



Testimony from Melissa Tsuei to Philadelphia City Council

April 30, 2025

Introduction

- My name is Melissa Tsuei, and I am the Manager for the Thrive Project at HopePHL. Thrive works to support 12 schools in the District, eligible families who participate in HopePHL's programming, and individual students across the District referred by the School District's homeless education office or other referral sources. We provide case management, rental assistance, eviction prevention, temporary hotel stays, security deposits, basic needs resources, referrals and much more. Some of the schools we partner with are Strawberry Mansion, Morton McMichael, E. W. Rhodes and Feltonville Intermediate. Our work operates under McKinney-Vento federal law, which governs the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness.
- HopePHL is a community-based agency whose mission is to inspire Philadelphia's children, youth, families and communities to thrive by providing housing, advocacy, and trauma-responsive social services. Specifically for children, we provide emergency shelter, truancy prevention, behavioral health programming, access to early learning programs, a crisis nursery, and much more. With our partners, we have led efforts to make the City aware of the scope and scale of homelessness among children.

Why Thrive?

I'd like to share a case that illustrates what our Thrive team does to support families experiencing homelessness. This family was comprised of a single Mom of a high schooler and middle schooler in the Philadelphia School District. The family was referred to us by her school counselor, who Mom disclosed a lack of utilities to – she had no heat or running water. The students did qualify as the family fit the definition of McKinney-Vento eligibility due to not having access to an **adequate** nighttime residence.

- Mom had historically worked as a home health aide but, at the time we met her, *she* was living on public assistance and waiting on a judgment on her unemployment claim. A filing error had delayed her payments.

- Mom said she was scammed by someone posing as the landlord who later disappeared and the home's heat and water had been cut off for some time.
- She reported symptoms of depression and had had a hard time recognizing the housing the family was living in was not entirely adequate or safe.
- She had experienced trauma in the Philly homelessness system and refused to return to the City's homeless housing agency (*Office of Homeless Services*).
- Her daughter was missing school on a regular basis due to the challenges the family was facing.
- My team provided the following:
 - Transportation funding for Mom to get to job interviews.
 - Gift cards for food, laundry, clothing, school supplies.
 - Referrals to the City's Career Link agency for employment support and to Methodist Social Services for mental health services.
 - Mom had been diligently submitting rental applications, and believed her credit score was dissuading landlords from accepting her application. Our team was able to reach out to the landlord and guarantee a security deposit, which allowed Mom to find a new rental for the family.
 - The family's high schooler was referred to the District's TEEN Program which supports students experiencing homelessness to develop education, job, and life skills that lead to independent success.
 - Worked together on a plan to address her daughter's truancy which resulted in the student's increased attendance.

One common factor in many cases is that time is required to *build a* trusting relationship that allows us to address the many layers of complexity that families are dealing with. Thrive's approach allows the Case Manager and the parent/youth to build that trust and offers support navigating systems that are also very complex. School counselors have been amazing partners in this work, but the case I shared illustrates how layered and multifaceted holistic supports need to be. Even

the most dedicated school counselor just cannot invest this amount of time and serve all their other duties. As a community-based housing agency, we already have relationships with many related service providers, supplemented by expertise navigating systems that school personnel may not be familiar with. In the case I shared, our staff was able leverage the long history of our agency (formerly two agencies, People’s Emergency Center and Youth Service, Inc.) to give some extra assurance to a landlord so they could choose to invest in a family getting back on their feet.

What does the City of Philadelphia get by investing in programs like Thrive?

- First, Thrive and our partners are increasing supports for children. Thrive has served *an estimated* 338 target students, and 483 siblings in 329 families. This means that we have supported the schools to meet the federal mandate to identify these students as eligible for homeless services, distributed funds to support families to stabilize, and provided trauma-informed case management to help ensure continued school participation and family stabilization.
- Second, we are a community-based organization with established trust with families and with strong relationships among the gatekeepers of various systems like housing, behavioral health, transportation, food access, career services, and more. We provide warm handoffs and help very stressed families to navigate any complexities.
- Third, our programs help refine how the district/schools identify students as homeless and we support their work to de-stigmatize homelessness in their school culture. Sometimes, this comes down to coaching school personnel on how to broach the very sensitive issue of housing in the first place. Sometimes it means finding ways to embed anti-stigma training that will keep staff knowledgeable about the existence of youth homelessness and McKinney-Vento protections and most recently, it means engaging reflection, looking at data and defining a consistent schoolwide system for identification where teachers and staff know exactly where to go with concerns about a student or family.
- Schoolhouse Connections, a leader in national education research has noted that when identification is increased and barriers are removed, homeless students can and do

succeed in school, which is their best protection against future homelessness. Results include:

- improved attendance and decreased chronic truancy.
 - Improved academic achievement.
 - Improved school graduation.
- And, recently, the School District reportedⁱ its annual evaluation of its homeless education work. Paying attention to homeless students in the past year has resulted in decreased suspensions, increases in academic achievement shown in standardized testing in Math and English, reduction in truancy. While the report does not link these improvements due to the School District’s additional funding for the work of Thrive, Valley Youth House, or Eddie’s House, we would argue that there is a relationship between the increased funding and these results.

Why Now?

- Homelessness among children and youth increased 20% in Philadelphia from School Year 2022 to School Year 2023ⁱⁱ. Overall there were 10,029 children and youth experiencing homelessness in School Year (SY) 2023, a 20% increase since the previous year and a 27% increase since 2020.
- Accessing *affordable* housing continues to be challenging for many people.
- Philadelphia has *the* opportunity to be a national leader in supporting homeless students.

What *do* we recommend?

- We request that the City of Philadelphia commit \$4.5 million over a three-year period to sustain the current programs, including Thrive. A 3-year commitment is necessary to retain qualified staff and build consistently good relationships with school principals and counselors.

Thank you for your attention.



For more information:

- Melissa Tsuei, mtsuei@hopephl.org
- For media requests: tdowney@hopephl.org

ⁱ School District of Philadelphia: Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in the School District of Philadelphia, Analysis of 2023-24 Data

ⁱⁱ Pennsylvania Department of Education: 2022-23 Pennsylvania ECYEH State Evaluation Report.