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RFK Jr. Cuts Head Start Access for Undocumented Kids

July 11, 2025

— Categories: Human Rights



Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced a policy change expanding restrictions on federal public benefits to bar undocumented children from enrolling in Head Start, effective immediately. The policy shift, effective upon publication in the Federal Register, reclassifies Head Start as a federal public benefit available only to citizens and lawful residents. Supporters say this measure restores accountability to public assistance, while critics warn it could harm disadvantaged children who already face significant barriers.

Kennedy stated that for too long, federal resources have been used in ways that effectively encouraged illegal immigration. “Today’s action changes that it restores integrity to federal social programs, enforces the rule of law, and protects vital resources for the American people,” he said in a prepared statement. The move rescinds the 1998 HHS guidance that excluded Head Start from the definition of “federal public benefits” under the 1996 welfare reform law, now reclassifying it and barring undocumented families from enrolling.

Head Start, which operates under the Head Start Act, offers early childhood education, health screenings, nutrition, and family support services to low-income families across the United States. The National Head Start Association criticized the decision, with Executive Director Yasmina Vinci arguing there was no justification for excluding immigrant children. Vinci said in a statement, “The Head Start Act has never required documentation of immigration status as a condition for enrollment over the last 60 years. Attempts to impose such a requirement threaten to create fear and confusion among all families who are focused on raising healthy children, ready to succeed in school and life.”

While opponents warn the policy could harm child development, HHS states it may free up federal funds to better target services for lawful resident children, though no official estimate of funds reallocated has been provided. Supporters of the new rule point out that limited public dollars should prioritize American citizens and lawful residents first, especially at a time when many communities are stretched thin.

Available research suggests that undocumented children make up only a small portion of the Head Start population. A 2019 study found immigrant children are about seven times less likely than U.S.-born children to enroll in center-based childcare. Nonetheless, the measure has sparked debate over whether federal health and education services should be shielded from illegal immigration pressures.

The policy also reclassifies other programs, including community health centers, substance use treatment, and Title X family planning, as public benefits now restricted to lawful residents, with the rule open for 30 days of public comment. The move reflects the administration’s intent to enforce immigration laws and restrict federal benefits to lawful residents, though critics warn it conflicts with earlier commitments to universal access, including those grounded in the 1982 Plyler v. Doe precedent for K-12 education.

The Department of Health and Human Services has indicated it will provide further details on the expected impact and how many children could be affected in the months ahead.

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