

By GRETCHEN PHILLIPS

Head Start advocates, including those in Southern Maryland, spent a day in Annapolis last month encouraging legislators and local representatives to support Head Start and keep cuts away from its funding.

While local Head Start employees said education and parent involvement are the two key components of Head Start, money is a big factor and with any cuts, some programs might be in jeopardy.

Head Start is a federally funded program for 3- and 4-year-olds and promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children and their families, according to information provided by Southern Maryland Tri-County Community Action Committee, which oversees the programs in Charles, Calvert and St. Mary's counties.

Currently there are 593 children in Head Start programs in Southern Maryland.

Six centers are located in Charles County serving a total of 255 children; three centers in Calvert service 148 children; and three centers in St. Mary's County serve 190 children.

Eileene Zimmer, director of the programs, said families can apply for the program provided their child is 3 years old and meets federal income eligibility.

Zimmer said 90 percent of Head Start enrollment are children whose families are at or below poverty level, which she said was approximately \$20,000 for a family of four.

Zimmer said Head Start can allow 10 percent enrollment for families above income eligibility. Ten percent of total enrollment is set aside for students with disabilities, she said.

Services are free for all enrolled families.

At a recent event, U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) discussed Head Start programs with teachers and parents at a Prince George's County elementary school.

According to a news release from Hoyer's office, Head Start is the nation's primary early childhood development program for low-income preschoolers, and under the budget for the remainder of this fiscal year, which ends June 30, more than 2,300 Maryland children will lose access to this critical program.

Currently, Head Start receives \$7.2 billion, according to the release from Hoyer's office.

Zimmer said Southern Maryland Head Start programs receive approximately \$4.3 million in federal funds.

For the remainder of the fiscal year, the release states that the GOP funding bill would have funded the programs at \$6.2 billion, which would affect 200,000 children in the programs.

Zimmer said cuts to funding could potentially affect 30 Southern Maryland children and potentially five staff positions.

Breanna Marini, a former Head Start parent of the Southern Maryland Tri-County Community Action's Head Start programs and current president of the group's policy council, took time to meet with representatives in Annapolis on March 21.

Marini, of Virginia, shared her experiences with Head Start and how the program not only helped her son, Nikholias, 6, when he was younger but also has helped give her confidence and direction to continue to pursue higher education.

"Prior to my involvement in Head Start, I had little direction or motivation in my life. Volunteering as a parent has not only given me experience, but has improved my effectiveness with goal setting and aided my personal life. I am forever grateful for what the Head Start program has offered me and my family," Marini wrote in a testimonial for legislators.

While in Annapolis, Marini said she spoke to several local representatives including Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton (D-Charles), Del. John F. Wood Jr. (D-St. Mary's, Charles) and Del Anthony J. O'Donnell (R-Calvert, St. Mary's).

She said all seemed very supportive of Head Start.

Marini said when she began with Head Start in 2008 the program received about \$200,000 in funding.

Last year, state funding dropped to approximately \$130,000 and this year the program works with roughly \$100,000, she said.

Marini said she expects little will change in Southern Maryland's state funding in the near future.

Marini said she had all three of her young children with her in Annapolis and she said the children helped to show representatives the reality of who would be affected by funding cuts to Head Start.

"It was a great experience. It's good to know our delegates are supportive of us," she said.

Simeon Russell, social services parent involvement specialist for Head Start, said what is unique about Head Start is that there is a policy council made up of community representatives, parents and Head Start staff who oversee policy and budget decisions.

Russell said parents have a large role in everything that goes on in Head Start because aside from education, parent involvement is a big part of what makes Head Start a success.

The policy council meets once a month and runs just like any typical board meeting with reports from breakout committees such as finance committees and planning committees.

The group votes on all personnel decisions also.

"I care about the program and what happens to the children," Marini told a reporter after the March meeting.

Marini said parent involvement is what makes the program run.

She said there are about 25 members of the policy council and the programs are continually seeking parent input and participation.

"Head Start has done a lot of good for families in the community and needs that funding now more than ever considering the state of the economy," said Valerie Jones of Lusby, family advocate for Head Start.

