

Sequester hurting Head Start funding

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Staff Reporter

Like the county's Area Agency on Aging and the Department of Social Services, officials with the county's Head Start program say the federally

mandated budget cuts known as sequestration is targeting another of society's most vulnerable — poor children.

"We're certainly feeling the impact," Rhonda Wrenn, acting Head Start director for the Yadkin

Valley Economic Development District Inc., which administers the program, said.

According to Wrenn, federal cuts for the four counties included in the program, including Davie, Stokes, Surry and Yadkin

counties, amount to a little more than \$126,000 this year.

Surry County is set to lose \$57,930 due to sequestration this year.

Head Start provides educational services for preschool-aged children

and accepts children ages 3 to 5 who qualify due to a diagnosed disability or low income households. The program boasts 22 classrooms.

"The teachers are as qualified as public school teachers, and we have fully

licensed pre-K teachers," Wrenn said. "In fact, all of our classrooms are five-star licensed through the North Carolina Division of Child Development."

Right now, Head Start is

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serving 211 children and transporting them daily. Thirty of the children in the program from Surry County have a diagnosed disability.

And the preschoolers aren't the only ones being touched by the budget cuts.

"The biggest thing we're doing to try to close the budget gap is reducing our staff hours to 35 hours a week instead of 40," said Wrenn, who noted that they're going to revisit the hours in January with the hope of bringing them back to 40 if the department's budget can accommodate the increase.

She said that her staff has been understanding in the face of the loss of five hours pay every week.

"They have been very positive about it," she said. "They understand how desperately these children need our services and they're willing to take a hit for their sake."

The sequester also means there is no longer such a thing as a free lunch.

"When we feed our children lunch, normally our teachers eat the same thing for lunch as the children in order to model good behaviors," Wrenn said. "We're cutting those teacher lunches to save what little we can."

'These cuts are affecting the most vulnerable, needy people.'

— Rhonda Wrenn

Acting Head Start director
for the Yadkin Valley Economic
Development District Inc.

Other staff members have volunteered to take a furlough over the summer without pay to try to save money for the program.

"I've been trying to take this week off without pay myself, but have had to come into the office a little bit," Wrenn said from her office.

In addition, Wrenn said she is in the process of trying to renegotiate contracts for things like cleaning supplies and classroom materials.

"We're just going to them and seeing whether there is anything they can do to help us reduce costs," she said.

Like other departments affected by the sequester, Wrenn said she is doing everything she can to continue providing services.

"We're having to cut everywhere we can," she said. "But we're trying not to impact the services we pro-

vide to children and families. A lot of other Head Start programs have been reducing their enrollment, but we want to serve these children who need us. We've tried to look for every way we can to save money and not penalize our children."

Over the past two years, the federal government has cut about \$200,000 from the Head Start program, Wrenn said.

"That's a lot of money we have to come up with, so we're having to be very smart in our spending," she said.

Wrenn said she is frustrated at who the sequester is hurting.

"These cuts are affecting the most vulnerable, needy people," she said. "These children are being penalized by the sequester. From our perspective, these preschoolers are our littlest clients. We're trying to get the ready for school so they're on a level playing field with the other children."

"Right now, I don't see a light at the end of the tunnel," Wrenn added. "But we're going to stay positive. We've never met a hurdle we haven't been able to handle. Whenever a challenge arises, we find a way, and we're going to keep that same attitude with this."

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