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Head Start expands to Magna

Stimulus » New building will welcome children this fall.

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Dozens of preschoolers in Magna will soon be getting a head start on school and a healthy life, thanks to federal stimulus money.

Head Start has received \$440,000 to construct a new facility in Magna, giving 102 children access to early childhood education for 3- to 5-year-olds.

Education is not the only benefit. The program aims to stop the cycle of poverty, and includes medical and dental care for students as well as benefits for parents, said Head Start director Erin Trenbeath-Murray. The program can help parents get a high-school diploma or kick a drug addiction, anything that will help them to become self-sufficient.

The Magna building, at the site of the demolished Smith's at 3500 South and 8400 West, will feature three classrooms and on-site case managers. Groundbreaking is planned in July, and the facility is slated to open in the fall. The funding covers the new building and all required staff, as well as some programming funds.

Head Start plans to offer a "Grandfamilies" class for grandparents raising children, as well as classes for step- and blended families, Trenbeath-Murray said.

Another grant of \$897,000 will focus on babies and toddlers, including helping pregnant teens. The money covers the cost of prenatal and well-baby visits, as well as staples like diapers and formula. There are 78 children enrolled in the program, including several babies due this year.

In Salt Lake City, stimulus funds will support 51 new Head Start slots. Jonah Wuthrich-Hanna, 4, is looking forward to meeting those new children -- hoping some of them like playing superheroes.

Many of his neighborhood friends would love to join the program, said his mother, Joey Hanna. She thinks it has helped Jonah, an only child, develop needed social skills and confidence. The program has also exposed him to diversity through new foods, literature and activities, she said.

Even with the expanded slots, Head Start will not be able to serve all the children in need. There are more than 300 children on the waiting list for the Magna program alone, Trenbeath-Murray said. That number is sure to grow now that eligibility has been expanded from families who live at the federal poverty level to those making 125 percent of that amount, which varies by family size.

The poorest get priority, leaving lots of families falling through the cracks. "We have so many kids waiting," Trenbeath-Murray said. "You could be on food stamps and still make too much money to be in Head Start."

Volunteer efforts help to stretch every dollar. The program, with several sites in Salt Lake County, needs \$2.7 million in in-kind donations to reach funding goals each year, Trenbeath-Murray said. Something as simple as mowing a lawn can save the program a few dollars a week, possibly giving another child a great head start for school.

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