

Promising Practices for Serving Young Children Experiencing Homelessness



Information for Staff Who Support Young Children Residing in Emergency, Transitional, and Supportive Housing





HopePHL™ (pronounced “hopeful”) was founded through an integration of two human service organizations in Philadelphia, PA: **People’s Emergency Center (PEC)** and **Youth Service, Inc (YSI)**. Leveraging 120 years of combined service experience, it is HopePHL’s mission

to inspire Philadelphia’s children, youth, families and communities to thrive by providing housing, advocacy, and trauma-responsive social services designed to promote equity, resilience, autonomy, and well-being. HopePHL helps over 25,000 community members and residents annually to reach their goals of safe homes, economically secure and healthy families, and thriving businesses. People with Hope, thrive.

HopePHL’s Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) Project, launched in 2016, offers families in Philadelphia shelters and permanent supportive housing programs with children younger than age five with access to high quality early childhood education programs, home visiting services, and resources.



Promising Practices for Serving Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

HopePHL's Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) Project increases participation in high-quality early childhood education (ECE) by children experiencing homelessness through training and supporting homeless housing agencies in how to access ECE. BELL has organized a citywide social impact network to:

- Increase equity for young children in a unique and effective method that could be replicated,
- Improve how young children from birth to age five access high-quality early childhood education,
- Improve environmental settings to help homeless housing programs become more aware and responsive to the specific needs of the young children, and
- Promote public policy designed to increase access to high-quality ECE and use data to inform decision making.



In September 2023, BELL convened a group of 20 staff from homeless housing programs to discuss what is needed to support young children. This booklet identifies those findings. It is also intended to encourage all housing programs to provide these services, educate new staff, and consider adding these services to job descriptions. This paper is not meant to be an all-inclusive document on how homeless housing staff can support children and families.

For more information, contact HopePHL's BELL Project at 267-777-5814 or bell@hopephl.org.

Glossary of Terms and Definitions:

BELL ECE Specialists: Staff with experience in early learning concepts who support housing providers with accessing early childhood programs like Head Start for their families and by providing training in child development.

Children's Work Group Early Childhood Conference:

In partnership with Parent Child +, BELL convenes this conference to gather a diverse group of stakeholders who work with young children experiencing homelessness. This includes homeless housing providers, early childhood agencies, municipal agencies, academics, health care staff, and others. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3ZGicCh>.

Childcare: Childcare means the care, protection, and supervision of a child, for a period of less than 24 hours a day on a regular basis, which supplements parental care, enrichment, and health supervision for the child, in accordance with his or her individual needs. High-quality childcare refers to an investment that yields returns for children by supporting their development and preparation for school success.

Determining Eligibility Flowchart: This flowchart (<https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/NCHE->

[Eligibility-Flowchart.pdf](#)) is meant to aid you in making decisions about a student's eligibility as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.), but it may not capture every housing situation. For the complete definition of homeless, visit <https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/>. For more information on making determinations, see the related issue brief from the National Center for Homeless Education at https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/det_elig.pdf.

Early Childhood Education (ECE): Educational program serving children birth to age eight and is designed to improve later school performance.

Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters: A tool developed by the U.S. Administration for Children and Families to help shelter housing program staff to understand if its policies, practices, and physical spaces are developmentally appropriate for young children.

Early Head Start: Early Head Start programs work with pregnant women and families with children younger than age three years with a variety of services designed to support school readiness.

Early Intervention: Early intervention is a system of services that helps babies and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities. The City of Philadelphia Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program visits shelters to serve families and children in residence.

Enrollment Fairs: BELL organizes these events by bringing early childhood program staff to the housing programs to streamline enrollment (onsite and virtual) for families and shorten admission wait times.

Head Start: Head Start programs support children ages three to five years old through services centered around early

learning and development, health, and family well-being. Head Start staff actively engage parents, recognizing family participation throughout the program as key to strong child outcomes.

Homeless Housing System: The system is comprised of various housing supports, including emergency shelter, transitional, supportive, and rapid rehousing.

Home Visiting: This prevention strategy is used to support expecting and new parents in their homes to promote infant and child health, foster educational development and improve school readiness.

McKinney-Vento: The federal law that ensures immediate enrollment and educational stability for homeless children and youth.

Pre K: Pre-school refers to a program that prepares children ages three to five for Kindergarten. This includes Head Start, Philly PreK, and PreK Counts.

Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services (OHS): The City department key to managing strategy, policies and funding to address homelessness.

Why Should a Shelter Focus on Child Development?

More than 2,500 young children experience homelessness in Philadelphia almost every year. Research indicates that the first five years of a child's life are critical to brain development, academic achievement, and positive outcomes later in life. Children and families living in homeless housing residences have unique needs, and these residences can provide essential services to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers during this challenging time.

Many children who transition from shelter to supportive housing will continue to need high-quality services.



Experiences of homelessness in early childhood are associated with poor early development and educational well-being. Experiences of homelessness during infancy and toddlerhood are associated with poor academic achievement and engagement in elementary school (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010). Additionally, experiences of homelessness are associated with social emotional delays among young children (Haskett, et al, 2015) and poor classroom-based social skills in elementary school (Brumley, Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Zager, 2015). These findings underscore the importance of ensuring that young children who are homeless have access to known protective factors.

High quality early childhood services are critical to narrowing the achievement gap prior to kindergarten. These experiences promote the development of essential cognitive, social-emotional, and learning behavior competencies necessary for early school success. Furthermore, they offer opportunities to the parents to

actively engage in their young children's education - a core component to long-term educational well-being.

Promising Practices for Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness

Entering the homeless housing system: When a family seeks assistance from the homeless system, they apply at the City's intake centers and learn of the available housing options, that should include connection to supports for the children. If entering a housing program, parents of all children not yet in kindergarten should be asked about what they want for their children's educational goals.

Parents of children not yet in early childhood education should be encouraged to enroll in high-quality programs like Early Head Start, Head Start, Pre-K, or quality childcare as quickly as possible, and referred where appropriate to resources like:

- **Breastfeeding accommodations**
- **Parenting classes**
- **Early Intervention**
- **Home Visiting**
- **Literacy programs, especially for infant-toddlers**



Homeless housing programs should annually use the “Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters” to determine how appropriate their environments are for young children. When using the tool, developed by the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, housing program staff ideally share expertise with local ECE program staff to complete the tool. This process assesses each shelter for policies, practices, and physical spaces that are developmentally appropriate for young children. Staff share perspectives and learnings, ultimately constructing a list of action steps for the shelter to better support early development.



On-Site Childcare: Agencies should provide on-site childcare if space is appropriate. This suggestion does not infer that the homeless housing system needs to fund this. Agency leadership are encouraged to think creatively about funding with knowledgeable staff who work with children.

Special Shout Outs for Best Practice

Homeless housing programs that have on-site high-quality early learning programs are favorable in many ways as best practice for families, like **Drueding Center**, which offers a nationally accredited childcare program, or **Methodist Family Services** of Philadelphia, which provides on-site Head Start

and childcare. Most other housing programs do not have space for programming. It is recommended that any new housing programs co-locate early learning programs directly in the housing environment to best serve families and children.

The **Baring House Crisis Nursery at HopePHL** is the only center in Philadelphia that serves children experiencing homelessness at no cost to the family. It has an extended schedule that accommodates people working evenings and weekends. It is located near several housing programs. HopePHL's team is working towards a Star 4 ranking in Keystone Stars.

Some housing programs have taken the additional step of making room for families to enjoy activities in developmentally appropriate learning rich environments through **Everyday Learning Play Spaces, a project of HopePHL**. A collaboration between HopePHL, Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network, and My Baby's First Teacher ®, created to encourage playful learning in the spaces that children experiencing homelessness use daily.



Everyday Learning Play Spaces, a project of HopePHL

Gaps in Services

Homeless housing staff identified the following needs that would build their capacity to support young children:

1. More dedicated staff to focus on children, including education staff, support staff, trained residential staff, overnight shifts.
2. For parents: parenting classes, life skills training.
3. For staff: training in child development, McKinney-Vento supports.
4. More consistent programming from outside agencies, i.e., Council of Relationships, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, JeffHOPE, others.
5. An updated list of community resources.
6. Activities for children with developmental needs / specialized supports.
7. Improved efficiency and timeliness for accessing Early Intervention services for children ages four and five, areas specifically for children with disabilities, autism, i.e., sensory rooms, de-escalation rooms.
8. Family therapy, art therapy, dance, sports.
9. Community activities.
10. Workshops for parents.

Education coordination staff identified the following service gaps:

11. Hygiene program that is trauma-informed.
12. Playground and outdoor green spaces.
13. Offer services to families who leave homeless housing.
14. Childcare serves families during regular and non-traditional work hours.

Resource Guide

The homeless housing staff who attended our most recent BELL Summit identified services that they use to bolster attachment to high quality early childhood education. The resource guide is not meant to be comprehensive. We acknowledge that homeless housing programs use a multitude of supports in their programs.

Baring House Crisis Nursery: The city's only crisis nursery center, HopePHL's Baring House provides children with temporary childcare and support from trained staff, freshly prepared meals, and developmentally appropriate opportunities for play and learning for children under age six. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3tI16xE>.

BELL: The Building Early Links for Learning Project (BELL) works with 25+ homeless housing agencies to streamline access to early childhood programs for young children who experience homelessness in Philadelphia. Learn more at Building Early Links for Learning - HopePHL (<https://www.hopephl.org/building-early-links-for-learning.html>); contact at BELL@hopephl.org.

BELL Resource Map: List Philadelphia's high-quality childcare programs on a Google map as of 2022 (some programs might have changed): <https://bit.ly/3Q3LTtP>.

Cap4Kids: The Children's Advocacy Project of Philadelphia is a resource for parents and staff showing perhaps the best resource of all types of services, and includes printouts, web links, help lines, and much

more. Access at Philadelphia | Part of the Cap4Kids Network (<https://cap4kids.org/philadelphia/>).

CHOP Homeless Health Initiative (HHI): provides free medical, dental, and wellness services to families living in local emergency housing shelters. CHOP HHI can also provide resources to support community-based health connections and follow-up, breastfeeding support (including 10 Steps to Breastfeeding Friendly Shelters), and free period products delivered to shelters monthly. Learn more at Homeless Health Initiative | Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (<https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/homeless-health-initiative>); contact at HHI@chop.edu.

Council for Relationships: Council for Relationships is a nonprofit organization that strengthens interpersonal connections through accessible, specialized, and expert individual, relationship, and family therapy, clinical training, and research, Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3ZMFaYC>.

Early Head Start: Early Head Start is the only federal program focused on prenatal to age three early development and learning for families from income-eligible households, with a proven impact on the lives of infants and toddlers and their families. Eligible infants, toddlers, and families include those whose incomes are below the Federal Poverty Line, children in foster care, and children experiencing homelessness.

Early Learning Resource Center: The single point-of-contact for families, early learning service providers and communities to gain information and access services that support high quality childcare and early learning programs.

Learn more at Home - ELRC (Early Learning Resource Centers) - 18 Philadelphia (philadelphiaelrc18.org).

Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters: This is a guide to support the safe and healthy development of young children in shelter settings and has been used by most of Philadelphia’s shelters since 2017. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3RPu4jo>.

Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH): The School District of Philadelphia’s program to reduce and/or eliminate educational barriers using local “best practices” and the authorized activities of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Learn more at Student Rights and Responsibilities – The School District of Philadelphia (philasd.org).

Find Childcare: The COMPASS early learning program search offers a simple zip code search to quickly find programs near you, or a more advanced search to meet your specific needs. www.findchildcare.pa.gov.

First Up: Provides in-class training, advocacy, and accessible technical assistance for the early learning provider community. Learn more at First Up - Champions for Early Education (<https://www.firstup.org/>).

Head Start: Supports children’s growth from birth to age five through services centered around early learning and development, health, and family well-being. Eligible children ages three to four and families include those whose incomes are below the Federal

Poverty Line, families on food stamps, children in foster care, and children experiencing homelessness. Learn more at Early Childhood Education - The School District of Philadelphia (www.philasd.org), and Early Learning Resource Center. Also, the national Head Start office offers online training accessible at <https://bit.ly/2Gv0Gug>.

Healthy Baby Initiative: Provides nursing services for newborns to the age of four months while residing in emergency shelter.

JeffHOPE: JeffHOPE (Health Opportunities, Prevention & Education) is a student-run organization of Sidney Kimmel Medical College that aims to improve access to health care for the homeless and housing insecure populations of Philadelphia. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3PJsgpt>.

Philadelphia Infant Toddler Early Intervention (EI): The Philadelphia Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program is an entitlement program for infants and toddlers between the ages of birth to three years of age who have or are at risk for having a developmental delay. During intake at the shelter, parents of all children not yet in kindergarten should complete the Ages & Stages screening and the Ages & Stages Social Emotional assessment. If areas of concern are identified the Early Childhood Specialist at the shelter supports the parents in making necessary referrals and getting connected with providers in the community.

In addition, children from the ages of three to five that have developmental delays are served in the Preschool Early Intervention Program. In Philadelphia, this

program is called Elwyn ELS.

- Click this link for information on Early Intervention - DBHIDS (Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services): <https://dbhids.org/services/intellectual-disability-services/childrens-services/early-intervention/>, call 215-685-4646 or email birthto3EI@phila.gov.
- Parents of children aged three to five should contact Elwyn at (215) 222-8054, #1

Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services (OHS):

This system provides homelessness prevention and diversion, as well as emergency and temporary housing, to people who are experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3ruKtil>.

Parents as Teachers at HopePHL: A home visiting program for parents in a Philadelphia shelter or transitional housing program. Families are paired with their very own parent educator to provide activities to strengthen parent-child interaction, development-centered parenting and family well-being. Also included in one-on-one visits are health and developmental screenings, parent group connections, and parent and child resources. Contact PAT@hopephl.org or visit hopephl.org/parents-as-teachers-home-visiting.

Philly Families CAN: Free support and expertise for new parents where you're most comfortable – at home! Includes access to home visiting programs. Learn more at Philly Families CAN (phillylovesfamilies.com).

Read, Baby, Read (RBR): a Free Library initiative focused on encouraging early literacy development among infants and young toddlers (from birth to 24 months old). They work with participating libraries to reach caregivers of all ages, providing them with resources that support early literacy skills, language development, and play. RBR has created dedicated permanent “baby spaces” designed specifically for infants and young toddlers. These spaces are open for free play during normal library hours and provide children up to 24 months old with their own special play area filled with baby-friendly play furniture and plenty of developmentally appropriate toys. Learn more at Read, Baby, Read - Free Library (<https://libwww.freelibrary.org/programs/read-baby-read/>).

Read by 4th: A citywide coalition of family, community, and systems leaders supporting young readers. Learn more at Resources – Read by 4th.

Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Programs Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness: This self-assessment tool is designed to help early learning providers evaluate how to be more responsive in serving children and families experiencing homelessness. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/46zgfd5>.

Policy Resources:

- **A State-Level Brief: Participation of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania**” (PA Head Start State Collaboration Office, January 2022) Read at <https://bit.ly/46wasFa>.

- **BELL Report to the Community, 2022:** <https://bit.ly/3FGDtD9>.
- **Children Cannot Wait (II)** HopePHL has summarized homeless education reports from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the School District of Philadelphia to draw attention to critical needs. Our summary is meant to inform practitioners and policymakers about children and youth experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia. Read at <https://bit.ly/45oTDLI>.
- **Families with young children in homeless shelters:** Developmental contexts of multisystem risks and resources: a peer-reviewed report on BELL's success and challenges. Read at <https://bit.ly/3PESSrL>.

We thank the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey, William Penn Foundation, and Vanguard Strong Start for Kids® for their support.

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to this document:**

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And to the housing partners who contributed:

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Lutheran Settlement House

Marie Ciarrocchi, Eliza Shirley House, Salvation Army

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