

Sen. Warren visits SMOC's Head Start program in Framingham



Sen. Elizabeth Warren makes a point while reading the children's book "Pete the Cat" to a group of 4- and 5-year-olds in the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's Head Start program in Framingham Friday. (Daily News Staff Photo/Ken McGagh)

By Danielle Ameden, Daily News Staff
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FRAMINGHAM – U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren pledged support for the South Middlesex Opportunity Council Thursday as she visited its Head Start program.

The Massachusetts Democrat popped into classrooms and read the picture book "Pete the Cat and his Four Groovy Buttons" to a group of 4- and 5-year-olds.

Meeting afterward with SMOC's senior managers, she bemoaned the damaging federal budget cuts to programs like this one in past years, forced by sequestering. She said Democrats in Congress have stood up to Republicans to avoid more cuts.

"It's a sorry state of affairs when I come in and say, 'The good news is you didn't get a hard punch in the face this year,' but the good news is, you didn't get a hard punch in the face this year, and hard punches hurt," Warren told the team. "We are in a better place in that sense."

SMOC serves hundreds of children with its Head Start program on Roxanna Street, offering comprehensive early education and support services for youngsters and families.

Executive Director Jim Cuddy said the program has been a model for his entire agency.

"It's really a nurturing and embracing program," Cuddy said. "When we think about everything we try to do in terms of building systems and cultures of care, Head Start is just a wonderful model to do it."

Warren said the federal government has the resources to support community programs like this one and work to "level the playing field."

But the climate in Washington doesn't make it easy.

"Unfortunately," she said, "there's a real political debate over whether or not we have the will to do that."

Warren heard from SMOC's leaders about the social service agency's work, ranging from housing to fuel assistance to WIC nutrition programs.

Among its many focuses, the agency works to help people find and sustain employment, Cuddy said.

Warren said she recognizes that the high cost of housing is a problem, as families are willing to work hard but just can't afford to put a roof over their heads.

She said she could help SMOC look for more federal money for its programs.

"There are pockets of money hidden in all kinds of places," Warren said. "We will help you in any way we can."

Warren said one good piece of news out of Washington is that the earned income tax credit, a temporary benefit expanded in 2009, is now permanent

The senator was enthusiastic in reading the children's book she brought to the youngsters.

“My name is Elizabeth and I work in Washington, D.C.,” Warren said, introducing herself to the kids. “Some day you should come see me there.”

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Sen. Elizabeth Warren listens as South Middlesex Opportunity Council staff introduced themselves during her visit to the SMOC Head Start program Friday. At right is SMOC executive director Jim Cuddy. (Daily News Staff Photo/Ken McGagh)