Serving the Most Vulnerable:
Policies and Partnerships to Support
Families and Children Experiencing Homelessness

Brief | April 2021

Elisa Garcia, SRI; Dominique Tunzi, SRI; Ellen Frede, National Institute for Early Education Research; Stephanie Gehres, ICF

There have been many resources developed to provide information and approaches on how to support families and children experiencing homelessness. This brief considers these resources and presents an overview of family homelessness and information about the policies, agencies, and programs that support families of young children experiencing homelessness. The brief focuses on how PDG B-5 Grantees can form strategic partnerships at the state and program levels to better serve these vulnerable families.

Families and Children Experiencing Homelessness Need Access to Coordinated Supports

In 2018, more than one million children experienced homelessness during the critical developmental period between birth and age 5 (Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 2020). The need for early intervention is most profound for these young children who have an increased risk of poor health, developmental delays (Cutuli et al., 2010; National Center on Family Homelessness [NCFH], 2011; Obradović et al., 2009), and behavioral and mental health challenges (Bassuk et al., 2014; Cutuli et al., 2010). Unstable living arrangements can result in devastating immediate and long-term consequences for families and children, including trauma, violence, and abuse which can accompany experiences of homelessness.

Families and children experiencing homelessness (FCEH) have complex needs that cross a variety of sectors from early childhood care and education (ECE) to housing, health and safety, and mental health. To serve this large and growing population of vulnerable families, strong partnerships and a commitment to coordinating outreach and services across agencies and programs are required. Federal policies and programs can support FCEH, but there are barriers to fully implementing them.

Building partnerships across systems can improve access to and use of services for vulnerable, unhoused children and their families.

This brief focuses on how PDG B-5 Grantees can build strategic partnerships among agencies and programs to promote access to needed supports and services for FCEH. This brief first presents the benefits, outlines some of the critical challenges, and provides strategies for PDG B-5 Grantees to form effective partnerships and mobilize coordinated outreach and services at the state and program levels.

Benefits of Building Strategic Partnerships to Support FCEH

Building an integrated system of support for FCEH at the state level can help stakeholders better implement policies to support FCEH and improve service delivery. Staff at multiple state agencies and offices have responsibility for a policy that impacts support for FCEH, including state agencies overseeing education, child care, and housing, as well as departments overseeing labor, justice, health, public transportation, food, data management, facilities development, and others. Below we offer recommendations for PDG B-5 Grantees to develop robust and coherent policies across state offices which will, in turn, facilitate coordination and enable best practices at the local level.

Improve and Use Early Childhood Homelessness Data at the State and Local Levels

PDG B-5 Grantees and other state officials should ensure that data elements across data systems are integrated and accessible to appropriate staff at state offices and local programs. State administrators must make decisions about how to include data elements that encompass the differing federal definitions. State teams should also consider developing data dashboards with access limited by user type. One challenge is the differing priorities of ECE and housing providers: housing officials are concerned with the prevention of homelessness and rapid re-housing, whereas ECE providers want to ensure continuity of ECE for young children. These priorities can at times be at odds (e.g., when prevention or re-housing leads to the ECE services being inaccessible). Timely access to data across state and service programs can help officials make better-informed decisions.

Aligned Policies and Regulations across State Agencies that Improve Services for FCEH

PDG B-5 Grantees and staff at state agencies serving as the coordinating body for FCEH policy should partner to enact policies and regulations in ECE and housing that together will improve services for FCEH. Partners can work together in the following ways:

- **Enact policies that give priority to serving FCEH in ECE programs.** For example, make the inclusion of FCEH a requirement in competitive grants, integrate FCEH provisions into Quality Rating and Improvement Systems and make homelessness an eligibility criterion for all relevant ECE programs, including child care subsidies.

- **Require ECE programs to develop plans for FCEH that integrate access** to housing, health, and mental health services, and provide technical assistance on those plans.

- **Require housing services to use the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters** which guides shelters in implementing practices that support the safe development of young children.

- **Support a two-generation approach through partnerships of early childhood and housing programs and services** including co-location with ECE services (e.g., Women, Infants and Children, child care, Head Start, state-funded preK, and health clinics).

- **Regularly communicate with key stakeholders, elected officials, and the public about the needs of FCEH and highlight successful programs.** States must work to build and maintain public and political understanding of the needs of FCEH to ensure adequate attention and funding for this often-invisible population. State administrators should regularly report on the status of FCEH and the programs that serve them to help make them be seen.

Challenges in Building Strategic Partnerships to Support FCEH

Supporting mobile children and families is already difficult work, but trying to build strategic partnerships across the state to support FCEH poses particular challenges. Federal definitions of homelessness, conflicting policies, and awareness all prove to be challenges states will face when trying to build strategic partnerships to support FCEH.

Differing Definitions of Family Homelessness

We don't know exactly how many families and children in the United States experience homelessness. One challenge to accurately counting FCEH is that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD; Box 1) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED; Box 2) have adopted different definitions from the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act. The administrators of housing services use the narrower HUD definition as established in Section 103 of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance

> **Box 1. Definition of homelessness adopted by HUD**
>
> 1. Individuals living in a **place not meant for human habitation**, in **emergency shelter**, in **transitional housing**, or are **exiting an institution** <u>and</u> resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately prior to entering that institution.
>
> 2. Individuals who will **imminently lose** their primary nighttime residence and lack resources to remain in housing.
>
> 3. **Unaccompanied youth** or families with children or youth who are **unstably housed** and likely to continue in that state.
>
> 4. Individuals who are **fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence** and have no other residence.

Act [42 U.S.C. § 11302] (S.896 The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009), whereas administrators of local educational agency (LEA)-administered preschools, Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) use the broader ED definition as found in Section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)] (McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act, 2001). This distinction creates challenges in systematically identifying FCEH eligible for services and complicates efforts to coordinate services across housing and ECE programs.

Another challenge to accurately identifying FCEH is a lack of coordinated, data on early childhood homelessness. The administrators of LEAs and Head Start must report annually on homelessness as

required by federal statute and Head Start Performance Standards, respectively, but LEA reports exclude children under age 3, and both reports exclude those who do not attend LEA-administered preschools or Head Start programs. The Child Care Development Block Grant Act also requires the collection and reporting of data on homeless families receiving child care subsidies.

<div style="border:1px solid #ccc; padding:1em;">

Box 2. Definition of homelessness adopted by ED

Children and youth who:

1. **Share housing** of other persons due to loss of housing or economic hardship; are living in **motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds** due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in **emergency or transitional shelters**; or are abandoned in **hospitals.**

2. 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.

3. Are living in **cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations**, or similar settings.

4. **Migratory children** who qualify because they are living in circumstances described in 1–3.

</div>

HUD reports include the number of families experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness based on (1) a "Point in Time" (PIT) count on a single night in January, and (2) administrative data through the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), which provides an annual count of families who used homeless services that year. Neither PIT nor HMIS reporting, however, accounts for families who share housing, did not access shelters, or whose housing status frequently changes. Available data thus likely underestimates the number of young children experiencing homelessness.

Although the available data cannot accurately identify all FCEH, we know that some families are especially vulnerable. The typical family experiencing homelessness includes a single, young mother with two children under age 6 (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011). Further, due to historical and ongoing discrimination practices around housing, employment, and education, FCEH are also much more likely to be families of color—African American and Native American families are particularly overrepresented in those experiencing homelessness (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018).

Conflicting Policies are Barriers to Implementation

Housing Policies

Federal housing policies typically do not target families and children ages birth through five specifically, but they can provide essential supports for FCEH. The federal Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 established a "housing first" policy, the Continuum of Care (CoC) program (a group of cross-sector representatives of homelessness agencies and programs for a geographic region that operates local HMIS, implements housing and service systems for individuals experiencing homelessness, operates and provides funds for nonprofit providers, and state and local governments), and coordinated entry (a standard process for assessing housing and

service needs and connecting to resources) among other provisions. Together, these programs support individuals and families experiencing homelessness with the goal of long-term housing stability.

Early Care and Education Policies

Participation in high-quality ECE programs is an essential support for young children experiencing homelessness. Federal policies such as the McKinney-Vento Act include provisions to help FCEH enroll and stay enrolled in ECE programs (see Box 3). For example, Head Start, Early Head Start, and programs funded by the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) must use the broader ED definition of homelessness (Box 2), enabling more young children to be eligible for services. They also must give priority to children experiencing homelessness during enrollment and offer a 90-day grace period for FCEH to submit required documents and obtain vaccinations for their children (see Box 3 for additional ECE policies).

Despite these policies, few children experiencing homelessness enroll in public ECE programs. In 2018, fewer than 10% of children experiencing homelessness under age 6 were enrolled in Head Start (9%), Early Head Start (4%), or programs funded through McKinney-Vento subgrants (5%) (Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 2020).

Box 3. Key Provisions of Federal and State ECE Policies Related to Family Homelessness

- Under McKinney-Vento, preschool-aged children experiencing homelessness are immediately eligible to participate in any LEA-administered program, including Early Head Start, Head Start, special education services, Title I, state or locally funded preschool, or home-based educational program if the LEA is a financial or administrative agent.

- Under McKinney-Vento, LEAs must appoint a liaison to identify families experiencing homelessness and coordinate with other agencies in outreach to these families.

- McKinney-Vento requires that children and families receive referrals for health, mental health, and other services and that school staff receive training specifically to support children experiencing homelessness.

- McKinney-Vento, Head Start, and the CCDF require that preschool programs give families experiencing homelessness a grace period to provide required documentation and obtain vaccinations. Preschool programs must also allow for alternatives to documents such as proof of residency.

- McKinney-Vento and Head Start require that children stay in their preschool if they become homeless or move unless it is against the parents' or guardians' wishes.

- Head Start and Early Head Start programs can reserve up to 3% of their enrollment for unhoused pregnant women and their children.

- Under CCDF, agencies must provide targeted outreach and services for FCEH and give priority to these families for enrollment in ECE services.

- Parts B and C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require states to identify, locate, and evaluate all children experiencing homelessness for disabilities and provide timely assessments and continuity of services for highly mobile children.

FCEH face numerous barriers in accessing needed programs and services. At the same time, administrators of state and local programs often struggle to implement the policies that support FCEH. Some of the barriers include the following:

Invisibility. Providers can only serve the FCEH whom they know about and identifying FCEH is a primary challenge. With different definitions of homelessness and a lack of consistent, complete data, agency staff often don't know who is eligible for programs and services. This lack of knowledge limits their efforts to serve eligible families, such as providing mutual referrals (e.g., a local Head Start program refers a family to a local housing program and vice versa). Program staff report that conducting outreach to FCEH is challenging because families are difficult to find, particularly those who often change locations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

Logistics. Families experiencing homelessness may have trouble providing documents required for enrollment in available services or accessing transportation to those services. FCEH often must move frequently which can require changing case managers and disrupt their access to services. Though certain ECE programs must give priority to FCEH for enrollment, long waitlists often prevent children from attending.

Lack of awareness. ECE staff may not have experience working with FCEH, hold unexamined biases, or not know about housing and other services outside of the early childhood system. Housing and health care staff, on the other hand, may not know about the importance of ECE for child development or about available ECE programs for the families they serve. Families may feel shame or embarrassment about their situation, not consider themselves homeless, or not know that laws (such as McKinney-Vento) guarantee flexibility, protections, and additional services to support their children receiving ECE.

Strategies for Program and Agency Staff to Effectively Build Strategic Partnerships to Support FCEH

Along with state-level efforts, strong partnerships among agencies and organizations can help to identify, reach, and continuously serve FCEH. The variety of federal and state policies and the number of agencies and organizations potentially serving FCEH can confuse both staff and families. Along with a state-level commitment to coordinating across policies and agencies, strategic partnerships among these agencies can reduce confusion and support the implementation of key provisions of federal and state policies.

1. Use Partnerships Across Agencies and Service Settings to Identify Eligible Families

To reach families experiencing homelessness, agencies and programs must form partnerships, communicate, and collaborate. Potential partners include:

- State Coordinators for Homeless Education

- McKinney-Vento LEA-appointed liaisons

- Head Start Collaboration Offices

- HUD-funded community planning bodies, such as the Continuum of Care program

- Lead agencies for IDEA Part C

- Public housing agencies

- Department of Health and Human Services/Department for Children Youth and Families

- Department of Education/Department of Public Instruction (State Education Agency)

- Service providers for runaway and homeless youth; private housing and emergency shelter providers; domestic violence agencies

- Medical clinics, particularly those providing prenatal and pediatric care

- Libraries, motels, soup kitchens, and food pantries, where FCEH may seek resources, food, and housing assistance

Regular communication and collaboration among these organizations and agencies will help program staff to identify and reach out to families. Partnerships among ECE, housing, and IDEA programs can help agencies identify additional families who need services. For example, ECE program leaders can designate staff to reach out to families in shelters and housing agencies. Shelters and housing agency leaders can in turn designate staff to communicate with families about their eligibility for ECE programs and services. Administrators from ECE and housing programs can engage with IDEA staff implementing the Child Find program which requires states to screen and identify all children for disabilities, including those experiencing homelessness. Leaders at each agency can develop resources for families and share to promote consistent messaging.

Agency staff should also share information with one another about families' common barriers or misconceptions. For example, staff at all types of agencies interacting with FCEH should know that FCEH do not need documentation of residence or up-to-date vaccinations to enroll in ECE programs such as Head Start.

2. Convene Stakeholders to Define and Consistently Address Priorities for FCEH

PDG B-5 Grantees and state leaders should establish a coordinating body for children and families with high-level representation from each relevant agency. This coordinating body should have a goal and strategic plan to address family homelessness and develop an organized system of policies, funding, and other supports for local programs. At the least, the state Early Childhood Advisory Council should include representatives from relevant state offices and local stakeholders and include coordination of FCEH policies, funding, and other supports as a regular topic or sub-group. It is also recommended that the councils or subcommittees include representation from FCEH.

This primary recommendation eases the adoption of the following recommendations which the organized system of policies, funding, and other supports should address. However, the different federal definitions of homelessness hamper the ability of state agencies to develop coherent policies, and these coordinating teams need to understand the differences (Box 1; Box 2).

3. Take Advantage of Relationships and Expertise to Fully Implement ECE Policies

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act explicitly addresses the early learning needs of preschool children experiencing homelessness (Box 3). Other federal and state policies, such as the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), and IDEA Sections B and C also include requirements for identifying and serving FCEH.

To fully implement these policies, agency and program staff can tap into a variety of resources. All states have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and LEAs must appoint McKinney-Vento liaisons. These positions exist to help programs implement McKinney-Vento requirements (Moore, 2018) and are useful points of contact for other agency or program staff working with FCEH. In addition, staff at community agencies and organizations can support programs in fully implementing these policies. Staff at Head Start Collaboration Offices can provide training and professional development and secure additional funding for high-need families, such as those experiencing homelessness. Housing agency administrators may also be able to provide additional funding to secure transportation to ECE programs (Shaw et al., 2020). State and local interagency coordinating councils provide another venue for agency staff to share information about McKinney-Vento requirements (Moore, 2018).

4. Provide Training and Professional Development for ECE Staff and Other Providers

Training and professional development for staff in ECE and housing agencies is critical to building a shared understanding of issues facing FCEH and available services. Staff in each sector bring specific expertise, and strong partnerships can provide opportunities to share this expertise across agencies and programs. ECE staff should receive training on accurately identifying families experiencing homelessness, the barriers that FCEH face, how to have sensitive conversations, and providing

trauma-informed care. Housing agency and shelter staff should receive training on the importance of ECE, child care options and subsidies, how to connect families to ECE services, and families' rights in ECE and Head Start under McKinney-Vento and in Head Start. Staff at ECE and housing agencies can connect with community partners (such as State Coordinators, McKinney-Vento liaisons, and Head Start Collaboration Offices) to identify and collaborate on training and PD opportunities.

5. Formalize Relationships Through Data Sharing Agreements and Workgroups

Forming partnerships across agencies is critical to serving FCEH, but informal collaboration alone may not sustain the work. Data sharing agreements and memoranda of understanding help staff in these agencies and programs to formally define and document their responsibilities to one another. These agreements can support efforts such as data collection and mutual referrals. When developing data-sharing agreements, agency and program staff should take care to document existing data collection efforts, new sources of data, definitions of data elements, and how they may differ (i.e., due to McKinney-Vento and HUD) using different definitions of homelessness and specify roles and responsibilities for data reporting.

Workgroups of ECE and housing program staff also can strengthen relationships and provide opportunities for staff to learn from one another and build shared knowledge and strategies. Such workgroups can also contribute to training and professional development efforts.

Conclusion

FCEH require extensive supports from a variety of agencies and programs to ensure that vulnerable unhoused families can secure long-term stability, enabling their children to thrive. PDG B-5 Grantees can support policies and practices at the state, agency, and program levels to support these goals. PDG B-5 Grantees and other state leaders must recognize the need for collaboration and partnerships among diverse departments, agencies, and programs and take steps to promote it. At the same time, state agencies' long-term goals should focus beyond serving FCEH and toward ending family homelessness, by addressing its root causes and implementing effective housing policies. These are challenging but necessary goals to better serve all children and their families.

Additional Resources

McCoy-Roth, M., Mackintosh, B.B., & Murphey, D. (February 2012). *When the Bough Breaks: The Effects of Homelessness on Young Children.* Child Trends. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2012-08EffectHomelessnessChildren.pdf

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. (September 2016). *The Most Frequently Asked Questions on the Education Rights of Children in Homeless Situations: Preschool and Other Early Childhood Programs.* https://naehcy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FAQpreschool.pdf

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. (October 2016). *Aligning Early Childhood Programs to Serve Children Experiencing Homelessness.* https://0va.b42.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ECEcrosswalkFINAL1042016-v2018.pdf

National Center for Homeless Education. (2018). *Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness.* https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Early-Care-and-Education-for-Young-Children-Experiencing-Homelessness.pdf

National Center for Homeless Education. *Homeless Liaison Toolkit 2020 Edition.* https://nche.ed.gov/homeless-liaison-toolkit/

School House Connection. (2020). *State Provisions to Help Children Experiencing Homelessness Access Child Care and Preschool.* https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/State-laws-on-ECE.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, (2017). *Checklist Questions: State/Territory Strategies to Increase Access to High-Quality Child Care for Families Experiencing Homelessness.* https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/checklist-questions-stateterritory-strategies-increase-access-high-quality-child-care

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, Early Childhood Training and TA System. *Families Experiencing Homelessness.* https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/topic-overview-ensuring-families-experiencing-homelessness-have-access

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2019). *Family Outreach Series—Strategies for Outreach to Families Experiencing Homelessness.* https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/family-outreach-series-strategies-outreach-families-experiencing-homelessness_eng_0.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, & U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *Policy Statement on Meeting the Needs of Families with Young Children Experiencing and at Risk of Homelessness.* https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/echomelessnesspolicystatement.pdf

References

Bassuk, E. L., Murphy, C., Thompson Coupe, N., Kenney, R. R., & Beach, C. A. (2014). *America's youngest outcasts: A report card on family homelessness.* National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research. https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Americas-Youngest-Outcasts-Child-Homelessness-Nov2014.pdf

Cutuli, J. J., Herbers, J. E., Rinaldi, M., Masten, A. S., & Oberg, C. N. (2010). Asthma and behavior in homeless 4-to 7-year-olds. *Pediatrics*, *125*(1), 145–151.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, As Amended by S. 896 Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, 42 U.S.C. 11302 https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/HAAA_HEARTH.PDF

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, 42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq. (2001). https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg116.html

Moore, J. (2018). *Early care and education for young children experiencing homelessness.* National Center for Homeless Education. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Early-Care-and-Education-for-Young-Children-Experiencing-Homelessness.pdf

National Center on Family Homelessness. (2011). *The characteristics and needs of families experiencing homelessness*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535499.pdf

Obradović, J., Long, J. D., Cutuli, J. J., Chan, C. K., Hinz, E., Heistad, D., & Masten, A. S. (2009). Academic achievement of homeless and highly mobile children in an urban school district: Longitudinal evidence on risk, growth, and resilience. *Development and Psychopathology*, *21*(2), 493.

Shaw, S., Hirilall, A., & Halle, T. (2020). *Facilitating access to early care and education for children experiencing homelessness* (OPRE Research Brief #2020-012). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/facilitating_access_to_early_care_and_ed.pdf

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2019). *Family outreach series—Strategies for outreach to families experiencing homelessness*. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/family-outreach-series-strategies-outreach-families-experiencing-homelessness_eng_0.pdf

United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2018). *Home, together: The federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness*. https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Home-Together-Federal-Strategic-Plan-to-Prevent-and-End-Homelessness.pdf

Yamashiro, A. & McLaughlin, J. (2020). *Early childhood homelessness state profiles 2020: Data collected in 2017–2018*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports.html

Suggested APA Citation:

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Office of Child Care

PDG B-5 TA Center

A Service of the Office of Child Care
1100 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 2800
Arlington, VA 22209

Email: PDGB5TA@sri.com

Subscribe to Updates
https://www.occ-cmc.org/
occ_announcements/signup.aspx

SRI Education™

A DIVISION OF SRI INTERNATIONAL