

A RESOURCE MANUAL



Supporting North Carolina's Homeless Children Age 0 to 5

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Introduction !

The data on the number of preschool-aged children 0 to 5 who are homeless is both under-reported and not readily accessible. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of tracking individuals who are highly mobile and who have very limited access to common systems and services (like schools), that could otherwise assist with data collection. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness' 2009 publication *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness*, 42% of homeless children in America (approximately 650,000 children) are under the age of 6! The *Report Card* also states that the number of families experiencing homelessness with children is growing. Finally, North Carolina ranks 44th out 50 (1 being best) among States when evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Extent of child homelessness
- Structural risk factors
- Child well-being
- State-by-state policy and planning efforts

There are an estimated 7,811 homeless children under age 6 in the State of North Carolina. Once again, this number is likely under-reported!

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act) was designed to remove barriers to accessing education services for school-aged children and youth who are experiencing homelessness. Under this Act, *children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence are considered homeless*. The McKinney-Vento Act protects the educational rights of homeless children and youth; includes special provisions for transportation services; and grants immediate enrollment privileges in schools (and preschools), even if required paperwork for enrollment is not immediately available. The McKinney-Vento Act also requires all local school districts to appoint a local Homeless Education Liaison to:

- 1) ensure that school staff are aware of these rights
- 2) provide public notice to homeless families
(at shelters and at school)
- 3) facilitate access to school and
- 4) link students to programs and resources.

The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (Head Start Act) mandated Head Start and Early Head Start programs to prioritize children 0-5 and expectant mothers experiencing homelessness (and their families) due to their new categorical eligibility for services. Since then Head Start programs across the nation have worked more purposefully to recruit, enroll, and administer comprehensive child and family development services to this vulnerable population. However, there still remains significant work to be done to strengthen the quality and depth of services provided to homeless children and families and in building collaborations between Head Start programs and school districts to accomplish this work.

For more than two years, the North Carolina Head Start-State Collaboration Office and the National Center for Homeless Education have partnered to educate staff from Head Start programs and school districts in North Carolina and across the country on federal regulations and best practices for identifying, recruiting, and serving highly mobile families with young children. More recently, this collaboration has been expanded to include the NC Homeless Education Program in an effort to foster deeper collaboration between local school districts and local Head Start programs in this State.

In summer 2010, these agencies collaborated to convene three Regional Forums across North Carolina to broker new relationships and strengthen existing ones between local Homeless Education Liaisons and local Head Start Family & Community Partnerships Managers. This Brief is a capstone of the sum total of this collaborative work to date. It is designed to be a resource tool to assist North Carolina's Head Start programs and school districts with building collaborative partnerships with each other to deliver high quality, responsive services to the young children and families experiencing homelessness in their service areas. The body of this work was informed by the insights provided by the participants who attended the summer 2010 Regional Forums, and was managed by the leadership and weighty contributions of the 2010 Head Start Collaboration Office *Special Projects Intern*.





Common Barriers

BEST PRACTICES, TIPS, & STRATEGIES

The intent of this section is to share some common barriers that have impacted the ability of Head Start programs and school districts to provide services to young children and families experiencing homelessness. These challenges can become overwhelming for Head Start programs and school districts. As these entities work together to meet the needs of this special population, it is critical that they recognize these challenges and think creatively to develop solutions.

Some common barriers that exist across the State include: transportation, identification, funding, limited public awareness about family homelessness and the McKinney-Vento Act, language and cultural barriers, lack of access to community resources (transitional housing shelters, affordable housing, and support services for families), and lack of interagency collaboration and communication. Throughout this section you will find tips and strategies for addressing those barriers that are referenced. The tips and strategies include a combination of best practices currently in use by Head Start programs and local education agencies; as well as newly suggested strategies resulting from the collaborative brainstorming of Head Start and School District staff.



Transportation

Your local School District or Head Start program may struggle with providing transportation services for children and families who are homeless. The McKinney-Vento Act entitles K-12 children to remain enrolled and receive transportation to their school of origin. This expense can present a financial strain on local school systems. A possible strategy could be for Head Start programs and local school systems to share costs for transportation and other direct services. However, the transportation regulations of each entity must be taken into account (e.g. Head Start programs are required to use special harness restraints for children and to have bus monitors on board).



Identification, Determining Eligibility, and Prioritizing for Enrollment

Many Head Start programs and school districts have found that the identification process of eligible children and families remains a challenge. Young children and families who are homeless may not be properly identified due to gaps in the application and intake process. It can also be difficult to identify eligible children when Head Start and school system personnel are unclear about the criteria for eligibility in accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act or Head Start Act.

Your program may have also struggled with determining eligibility because a family does not actually lack some form of housing. For example, there are instances where there are two or more families living under one roof or sharing a mobile home (a circumstance referred to as “doubled-up”). Sometimes these families may even be relatives! However, this situation does meet the legal definition of “homelessness” and could, by virtue of only a surface glance, prevent program staff from accurately determining eligibility for services outlined in the McKinney-Vento and Head Start Acts. A family that moves in with another (including relatives) due to factors like loss of housing or an

economic crisis could be overlooked for meeting eligibility requirements simply because they have not experienced homelessness as a result of more familiar circumstances (like generational poverty). An effective strategy to properly determine eligibility is to change the way questions are posed on enrollment applications. Avoid simply asking, “Is your family homeless?” Instead, ask more general questions that get at the families’ living situation and that can help you make a determination about their status, based on the legal definition: Families that lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. For example, you may include questions on your enrollment application like: “Have you moved multiple times within the last year?”; “Are you currently living with another family?”; “Do you own or rent your home?”; “Are you living in a temporary housing situation?”, etc.

In addition, some Head Start and school system personnel may not be clear on how to fully address the issue of homelessness with families in a sensitive manner that removes the stigma and preserves their dignity. It is important to remember that the goal as a service provider is not to try to convince families that they are “homeless”; but to properly identify children and families who are eligible for educational services according to the federal definition and criteria set forth in the law. In addition to properly identifying homeless families, Head Start programs must also prioritize them for enrollment.

Head Start programs may struggle with prioritizing homeless families for enrollment, as required by the Head Start Act, because they have other families who they may perceive as having greater risk factors. Take note that children and families experiencing homelessness make up the only category of eligible families who must be prioritized for enrollment in Head Start programs. Whereas there are many children and families with an abundance of needs (who, by the way, will likely rank high on the Head Start selection criteria), no other risk factor situation is federally mandated to be given enrollment priority. **

One useful strategy for Head Start programs to prioritize homeless children and families for enrollment is to adjust the point system on the Head Start selection criteria – giving vastly more points to this particular risk factor. This will help to ensure that homeless families

are given preference when decisions are made for selection for the program. The recruitment of eligible families can also be a barrier for some Head Start programs and LEAs.

Programs might consider conducting outreach in the shelter community, and other agencies that serve children and families at-risk, to identify eligible children. This needs to be a targeted and focused outreach effort by staff trained to perform recruitment functions. Another strategy could be for Homeless Education Liaisons to assist Head Start programs with their identification and recruitment efforts by referring the younger siblings of the K-12 students they serve to the local Head Start or Early Head Start program for enrollment. Head Start programs, in turn, could make similar referrals to LEAs, as they encounter preschool-aged children who are homeless and who have older school-aged siblings.

Head Start programs and LEAs must immediately enroll children and families experiencing homelessness. LEAs and Head Start programs must remove enrollment barriers for families experiencing homelessness by providing immediate access to services and obtaining paperwork (e.g. birth certificates, health records, etc.) at a later time. (Note: The federal government only requires that such paperwork be collected in a “reasonable time frame”).

*** Children with special needs are the only exception to this statement. They are legislatively mandated to be prioritized for enrollment, in that they must account for not less than 10% of a Head Start or Early Head Start’s total enrollment.*





Language & Culture

Across North Carolina and the United States we are becoming an increasingly multicultural society. North Carolina Head Start programs and school districts are faced with developing innovative strategies for meeting the needs of our families who may have different cultures and languages. These barriers are common for school systems and Head Start programs that may not have bilingual interpreters and/or bilingual personnel to translate for families who speak a language other than English. This can dramatically hinder the identification process and service delivery to children and families experiencing homelessness whose native language is not English. To ensure that these families who do not speak English understand their rights to access free public preschool education and other services, Head Start programs and LEAs might consider sharing the costs for specialized staff like bilingual interpreters and other personnel.

It is important to remember that some families (and especially those who have immigrated to the United States from developing nations) may not view themselves as homeless simply because they are living with relatives in a doubled or tripled up situation. Once again, Head Start programs and school districts do not want to find themselves engaging in power struggles with families over labels. The focus should always be on advocating for the rights of all families based on the eligibility criteria defined in the federal legislation.



Public Awareness !

Some communities across the State may have limited understanding about or awareness of the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act and Head Start Act. Limited public awareness can have a direct impact on the ability to properly enroll children and families in Head Start programs and public schools. To raise public awareness about the Head Start and McKinney-Vento Acts, programs can disseminate brochures/flyers/posters about their services to local agencies serving the homeless or those at risk of becoming homeless due to socio-economic conditions. Some local agencies that could be targeted for this effort include: Health Care Centers, Dental Care Centers, Departments of Social Services, Faith Based Organizations, transitional housing shelters, WIC, Boys & Girls Clubs, Public School System Child Find Units or Education Centers, Smart Start agencies, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, etc.

Interagency Collaboration

The absence of interagency collaboration and communication and the challenges it presents to serving homeless children surfaced as a barrier at the Head Start-Local Homeless Education Liaison Regional Forums in summer 2010. Head Start personnel and Homeless Education Liaisons have found that they lack awareness of each other's existence and purpose. The local Head Start program might not be used to collaborating with the local school system around these issues, and vice-versa. In addition, the existence of multiple early childhood programs, sometimes with overlapping services (Head Start, More at Four, Title I, etc.), could prove confusing for local Homeless Education Liaisons.

Depending on the size of the school district, the Homeless Education Liaisons could have a variety of roles and responsibilities which may greatly limit their time and capacity to identify and reach out to the various Pre-K programs administered in their service areas. Confidentiality clauses around paper work and information-sharing also contribute to the barriers that hinder interagency collaboration.

To build interagency collaboration, Head Start programs can invite their Homeless Education Liaison to serve on the Head Start Policy Council as a community representative. In addition, Head Start Family and Community Partnership Managers can participate in local councils or committees that advocate for children and families experiencing homelessness. Homeless Education Liaisons might also provide training about the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act to local Head Start program staff. Likewise, Head Start Family and Community Partnership Managers might provide training to school system personnel about Head Start/Early Head Start services. Head Start programs and local school systems can also embed provisions in their existing Memorandums of Agreement on collaboration to provide services to children 0-5 and their families experiencing homelessness. Head Start programs could also develop transition plans in collaboration with their local school system to meet the needs of their children and families experiencing homelessness that are exiting Head Start and matriculating into the local public school system.

A Final Thought

Young children and families experiencing homelessness struggle to meet their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, preventing the family's development of stability and healthy routines. Families who are homeless are often forced to live a transient lifestyle, relocating frequently for access to resources (jobs, shelter, etc.). Head Start and School District efforts to keep track of families and provide follow up care can prove frustrating. Service providers have shared how enrollment and attendance are also impacted with regard to children and families in transition. It was suggested that the Head Start intake process incorporate a Family Needs Assessment through the form of questionnaires and surveys to assist with the identification of children 0-5 and their families experiencing homelessness. This can help programs identify the level and type of need that homeless families have. As a result, program staff should be better equipped to provide intensive, deliberate case management to young children and families experiencing homelessness.

Head Start programs and school districts are faced with restrictions on funding that can make it difficult for them to allocate resources for what is really needed – more services for children and families. This was identified as a key concern for both Head Start programs and local school systems because it negatively impacts their ability to provide comprehensive, high quality services for the children and family they serve. Another suggested strategy was that Head Start programs and Local school districts should collaborate on grant funding opportunities and share costs whenever possible.

The suggested best practices are meant to be a starting point for your work in supporting children 0-5 and their families experiencing homelessness. As these ideas are implemented into local Head Start programs and school systems, additional best practices will likely emerge, resulting in greater improvement in the quality of services that are provided to children 0-5 and their families experiencing homelessness.

Resources !

For research, resources, and other information about the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness, contact the following agencies:

- National Center for Homeless Education at The Serve Center (800) 308.2145 // www.serve.org/nche
- North Carolina Homeless Education Program (also to find your local homeless education Liaison) (336) 315-7400 // http://center.serve.org/hepnc/nc_pol.php#nchep
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children & Youth (202) 364.7392 // www.naehcy.org
- National Center of Family Homelessness // (617) 964.3834 // www.familyhomelessness.org
- National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center // (919) 962-2001 // www.nectac.org

For more information about Head Start, contact the following agencies:

- North Carolina Head Start-State Collaboration Office (also to find your local Head Start program) // (919) 431.2005 // www.ncprek.nc.gov/HeadStart
- Office of Head Start // www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/

