



ROCKY COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT HEAD START SUPPLEMENT 2025

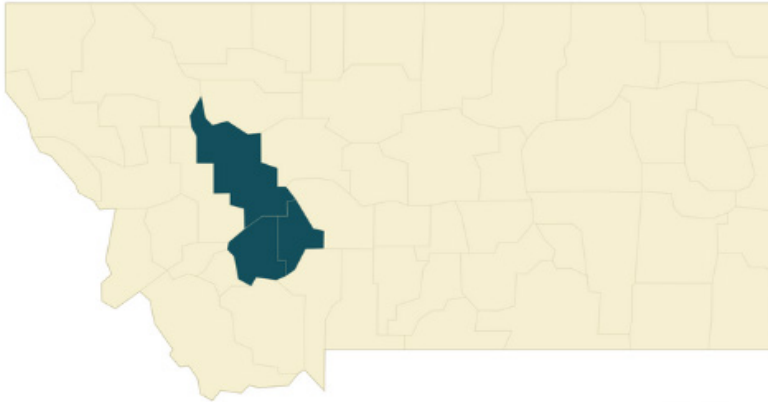
This Head Start Supplement builds on Rocky's agency-wide Community Needs Assessment (CNA), which includes a broad analysis of community needs, resources, and service gaps. The supplement provides additional program-specific data required under Head Start regulations and is intended to align with and complement the broader CNA findings.



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Service Area Overview and County Profiles



Counties Served:

■ Lewis & Clark, Broadwater, Jefferson Counties

Rocky Mountain Development Council, Inc. (Rocky) is a 501(C)3 non-profit organization based in Helena, serving Lewis and Clark, Broadwater and Jefferson Counties. Rocky Head Start is a comprehensive early childhood development program that works in partnership with the community to create bridges between needs and resources and to promote a sense of shared responsibility for the welfare of children and families with low incomes. The program takes applications throughout the entire year for 3-and 4-year-old children and their families of all abilities and accepts applicants at no cost to families who meet the eligibility criteria. Rocky Head Start also provide separate program services and referrals to community partners for familial support. Head Start centers on supporting families to identify strengths, work toward goals, and recognize and build on efforts to be strong families and successful children. The program focuses on high quality early childhood education, physical and oral health, positive social/emotional development, health nutrition, and access to a stable, nurturing, and encouraging environment.

Rocky Head Start operates a center-based program, serving 125 children and their families within Broadwater, Jefferson, and Lewis and Clark Counties. Rocky Head Start programs are located in Helena, East Helena, and Townsend.

- Lewis and Clark County encompasses 3,458.36 square miles of land area. Four Head Start sites hold five classrooms in Helena, and one site has two classrooms in East Helena.
- Broadwater County encompasses 1,192.35 square miles in land area. There is one site with one classroom in Townsend.
- Jefferson County encompasses 1,657.00 square miles in land area. Families who live in neighboring communities within Jefferson County bring their children to our Helena and East Helena sites.

About Lewis and Clark, Broadwater, and Jefferson Counties

Service area community environment and assets

From the peaks of the Rocky Mountains to the winding Missouri River valleys, the 3-county service area of Rocky encompasses a total land area of 6,307.70 square miles: bigger than the entire state of Connecticut. Alternatively, the total population of the 3-county service area is 89,832 people, or an average population density of only 14 people per square mile. Lewis and Clark County, home to Helena—the state capital—has an average population density of 21 people per square mile, while Broadwater County (the least populated county in the service area) has a population density of only 6 people per square mile. Today, the area remains largely rural, with Helena serving as the primary population center within the Rocky District 8 service area. The map below shows the counties in Montana with their corresponding total population and population densities.

Figure 1: District 8, Rocky service area

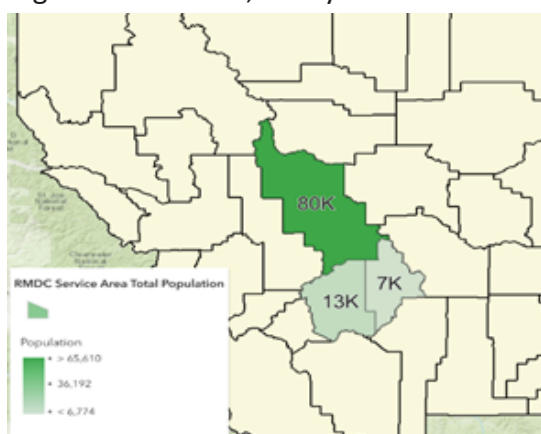


Table 1: Rocky service area population estimates

Service Area	Total Population	Total Land Area (Square Miles)	Population Density (Per Square Mile)
Rocky Total Service Area	89,832	6,307.70	14
Broadwater County	6,774	1,192.35	6
Jefferson County	12,501	1,657.00	8
Lewis and Clark County	70,973	3,458.36	21
Montana	1,084,225	145,549.54	7
United States	331,449,281	3,533,018.38	94

1 U.S. Census (2020)

2 U.S. Census (2020)

3 U.S. Census (2020)

U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). Decennial Census of Population and Housing. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov>

The populations of Jefferson and Lewis and Clark counties have remained somewhat stable over the last decade, while the population of Broadwater County has increased steadily. Table 3 below shows the populations of the 3-county service area from 2010-2022.

Table 2: Service area population (2010-2022)

Service Area	Broadwater County	Jefferson County	Lewis and Clark County
Population Estimates, (2024)	8,302	13,304	75,129
Population Census, (2020)	6,774	12,085	70,973
Population Census, (2010)	5,612	11,406	63,395

Source: U.S. Census QuickFacts, U.S. Census Population Estimates Program

As shown, of the counties in the Rocky service area, the population of Lewis and Clark County has increased the most, largely due to growth in the city of Helena.

Service Area Demographic data relevant to Head Start

Lewis & Clark County

According to the 2021 Kids Count, there were 15,359 children under age 18 and 4,692 children under age 6. In 2021, 11.2 % of children lived in poverty, down from 13.4% in 2018.

The racial/ethnic composition is 2.2% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.6% Black, 93.6% White, and 2.7% Multi-racial. English is the primary language spoken.

The 2024 population of Helena, the Lewis and Clark County Seat, is 35,204. Helena is growing at a rate of 2.15% annually, and its population has increased by 9.18% since the most recent census, which recorded a population of 32,244 in 2020. Rocky Head Start serves 80 children and their families in Helena.

East Helena has a 2024 population of 2,201. East Helena is growing at a rate of 2.95% annually, and its population has increased by 12.99% since the most recent census, which recorded a population of 1,948 in 2020. Rocky Head Start serves 30 children and their families in East Helena.

Broadwater County

The US Census estimates the total population of Broadwater County for July 1, 2023, at 8,032, up from July 1, 2022, estimate of 7,793. According to the 2021 Kids Count, there were 1,417 children under age 18 and 464 children under age 6. In 2021, 12.6% of children lived in poverty, down from 15.5% in 2018.

Race/ethnic composition in Broadwater County is 1.4% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.8% Black, 95.5% White, and 1.8% Multi-racial. English is the primary language spoken.

Townsend has a 2024 population of 2,235. It is also the county seat of Broadwater County. Townsend is growing at a rate of 4.78% annually, and its population has increased by 22.4% since the most recent census, which recorded a population of 1,826 in 2020. Rocky Head Start serves 16 children and their families in Townsend.

U.S. Census QuickFacts, U.S. Census Population Estimates Program

Jefferson County

The US Census estimated the total population of Jefferson County for July 1, 2023, at 13,048, up from the July 1, 2022, estimate of 12,826. According to the 2021 Kids Count, there were 2,462 children under age 18 and 642 children under age 6. In 2021, 9.3% of children lived in poverty, down from 10.4% in 2018. The race/ethnic composition in Jefferson County is 1.9% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.6% black, 94% white, and 2.8% multi-racial. English is the primary language spoken.

Overview of Identified Needs

Families must have access to safe, stable, affordable housing, mental and physical health care, quality nutrition, transportation, childcare, education, and employment to thrive. Families living in poverty face barriers in one or more of these areas. Because of that, they represent some of the most vulnerable of our community's citizens.

Families are eligible for Head Start at 100% or below the federal poverty line. Families are eligible for SNAP at 135%, Medicaid at 143%, Health Montana Kids/CHIP at 261%, Energy Assistance at 150%, Best Beginnings Childcare Scholarships at 185%, and WIC at 185%. Economic and resource barriers become apparent when looking at the resources available to people living in poverty compared to the actual costs of meeting basic needs. Between LendingTree's 2023 and 2025 studies show that the average annual essential costs to raise a small child (from food and apparel to transportation and childcare) the average annual cost rose by 51.8%. To calculate the estimated costs of raising a child, LendingTree uses data from sources including the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' consumer expenditure surveys, Child Care Aware of America's Price of Care report, and the IRS.

Cost of living is defined as the amount of money needed to sustain a certain standard of living by affording basic needs such as housing, food, healthcare, and more. It is based on a US average of one hundred. An amount below one hundred means a state is cheaper than the US average. A cost-of-living index above one hundred means a state is more expensive. Montana's cost of living is 103.7. Housing is the most significant factor in the difference in the cost of living. Groceries and health care are also more expensive than the US average.

According to 2021 data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Montanans' average total personal consumption cost is \$47,887 annually. MERIC data in 2022 showed Montana ranks 35th in cost of living. That means Montana is more expensive than over half of the country. On January 1, 2025, Montana's minimum wage increased from \$10.30 to \$ 10.55/hour, bringing an annual salary to \$21,944. The gap between what is needed to live and what is earned in a minimum wage job is \$25,943. The estimated livable wage for one adult and one child in Lewis and Clark County is \$36.12/hour; in Broadwater County, it is \$37.48; and in Jefferson County, it is \$36.42.

The expiration of COVID-19 relief programs has contributed to rising poverty and housing instability among families. Temporary supports such as emergency rental assistance, eviction moratoriums, expanded Medicaid and food benefits, and the monthly child tax credit had helped families cover basic needs and remain housed during economic hardship. As these programs ended, many households faced increased living costs without the same level of financial or housing support, leading to higher rates of

instability throughout the tri-county area.

Child Poverty

Poverty elevates a child's risk of experiencing behavioral, social and emotional and health challenges. Child poverty also reduces skill-building opportunities and academic outcomes. This can have lasting impacts on the child's capacity to learn and continue furthering their education. Therefore, measuring child poverty is important.

Table: 3 Children in poverty Ages 0-17 (1-year estimates) (Number & Percent)

County	2021	2022	2023
Broadwater	175 (12.6%)	152 (10.0%)	177 (11.1%)
Jefferson	224 (9.3%)	231 (9.2%)	245 (9.6%)
Lewis and Clark	1,676 (11.2%)	1,505 (9.9%)	1,489 (9.6%)
Montana	34,221 (14.9%)	31,626 (13.8%)	29,566 (12.8%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe.html>

Race and ethnicity of children

The race and ethnicity of children ages birth to 19 for each county within the Rocky Head Start service area is outlined below:

Table:4 Child population age birth to 19 by race and ethnicity (Number & Percent) (2023)

Race/Ethnicity		Broadwater County	Jefferson County	Lewis and Clark County
American Indian and Alaska Native	Number	36	55	469
	Percentage	2.0%	1.9%	2.7%
Asian	Number	6	8	176
	Percentage	0.3%	0.3%	1.0%
Black or African American	Number	15	19	96
	Percentage	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%
Native Hawaiian And other Pacific Islander	Number	1	3	23
	Percentage	0.1%	0.3%	0.1%
Two or more races	Number	61	172	941
	Percentage	3.4%	6.0%	5.5%
White	Number	1,693	2,617	15,394
	Percentage	93.4%	91.1%	90.0%
Hispanic	Number	141	139	1,260
	Percentage	7.8%	4.8%	7.4%
Non-Hispanic	Number	1,671	2,735	15,839
	Percentage	92.2%	95.2%	92.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program

Head Start eligible children and families in service area

Table 5: Number of children born 2019-2024 (2020 unavailable)

County	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
Broadwater	57	84	76	75	75
Jefferson	89	110	111	93	136
Lewis and Clark	659	707	684	667	633

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Office of Epidemiology and Scientific Support

Table 6: Child Population by Age Group (Ages 0-4) in Montana

County	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Broadwater	378	401	436	440	459
Jefferson	540	529	556	565	584
Lewis and Clark	4,032	3,894	3,797	3,734	3,604

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program

Nutrition

One in seven people is hungry, including one in five children who do not have enough to eat and one in five seniors who wonder when their next meal might be. Most Head Start families qualify for SNAP and WIC.

Table 7: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients age birth to 18

County	2022	2023	2024
Broadwater	135 (8.4%)	139 (8.2%)	123 (7.0%)
Jefferson	224 (8.3%)	247 (9.0%)	201 (7.2%)
Lewis and Clark	2,081 (12.8%)	2,081 (12.5%)	1,925 (11.8%)

Sources: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Human and Community Services Division. U.S. Census populations with bridged race categories from the National Center for Health Statistics. Obtained from the Missouri Census Data Center: <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/population/by-age/>

Table 8: Infants and children participating in the supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children (WIC)

County	2022	2023	2024
Broadwater	89	65	78
Jefferson	129	119	120
Lewis and Clark	800	813	793

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Early Childhood and Family Support Division

Table 9: Eligible recipients of free or reduced-price lunch

County	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025
Broadwater	242 (34.3%)	298 (42.6%)	280 (39.1%)
Jefferson	526 (28.0%)	589 (31.4%)	505 (27.9%)
Lewis and Clark	3,517 (35.1%)	2,742 (28.0%)	3,656 (37.8%)

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction

In 2024, Lewis and Clark County, 37.8% of children participated in the free or reduced-priced lunch program; Broadwater County has 39.1% of children participating, and Jefferson County has 27.9% participating.

Child in foster care

The number of young children in foster care in the service area represents another important indicator to include in the needs assessment for Head Start. The Budget and Policy Center offers some individual estimates per county, including the number of children and the rate. Rate per 1000 is compared to the total number of children ages birth to five in the matching county. Data is not reported if fewer than 10 children are represented in a given location to protect confidentiality. Foster Care includes all children with an Out-Of-Home Placement, which includes kinship care placements.

Table 10: Children age birth to 5 in foster care (Number & Rate)

County	#/Rate:	2022	2023	2024
Broadwater	Number	NA	NA	NA
	Rate	NA	NA	NA
Jefferson	Number	NA	NA	NA
	Rate	NA	NA	NA
Lewis and Clark	Number	100	72	78
	Rate	21.3	15.4	17.6
Montana	Number	1,934	1,701	1,595
	Rate	27.5	24.3	23.2

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Child and Family Services Division

As of 2024, Montana has 15.1 children in care per 1,000. The Montana Budget and Policy Center data show 3,506 children ages birth to 17 in foster care in 2024. According to Who Cares: A National Count of Foster Homes and Families, Montana has 1200 foster homes as of 2023.

Housing and Homelessness

Affordable, safe, and stable housing is a barrier for families living with low or no income in the tri-county area. Services for the unhoused and rehousing have limited resources, and waitlists for HUD housing programs are long and depend on the bedroom size needed. If a family member has a felony record, it creates even more barriers to securing affordable housing, as they may not be able to access HUD housing. Another factor that may limit families from seeking housing services is the fear of losing their children. Parents reported staying in abusive relationships for fear of losing shelter. Many families double up to share expenses; some couch surf. The instability of not having a permanent home puts children at higher risk of witnessing abuse or being abused themselves.

Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom in Lewis and Clark County is \$1,596 monthly, up from a year ago when it was \$1,057 monthly. Fair Market Rent prices are also high in Broadwater County, for a two-bedroom it is \$1,694 up from \$1,141 in 2024. Fair Market Rent for Jefferson County for a two bedroom is \$1,361 up from \$941 in 2024. (FY 2025 Fair Market Rent Documentation System)

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, there were an estimated 1,585 people experiencing homelessness on a single night in Montana in 2022. The 2023 Point in Time survey

conducted in Helena on January 27 counted 164 neighbors living unsheltered, another 40 neighbors living in vehicles, and 110 community members living in local hotels through the Montana Emergency Rental Assistance Program. This count is based on the HUD definition of homelessness, so the numbers do not count people who are couch surfing or living doubled up with other families.

According to Helena Public Schools, the district identified 383 students fitting the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition of homeless in the 2022-2023 school year. Rocky Head Start tracks the total number of families experiencing homelessness that are served each program year. During the 2022-2023 school year, Rocky Head Start served 10 families living unhoused. About two months into the 2023-2024 school year, the district had already identified 275 students fitting that definition. In the 2024-2025 school year, 144 children were enrolled throughout the year, and 26 of those children were living unhoused. Of the 130 families who have been enrolled so far in the 2025-2026 school year, 23 of those families qualified for services as unhoused.

Resources available for families living unhoused are limited. Family Promise and God’s Love Shelter provide services for families experiencing homelessness. Both programs are always full and have waiting lists. The Montana Emergency Rental Assistance program quit accepting applications on March 24, 2023. The average wait time on the wait list for HUD housing is typically around two years in Montana.

On August 15, 2024, Montana closed the waitlist for Section 8 vouchers, also known as Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV), because of decreased funding disbursements from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The people on the waitlist before it closed remained on the waitlist; however, vouchers were not being issued. On July 1, 2025, the waitlist for Section 8 vouchers, also known as Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) was reopened.

Health and Family Wellness

According to the Montana Kids Count 2023 Data, 7% of children in Montana were without health insurance. The percentage of children birth to 18 without health insurance is 8.2% in Broadwater County, 7.3% in Jefferson County, and 6.3% in Lewis and Clark County. (U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Health Insurance Estimates).

Table 11: Children enrolled in Medicaid or Healthy Montana Kids) Percent in 2024

County	Children enrolled in Medicaid ages 0-18	Children enrolled in Healthy Montana Kids (CHIP) ages 0-18	Total
Broadwater	20.2%	5.3%	25.5%
Jefferson	23.6%	5.5%	29.2%
Lewis and Clark	28.7%	5.5%	34.2%

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Human and Community Services Division.

Table 12: Women who receive early prenatal care (in the first trimester)

County	2022	2023	2024
Broadwater	67.1%	78.7%	76.0%
Jefferson	74.8%	80.7%	69.9%
Lewis and Clark	73.0%	72.1%	70.9%

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Office of Epidemiology and Scientific Support

Mental Health and Early Childhood Development

Concerns about mental health and substance use remain elevated five years after the onset of the pandemic, with 90% of U.S. adults believing that the country is facing a mental health crisis, according to a recent KFF/CNN survey. The pandemic has affected the public's mental health and well-being in a variety of ways, including through isolation and loneliness, job loss and financial instability, and illness and grief.

Access to mental health support for children under five is extremely limited. Without insurance coverage or financial assistance, counseling is often unaffordable, and even those who can pay face long waitlists due to a shortage of providers. The current workforce shortage has only deepened these barriers, particularly for families living in poverty.

Research highlights the importance of supporting young children's emotional and social development as a foundation for long-term well-being. In Montana, 22.5% of children ages 0–17 have experienced two or more adverse experiences, such as parental separation, substance abuse, domestic violence, incarceration, discrimination, or the death of a parent.

In Lewis and Clark County, based on adult reports of mental health and alcohol use, an estimated 1 in 10 children live with a parent who is a heavy drinker, and 1 in 3 has a parent who has experienced poor mental health in the past month. These data underscore the need for family-centered interventions that promote resilience, reduce exposure to trauma, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Transportation

Transportation issues are the leading cause of absences and withdrawals from enrollment for Rocky Head Start families. Owning and maintaining a vehicle is prohibitive for many families living in poverty; insurance, driver's license renewals, registration, and fines are not in the budget for people with little to no income. The average transportation cost in Montana for a family of five, two working adults and three children, is \$19,785 (Source: SoFi (2025)).

Living in a community that does not have adequate public transportation, without private transportation, is a barrier. There are long geographic distances within communities, extreme weather conditions, and limited public transportation for Head Start sites in Lewis and Clark County. Public transportation is nonexistent for Head Start sites in Broadwater and families living in Jefferson County. The public transportation available mainly provides service within Helena city limits.

Adult Education and Employment

Educational advancement is essential because qualifying for degree positions leads to increased income. According to the 2022 Census, 94.5% of Montanans have a high school equivalent (HiSET), a high school degree, or higher. In Lewis & Clark County, the number of adults with a HiSET, high school degree or higher is 95%, 93.7% in Jefferson County, and 93.3% in Broadwater County.

The implications of inadequate education are profound. People remain under-employed or unemployed without a solid educational foundation (including literacy and numeracy). Quality early childhood education or high-quality childcare includes consistent interaction and age-appropriate activities that

stimulate healthy brain development. Families in poverty often cannot find suitable childcare at a price they can afford.

Table 13: TANF and children with all parents working

County	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Households (TANF) 2024	Children with all parents working (2019-2023)
Broadwater	3	68.2%
Jefferson	5	73.8%
Lewis and Clark	59	77.1%

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Human and Community Services Division, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year estimates

The majority of Head Start families work between the hours of 6 am and 6 pm, 4 to 5 days a week. The workweeks usually include a weekend day. There are parents working swing and overnight shifts. Shifts that are early morning, weekends, and hours after 6 pm are challenging times to find childcare and public transportation.

Early Childhood Programs and Disability Services

Montana is 1 of 5 states that fail to meet even half the potential need for childcare. Families not qualifying for Head Start or Special Education preschool use private preschools and/or childcare homes and centers for out-of-home child development experiences.

According to Montana Kids Count, in 2024, there were 706 children under age 6 in Jefferson County. As of December 2024, Jefferson County only meets 65% of the demand for childcare. In Lewis and Clark County, there were 4,431 children under age 6, with current licensed childcare capacity only meeting 66% of the demand. In Broadwater County, there were 554 children with current licensed childcare capacity only meeting 15% of the demand. (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program, MTDLI analysis of childcare capacity data provided by MTDPHHS)

Childcare is considered affordable when it takes up 7% or less of a household’s income. A typical Lewis and Clark County family spends over 27% of their income on childcare for one infant and toddler. In Broadwater County, it is 29%. And in Jefferson County, it is 25%. Licensed childcare in Montana meets only about 47% of demand, leaving over 20,000 children without licensed care.

Table 14: % of all children under < 6 that can be served by regulated childcare capacity

County	Percentage of children <6 that can be served by regulated childcare capacity	Licensed childcare capacity ages 0-12 (2024)
Broadwater	10.6%	58
Jefferson	65.9%	460
Lewis and Clark	63.9%	2,980

Source: Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Early Childhood and Family Support Division

The percentage of all children under 6 that can be served by regulated childcare is important to consider because it highlights how many children could be served by childcare services. As outlined, not all parents are able to work because there would be no available space in childcare services. Head Start programs are part of the solution, as they allow parents to work while their children receive high-quality care and education. Head Start programs provide families with wrap-around services and support to help their family thrive.

Rocky Head Start has consistently served more than the federally mandated minimum of 10% of children identified as having a disability. Rocky Head Start receives support and services from one local school district (Helena Public Schools) and one special service cooperative (Prickly Pear Cooperative) that serves Townsend and East Helena.

Table 15: Children who received an evaluation under IDEA to determine disability

Total number of children who received an evaluation under IDEA	Total children diagnosed with a disability under IDEA
21	18

Source: Rocky Head Start 2024-2025 Program Information Report

This data demonstrates that Rocky Head Start supports families with children with disabilities to obtain the support they need to be successful in school and beyond.

Workforce Impacts and Head Start Staffing

As of July 1, 2021, 171 childcare programs closed in Montana. The lack of workforce in early childhood has profoundly impacted children receiving an early childhood education. Low wages and high costs contribute to the childcare crisis. The Montana Department of Labor and Industry says 40% of businesses report difficulty recruiting or retaining qualified workers due to a lack of affordable childcare in their communities. And 30% of Montana businesses say inadequate childcare has prevented their business from growing.

Rocky Head Start has felt the impact of a shrinking workforce. Due to staffing shortages, three classrooms could not open in the 2023-2024 school year. Efforts have been focused on retaining and recruiting teachers and teaching assistants, including raising wages. Due to this staffing crisis, Rocky Head Start asked for and received a reduction in child slots from 176 to 125. As of October 2025, Rocky Head Start is fully staffed for the first time since the fall of 2020.

Rocky Head Start enrolled children and families (2024 - 2025)

Table 16: Ages of enrolled children

Ages:	Number of Children:
2 years old	1
3 years old	75
4 years old	68
Total cumulative enrollment:	144

Source: Rocky Head Start 2024-2025 Program Information Report

Table 17: Characteristics of enrolled children

Type of Eligibility	# of children
# Income at or below 100% of federal poverty line	25
# TANF documentation	1
# SSI documentation	3
# SNAP documentation	77
# foster care	1
# Unhoused	22
# eligibility based on other type of need but not counted in above.	12
# incomes between 100%-130% FPL but not already counted.	3

Source: Rocky Head Start 2024-2025 Program Information Report

Table 18: Race and ethnicity of enrolled children

	Hispanic or Latino	Non-Hispanic or Non-Latino
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	4
Asian	0	0
Black	1	5
Native American or Pacific Islander	0	0
White	15	103
Bi-racial/multi-racial	2	13
Unspecified/Other	0	0

Source: Rocky Head Start 2024-2025 Program Information Report

Rocky Head Start enrolled children and families (2024 - 2025)

In addition to high-quality early childhood education, Head Start also contributes to the health and well-being of children. The table below shows health indicators of children at enrollment.

Table 19: Number and indicators at enrollment

	# of Children
# of children enrolled in Medicaid or CHIP	121
# of children <u>up-to-date</u> on a schedule of age-appropriate preventative care and primary care	112
# of children diagnosed by a healthcare professional with autism spectrum disorder	2
# of children diagnosed by a healthcare professional with attention hyperactivity disorder	1
# of children diagnosed by a healthcare professional with asthma	5
# of children diagnosed by a healthcare professional with hearing problems	0
# of children diagnosed by a healthcare professional with a vision <u>problems</u>	16
# of children diagnosed by a healthcare professional with blood lead level test with elevated lead levels >5g/dL	0

Source: Rocky Head Start 2024-2025 Program Information Report

Rocky Head Start also coordinates family services that contribute to the well-being of children and families and promote family outcomes. Some examples are 100 families received emergency/crisis intervention support, 36 families received housing assistance, 92 families received mental health services, 108 received asset building services and 42 families received a research-based parenting curriculum.

Rocky Head Start Volunteers

Volunteers are huge part of the success of Head Start. In the 2024-2025 School year, Rocky Head Start had 415 volunteers with 222 of those volunteers being current or former Head Start parents.

Head Start Family Input on program and needs

The full CNA provided population information for the 3-county service area of Rocky including the counties of Lewis and Clark, Broadwater and Jefferson. The first part of this Head Start Supplement provided information on Head Start eligibility and enrollment. This section reviews findings from a survey of families with children enrolled in the 2024-2025 school year.

Head Start Family Survey

In the Spring of 2025, Rocky Head Start collected responses from 41 families through an open web link survey. The feedback offers valuable insight into how families perceive program strengths, communication practices, and areas for growth as the program continues to strengthen family engagement and support services.

Respondent Overview

The majority of respondents were mothers (72%), followed by fathers, guardians, and other caregivers such as grandparents or foster parents. Most families reside in Helena (50%), with additional participation from East Helena, Townsend, and Helena Valley.

Employment status varied: 39% work full-time, 26% part-time, and 26% identify as stay-at-home parents. These findings show that Head Start families balance employment, parenting, and program participation daily.

Program Satisfaction and Family Experience

Rocky Head Start continues to receive strong praise from families. Nearly all respondents (97%) would recommend the program, and 95% reported that their classroom location was convenient. Families described the program as extremely friendly (89%) and consistently highlighted the kindness, professionalism, and support from staff.

Many parents expressed gratitude for teachers who “meet families where they are” and create safe, nurturing environments. Families also commented on the positive relationships built with staff, the welcoming culture of each site, and how comfortable they feel sharing their needs and ideas.

Communication and Information Sharing

Families expressed satisfaction with communication across multiple formats. Preferences were nearly evenly split between email (49%) and both email and hard copy (46%). Text messaging and family calendars were rated highly, and 95% of respondents said information from Head Start was easy to access and understand.

Parents requested more frequent reminders, calendar invites, and expanded use of the digital app to streamline communication. Many noted that brief daily conversations at drop-off or pick-up times remain one of the most effective ways to connect with their child's teacher.

Family Engagement and Events

Eighty-one percent of families attended classroom meetings or program events, and 65% said they were very likely to recommend family events to others. Volunteer participation was lower at 32%, with work schedules and family responsibilities as main barriers.

Families shared a desire for flexible volunteer opportunities that could be done at home or around classroom hours. The most popular events were the Family Picnic (94%), Ice Cream Social (83%), and Winter Holiday Event (69%), showing that informal, relationship-based gatherings are particularly meaningful to families.

Program Quality and Child Development

Families rated the program as exceeding expectations in several areas: 78% for school readiness, 89% for safety, 92% for clean environments, and 76% for healthy meals. Teachers were commended for their collaboration with families and their ability to individualize activities around each child's needs.

Parents also valued School-to-Home projects, with 86% reporting completion of at least one project and 75% saying teachers explained them clearly. The data reinforce that families see Rocky Head Start as a supportive partner in their child's growth and development.

Family Well Being and Support

Families identified financial challenges as their top stressor, followed by parenting responsibilities and child behavior. Many appreciated their Family Advocates for offering connections to community resources and goal support.

One parent shared, "My advocate met me where I was and never pushed too hard—just supported me until I was ready." These results highlight the importance of continued family support initiatives and accessible resources to strengthen stability and well-being.

Summary and Recommendations

The 2024–2025 Family Survey confirms that Rocky Head Start provides high-quality, family-centered early education. Families overwhelmingly view the program as welcoming, effective, and supportive.

Key strengths include:

- Strong relationships between families and staff
- Safe, clean, and nurturing environments
- Responsive and accessible communication
- Meaningful teacher-family collaboration

Opportunities for continued growth include:

- Expanding digital communication tools
- Offering flexible volunteer and in-kind opportunities
- Continuing to explore before/after school options
- Strengthening access to family supports addressing financial and behavioral stressors

Strengths of the community

Families identify the strengths in their community as being close to nature and having access to outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, and hunting. Families enjoy parks, libraries, youth sports, community events, and celebrations.

Being able to count on the help of neighbors and having the small-town atmosphere feels supportive to families. Giving generously is a great strength. For example, at Christmas, the Helena and East Helena communities adopted all Head Start families enrolled and on the waitlist who needed assistance during the holidays.

As reflected in the community needs assessment, the tri-county area has many agencies, community-based organizations, and coalitions in operation whose missions and visions are to meet the needs of families living in poverty and to build strong, resilient communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Rocky Head Start had 52 staff members and served 136 families in 2024-2025. The service area includes a large, rural and spread-out area across three counties. Significant challenges exist such as housing, transportation barriers, employment barriers, some of which are due to lack of childcare. Rocky Head Start helps to address some of these challenges by providing a free federal program for the area's most vulnerable children. During the 2024-2025 school year, there were 25 children from families at or below 100% of the federal poverty guidelines, 81 enrolled from families on public assistance, and 22 unhoused children. The community needs assessment, and this supplement help to highlight needs and challenges faced in the Rocky Head Start service areas while also providing recommendations for the future.

Rocky Head Start Comprehensive Needs Assessment Recommendations

Housing, transportation, childcare, and access to medical and mental health care remain the top identified needs of families. These are complex, interconnected issues that require a collective approach among community partners. Rocky Head Start continues to play an active role in bridging service gaps by working collaboratively with local organizations and advocating for systems-level coordination. The program maintains strong partnerships with Rocky's Resources and participates in community groups such as the Helena Resource Advocates, Greater Helena Area Housing First, and the Capital Transit Advisory Council to address barriers related to affordable housing and transportation. Through these

partnerships, Rocky Head Start helps families connect to critical resources, identifies unmet needs, and advocates for improved access and infrastructure within the communities it serves.

In response to childcare challenges, Rocky Head Start remains committed to supporting high-quality and accessible early education options. The program participates in the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), currently undergoing statewide revision, and maintains the highest quality rating—Star Level 5—in all classrooms. Rocky Head Start is a licensed childcare provider and an active member of the Early Childhood Project, the state's professional registry for early childhood educators. Families are connected to the Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship Program to reduce financial barriers, and the program works closely with local school districts to coordinate enrollment efforts and expand preschool opportunities for families who may otherwise be unable to access early education.

To strengthen health and mental health supports, Rocky Head Start continues to integrate a comprehensive approach that prioritizes prevention, access, and collaboration. The program partners with local health and behavioral health providers to ensure families receive timely referrals and follow-up care. On-site health screenings, developmental and behavioral assessments, and family consultations help identify needs early, while mental health consultants provide classroom observations, individual consultations, and staff training focused on trauma-informed care, regulation, and social-emotional development. These supports not only promote child well-being but also equip staff and families with tools to manage stress and foster resilience.

Finally, to improve coordination across all areas of need, Rocky Head Start continues to participate in and advocate for the universal use of the CONNECT system—a web-based referral and tracking tool housed within the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. By using this platform, the program strengthens communication among providers, increases successful service connections, and ensures families receive timely, coordinated support. Through these collective and sustained efforts, Rocky Head Start remains committed to addressing the complex needs of families and strengthening the community systems that support them.

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