

2009 Audio Cast Series

Part 2: Creating Safe Havens through Community Connections: Serving Expectant Families and Infants, Toddlers and Their Families Experiencing Homelessness

Policy Clarifications Related to Serving Families Who Are Experiencing Homelessness

The following Policy Clarifications are available on-line at the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center:

http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Program%20Design%20and%20Management/Head%20Start%20Requirements/Policy%20Clarifications%20and%20FAQs/i_pc.htm?keywords=homeless#1088.

OHS – PC – I – 080

Are “homeless children” eligible for Head Start?

Yes, homeless children are categorically eligible for Head Start.

Requirement

Sec. 642(c)(1)(B) of the Head Start Act

OHS – PC – I – 081

What is the definition of “homeless children”?

The term “homeless children” has the meaning given the term “homeless children and youths” in section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

“Homeless children” means:

1. Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
2. Includes -
 - a. Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
 - b. Children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
 - c. Children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - d. Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described in a-c above.

Requirement

Sec. 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.



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Policy Clarifications Related to Serving Families Who Are Experiencing Homelessness (cont'd.)

OHS – PC – I – 085

What is required for documenting/proving homelessness?

Section 640 (m) (1) of the Head Start Act as amended requires that homeless children be prioritized for enrollment. The Office of Head Start (OHS) recognizes that verification and documentation of the circumstances that fall within the federal definition of homeless children can present unique challenges to Head Start agencies. OHS encourages agencies to enroll homeless children based on the families description of their living situation (if that description meets the definition) while required verification of circumstances and collection of documents are obtained within a reasonable time frame. OHS encourages grantees to engage their school district homeless liaisons, private and public shelter providers, HUD Continuums of Care, and other homeless service agencies in their service area to assist in the verification and documentation process. OHS urges agencies to exercise sufficient care to ensure that their verification activities do not increase the risk that families may be evicted or suffer other resulting adverse consequences.

Informal Guidance

OHS – PC – I – 086

What type of living situation typically qualifies a child to be "homeless"? Also, what is the definition of "substandard housing"?

To be categorically eligible for Head Start services as a "homeless child", a child must meet the definition in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001. That Act defines homeless children as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." In addition the definition goes on to specify a number of living situations that homeless children may be found in, such as living in "trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations". The fact that a child lives in a trailer park does not necessarily cause such child to come within the definition of 'homeless child' unless other factors are present. The examples listed in the definition include many of the more common situations of homelessness but those examples are not meant to be exclusive; there may be some homeless families living in situations not included in the examples in the definition. Head Start staff must gather and analyze information from the family and possibly other sources in order to make the appropriate determination of eligibility. This must be done on a case by case basis because the circumstances of homelessness vary with each family's situation.

In determining whether a child is living in "substandard housing", Head Start staff must evaluate whether the child's housing situation falls short of community standards or is of lower quality than the law prescribes. Staff should consider factors such as whether there are health and safety concerns related to the housing; the number of occupants per square foot; the age(s) of the occupants; and whether the housing meets State or local building codes. Does a comparison of the housing in question with community norms and laws lead staff to conclude that it is lower than what community norms or laws require? Informal Guidance



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Learning about Housing

Many families who are considered “homeless” under this broad definition in the law would not use this term to describe their own housing situations. Faculty for this audio cast talk about the importance of learning about where a family is living, while remaining sensitive to the use of terminology and labels (such as “homeless”). Here are some questions that can help program staff learn more about a family’s living situation:

Where are you living now?

Are you comfortable where you are living now?

Are you able to stay there?

Do you have affordable housing?

Do you have safe housing?

Describe where you are living. What do you like about it? What don’t you like about it?

I heard you say that you are living (fill in the blank with a description, using the same words that the family uses). Tell me more about that.

How can we help you?



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Addressing Homelessness in Program Planning and Community Assessment

How can you use program planning and community assessment to better understand the needs of families with young children experiencing homelessness in your community? Consider the following strategies:

- Consider your program's strengths and weaknesses in serving homeless children and families when conducting your program self-assessment activities.
- Work with your T/TA Specialist to address any identified areas for program improvement in working with homeless families.
- Contact your local homeless education liaison and establish routine communication to coordinate planning.
- Work with local health programs to address providing immunizations, health care, and medical care, and maintaining health records for families experiencing homelessness.
- Include data about homeless children and programs serving families experiencing homelessness in Community Assessments. Consider including the following questions:
 1. How many families with young children in your community are homeless?
 2. What are the trends in homelessness?
 3. Where do homeless families with young children or homeless pregnant women stay?
 4. What is the level of employment of homeless families? Where are they working?
 5. What resources exist in the community?
 - a. What is the availability of child care for very young children who are homeless?
 - b. What are the challenges for homeless families with young children as they attempt to access local resources?
 - c. What is the availability of transportation resources that could assist Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start families?
 6. What task forces or coalitions on homelessness serve your community?
 7. How is the issue of homelessness represented in other community task forces or coalitions (e.g., for pregnant women)?
 8. How do other programs serving infants and toddlers in the community serve homeless children?



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9. Who are the homeless education liaisons in the communities you serve? What do the homeless education programs look like? How do they serve expectant families or families with infants and toddlers?
10. What state childcare licensing policies might pose barriers to enrolling and serving homeless children?



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Community Partners

Head Start programs must look to community partners as they work to build on the unique strengths and address the varied needs of the families they serve. Faculty for this audio cast have developed unique partnerships in support of families experiencing homelessness. Their list of less traditional partners is included below. Remember that community resources vary widely across communities. In tight economic times, it pays to be creative! Who do you work with in your community? Who can you approach? What services can they offer? Remember how much your program has to offer as well. As you approach potential partners, remember to bring information about your services. Think together about how you can make the most of what all of you have to offer as you serve families.

Community Partners	Resources
Civic Organizations (Lion's Club, Junior League, etc.)	Labor (to work on family housing or facilities), or clothing, toy, food or furniture donations
Freecycle (www.freecycle.org)	Locally managed internet community offering free household items; will need to arrange pick up
Housing Authority	Information on initiatives and programs at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), available public housing, and housing laws and regulations
Local businesses	Labor (to work on family housing or facilities), or clothing, money, toy, food or furniture donations
McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaisons	Information about homelessness and education for children experiencing homelessness; additional resources for homeless families through subgrants (check availability and eligibility in each locality)
Police	Toys, staff/family safety training
Realtors	Information on available housing and tenant/landlord laws, access to household items that are left behind, cash donations in support of program work
Religious Organizations	Food, clothing, or housing assistance
Senior Centers	Knitted hats/mittens, volunteers
Shelters and Domestic Violence Centers	Access to families, referral source, information on needs of homeless, may offer space
State/Local Legislators	Info on available public funding streams, grants, new state initiatives

