CHILDREN CANNOT WAIT

Recommendations
from the
Building Early Links
for Learning
2021 Summit

Prepared by the

Policy Department of

People's Emergency Center
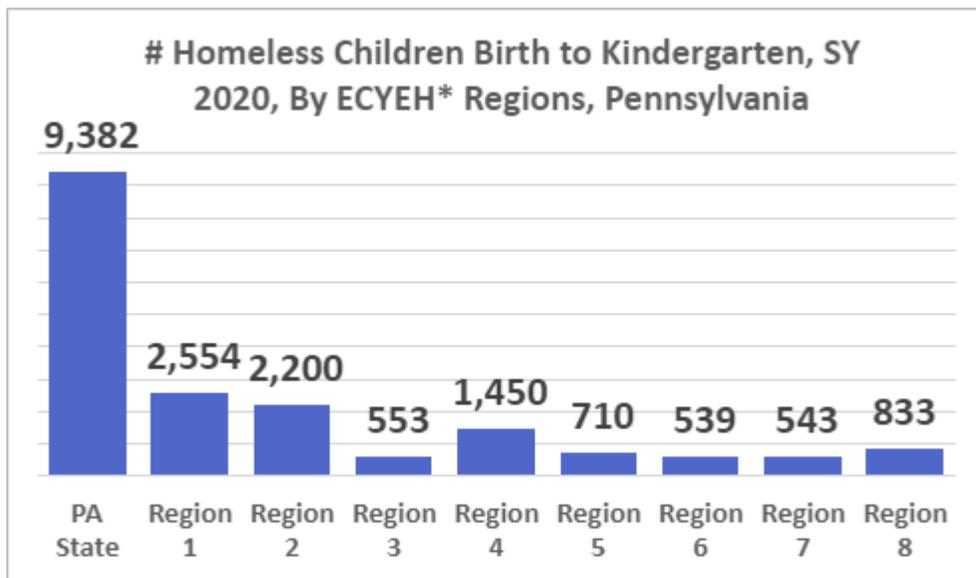
Children Cannot Wait

In 2022, Pennsylvania voters will elect a new Governor and new United States Senator. Will elected policymakers support young children experiencing homelessness? Will newly elected representatives build upon the policies and funding that support young homeless children, or reverse the progress?

People's Emergency Center (PEC) and its partners have organized a campaign called *Children Cannot Wait*. In September, PEC's 'Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) Summit featured national, state, and local leadership who offered recommendations how best to support young children (learn more at https://www.pec-cares.org/bellsummit.html.) After consideration by the PEC Policy Advisory Committee, and through stakeholder feedback, PEC is recommending a three-point package of recommendations (see page 6) that the next Pennsylvania Governor and United States Senator should embrace.

Why focus on young children experiencing homelessness?

A large body of evidence supports that the opportunity to best support children, bolster their academic careers, and strengthen their healthy development is in the first five years of their lives. The United States Department of Education estimated 29,000 children ages birth to five experienced homelessness in Pennsylvania in 2019. Homeless children are found in every county in the Commonwealth, residing in all communities. While many children experiencing homelessness are resilient despite adversity, many are not.

Thankfully, there are thousands of Pennsylvanians who work to support these vulnerable young children, and who have made key improvements in child serving systems and state and federal policies over the last ten years. However, these changes have not been enough. Most young children experiencing homelessness are not supported by any strategy to ensure their development is on par with their peers. Less than one-third of the 29,000 children are provided some type of service from Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) program.

 # Homeless Children Birth to Kindergarten, SY 2020, By ECYEH* Regions, Pennsylvania

PA State	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5	Region 6	Region 7	Region 8
9,382	2,554	2,200	553	1,450	710	539	543	833

*Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) program.

The challenge

Over the past five years, the early childhood education and homeless housing systems have been improving how they coordinate services in support of young children experiencing homelessness and working together to eliminate barriers to accessing

services. While many good policies have been implemented, and leadership in several counties are forging links between systems serving young children experiencing homelessness, there are still too many children who are homeless who are not benefitting. Less than one-third of the 29,000 children experiencing homelessness are provided services from Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) program.[i]

This is important because young children experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of poor health and academic outcomes, and the experience of homelessness can slow a child's development, resulting in persistent delays. Young children experiencing homelessness are more likely to lack access to, and to participate regularly in, early childhood programs and services known to help mitigate the negative impact of homelessness and any of the range of co-occurring trauma or toxic stress known to accompany unsafe, unstable, and inadequate housing.[ii]

Research has shown that children experiencing homelessness had lower pre-reading skills,[iii] higher rates of behavior problems and early developmental delays compared to national norms for children their age. In addition, Pennsylvania's homeless children who take the standardized reading and math tests in the third-grade score significantly lower than their housed peers.[iv] Falling behind early in their academic careers lowers high school graduation rates, increases usage of remedial studies, and more.[v]

and % PA Homeless Children Enrolled in Head Start, FY '19

# All Children Served	44,170
# Homeless Children Served	2,690
% Homeless Children / All Children	6.09%

Infants and toddlers are among the populations at highest risk for experiencing homelessness. Resources and data to understand the full impact of primary and secondary challenges facing this population are inadequate. In addition, the existing sources of information vary regarding how they define and measure homelessness, making it harder to collect and interpret the data.[vi] There is no comprehensive data system for early childhood programs in Pennsylvania to inform who is enrolled in a quality program. There are no requirements for high-quality programs to contribute individual enrollment data to such a system, partly because there is no common

mandate that spans federal, state, and local funding mechanisms. **Ultimately, decision makers are unable to tell who gets into these programs, who stays in, who benefits, and who is left behind.**

Only an estimated 27% of young children in shelter in Philadelphia attend a high-quality program.[vii] In Pennsylvania, only 2,690 homeless children were served by Head Start/Early Head Start in Fiscal Year 2019, or 6.09% of the 44,170 children enrolled in 2019.

Nationally, and in Pennsylvania, more than 70% of children identified as homeless are staying with other people temporarily in situations that are unstable and that jeopardize healthy child development.[viii] Not only do communities lack adequate shelter for families, but many families fear shelter – this was especially true during the pandemic. In the age of COVID-19, temporarily staying with other people means that families cannot social distance or self-quarantine; they are at the mercy of others in arrangements that are precarious, volatile, and lead to frequent moves. They are less visible, not less vulnerable.

The Congressional federal mandate to identify all homeless children and youth is an appropriate policy but implementation is challenging at the county and school level. One report showed that student homelessness in Pennsylvania is consistently higher in cities, however from 2013-14 to 2018-19 student homelessness in suburbs/towns and rural areas grew at higher rates than in cities (55%, 50%, and 19% increases respectively).[ix] Another report showed that seven of every nine homeless students are not identified.[x] It could be that the growing numbers of homeless families and students over the past ten years have challenged the education system's capacity to serve them.

Responding to Covid, Congress provided Pennsylvania with $32 million for its Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program. This should help to improve identification and support of students experiencing homelessness. These funds need to be spent by January 31, 2025, spilling into the next Governor's administration beginning in 2023.

Supporting young children experiencing homelessness

Participating in high quality early learning programs can build resiliency in young children. Children ages three and four who participated in Head Start or other high-quality early education programs displayed stronger pre-math and pre-reading skills

than those who were only in parental care. For children enrolled in Head Start, housing instability did not interfere with their regular attendance.[xi] These facts motivated local, state, and federal changes that improved supports for these children. Obviously, a crisis response system and affordable housing options are important. This paper, however, focuses on the child's socio-emotional and educational needs.

Key systems that support all children also support young children experiencing homelessness. Some of those systems, but not all, include high-quality childcare, Head Start/Early Head Start, Early Intervention, and home visiting. While supporting the child, these strategies also support the parent(s) by giving time for them to work, strength connections to health and other services, improve parenting skills, and much more. All these strategies exist in most of Pennsylvania's counties.

Children Cannot Wait: Recommendations

1. Remove barriers to participation to enroll all eligible children

- Appoint a senior leader within the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning to improve services for all children ages birth through 17 years and coordinate with other state departments.

- Fund designated Enrollment Specialists positions in the Head Start, Child Care, Home Visiting, and Early Intervention systems.

- Optimize Head Start presumptive eligibility and coordinate Head Start and Child Care Development Fund policies. Align regulations to ensure that services are consistent and family-friendly.

- Connect child welfare resources to boost early childhood education engagement.

- Remove enrollment paperwork barriers.

- Train homeless services staff about the value of high-quality early childhood education.

- Create persuasive educational materials for homeless parents to choose high-quality early childhood education.

- Additional provisions to the childcare system [i.e., design of new regulations, cost assessment and cost and subsidy structures, costs of serving children with higher level of needs, meeting requirements without financial loss].

- Environmental scan of best practices that enable the counties to respond. Some ideas are to enact specific regulations, remove barriers to childcare that could include waiving the copay and carving out slots.

- Continued professional development "communities of practice."

2. Prioritize the improvement of state data collections systems

- To include enrollment information for all children attending early childhood programs.

- Build the will to adopt these and other policies by collecting and releasing data.

- Require that all high-quality programs contribute individual enrollment data to a single data collection at the state level.

3. Funding

- Continue to increase funding for Head Start/Early Head Start and the childcare system that would specifically support a designated staff person to specialize in identifying, recruiting, and meeting the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness and other mobile, vulnerable children.

- Increase capacity and support employees by raising wages and increase training.

- Invest in needs assessments that can inform strategic uses of funds, and quantitative and qualitative data to make the case to policymakers and philanthropists that these funding levels should be sustained.

- Enable the early learning system to provide housing assistance.

- Expand revenue for the state Housing Trust Fund.

- Expand services by first using the most restrictive funding sources who already have policies supporting homeless young children, such as Title I and the McKinney–Vento Act, followed by more flexible funding streams.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania is at a crossroads with the advent of new policy makers. New leadership at state and federal levels will affect how young children experiencing homelessness. But will they support vulnerable young children?

PEC will organize a coalition to seek answers from key candidates for public office. Join us in advocacy by emailing us at policy@pec-cares.org.

About People's Emergency Center
People's Emergency Center (PEC) uplifts our community by providing housing, social services, and quality of life supports that empower people and encourage more prosperous and safer neighborhoods for all residents of West Philadelphia. Learn more at www.pec-cares.org.

PEC's Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) project (https://www.pec-cares.org/building-early-links-for-learning.html) is supported in part with funding from by Vanguard Strong Start for Kids, William Penn Foundation, and United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey.

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Listing of the committee members is included here for identification purposes and does not imply that their organization endorses this paper.

[i] The Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) is the education system's response to supporting students who are homeless. Learn more at https://bit.ly/3HPhAAK.

[ii] 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

[iii] Pre reading skills are skills that help a child learn to read, such as phonological awareness, listening skills, learning new words, and print recognition.

[iv] Office of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia: Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (Analysis of 2018-19 Data)

[v] Council for a Strong America: ReadyNation • Council for a Strong America (strongnation.org)

[vi] JJ Cutuli: Testimony at 2020 BELL Summit, September, 2020.

[vii] People's Emergency Center: Final Report to Vanguard Strong Start for Kids®, 2020.

[viii] PA Department of Education: Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Evaluation Report, 2021.

[ix] PA Department of Education: Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Evaluation Report, 2020

[x] Cutuli, JJ, Treglia, D., Yamiguchi, D.: High School Students Experiencing Homelessness: Findings from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).

[xi] Haskett, Mary, Neal, S. C., & Norwalk, K. "Variability in social and behavioral adjustment among children in Head Start who are unstably housed." 2020