

July 22, 2024

The Honorable Miguel Cardona Secretary U.S. Department of Education 400 Maryland Ave, SW Washington, DC 20202

RE: Request for Information on Identifying and Tracking Data Related to Early Childhood Education Providers (Docket ID ED-2024-OPE-0072)

Dear Secretary Cardona:

On behalf of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), I write to provide comments in response to the U.S. Department of Education's June 20, 2024, *Federal Register* Request for Information on Identifying and Tracking Data Related to Early Childhood Education (ECE) Providers.

ASHA is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 234,000 members certificate holders, and affiliates who are audiologists; speech-language pathologists (SLPs); speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology assistants; and students. Audiologists specialize in preventing and assessing hearing and balance disorders as well as providing audiologic treatment, including hearing aids. SLPs identify, assess, and treat speech, language, swallowing, and cognitive-communication disorders.

Nearly 47% of ASHA members work in early childhood and K-12 educational settings, including 5.3% who work in preschool settings. These professionals support students, families, and staff in early intervention, early childhood, and both general and special education settings. The services they provide help ensure that all children and students develop effective cognitive-communication skills and achieve successful learning outcomes. ASHA supports expanding eligibility for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program to early childhood education providers who are currently ineligible.

Speech-language pathology services are highly utilized by students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to the Department's *Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, 2023*, speech or language impairments are the most prevalent disability category of services provided under IDEA Part B's early childhood services to children ages 3-5 (34%).² Audiologists and SLPs also provide essential early intervention services and support to children and students under IDEA, regardless of their primary disability category. Additionally, they provide services to children, students, and their families outside of the IDEA framework.

ASHA's comments are in response to #1 and #5:

1. Are there other uniform sources that the Department might consider using for determinations of qualifying employers?

AND

5. Should the Department consider a process that relies on unique identifiers associated with licensure as opposed to EINs to identify eligible employers?

The use of employer identification numbers (EINs) to determine PSLF eligible employers is useful and should be retained.

We support the use of other methods, in addition to EINs, to determine the eligibility of an ECE provider. Specifically, we recommend the use of data regarding state licensed and regulated ECE providers and childcare facilities to identify eligible employers. The use of state licensed and regulated provider lists would ensure that ECE providers meet the definition of an "early childhood program" included in Section 103(8) of the Higher Education Act.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children & Families notes that licensing ensures minimum health and safety requirements and requires monitoring to ensure those standards are met.³ The use of state licensure and regulation data provides an additional source of ECE providers who meet consistent standards, regardless of tax status.

Supplementary Feedback for Eligibility (Including Other Employers)

In addition to the responses above, we offer the following supplemental feedback regarding expanded PSLF eligibility for ECE workers. ASHA recommends that the Department **consider** ways to ensure that ECE workers—such as audiologists and SLPs—are eligible for PSLF, even when not directly employed by the ECE provider entity.

Many ASHA members provide services on a contract basis, either individually or through a for-profit company. According to ASHA's 2024 Schools Survey, 12% of school-based SLPs work as contractors, including 10.7% who work in preschools. Nearly a quarter (23.1%) of SLPs who provide services primarily in students' homes, and over two-thirds (69.6%) of those who provide services primarily via telepractice are contracted employees. Though comprehensive, this survey is not exhaustive of all members who provide ECE services, and the number of audiologists and SLPs contracted to provide ECE services is believed to be much higher.

ASHA urges the Department to consider the use of the National Provider Identifier (NPI) maintained by the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services as a potential uniform data source to identify individuals who are contracted to provide services to an eligible ECE provider. Since NPI numbers are publicly available, they can be cross-referenced to confirm that the ECE provider—to whom the individual was contracted to provide services—was an eligible ECE provider (regardless of their tax status).

This approach could be utilized to expand access to PSLF for other settings where individuals, such as audiologists and SLPs, work under contract for an eligible employer.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments. If you or your staff have any questions, please contact Eric Masten, ASHA's director of federal affairs for education, at emasten@asha.org.

Sincerely,

Tena L. McNamara, AuD, CCC-A/SLP

2024 ASHA President

¹ American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2024). 2023 Member and affiliate profile.

² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. (2024). *45th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2023*. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/45th-arc-for-idea.pdf.

³ Office of Child Care. (n.d.). What Is Child Care Licensing? https://childcare.gov/consumer-education/childcare-licensing-and-regulations.

⁴ American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2024). 2024 Schools survey. Survey Summary Report: Numbers and Types of Responses, SLPs. https://www.asha.org/siteassets/surveys/2024-schools-slp-summary.pdf.