



# Increasing State Leaders' Collaboration to Support Families Experiencing Homelessness

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Sarah Nixon Gerard, SRI Education; Dominique Tunzi, SRI Education; Ellen Frede, National Institute for Early Education Research; Faith Scheibe, SRI Education

*There have been many resources developed to provide information and approaches on how to support families and children experiencing homelessness. This tip sheet considers those resources and highlights strategies to increase collaboration among state-wide early childhood programs and services to support families experiencing homelessness.*

## Tip #1. Assess the complex needs of families and children experiencing homelessness (FCEH).

An estimated 171,670 individuals in families—or 53,692 family households in the United States were experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2019 during HUD's Annual Point-in-Time Count (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019). Young children facing homelessness have increased risks of poor health, developmental delays (Cutuli et al., 2010; National Center of Family Homelessness, 2011; Obradović et al., 2009), academic underachievement (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Rafferty et al., 2004; Shinn et al., 2008), and behavioral and mental health challenges (Bassuk et al., 2014; Cutuli et al., 2010). A variety of federal, state, and local policies and programs can help address the needs of families and children experiencing homelessness (FCEH), but state leaders may not be familiar with all of these resources or be able to implement them as intended. Addressing the complex needs of FCEH and taking full advantage of existing policies and programs require coordinated efforts across many public sectors including early care and education (ECE), housing, health and safety, and mental health. State leaders can build and strengthen partnerships across systems and agencies to create a common understanding of homelessness, share knowledge of relevant policies and available programs and their eligibility requirements, analyze data, and improve families' access to high-quality services. The remainder of this tip sheet provides strategies for state program and agency staff and relevant stakeholders to address the complex needs of families experiencing homelessness.

## Tip #2. Make coordinating policies for FCEH a statewide priority across diverse stakeholders.

There are resources available that may help state leaders who are planning and implementing programs that support FCEH. Two resources that provide descriptions of statewide infant/toddler and early childhood homelessness initiatives and how they were implemented are [Ensuring Families Experiencing Homelessness Have Access to Infant and Toddler Care](#) and [State Examples:](#)

**ACCESS for Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness**. There are multiple ways state leaders can support FCEH. They can consider creating an advisory group and include local stakeholders and representatives from relevant state offices such as the departments overseeing education, child care, housing, labor, justice, health, public transportation, food, data management, and facilities development. State leaders can also establish a coordinating body for FCEH with a commitment to address family homelessness and include high-level representation from each relevant agency.

Partners can work together in the following ways:

- Include discussion of FCEH policies, funding, and other FCEH supports as a regular topic on meeting agendas.
- Consider creating a subgroup of stakeholders from diverse organizations to focus exclusively on issues of family homelessness in your state.
- Develop an organized system of policies, funding, and other supports for local programs. This may include clarifying and documenting differences in definitions of homelessness.
- Support a two-generation approach through partnerships between early childhood and housing programs and services including co-location with ECE services (e.g., Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), child care, Head Start, state-funded preK, health clinics).
- Regularly communicate with key stakeholders, elected officials, and the public about the needs of FCEH and successful programs to meet those needs. Maintaining and building public and political understanding of the needs of FCEH is necessary for ensuring adequate attention and funding for this often invisible population.

### **Tip #3. Improve and leverage early childhood homelessness data at the local and state levels.**

Though several agencies and programs collect and report annual data on FCEH, this population is undercounted in part due to lack of collaboration. ECE and housing providers have different priorities; housing officials are concerned with prevention of homelessness and rapid re-housing and ECE providers are focused on ensuring continuity of services for young children. The Office of Child Care, Office of Head Start, and Office of Early Childhood Development-funded programs use the definition of homeless children and youth found in Section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)]. According to the McKinney-Vento Act, the term "homeless children and youths" refers to individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The definition specifically includes children living in emergency shelters, motels, hotels, trailer parks, cars, parks, public spaces, or abandoned buildings, and those sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.

Staff across state agencies should:

- Collaborate and ensure that common terminology and definitions are used.
- Integrate existing data elements across data systems and offer appropriate access to the data for state and local program offices. Develop data dashboards with access limited by user type and establish data sharing agreements across agencies. Timely access to data on housing status across programs can help officials make better-informed decisions.
- Add data elements regarding FCEH into Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to support increased program accountability.
- Identify ways for programs and agencies to regularly share and discuss data about FCEH.
- Include homelessness data in any regular reporting by all state-funded or state-regulated programs. People have a natural tendency to “value what we measure” rather than “measure what we value.” Embedding homelessness information into current program reporting ensures that programs are collecting data on FCEH and that program staff and stakeholders regularly review and discuss the data and implications for programming and services. This also streamlines collection of aggregated data across programs and services which can inform state policy decisions and implementation.
- Report data disaggregated by race/ethnicity to measure, better understand, and aim to improve programs and policies to address the racial/ethnic disparities among FCEH. Family homelessness is more common among families of color, especially African American and Native American families, than White families (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018).

### **The difficulty of defining homelessness**

Different agencies use different definitions of homelessness—the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) adopted a narrower definition than the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Local educational agency (LEA)-administered preschools, Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) use the ED definition. These definition differences and qualifications across agencies make identifying FCEH and understanding who is eligible for services challenging. Stakeholders must determine how to work with each other to best serve FCEH, despite using different definitions.

## **Tip #4. Enact policies and regulations across agencies that improve services for FCEH.**

Representatives of state agencies who are responsible for programs and services across the mixed delivery system should partner to advocate and enact policies and regulations in ECE and housing that together will improve services for FCEH.

Staff at state agencies should also:

- Enact policies that require ECE program leaders to give priority to FCEH. For example, make inclusion of FCEH a requirement for ECE programs to receive competitive grants. Establish homelessness as a condition that guarantees eligibility for all ECE programs, including child care subsidies. Reserve spaces in ECE programs for children experiencing homelessness.
- Recognize the high cost of serving FCEH and increase funding for programs serving this population.
- Require ECE program leaders to develop plans to support FCEH by facilitating access to housing, health, and mental health services, and provide technical assistance for implementing those plans.
- Establish cross-agency professional development opportunities that allow providers to learn from each other. Professional development opportunities could include sessions to highlight the data on FCEH that are available from various agencies and programs and promote use of the data.
- Require housing services to implement developmentally appropriate practices to support young children living in shelters. Use the [Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters](#) to identify areas of improvement. Collaborate with ECE professionals to provide professional development for housing service professionals. Use the [Families Experiencing Homelessness Action Planning Template](#) with housing service professionals to target existing practices that can be expanded or strengthened and identify new practices to serve more families.

## Conclusion

State leaders have many opportunities to address the critical issue of family homelessness by supporting collaboration among diverse stakeholders; creating a culture of data sharing that facilitates discussion and action; and enacting policies across departments, agencies, and programs to support FCEH. State-level coordination should enhance and enable coordination at the local level, to include outreach across agencies and service settings, full implementation of required policies, professional development for service providers, and formal data sharing agreements. Addressing the complexities of family homelessness is a challenging but necessary goal. State leaders can help by identifying and coordinating all available resources to better serve all children experiencing homelessness and their families.

## Additional Resources

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](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/family-outreach-series-strategies-outreach-families-experiencing-homelessness_eng_0.pdf)

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**PDG B-5 TA Center**

A Service of the Office of Child Care  
1100 Wilson Boulevard Suite 2800 (28<sup>th</sup> floor)  
Arlington, VA 22209

**Email:** [PDGB5TA@sri.com](mailto:PDGB5TA@sri.com)

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