



## Memorandum

**To:** Illinois Early Head Start/Head Start Programs

**Subject:** Announcement of 2026 Nutrition Support Opportunities for Illinois Head Starts

**Information:** In March 2025, the Administration of Children and Family Services (ACFS) issued a [memorandum](#) to affirm the critical role Head Starts play in ensuring families and children have access to nutritious foods and in providing comprehensive nutrition services. The memo emphasized the importance of leveraging partnerships and resources available to support Head Start programs in meeting relevant statutory and regulatory requirements.

The Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA) is pleased to announce we are partnering with the Illinois Public Health Institute to provide Illinois Head Start programs with **two free opportunities developed based on our feedback and identified needs. IHSA strongly encourages you to take advantage of these opportunities, which commence in April 2026. Please sign up for these opportunities via the brief form [linked here](#) by Tuesday, March 31, 5pm.**

**Our Goal:** IHSA's goal is for up to 12 Illinois Early Head Start/Head Start programs from across the state strengthen local food access/Farm to ECE practices and up to 8 programs to strengthen lactation support practices by participating in these opportunities. We can also leverage these opportunities to identify ways to scale this work to programs across the state.

### Overview of Opportunities:

#### Opportunity 1: Local Food Procurement/Farm to ECE

- **What:** Access focused support and resources to find solutions to your local food purchasing challenges. Join the Illinois Farm to ECE Network quarterly virtual calls to engage in focused conversations with local food partners and subject matter experts to advance local food procurement through collaborative purchasing agreements, and gain access to training and resources on Farm to ECE. Key participants include Illinois Head Start Programs, Local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, SNAP Educators, Local Health Departments, Farmers, and others.
- **When:** Quarterly Virtual Meetings:
  - Session 1: Friday, April 24 - 10am-12pm



- Session 2: Friday, May 15, 10am-12pm
- Session 3– Friday, August 14, 10am-12pm
- Time Commitment: 2 hours per quarterly call
- Directors, Education Manager, Health Manager/Program Manager/Nutrition Staff, Parent Advocates

#### Opportunity 2: SPAN Lactation Support Community of Practice

- What: Receive training and support on strengthening lactation-supportive policies, environments, and referral practices at Early Head Start/Head Start sites. Topics could include (and will be based on your feedback!):
  - Family-Centered Approach
  - How to offer Individualized, Culturally Appropriate Support
  - Important Role of Head Start Staff
  - Create Friendly Environments for Breastfeeding
  - Help Develop Policies and Procedures
  - How to Engage Community Partners
- When/Where - virtual meetings:
  - Session 1: Friday, April 17, 10am-12pm
  - Session 2: Friday, May 1, 10:0am-12:00pm
  - Session 3: Friday, September 11, 10:00am-12:00pm
- Time commitment
  - Group lead identifies and engages other participants
  - 3 two-hour meetings (part of your existing meeting schedule)
  - Up to 2 additional one-hour technical assistance calls
  - Any group working time between meetings
- Who should attend?
  - Required: A Program Leader with decision-making authority (i.e. Executive director, Health Managers, Program Director, or designee) to drive implementation of policy and process changes?
  - Highly encouraged: A frontline staff member with direct, day-to-day interaction with families (i.e. a lactation consultant, peer counselor, or family services staff) who can support implementation and bring real-time feedback to families and classrooms.
  - Also encouraged:
    - A Lactation Consultant or Peer Counselor - strongly encouraged
    - Family Services



- Health or Nutrition Leads
- Home Visiting Staff
- Community Partner (WIC, Hospitals, Doulas, Etc.)
- Family Advocate
- Family Educator
- A Parent/Caregiver

**[Sign up for these opportunities here!](#)**

Click for expanded background on these opportunities:

These opportunities are made available via the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded Illinois State Physical Activity and Nutrition (ISPAN) program, a five-year initiative to establish and strengthen policies and systems related to nourishing food access, lactation support continuity of care, physical activity in the built environment, and Early Care and Education (ECE). SPAN is led by the Illinois Public Health Institute (IPHI), a nonprofit that works to advance health justice through equitable policy, systems, and institutional change.

SPAN's Early Care and Education work is guided by [CDC's Spectrum of Opportunities](#), which identifies evidence-based strategies for nine areas states can work in to improve nutrition access and physical activity in Early Childhood settings. Promoting enhanced standards within state funded programs (Head Start), strengthening fresh food procurement and distribution chains, and increasing Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) participation and retention rates are evidence-based strategies of focus for SPAN.

Aligning with the ACFS memo, IHSA and IPHI spent 2025 engaging Head Start Directors on support needs and opportunities in these areas:

- **Nutrition Access:** Head Start serves over 1 million low-income preschool children, making it a crucial setting for nutrition services. Head Start programs are required to participate in CACFP, a USDA program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children enrolled, yet a survey of Illinois Head Start Directors from across Illinois revealed that 41.60% programs identified delivery/vendor issues and access to grocery stores as a key barrier to participation. 75% of directors expressed interest in establishing collaborative purchasing agreements with local partners (e.g. school or other entities) to address delivery/access issues.



- Farm to ECE: Farm to Early Care & Education is using local foods in meals, teaching kids about nutrition education, and engaging kids in hands-on learning through gardening. Farm to ECE will help Head Start programs meet program and regulatory requirements related to parent/child nutrition education, local food access/purchasing and child development domains outlined in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. 92% of the Head Start programs surveyed expressed interest in Farm to ECE training and resources.
- Lactation Support: Breastfeeding has many known health benefits for infants and parents and yet there are significant disparities across the state in terms of access to lactation support services. Having continuous supports throughout the breastfeeding journey is important for success. Head Starts can play an important role in creating environments that support breastfeeding parents through policies, training, and best practices. 67% of survey respondents indicated that Head Starts are a place to engage lactating parents but 58% reported they did not have or didn't know if they provide or promote lactation supports.

**Email [Sarah.Flores@iphionline.org](mailto:Sarah.Flores@iphionline.org) with any questions or concerns.**

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