Head Start coordinator, said. "It's been a transition for us. Our hope is the sequester will end and our budget will get back to what it was, so we can pick up more families. The Northern Panhandle relies on agencies like ours to service and help the families of the area."

Bell said reducing rented facilities has allowed Head Start to keep some of the programs previously funded with federal money. However, to keep all the program's services, two of the three Head Start programs for children 3-5 years old and eight staff positions were eliminated. Early Head Start for children 1-3 years old now occupies the former preschool classrooms.

"We were forced to make this change in Marshall County based on budget reductions, and with the reduction of 37 preschooler slots at the Fourth Street facility, it was obvious we had to combine these operations into one facility," Marlene Midget, Head Start executive director, said. "The sequester has forced many federally funded agencies to make operational changes, and within our early childhood program, the effect is that less families with young children will have access to our program."

Head Start serves prenatal women and children from birth to 5 years old, while providing early childhood development services, including education, transportation, medical referrals and social services to low-income families free of charge. Bell said she sees a great need for these support services for families in Marshall County.

"Some families have no support system at all," Bell said. "We have families that are working families that just may not make enough to make ends meet. There are so many families that couldn't afford quality day care and services. A lot of them would fall through the cracks because they wouldn't know where to turn. We are one of the only agencies to provide these kind of comprehensive services."