**MISSISSIPPI COUNTY, ARKANSAS, E.O.C.**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

1302.12

**ELIGIBILITY POLICY**

**POLICY:**

The program determines, verifies, and documents eligibility in accordance with the regulations.

**PROCEDURES:**

**Determining, Verifying, and Documenting Eligibility**

ERSEA and Family Service Staff must conduct an in-person application interview with each family, unless impossible or not convenient for the family, in which they can interview the family over the telephone.

Staff must verify county residency, age, income, immunization status and eligibility.

ERSEA staff must file a signed copy of the ***Verification of Eligibility Form*** to indicate they have examined all forms of income and have confirmed the child’s eligibility.

The Family Service Staff must enter the child/family onto the appropriate waiting list(s) requested by the family within 2 business days of receiving all required application documentation.

**Age Requirements**

For Early Head Start, a child must be an infant or a toddler younger than three years old. Children are eligible to enter center program when they reach 6 weeks of age, have had their first set of immunizations and have received medical clearance to participate in program. Children are eligible to remain in EHS after their third birthday if they are in the transition process. The ERSEA Coordinator guides Family Service Staff and Home-Based Visitors in their work with families to ensure successful transitions.

For Head Start, a child must be at least three years old or, turn three years old on or by August 1st, the date used to determine eligibility for public school in the community, and be no older than the age required to attend school.

The ERSEA Coordinator must confirm the child’s age eligibility by obtaining a copy of the child’s official birth record or birth certificate, official medical forms such as immunization records, health insurance card, or physical. The program cannot require families to provide documents that confirm a child’s age, if doing so creates a barrier for the family to enroll the child. If the family does not have immediate access to a birth certificate or birth record, staff will assist the family in obtaining such record.

**Eligibility Requirements**

A child or pregnant woman is eligible if:

1. The family’s income is equal to or below the federal poverty line; or
2. The family is eligible categorical if they would be potentially eligible for public assistance.
3. The child is homeless; or
4. The child is in foster care.

If the family does not meet a criterion listed above, the program may enroll a child who would benefit from services, provided that these participants only make up to 10% of the program’s actual enrollment.

At the time that the program reaches its 10% over income limitation, the program will evaluate whether or not to implement the 101-130% allowance as described below.

**101-130% Allowance**

A program may enroll an additional 35 percent of participants whose family’s incomes are 101- 130% of the federal poverty guidelines if the program:

* Establishes and implements outreach and enrollment policies and procedures to ensure it is meeting the needs of eligible children and children with disabilities, before serving children who do not meet the eligibility requirements listed above.
* Establishes criteria that ensure children eligible under the criteria listed above are served first.

The program must be able to report to the Office of Head Start:

* How it is meeting the needs of low-income families or families potentially eligible for public assistance, homeless children, and children in foster care, and include local demographic data on these populations;
* Outreach and enrollment policies and procedures that ensure it is meeting the needs of eligible children before serving over income children;
* Efforts, including outreach, to be fully enrolled with eligible children;
* Policies, procedures, and selection criteria it uses to serve eligible children;
* Its current enrollment and its enrollment for the previous year;
* The number of children served, disaggregated by the eligibility criteria; and
* The eligibility criteria category of each child on the program’s waiting list.

**Verifying Eligibility**

1. **Income**

To verify eligibility based on income, program staff use the following documents to determine the family’s income for the relevant time period: tax forms, pay stubs, written statements from employers, current public assistance benefit statements, signed declarations, and other proof of income.

If the family cannot provide proof of income for the relevant time period, program staff may accept written statements from employers, including individuals who are self-employed, for the relevant time period and use information provided to calculate total annual income with

appropriate multipliers. A written declaration and explanation can be collected at the time of application using the ***Self-Declaration of Income form***.

If the family reports no income for the relevant time period, the program may accept the family’s signed declaration to that effect, if program staff describes efforts made to verify the family’s income, and explains how the family’s total income was calculated or seeks information from

third parties about the family’s eligibility, if the family gives written consent. This will be documented on the ***Zero Income Statement*** provided at application.

If the family can demonstrate a significant change in income for the relevant time period, program staff may consider current income circumstances.

For families whom have 50/50 physical placement for child custody, the income is to be collected by both households and divided by 2 to reflect both household’s income. The size of the family will be determined by examining both households’ relation to the child per the Head Start Program Performance Standard definition of family. Once the household size is determined for both households, it too will be divided by 2.

1. **Public Assistance (TANF, SSI) or Potential Eligibility in the Absence of Child Care**

To verify whether a family is eligible for, or in the absence of child care, would be potentially eligible for public assistance, the program obtains documentation from either the state, local, or tribal public assistance agency that shows the family either receives public assistance or that shows the family is potentially eligible to receive public assistance.

1. **Homeless**

To verify whether a family is homeless, the program may accept a written statement from a homeless services provider, school personnel, or other service agency attesting that the child is homeless or any other documentation that indicates homelessness, including documentation from a public or private agency, a declaration, information gathered on enrollment or application forms, or notes from an interview with staff to establish the child is homeless; or any other document that establishes homelessness. If a family can provide one of the documents described above, the ERSEA Coordinator must describe efforts made to verify the accuracy of the information provided and state whether the family is eligible because they are homeless. The program may accept the families signed declaration to verify housing status. This is obtained at the time of application by the family completing the application or preapplication in MyHeadStart.com

1. **Foster Care**

To verify whether a child is in foster care, program staff accepts either a court order or other legal or government issued document, a written statement from a government child welfare official that demonstrates the child is in foster care, or proof of a foster care payment. Children who are in foster care must have their application approved by a legal representative from the department of social services, either the foster care supervisor or higher in the chain of comma

Children in foster care, homeless children, and families receiving public assistance (TANF or SSI) are automatically eligible for services and count as income eligible. Eligibility is documented on the ***Office of Head Start Eligibility Verification Form*.**

**Eligibility Duration**

If a child is determined eligible and is participating in a Head Start program, he or she will remain eligible through the end of the succeeding program year. Should a child remain age eligible for a third year, the ERSEA Coordinator must verify the family’s eligibility again.

If a child is determined eligible and is participating in an Early Head Start program, he or she will remain eligible while they participate in the EHS program. If a child moves from an Early Head Start program to a Head Start program, program staff must verify the family’s eligibility again.

When the program operates both an Early Head Start and a Head Start program, and the parents wish to enroll their child who has been enrolled in the program’s Early Head Start, the program ensures, whenever possible, the child receives Head Start services until enrolled in school, provided the child is eligible.

**Records**

The program keeps eligibility determination records for each participant and ongoing records of the eligibility training for staff.

Participant eligibility determination record includes:

* ***Eligibility verification*** (documentation of in person interview)
* Copies of any documents or statements, including declarations that are deemed necessary to verify eligibility
* ***Verification of Eligibility Form***
* ***Selection Criteria Form***
* ***MyHeadStart Application*** (documents income)

The program keeps eligibility determination records for those currently enrolled, as long as they are enrolled, and for one year after they have stopped receiving services. All eligibility records are housed with the ERSEA Coordinator.

**Training on Eligibility**

The program trains all governing body, policy council, management, and staff who determine eligibility on applicable federal regulations and program policies and procedures. At a minimum, the training:

* Includes methods on how to collect and complete accurate eligibility information from families and third-party sources;
* Incorporates strategies for treating families with dignity and respect and for dealing with possible issues of domestic violence, stigma, and privacy;
* Explains program policies and procedures that describe actions taken against staff, families, or participants who attempt to provide or intentionally provide false information.

The program trains management and staff members who make eligibility determinations within 90 days of hiring new staff. Training is provided at least every two years to ensure staff remain current with practices in the field.

The program trains all governing body and policy council members within 180 days of the beginning of the term of a new governing body or policy council. Training is provided at least every two years to ensure governing body and policy council members remain current with practices in the field.

The program also provides eligibility training to all staff during their onboarding process (within 60 days of employment).

**Violation of these Policies and Procedures**

If staff violate federal and/or program eligibility determination regulations, the program will administer performance improvement action, up to and including termination, according to the agency’s Personnel Policies.

In the event that the program suspects that a parent or guardian provided false or inaccurate information during the eligibility determination process, the Head Start Director and ERSEA Coordinator will conduct a full investigation. The family may be required to reapply for services using accurate eligibility information. Each situation will be investigated and responded to appropriately.