

Enhancing Early Learning Opportunities for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania

A Summary Report submitted to the
Pennsylvania Head Start State
Collaboration Office
September 2022



Introduction

This report contains a summary of activities, under the direction of the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office (PA HSSCO), to better understand the involvement of young children experiencing homelessness in early learning programs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The report will describe these activities, list several resulting documents, and suggest next steps to address identified needs. Several methods were used over a period of approximately eighteen months to gather information, including a review of available data and key documents, discussions with systems leaders and practitioners, and facilitation of early learning communities of practice during which participants shared expertise, challenges, resources, and needs. Finally, recommendations are offered to promote increased access to and participation in quality early learning for this especially vulnerable population.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation #1 – Training and Technical Assistance:

Assure working knowledge of the *federal McKinney-Vento definition of homeless for children and youth* as reflected in refined protocol and ongoing practice.

Recommendation #2 – Partnership and Collaboration:

Direct and facilitate systemic infrastructures that sustain communication of providers and key leaders at state and community levels.

Recommendation #3 – Policy Transformation:

Update and align policies related to equitable early learning access for young children experiencing homelessness and ensure full implementation of stated policies.

Recommendation #4 – Data Integrity:

Update and align data systems across sectors to create robust capacity and assure accurate data entry, reporting, and monitoring of trends.

Recommendation #5 – Research and Evaluation:

Continue to engage academic and research partners in measuring and reporting on progress.

Young children experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of poor health and academic outcomes, and the experience of homelessness can disrupt a child’s development, resulting in persistent developmental delays. Young children who experience homelessness are more likely to lack access to and to participate regularly in early childhood and child care programs, especially high-quality programs, known to help alleviate the adverse effects of homelessness and any of a range of co-occurring trauma

or toxic stress that often accompany unsafe, unstable, and inadequate housing.¹ Further, the challenges presented by homelessness during the early years are particularly urgent to address. “While becoming homeless is potentially traumatizing for people of any age, it is important to recognize that, when young children experience trauma, there is a relatively short window in their developmental process to address the trauma before it becomes a serious problem that affects them as adults.”²

Again, this report summarizes efforts to explore challenges and opportunities to increasing the enrollment and ongoing participation of young children experiencing homelessness in quality early learning in the Commonwealth. Activities took place during the period February 2021 to August 2022, and included examination of data and documents, facilitation of discussions and communities of practice, and development of potential next steps for systems change.

Multiple early learning systems in the Commonwealth were engaged, including Head Start and Early Head Start, Early Learning Resource Centers (CCR&Rs), PA Pre-K Counts (public prekindergarten program), Head Start

Defining Homelessness: McKinney-Vento and HUD Definitions

Early childhood and education programs funded or regulated by the US Department of Education and the US Department of Health and Human Services must use the McKinney-Vento Act education subtitle’s definition of homeless for children and youth. This *definition focuses on the needs of the child by removing barriers to educational success* and includes children who are staying with others, including family and friends, due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. [McKinney-Vento Definition – National Center for Homeless Education](#)

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homeless focuses *primarily on adults* but does include “*families with children.*” It is narrower and centers on those who are in shelters, unsheltered or who move frequently within a short period of time. [HUD’s Definition of Homelessness: Resources and Guidance - HUD Exchange](#)

Using the McKinney-Vento definition to identify and determine eligibility is necessary to ensure each child’s access to the benefits, accommodations, and services designed to address their unique health, development, and learning needs.

¹ Brown, S.R., Shinn, M., and Khadduri, J. (January 2017). *Well-being of Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness*. Homeless Families Research Brief. OPRE, Report No. 2017-06. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre_homefam_brief3_hhs_children_02_24_2017_b508.pdf

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (July 31, 2019). *Child Homelessness: A Growing Crisis*. Rockville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/child-homelessness-growing-crisis>

Supplemental program, the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation network, and ECYEH liaisons and coordinators (Local Education Agency (LEA) McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaisons and their Regional Coordinators). Additionally, the East and West Continuums of Care from Pennsylvania's housing sector were engaged. HopePHL, a Philadelphia housing agency, was a significant partner in analyzing and reporting data and in exploring potential state-level policy discussions and collaborations. These efforts of the PA HSSCO resulted in additional interest from Early Intervention for infants and toddlers (PA's IDEA Part C) to conduct similar activities. Although initially included, engagement of Pennsylvania's child welfare and home visiting sectors was postponed.

Exploring and Summarizing the Data

Gathering and analyzing data was a critical first step to understanding current involvement of young children experiencing homelessness in early learning programs. The following three briefs were developed to organize available data and report findings:

- To better understand what data is available through Head Start's Program Information Reports (PIR) over time: *Head Start Collaboration and Partnerships to Support Families Experiencing Homelessness*, Research Brief 11, Center for Schools and Communities, December 2021
- To better understand the population of young children experiencing homelessness in the Commonwealth within the context of Pennsylvania's early learning systems and opportunities: *A State-Level Brief: Participation of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania*, PA Head Start State Collaboration Office, January 2022
- To better understand young children and families experiencing homelessness served by Head Start within the context of Pennsylvania's housing services sector: *Continuums of Care and Head Start Working Together to Address Housing Vulnerability of Pennsylvania's Families*, PA Head Start State Collaboration Office, January 2022

Key takeaways of the three data-related efforts above are:

- Both Head Start and the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) serve a significant number of children identified as meeting McKinney-Vento criteria. They provide the only systemic and generally reliable early learning data and the only consistent data points over time in the Commonwealth. Note that the vast majority of the children they identify as homeless are preschool-aged. Infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness are less visible in early learning data overall.

- Trend data indicate that although Head Start is primarily an early learning program, its family services teams provide substantial housing supports for families.
- Trend data for PDE indicate a steady and notable increase in the number of young children identified each year through the public schools.
- Data from Form ACF-801 for CCDF and from PELICAN for PA Pre-K Counts and Early Intervention indicate negligible participation of children meeting McKinney-Vento criteria, although it is unclear whether children are not served, not identified or not counted.
- Staff responsible for identifying children and entering data related to housing status are often unaware of federal and the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) reporting requirements and the McKinney-Vento definition, especially in programs outside of PDE and sometimes even Head Start.

HopePHL was especially skillful in organizing available data for each sector based on their individual regional structures which made the data relevant and useful for local communities. For example, PEC created one-page summaries of Head Start data for each Continuums of Care, Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) region and Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) region.

The steps below can help in establishing reliable and complete data availability:

- Increase the number of eligibility staff/enrollment specialists who are intentional and proficient in assessing housing situations using the McKinney-Vento definition.
- Increase the number of staff who enter data who are intentional and proficient in using the McKinney-Vento definition when entering data.
- Increase the number of early learning staff overall who are proficient in assessing housing situations using the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless so that accurate data reporting occurs for children identified during the program year.

Engaging Providers to Learn Together through Communities of Practice

The following Communities of Practice were planned and facilitated:

- Head Start and Early Head Start (July 20 & 27, 2021)
- Early Learning Resource Centers (September 10 & 17, 2021)
- ECYEH/McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaisons (February 8 & 9, 2022)

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- Housing Continuums of Care (May 6, 2022)
- Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants (May 12 & 14, 2022)
- PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental (July 13 & 14, 2022)

Each Community of Practice (COP) required collaboration with sector leadership and the review and summary of sector policies, documents and data. Areas of need were identified which then guided the content of each training and technical assistance opportunity for staff. Participants were encouraged to explore ways to enhance their practices to eliminate barriers to access and participation and to better engage children and families experiencing homelessness, to strengthen program capacity to recognize and address the housing needs of families, and to better track homelessness as it impacts their children, families, staff, programs and community partnerships.

Key takeaways from the six communities of practice above are:

- While there is interest in serving children and families experiencing homelessness, both proficiency and interest appears to be program and location specific rather than systemic, perhaps due to staff turnover, changes in leadership, competing community and systemic priorities, e.g., COVID-19, insufficient resources, etc.
- Some staff are unaware of federal and OCDEL policies, including those that prioritize children experiencing homelessness or those that provide accommodations to ease access, resulting in inconsistent policy implementation and barriers to access and participation.
- Staff identified areas where policies might be revised to remove barriers to enrollment and participation, e.g., streamlining referral protocol or having single points of contact.
- Overall, staff would like to see additional technical assistance provided on how to assess the housing needs of families and ways to embed this into their program procedures.
- Although many programs maintain ongoing partnerships with community partners to help support families with housing needs so that they can streamline referrals and share resources, there was particular interest in increasing connection to local ECYEH contacts.
- It would be beneficial for there to be guidance regarding how to embed an understanding of housing needs into the culture of trauma informed care.

Yet to be decided is what type of activities will follow these initial communities of practice but additional regional round tables that were facilitated prior to 2022, should they resume, and other such activities will help to sustain a focus on continued strengthening of capacity to engage and support this population of children and families and to promote strategic collaborative early learning systems in communities that ensure increased and equitable access and participation.

Additionally, in June Pennsylvania's Early Intervention training and technical assistance provider began implementing a series of activities to focus on increasing identification and enrollment of young children experiencing homelessness and their families. They are offering a series of four Lunch & Learns for Early Intervention service coordinators and supervisors to be followed up by a two-session COP. The Lunch & Learn sessions provide a certificate of completion and each is being recorded for later viewing and credit.

Review of data has been helpful in establishing both the need for this focus and a baseline for measuring progress in increasing access and participation. Policy guidance, both federal and Pennsylvania, are clear in the need to especially reach out to this particular population of infants and toddlers and the review of existing requirements and reprioritizing of this work is timely and promises to have a positive impact.

Reviewing Policies and Potential Enhancements

The following documents were reviewed since they provide guidance for the main structural components of the early learning system:

- 1) PA Family Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers
- 2) PA Child Care and Development State Plan 2022-2024
- 3) PA Pre-K Counts - Statute, Regulations and Guidelines
- 4) PA Early Intervention Services for Children Birth to 3
- 5) PA Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
- 6) PA OCDEL Announcements for Early Learning Programs

Language and processes described in the above that are relevant to supporting young children experiencing homelessness and their families were reviewed in detail and, where possible, compared to similar national documents or those from other states. A number of recommendations were offered to strengthen practices so that outreach efforts to enroll young children experiencing homelessness might

be expanded, accommodations to ease enrollment and participation might be clarified, and processes to ensure the accurate and systemic identification, enrollment, reporting of children experiencing homelessness and support of children, families, staff, and programs might be strengthened and sustained.

Detailed recommendations are included in the following reports:

- To describe specific enhancements to the language and substance of regulations that govern child care centers and family child care homes: *Recommendations to Further Address Homelessness in PA Chapters 3310 and 3320: DRAFT Pennsylvania Child Care Certification Regulations for Family Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers Submitted to the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development an Early Learning through the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office* (August 2022)
- To describe specific enhancements to the language and substance of policies and best practice that guide a range of early learning programs under the direction of OCDEL: *Enhancing Early Learning Opportunities for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Pennsylvania: Policy and Regulatory Recommendations submitted to the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development an Early Learning through the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office* (August 2022)

Key take-aways from these documents and the recommendations and suggestions discussed in them center on including in policy and contract language the requirement to use the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless throughout the early learning system of programs and services, embedding content related to homelessness into ongoing training and technical assistance and existing training platforms to ensure proficient identification of young children experiencing homelessness and accurate recording of such data, expanding accommodations for families to remove barriers to ongoing participation, and establishing structural and systemic strategies to sustain communication across sectors of early learning and service systems to connect children, families and staff to the supports needed to ensure equitable access to and participation in quality early learning programs. In summary, Pennsylvania's policy and guidance must be implemented consistently for all families and in communities, and it is timely that current policy and guidance be revisited to more clearly connect homelessness, trauma informed care, quality and equity in early learning programs and practice.

General Recommendations

To summarize again, overall recommendations emerging from the range of activities described above, including document and data review, discussions and communities of practice with system leaders and providers of early learning and housing, and review of policies and guiding documents can be grouped into five key areas:

- **Recommendation #1 – Training and Technical Assistance:** Assure working knowledge of the *federal McKinney-Vento definition of homeless for children and youth* as reflected in refined protocol and ongoing practice.
 - Reinforce that all staff at all levels in multiple sectors and roles complete at least the first four modules of the national nine-module training series so all know the definition to be working with
 - Build capacity to embed an understanding of the housing experiences of children into earlylearn practice at all levels and in all roles
- **Recommendation #2 – Partnership and Collaboration:** Direct and facilitate systemic infrastructures that sustain communication of providers and key leaders at state and community levels.
 - Consider identify key points of contact in state, regional, local, and programmatic structures for clarity, coordination, accountability and leadership
 - Consider resuming regional roundtables or continue to convene Communities of Practice
- **Recommendation #3 – Policy Transformation:** Update and align policies related to equitable early learning access for young children experiencing homelessness and ensure full implementation of stated policies.
 - Monitor full implementation of current policy and guidance
 - Consider recommendation offered in companion documents for PA Chapters 3310 and 3320 DRAFT [Pennsylvania Child Care Certification Regulations for Family Child Care Homes and Child Care Centers](#) and PA Child Care and Development State Plan 2022-2024
 - Consider revisiting Announcement Announcement: EI 14-#01 Effective Date: November 21, 2014 SUBJECT: At-Risk Tracking for Infants and Toddlers Experiencing Homelessness to update guidance to programs, including PPK

- **Recommendation #4 – Data Integrity:** Update and align data systems across sectors to create robust capacity and assure accurate data entry, reporting, and monitoring of trends.
 - Aim to make ongoing training is available to programs on federal and OCDEL policies related to data reporting and using the McKinney-Vento definition
 - Work to align data elements and systems across sectors so that more robust capacity is available for monitoring data trends and policy discussions
 - Establish a structure and schedule to continue data system refinement, data collection and sharing, collaborative planning, and measuring progress.
- **Recommendation #5 – Research and Evaluation:** Continue to engage academic and research partners in measuring and reporting on progress.

Bringing attention to homelessness is already resulting in increased attention to this vulnerable population and continued efforts to implement recommendations made will lead to continued increased enrollment and equitable access and participation for young children in early learning in Pennsylvania. Especially at this particular time, considering economic challenges in communities, the attention to including housing experiences of young children into understanding their developmental and learning needs is crucial. Hopefully, this summary of the voices joined throughout these activities can provide some guidance in that process.