

https://www.winchesterstar.com/winchester_star/frederick-county-head-start-to-resume-operations-jan-27-after-lengthy-delay/article_0512a6e2-57ea-5408-9909-1d7f10fca78a.html

CENTERPIECE

Frederick County Head Start to resume operations Jan. 27 after lengthy delay

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
Jan 16, 2025



The Frederick County Head Start Center at 444 Shady Elm Road, which didn't open at the start of the school year, is now set to open Jan. 27. Head Start is a federal program that offers free educational and developmental resources, including preschool programs for 3 and 4 year olds, to children between birth and age 5 whose families meet federal low-income guidelines.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — On Aug. 16, when back-to-school season was getting into full swing, families enrolled in Frederick County's Head Start preschool program received an email.

Planned construction projects for the facility on Shady Elm Road had been delayed, meaning the program's start date would be pushed back indefinitely.

“At this time, we do not have a start date but will update you as soon as we can,” the message read. “We apologize for any inconvenience that this delay will cause your family. If you need to make other arrangements for your child, please let us know.”

This began a months-long waiting game regarding when children would return to the classroom.

In late September, another email informed families that teachers were back at work preparing to welcome students, fueling hope that a start to the school year was imminent. But it wasn't until Dec. 9 that families were given an official start date.

Now, nearly four months after that initial message, families are finally preparing to send their children to their first day of school on Jan. 27.

But the construction projects that prompted the delay remain in limbo, leaving families and other stakeholders with questions about how and why the process played out this way.

What is Head Start?

Head Start is a federal program that offers free educational and developmental resources, including preschool programs for 3 and 4 year olds, to children between birth and age 5 whose families meet federal low-income guidelines.

The Frederick County facility on Shady Elm Road, which currently serves 68 students from Winchester and Frederick County and employs 18 staff members, has housed Head Start preschool programs for a number of years.

For more than two decades, the site — formerly called Apple Country Head Start — served as a regional Head Start for students from Winchester, Frederick County and Clarke County.

However, in 2018, the organization that had been running the facility, Tri-County Virginia OIC, discontinued the program, citing a nationwide teacher shortage, a drop in enrollment and competing preschool options as barriers to continued operations.

The Virginia-based nonprofit People Incorporated, which now runs seven Head Start centers in Southwest Virginia and the Northern Shenandoah Valley, was selected to take over the Shady Elm Road facility in 2020.

In-person services resumed there in 2021, and a separate Clarke County Head Start program, also run by People Inc., was launched in 2022.

The delay

Bryan Phipps, president and CEO of People Inc., said that when his organization took over the site at Shady Elm Road, it identified some improvements that were needed at the center, including more bathrooms for staff and children, installing a kitchen and converting an existing storage area into an additional classroom.

“It just really needed to be updated and rehabilitated,” Phipps said.

Because Head Start utilizes federal dollars, People Inc. must get approval from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to make renovations, which Phipps said “has become a very laborious process.”

“This has been a situation where our original plans were to do the improvements to the facility over the summer, with the idea that whenever school went out in May, then we could get contractors in there and be ready to go in September when school started,” he said. “And we just got caught up in those delays. And then ... what we were hearing was that their approval would be imminent, so we didn’t want to bring [students] back, and then have to discontinue services if we were going to do the improvements.”

Then, amid the wait for approval, Phipps said it became clear that the facility needed roof repairs before children returned to their classrooms.

“We knew, at some point, we were gonna have to address the roof, but it just became increasingly obvious that we needed to do that rather than wait any longer,” he said.

People Inc. managed to get the green light from federal officials to make the roof repairs, and contractors have been working on that project ahead of center’s Jan. 27 start date.

As for the rest of the projects, there’s really no timeline for when that federal approval may come, which Phipps said led to the decision to go ahead and start the school year rather than continuing to wait.

“I mean, really for us, the calculus has been, we’ve been without services there for six months,” he said. “The community needs access to these services. And frankly, our staff needed to be employed, and we needed to get them back in so they could be working. So that was really, I think, what led to the decision, more than anything, is just getting the services back up and going and being able to support our staff and the community.”

Lingering questions

Mandee Keil, whose son is set to return to Head Start for his second year, said the past few months have left her with questions.

Keil keeps a pulse on what’s going on with children and education by volunteering with organizations like La Leche League and receiving services through the local nonprofit Healthy Families, among other things, making her “a bit of a community resource” for other parents, she said.

“If you kind of want to know what’s going on with kids and babies, I might have a clue,” she said. “And so I started getting parents that were talking to people in other organizations going, ‘Have you heard anything?’”

Feeling unsatisfied with the three official email communications from Head Start, Keil said she started seeking answers on her own, which left her feeling even more confused about what was behind the delay.

Rachel Fogg, director of communications for People Inc., said the organization recognizes that there may have been confusion, especially during the early days of the delay. She said that aside from the three official emails sent to families from People Inc., family engagement specialists were in touch with parents as well.

However, around the time of that second email in late September, Fogg said “we actually realized in the child and family development department that there was confusion about delays even amongst our staff.”

“So we can definitely see how that may have contributed to some confusion for the families for sure,” she said.

Fogg added that September was about the time that Kim Hill, director of child and family development for People Inc., who also oversees Head Start programs, was brought on board. Since then, Hill has been hosting monthly meetings with staff to keep them updated, according to Fogg.

“So the communication should have been clearer since that time, but totally understand if our initial communications were confusing, because it was even confusing at the staff level,” Fogg said.

The Frederick County Head Start center was also without a director until October, which Fogg said could have contributed to the confusion as well.

“On behalf of the agency, we would like to apologize for any confusion, misunderstandings or miscommunication throughout this time, and we are working to correct those issues,” said Fogg. “And moving forward, we’re going to try to limit confusion as much as possible and be direct and clear with families, but again, we apologize for any inconvenience that may have caused families initially.”

Keil also raised questions about why, during this months-long delay, People Inc. didn’t look into providing a distance learning plan for Head Start students, or move them to a different location in the interim.

Fogg said that Head Start doesn’t recognize distance learning, a rule that was temporarily lifted during the pandemic but is now back in place. She also said that efforts were made to connect with school divisions in Winchester, Frederick County and Clarke County — where Clarke County’s Head Start center is housed — to see if there was any space for the Frederick County Head Start students, “and there is actually no physical room in any of those places to move kids.”

Impacts and moving forward

Besides Head Start, there are Virginia Preschool (VPI) classrooms in Winchester Public Schools and select Frederick County Public Schools, which also serve families meeting low-income and other criteria at no cost.

However, FCPS’s classrooms, which serve 4 year olds, are only available to children living in certain school zones, according to its website, and the program has a limit of 72 students, sometimes leaving eligible families on a waiting list.

WPS's program, which spans the entire division, is only available to children living in the city. The division's 4-year-old classrooms are full, and the lone 3-year-old classroom has a waiting list, according to officials.

Beyond that, affordable or free preschool options aren't abundant in the area.

Keil's family can't afford to pay for another option. She said the wait for Head Start to open has been frustrating. She's had no break in providing childcare, and she's worried about her son's social development as he prepares to head to kindergarten next school year.

"And I'm lucky in the fact that I have my children's father ... providing us a place to live," she added. "Not everyone has that privilege. There are people who have to work two and three and four jobs."

Stacey Snow, who crossed paths with Head Start families through her former role with Healthy Families, said the delayed start has left some parents unable to seek employment.

"Some of them can't get a job because they can't afford childcare," she said, "and they were hoping on Head Start being open so they can at least work during those hours."

Phipps recognized that the pause in services at the Frederick County Head Start site has been "problematic and challenging" for families.

"It's very unfortunate," he said, especially for low-income families "that really depend on the Head Start program for childhood education care."

He also noted that it's been a difficult time for staff members, as the layoff status they're typically placed on during the summer months was extended beyond what they expected. Employees were finally brought back to work a couple of months ago, Phipps said, "because it had been long enough."

"We've had some folks that have moved on to other employment simply because they couldn't wait any longer," he said. "We understand that. So it's certainly not a situation that we wanted to have happen, but it's one that we're trying to manage our way through as best we can."

There's also the matter of lost instruction time.

Although preschool isn't mandatory in Virginia, Head Start typically follows a traditional 180-day school year schedule. When classes resume at the Frederick County center on Jan. 27, Phipps said there aren't currently any plans to add days back onto the calendar or extend the remaining school days to make up for the delay.

There isn't any indication that there will be repercussions over the lost time, he said, or that People Inc. will have to return federal funding to the Department of Health and Human Services.

"We were very transparent and clear with them that we needed to get our staff back," Phipps said. "We weren't operating, and we shouldn't be penalized due, frankly, to their delay in getting us the approval to do the work that we asked two years ago to do. So it's been a very good conversation."

Keil, for her part, said she was worried that the lost time would remain just that — lost. She said she's especially concerned for the children who are supposed to enter kindergarten next school year who, unlike her own son, haven't had any classroom experience up until this point.

"I'm concerned that somehow, someone's going to get a waiver that lets the institution off the hook for the time that these children deserve," she said. "And I don't think that that's OK. I don't think many of us would mind going later or going longer if it meant that they got what our kids deserved."

Officials, however, say they don't foresee any lasting implications for these students.

"With the age of the children being 3 and 4, they may or not be in an educational program to begin with," said Hill, People Inc.'s director of child and family development. "Hopefully they are, but not necessarily all of them are. So the impact is typically lower at this age than what it would be with a school-age child. ... so I don't expect the impact to be great when it comes to child education and development."

Phipps said that while the children missing out on educational services over the past few months "isn't an ideal situation," he doesn't foresee "any lingering effects" beyond that. And while some families have opted for alternative arrangements due to the delay, Phipps said that "we have traditionally had a pretty large waiting list for services in the community."

"So we don't anticipate, at this point, that we will have any challenges in filling all the slots that we have," he said.

Plans for when and how the remaining renovations will be completed are to be determined, as there isn't any indication as to when People Inc. will receive that federal approval.

"It's not really a question of money or really even appropriateness of what we are proposing," Phipps said, noting that much of the funding is available through carryover dollars from previous years. "It is mainly just administrative work that needs to happen in the federal government."

That said, Phipps said he wants families to understand that People Inc. is apologetic about the way the delay played out.

"We're very sympathetic to the fact that this is not ideal for the families, and we've not only had to not begin services the way we want to, but it's also having an impact on our staff," he said. "But you know, I know for a fact that we have been very diligent and responsive to all the requests we've gotten from the Office of Head Start about the information that they've needed, and gone through all the processes that have been prescribed for us to receive approval to improve the center. But beyond that, there's not a whole lot that we can do."

To fill out a Head Start application, or for more information about the program and its locations, visit <https://www.peopleinc.net/service/head-start/>.

— Contact Molly Williams at mwilliams@winchesterstar.com

Molly Williams