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Impact of sequestration felt outside of Washington political arena

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service

CHARLES TOWN, W.Va. — When Misael Santamaria thinks about how well the Head Start program at St. James Catholic Church prepared his older child for the West Virginia public school system, he thanks God it was available for his younger daughter before sequestration cuts eliminates spots for eligible preschoolers.

"It changes their lives to go through this program," said Santamaria, a Charles Town resident whose daughter Jasmine is currently enrolled in the St. James Head Start/Pre-Kindergarten class. "That's why I see that it would be a loss for the other kids who are not going to have that same chance."

At least one Head Start classroom will be eliminated in the next school year in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle, since the region will lose \$230,000 in federal funding for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

This means at least 15 preschoolers who would normally have been eligible for Head Start in this region will not have a seat in the program, and at least four employees will lose their jobs, said Diane Ansari, director of the program that provides pre-kindergarten classes in three West Virginia counties; Berkeley, Jefferson and Morgan.

Head Start reductions are coming nationwide on the heels of automatic across-the-board spending cuts that took effect March 1. It's known as sequestration, and the cuts in current fiscal year spending total about \$109 billion. They equally affect domestic and military programs in an attempt to whittle down the country's \$16 trillion deficit.

According to the National Head Start Association, sequestration budget cuts will keep some 70,000 children out of Head Start programs across the nation. Established in 1965, the federal program prepares

children from low-income families to be better prepared to enter school. Up to 4 million Meals on Wheels provisions for needy senior citizens also will cease under the cuts.

"The sequester is hurting poor people," said Kathy Saile, director of domestic social development for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "It's not until we really started to see airport delays and other things that are hitting the public that people seemed to recognize that sequester is really going to have negative impacts on people."

When sequestration began in March, it cut \$253 million from the Federal Aviation Administration, causing that agency to furlough air traffic controllers, which resulted in several days of flight delays and cancellations.

Congress quickly transferred funds to put the air traffic controllers back to work, prompting President Barack Obama and others to criticize lawmakers, saying they compromise quickly when powerful interests demand it.

"But poor people, such as children in Head Start programs, seniors who count on Meals on Wheels programs," Saile said, "don't have lobbyists looking out for their interests."

Valerie Oviedo, a classroom aide in the St. James Head Start program in Charles Town, believes a grass-roots effort is necessary to force Congress to hear how each community will be affected by the cuts.

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"We're small little ants compared to so many," said Oviedo, who also had three of her children go through the program. "So yes, I think our voices often do kind of get brushed to the side. We definitely need a stronger voice.

"The more parents, the more families, the more community volunteers that we can have (who) come forward and voice (their) opinions about Head Start, would help us immensely," she said. "Let the government know that you do need us, that we can help and we do help every day. Not just educating children, but also educating parents in the community, so they can go farther instead of falling backwards."

Several studies have shown that for every dollar spent on early childhood education, the government saves \$7, Ansari said.

"Children who are in a quality pre-K/Head Start program are less likely to become pregnant as a teen, go to jail or become unemployed," she said. "There are so many studies out there that show the difference this causes."

Not only would denying eligible children enrollment in a Head Start program preclude them from the classroom experience, it also will make them less prepared when they attend kindergarten, which ultimately affects everyone in that class, Ansari said.

"It's critically important for the whole future, and it's important for us as a society," she said. "Study after study has been done about brains and how they develop, and this is the time for children to be learning."

During a recent "Dads Day" at the St. James Head Start classroom, Santamaria proudly watched his daughter interact with her teacher, learn the lyrics to songs and share her toys with other children on the

playground.

He said he wishes members of Congress could see the value of this program as well as he does. Santamaria also wishes members of Congress could compromise as well as some of the children he observed in the church classroom that day.

The indiscriminate, across-the-board spending cuts to domestic programs and the Defense Department had been set up in hopes it would be so loathsome that the president and Congress would agree on a more reasonable solution to deficit reduction.

The president had calculated that Republicans would be as protective of military spending as the Democrats are of domestic programs, but members of the GOP eventually embraced the idea that sequestration would help gain \$1.2 trillion in cuts over 10 years that otherwise may not be possible.

In the past, Republicans felt burned in Washington deficit-reduction deals where taxes were raised, but the agreed-upon spending cuts failed to materialize.

The political maneuvers in Washington in sequestration have resulted in the loss of nearly \$3.2 million for Head Start programs in West Virginia, a state that has a higher rate of people living below the poverty level than the national average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Ansari is hoping that members of Congress will reconsider the cuts to Head Start, and measure the social and economic impact the program has on society at large.

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