



Maffei's Auburn office lends a 'Hand' to local Head Start program



JUNE 14, 2013 3:05 AM • [KELSEY DURHAM](#) | KELSEY.DURHAM@LEE.NET

AUBURN | More than 25 percent of children in Cayuga County younger than 5 are living below the poverty line, but they are never denied a chance to have a proper education.

At Head Start, a program run by the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency that specializes in early childhood education for low-income families, hundreds of children each day are given the opportunity to get a

free education that they wouldn't otherwise receive. But when the economy started to turn and federally funded agencies began to lose their government aid, the organizers of Head Start found themselves in need of something that would raise awareness for their program.

"The sequester really hit us hard and we lost about \$200,000 of our funding," said Kim Oropallo, director of Head Start. "We lost slots for children, and it hurt the kids."

To combat the issue, the national Head Start organization launched "Hands in for Head Start," an art exhibit serving as a nationwide response to gain support for the program and bring in more money for the children. The exhibit features artwork made by children that is meant to call attention to all the families that benefit from Head Start programs across the country, and show how the funding cuts have affected them.

"The idea is that each one of the hand prints shown on this artwork represents a child or family in our community that we serve," said Kristen O'Connell, center-based supervisor for Head Start in Cayuga County.

The exhibit opened June 7 and is being displayed at the Auburn office of U.S. Rep. Dan Maffei, D-DeWitt, as a tribute to the support that he has shown for the program and its attempts to raise awareness. All the artwork was made by children enrolled in the program, represented by their individual hand prints in different colors of paint, and the hand prints are arranged in circles and hearts, surrounding images like a globe to show the impact that their Head Start education could someday have on the world.

On the day of the opening, Maffei hosted a reception at his office as part of First Friday in order to formally announce the exhibit, and let the community know more about what Head Start does.

"He's been very supportive of the entire project," Oropallo said, "so the event was just a perfect fit."

Trish Ottley, grant writer and marketing director for the C/SCAA, said that the event was a huge success and helped to inform many people about how the program benefits the community.

"There were kids here with their parents and people checking out the artwork, and there was just activity the entire time," Ottley said. "It was a great opportunity for us to expand into the community and help elevate the importance of Head Start."

The program offers education for young children, ranging in age from 18 months to 5 years old, providing them with the opportunity to go to preschool before starting kindergarten. Since its start in the 1960s, the program has grown throughout the years, and currently serves 368 different families in Cayuga County.

The programs are specialized for groups of all ages and focus on preparing the students for the education that they'll receive once they enter public school. Because the program is geared toward low-income families, there is no cost to participate.

Emily Tortorici entered her son, who is now 7 years old, into the Head Start program two years before he was scheduled to start kindergarten. Now she works as a case worker and home visitation specialist with the program that helped improve her child's life.

"It's an awesome thing," Tortorici said. "I was working, but preschool is expensive, and this way he was able to be ready for kindergarten, but I didn't have to worry about the cost."

Those who work with the program are hoping that the "Hands in for Head Start" exhibit will help the community see its importance and significance in the lives of the people involved.

"We're not just here for the children — it's a family program, as well," O'Connell said. "Our doors are always open to parents and to the community."

If you go

WHAT: "Hands in for Head Start" exhibit

WHEN: During office hours through the end of June

WHERE: Office of U.S. Rep. Dan Maffei, 30 Dill St., Auburn

INFO: Call 253-4176