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News

## Parents get bad news on Head Start

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BRISTOL — Raven Cooper, a single mother of three, doesn't know what she's going to do with her 3-year-old son on Monday when his Head Start classroom won't open due to the lack of a state budget.

"I have nowhere for my son to attend and I'm scheduled for work," said Cooper. "I'm totally lost right now."

Cooper, who works full- and and part-time jobs to support her family, came to a meeting for Head Start families Wednesday at the Bristol Community Organization. There, she learned that her son was placed in one of the two state-funded classrooms that wouldn't be opening on schedule Monday.

"It is very sad that the situation could come to this, that we lack the funds for our growing children," said Cooper, who said it's "terrible" not to know if, or when, the class will be restored.

Cooper, who has a friend who will sometimes babysit but isn't always available, said she will look for other care for her son. But she also hopes she won't have to take too much time off work because of the Head Start closing.

"I'm not looking forward to an eviction," said Cooper.

Kate Perron, director of the Head Start program in Bristol, said many of the parents impacted by the classroom closures are working and are now stuck without childcare.

"This is very hard for working parents," Perron said.

It's not easy on the children, either, according to Erica Romero and Luis Maldonado of Bristol, whose 4-year-old daughter is eager to return to her Head Start classroom.

"I think it hurts her in a way, too," said Romero.

Romero and Maldonado said they doesn't like that the youngest children are getting hurt in the state budget crisis.

"The kids are really the ones that are losing out on their education," said Maldonado. "We want it to be open in time."

The decision of which children get to remain in the two federally funded classes that will open on time and which ones were placed in the state funded classes and won't be going to school on Monday, said Perron, is based on a point system used by Head Start.

Children are allotted points based on whether they're part of a one or two-parent home, Perron said, or whether they're

being raised by foster parents. Family income, the child's age, social development mental and physical health, as well as whether the parent is working, going to school or in a training program are also weighted. All of it is by formula.

"That's a federal regulation," said Perron. "There is absolutely zero picking and choosing on our part."

In some ways, the Bristol Head Start program is faring better than others.

"Six other Head Start programs in Connecticut have closed their doors," said Perron, who said the local program is lucky to be under BCO's umbrella.

In Bristol, the two surviving Head Start classes will be located in the BCO headquarters at 55 South St., and the other two classrooms on Lake Avenue will be shuttered, at least for now.

When the state-funded classes are restored, they'll be located in the Lake Avenue building for the year, said Perron. She said changing the location to Lake Avenue from South Street could pose a problem for some Head Start families that don't drive.

"We have a lot of walkers," said Perron. "A lot of our parents don't drive, don't have access to a vehicle."

Thomas Morrow, executive director of BCO, said it was costing the non-profit agency \$50,000 a month to maintain services — primarily Head Start and Dial-a-Ride — that had been funded by the state.

"We really thought there would be a budget by now," Morrow told the parents.

There's no way to predict when the budget will be passed, Morrow said, or how much funding Head Start might get under a new budget.

"Things change on an hourly basis," said Perron.

All they know, Morrow said, is that there's no money at the moment.

Morrow said they can't begin the programs again without an approved state budget in place, knowing what the funding level will be, so they're shutting them down.

"Hopefully, this will only be a temporary thing," said Morrow.

BCO hasn't received any payment from the state for Head Start or Dial-a-Ride for July or August, said Morrow, and doesn't expect to recoup the money, which is about \$100,000.

"This is one of the ways that the state is saving money," said Morrow.

Operating without a budget, the state is being run by executive order, said Morrow, and Head Start and Dial-a-Ride didn't make the cut, which means no reimbursement.

"They're not considered, I guess, essential services," said Morrow.

When state-funded Head Start classes resume, Morrow said, parents will be notified by letter, and will call everyone for whom the agency has phone numbers.

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