

# Federal funds to give babies a head start

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Low-income families with infants and toddlers and pregnant women can soon take part in early childhood programs not previously offered in the Salem area.

Early Head Start, a program to serve children from birth to 3 years old, will take off for the first time in the Mid-Valley, thanks to federal stimulus funds.

The arrival of Early Head Start in Salem comes at a time when any kind of infant and toddler services are scarce and expensive, as reported in December in the Statesman Journal series Raising a Community: The Gap of Good Intentions in School Readiness.

Before the federal funds came in, Early Head Start programs were serving about 3 percent of eligible families in Oregon; none were in Salem. The now-expected stimulus funds will bring the number of eligible families served to about 6 percent.

The programs will create 40 new jobs in the Mid-Valley and provide early education and care for 150 children.

"We all know there's a huge need in our community for services for infants and toddlers and their families," said Sue Miller, the executive director of Family Building Blocks, which will run one of the Early Head Start programs. "We are just thrilled that we're going to be able to serve more than we've ever served before."

Early Head Start is designed as a precursor to the federally funded program Head Start, which serves 3- and 4-year-olds.

The funds were awarded to Family Building Blocks and the Oregon Child Development Coalition, which serves migrant children and families.

Family Building Blocks is a relief nursery that provides services to high-risk families with children who are 6 weeks to 5 years old. Family Building Blocks aims to prevent child abuse and neglect by providing early childhood education in classrooms and through home visits.



**Statesman Journal file**  
Volunteer Lori Jones of Salem holds Alfredo Ornelas at Family Building Blocks in 2007.

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The grants received by Family Building Blocks and the Oregon Child Development Coalition were part of \$11.1 million in federal grants distributed to Early Head Start programs statewide, said Dell Ford, who heads the Head Start collaboration for the state Department of Education. Eight new Early Head Start programs were created.

The funds established openings for 879 children in Early Head Start programs, which includes tribal and migrant worker programs.

The Oregon Child Development Coalition offers early childhood education and services to children of migrant and seasonal working families ages 6 weeks to 5 years in seven Oregon counties. It currently runs programs in Woodburn and Silverton, and will open its first Salem location in two weeks.

Marion County Circuit Judge Pamela Abernethy, a Family Building Blocks board member, has been a longtime advocate of early childhood programs.

"The science that Early Head Start's based on is designed to enhance first relationships, and for parents to learn how to have loving, reciprocal relationships with their child," Abernethy said.

The Early Head Start program will be operated out of Family Building Blocks' West Salem location, called Gracie's Place. Families can begin enrolling in April, with services set to begin in May or June.

Because of federal program guidelines, only families who live in South Salem and the neighborhoods around Washington and Highland elementary schools in northeast Salem will be eligible to apply for the Family Building Blocks Early Head Start program. The boundaries must align with the Salem-Keizer School District's Head Start programs, which serve those areas. Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, another Head Start provider, serves the remainder of the Salem-Keizer areas.

"The service area was dictated by the Early Head Start office," Miller said. "We didn't have much influence in that."

Infants and toddlers will travel by bus — supervised by a staffer — to the West Salem location.

Family Building Blocks received federal funds of \$693,000, about half of which is for start-up, to serve 60 families. Early Head Start will serve 10 pregnant women through home visits.

The new Early Head Start will create 20 new jobs. Family Building Blocks is posting six of those jobs, including a program manager and classroom teachers.

The Oregon Child Development Coalition's Early Head Start program will serve 64 migrant and seasonal families in a rented northeast Salem location at Lancaster and Hayesville drives, said executive director Donalda Dodson. About 20 people have been hired at the Salem location. Dodson said the coalition eventually plans to be located on the Chemeketa Community College campus.

The coalition received \$4.1 million in stimulus funds to serve 352 children in migrant Early Head Start programs in Oregon; about \$1.16 million was funded for the Salem center, Dodson said.

By May or June, during the next harvest season, the Oregon Child Development Coalition's Salem location will add an additional 90 families of children ages 6 weeks to 5 years to serve families during that time. The migrant Early Head Start is set to be a year-round program.

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