START® EARLY | Together for Head Start

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH HEAD START ASSOCIATIONS

February 26, 2026

Head Start Non-Competitive Grant Application Training

Tips, Pitfalls and Proven Strategies

Together for Head Start: A Webinar Series for Champions and Changemakers

Rio Romero-Jurado
Assistant Director
Policy and Advocacy| Start Early

Today’s Webinar Facilitator

WELCOME

ABOUT START EARLY

Start Early is a national nonprofit dedicated to advancing quality early learning and care for children and families living in under-resourced communities from before birth through the first five years.

TOGETHER FOR HEAD START: A WEBINAR SERIES FOR CHAMPIONS AND CHANGEMAKERS

Multi-part webinar series hosted by Start Early designed to equip Head Start grantees, early childhood educators, and advocates with the tools, knowledge, and strategies to protect and strengthen Head Start at every level.

INTRODUCTIONS: IN THE CHAT

We'd love to know who is joining us today!
Please add in the chat your:

- Name
- Program
- State/Territory

HOUSEKEEPING & ENGAGEMENT

ENGAGEMENT

- Use the Q&A feature for questions
- Chat is open – share comments or thoughts
- The Start Early chat moderator will use the “ ❗ ”

RECORDING NOTICE

- This webinar will NOT be recorded
- A copy of the slides will be available on Start Early's website and the Together for Head Start LinkTree

TECHNOLOGY TIPS

- Closed captioning and translation are available for this webinar— click the 'CC' or 'Live Transcript' button on your screen.
- Having trouble? Try rejoining or emailing us at Events@StartEarly.org

LEGAL DISCLAIMER

Nothing in this webinar should be considered legal advice.

Your attendance at this webinar does not constitute an attorney-client relationship and we encourage you to seek your own legal counsel as needed.

This webinar is presented for informational purpose. The opinions and viewpoints shared are those of our speakers who have generously offered their time today.

This presentation and any related discussion are based solely on the presenters' professional experience and interpretation of federal regulations at the time of the presentation. It should not be considered formal federal guidance or an official statement of policy. For definitive requirements, please refer to the relevant federal statutes, regulations, and agency-issued guidance.

MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA

Welcome and thank you!

- Please identify yourselves by updating your Zoom name to include PRESS (e.g. Rio Romero-Jurado- PRESS).
- Please consider this a background information call. Do not attribute written or oral statements or questions to any speakers or attendees without their permission.
- Q&A box is for Head Start grantee use.

Questions?

Please reach out to Press@StartEarly.org.

TODAY'S SPEAKERS

Karen McNamara

Managing Partner

Skyline Advisory Partners

Beth Fuller

Managing Partner

Skyline Advisory Partners

Ann Linehan

Former Deputy Director

Office of Head Start

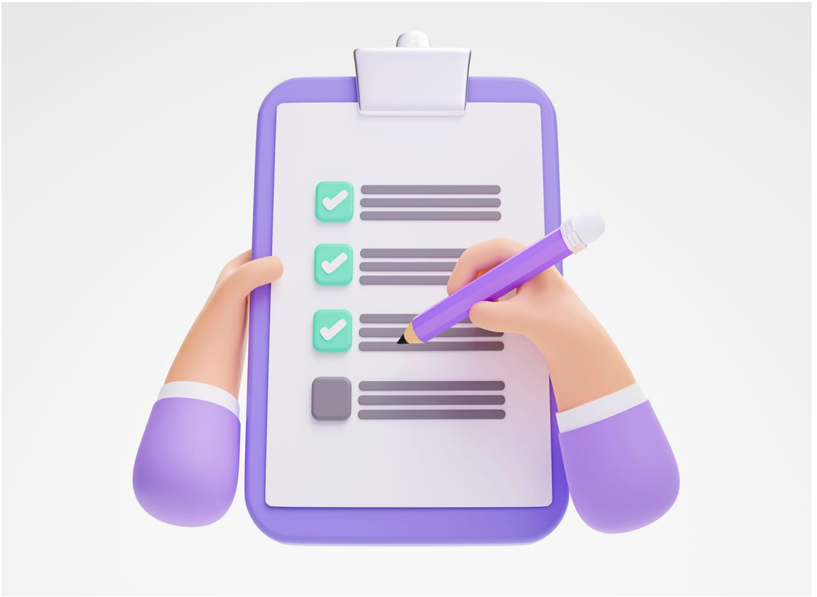
Agenda

- Understanding Application Types
- Navigating Application Requirements
- Avoiding Common Pitfalls
- Implementing Best Practices

Non-Competitive Application Types

Baseline Application

Required for the first year of a new grant. Describes comprehensive program design, service delivery approach, and supporting budget.



Continuation Application

Required for subsequent years after baseline approval. Primary focus is the budget.

Pro Tip: The funding guidance letter indicates which application type is required for the upcoming grant application. Be sure to **thoroughly** review the funding guidance letter.

Who Submits a Baseline Application?

1

Final 12 Months Recipients

Recipients in the final 12 months of their current grant applying for a non-competitive new grant

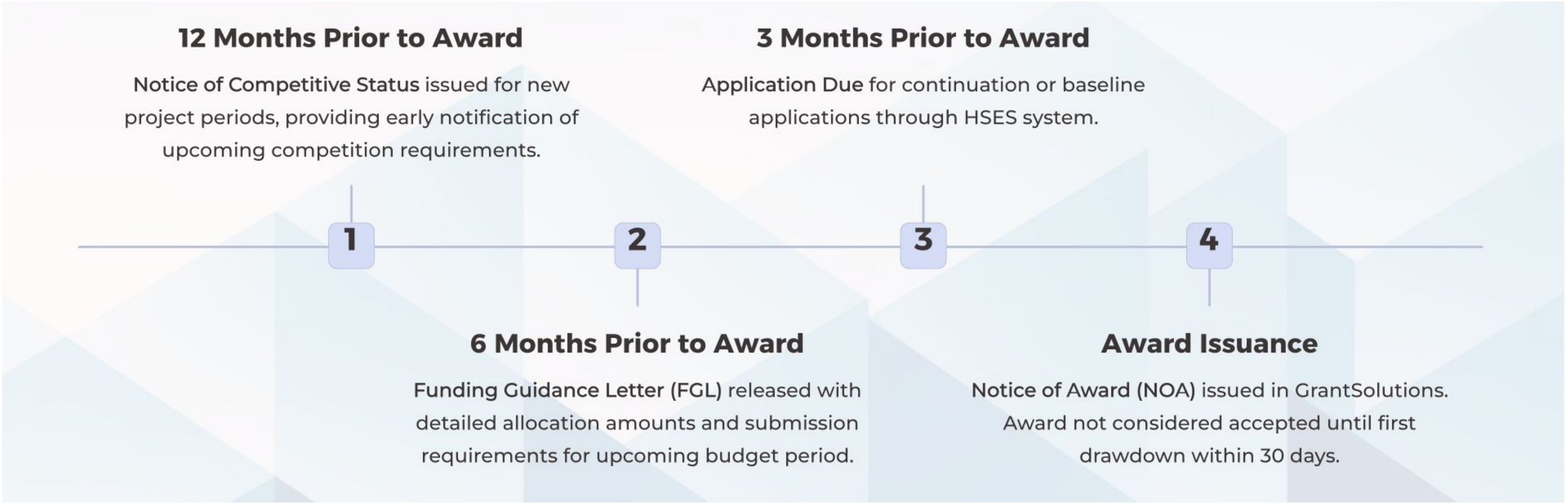
2

Competitive Grant Awardees

Recipients who received a grant through the competitive process submitting their first application in HSES

Important Timing Note: Competitive grant recipients submit their baseline a few months to up to a year after grant start, depending on initial budget period length. For example, a grant starting 09/01/2025—04/30/2026 requires a baseline for the 05/01/2026—4/30/2027 period.

Approximate Grant Application Timelines



Critical Formatting Requirements

Page Setup

- Double-spaced text
- One-inch margins on all sides
- Page numbers in lower right corner

Typography

- 12-point font size for narrative
- Tables, headers, and illustrations may vary

Length Limits

- Application Narrative and Budget Justification: 30 pages maximum
- Follow sequential order per instructions

Pro Tip #1: Set up your document template with these specifications before you begin writing to avoid last-minute formatting issues.

Pro Tip #2: Number each response in alignment with the questions in the Application Instructions.

Application Requirements

Location	Element	Baseline	Continuation
HSES Application Tab	Program Schedule	Required	Required
HSES Application Tab	Budget	Required	Required
HSES Application Tab	Other Funding	Required	Required
HSES Application Tab	SF-424 and SF-424A	Required	Required
Other Documents Folder	Cost Allocation Plan	Required	Required
Other Documents Folder	Indirect Cost Rate Agreement	If applicable	If applicable
Other Documents Folder	Application Narrative- Sub-Section A: Service Delivery	Required	Not Required
Other Documents Folder	Application Narrative- Sub-Section B: Governance, Organizational, and Management Structures	Required	Not Required
Other Documents Folder	Application Narrative- Budget Justification	Required	Required
Other Documents Folder	Sample Delegate and/or Partnership Contracts	If applicable	If applicable
Other Documents Folder	Other Supporting Documents	If applicable	If applicable

Application Instructions: Version 3.01 vs Version 4.0

The following supporting documents were required to be uploaded according to version 3.01, but are no longer required to be submitted in HSES:

- Application Narrative: Program and School Readiness Goals
- Results of Self-assessment and Improvement Plan
- Governing Body and Policy Council Decisions (Signed Statements and Meeting Minutes)
- Selection Criteria
- Training and Technical Assistance Plan
- Annual Report to the Public

Pro Tip: Although these documents are no longer required to be submitted, programs should still prepare and retain these documents as required by Head Start regulations.

Baseline Application - Service Delivery Narrative

Narrative must include:

- Service and recruitment area with locations and partnership slots
- Community assessment data on eligible children and families
- Proposed program option and compliance requirements
- Recruitment, selection, enrollment and attendance strategies
- Education and child development approaches including curriculum
- Health services and screening timelines
- Family and community engagement strategies
- Services to children with disabilities
- Services to enrolled pregnant women
- Transition services
- Transportation needs

Baseline Application: Governance Narrative

Describe governance, organizational, and management structures in your Baseline Application:

Governance Structure and Key Processes

- Identify governing body members with required expertise and describe policy council makeup
- Explain how governing body and policy council receive information and make decisions

Human Resource Management

- Include or upload an organizational chart
- Describe the approach to developing pay scales, determining compensation rates and wage comparability
- Describe systems and processes developed to ensure criminal record checks occur prior to hire
- Describe processes for staff orientation, training and professional development

Program Management and Quality Improvement

- Describe systems and processes for continuous quality improvement related to goals, staff development and retention
- Describe how the management systems ensure sufficient budget and staffing patterns to allow for the provision of a full range of comprehensive services
- If applicable, describe internal controls findings/issues and plans to address these findings/issues

Continuation Application: Streamlined Process

Continuation applications focus on changes and updates to budget. The process is streamlined because your baseline has already been approved.

What's Different

Continuation applications require significantly less narrative. Focus on budget updates and any changes in scope.

Required Narrative Elements

1. Locally Designed Option requests (if applicable)
2. Enrollment Reductions and Conversions (if applicable)
3. MSHS center and crop information (if applicable)

Plus: Budget Justification with same components as baseline

Important: All document upload requirements remain the same as baseline (Cost Allocation Plan, Indirect Cost Rate Agreement, sample contracts, etc.)

Change in Scope Requests

Locally Designed Option

Program option variation waiver under 1302.24(c) requiring specific rationale and considerations

Enrollment Reduction

Decrease in funded enrollment slots requiring justification per ACF-IM-HS-22-09

Conversion

Change in program type or slot allocation requiring detailed explanation

Warning: Applications not fully addressing Change in Scope considerations will be returned. In some cases, Regional Office may require a separate Change in Scope Application.

Budget Justification: Key Components

Separate projected budgets must be completed for **Head Start and Early Head Start** program operations and training/technical assistance and **by delegate**. Required items are the same for both Baseline and Continuation applications.

- **Personnel and Fringe:** Explain significant adjustments for lines a and b on SF-424A. Identify cost allocated salaries among programs, federal and non-federal.
- **Direct and Indirect Costs:** For lines c through h on SF-424A, ensure narrative aligns with amounts requested. Identify cost allocated expenses, federal and non-federal.
- **COLA Funds:** If applicable, describe planned use of cost-of-living adjustment funds based on related Program Instruction.
- **Non-Federal Match:** Identify each source with estimated amount and valuation methodology. Explain how match is allowable per 45 CFR §75.306, 2 CFR § 200.306, and Section 1303.4.

Budget Justification: Key Components

Separate projected budgets must be completed for **Head Start and Early Head Start** program operations and training/technical assistance and **by delegate**. Required items are the same for both Baseline and Continuation applications.

- **Enrollment Reductions and Conversions:** If requesting a change in scope, explain the rationale and address the budget considerations outlined in ACF-IM-HS-22-09 and Enrollment Reduction and Conversion Considerations Appendix.

- **Equipment:** If requesting equipment funds per 2 CFR § 200.439, identify each item individually and describe procurement procedures.

- **Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA):** Describe the use of T/TA fund by program and object class category. Totals for each object class category must align with the 424A.

Critical Budget Reminders

Separation Requirements

Complete separate projected budgets for Head Start and Early Head Start by grant and by delegate.

Partnership Contracts

Identify all partnership contracts for direct services **individually** in the Budget Tab under "Contractual" budget category, line "8. Other Contracts."

Large Expenditures

Any single line-item costing more than $250,000 in "Other" category must be entered as individual financial line item.

Common Program Narrative Pitfalls

Over-Complicated Narrative

Less is more. Clear, concise explanations are more effective than lengthy justifications. Focus on the essential information needed to understand your program operations.

Not Addressing All Required Questions

Failing to answer all required questions can result in delayed funding. Ensure all questions are answered. If the questions are not relevant to your grant, noting “not applicable” may be helpful.

Program Schedule ≠ Program Narrative (Baseline)

Double check that the Program Schedule tab aligns directly with your described program options in the Program Narrative. If you copied forward the Program Schedule from a previous application always double check it is accurate.

Missing Organizational Chart (Baseline)

Ensure you upload or include your program’s organizational chart. The organizational chart should reflect a staffing structure that aligns with your program plans, i.e. the options/services you intend to provide.

Service Locations Not Accurate (Baseline)

Ensure your service locations in your narrative align with the center data in HSES. If there are explainable differences (i.e. proposed new center, etc.) ensure the narrative highlights this information.

Unnecessary Documents Uploaded

Only upload required documents. There is no need to upload documents that are not required by the grant application instructions, or requested by ACF.

Common Budget Pitfalls

Over-Complicated Budget Narrative

Less is more. Clear, concise explanations are more effective than lengthy justifications. Focus on the essential information needed to understand your budget choices.

Incorrect Funding Amounts

Verify that totals for each Common Accounting Number (CAN)—including Head Start and Early Head Start program operations and Training/Technical Assistance—exactly match the amounts specified in your Funding Guidance Letter. Discrepancies may delay approval.

Combined Budgets

Prepare distinct, detailed budgets for Head Start operations, Early Head Start operations, Head Start Training and Technical Assistance, Early Head Start Training and Technical Assistance and any subrecipients or delegates budgets. Consolidated budgets are not acceptable and will generally be returned for revision.

Incorrect Non-Federal Match

Calculate non-federal match carefully: it must minimally equal 20% of total award amount, or 25% of the federal award amount. Include all sources and ensure your calculations are precise and justified.

Questionable Administrative Costs

Review your administrative cost report in HSES. Ensure all staff are correctly allocated between program and administrative functions, and verify that all federal and non-federal administrative costs are properly included.

Miscategorized Travel Costs

Travel costs should include only: transportation, lodging, sustenance (meals), and other directly related costs incurred by employees on official travel status. Do not include costs that should be categorized elsewhere such as conference fees or tuition.

Keys to Success: Final Strategies

Start Early and Plan Thoroughly

Begin application preparation well before deadlines. Assemble your team, review all requirements, and create a detailed timeline with milestones.

Follow Instructions Precisely

Adhere to formatting requirements, page limits, and sequential order. Address every question completely. Break out budget line items as required.

Use Available Resources

Contact your Regional Office with questions. Reach out to technical assistance early if you encounter HSES issues. Don't wait until the last minute to ask for help.

Review Before Submission

Have multiple team members review the complete application. Check that all documents are uploaded to correct folders. Verify budget totals match across forms.

QUESTION
&
ANSWER

RESOURCES

** Contents of this presentation are based on the *Head Start Non-Competitive Grant Application Instructions Version 4.0* **

START EARLY® | Together for Head Start

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Together for Head Start LinkTree

https://linktr.ee/TOGETHER4headstart

RESOURCES FROM TODAY'S WEBINAR

- https://www.startearly.org/togetherforheadstart (Webinar Series Page)
- Together for Head Start LinkTree
- Grant Application Instructions

ATTEND UPCOMING TOGETHER FOR HEAD START OFFICE HOURS

Sign Up: https://linktr.ee/TOGETHER4headstart

Next Date/Time: March 5th at 3pm EST

THANK YOU & CLOSING

THANK YOU!

REACH OUT

advocacy@startearly.org

VISIT START EARLY'S WEBSITE

https://www.startearly.org/togetherforheadstart

JOIN UPCOMING WEBINARS

https://www.startearly.org/togetherforheadstart

SHARE YOUR FEEDBACK VIA SURVEY

START® EARLY | Together for Head Start