

ACF Administration for Children and Families	U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES Administration on Children, Youth and Families	
	Log No. ACF-IM-92-12	Issuance Date: 06/05/92
	Originating Office: Head Start Bureau	
	Key Word: Homeless Children and Families	

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

TO: All Head Start Grantees and Delegate Agencies

SUBJECT: Homeless Children and the Head Start Program

PURPOSE: To provide guidance to Head Start agencies to foster the recruitment and enrollment of homeless children and their families into the Head Start Program.

BACKGROUND: The Head Start Program is based on the premise that all children share certain needs, and that children of low-income families can benefit from the delivery of comprehensive developmental services to meet those needs. Homeless children are particularly vulnerable and need the services that a Head Start program can offer. Secretary Sullivan has challenged the Department to improve children in homeless families, which includes ensuring that Head Start is accessible and responsive to homeless children and their families.

In response to this challenge, the Head Start Bureau, in its most recent funding guidance, encourages local Head Start grantees to target homeless families wherever possible. In keeping with the philosophy of the Head Start program to adapt to the changing needs of its clientele, the first section of this memorandum provides an overview of Head Start's experience with homeless children and families as well as guidance on how to modify the Head Start program in order to effectively serve this population. The second section discusses concerns identified in a recent study conducted by Macro Systems, Inc. (1991) surrounding issues related to access to Head Start for the homeless.

INFORMATION: Being a parent and being homeless is a double challenge. Head Start can build on the strengths of these families - such as their intense desire to make a better life for their family and their commitment to and love for their children - and enable the parents(s) to increase their capacity to nurture, protect and provide for their children.

A homeless family in Head Start could be a single parent or a two-parent family, living in a rural or an urban setting. While the homeless and the housed low-income share some of the same characteristics and problems, the homeless child and family are faced with additional stresses such as losing their former community and living in a crowded shelter with little privacy, in a single motel room, or in a car. This shelter may be located far from their former home, or in a noisy, drug-infested environment, and the child may have no space to play, have lost his/her toys, books, and clothes and have no access to regular meals. Being homeless is arduous for the whole family and, unfortunately, has serious consequences for young children.

The research on the affect of homelessness on preschoolers documents the negative consequences of this condition. Homeless preschoolers are more likely to have a developmental delay in language, motor development and/or social skills (Basuk and Rubin, 1987; Koblinsky and Taylor, 1991); exhibit more aggression, shyness or sleep problems (Reinherz and Cracey, 1982; Basuk and Rubin, 1987); exhibit behaviors that warrant mental health intervention (Basuk et al., 1986, Molnar et al., 1991); have lower self-concept (DiBiase and Waddell, 1991); and show an unusual degree of ambivalence in relationships with their mothers (Phillips and Hartigan, 1984; Molnar, 1988.)

Given these problems, preschool is especially significant for the homeless child - in many cases, Head Start can offer the stability and supports needed for a child to cope with his or her situation. Research also demonstrates the importance of early childhood education for homeless children. Koblinsky and Taylor (1991) found that the more months that homeless children had attended preschool, the better they performed on the Early Screening Inventory (ESI). Molnar et al. (1991) also found that children with as little as three months of Head Start or publicly-funded daycare exhibited more age-appropriate performance on developmental tasks than children who did not have the opportunity for preschool enrollment in Head Start or publicly-funded daycare.

1. THE HEAD START EXPERIENCE AND GUIDANCE

Many Head Start agencies have already begun to serve homeless families in a variety of ways. There are both home based programs that serve families in shelters as well as center-based programs that have classrooms with both homeless and non homeless children. In the 1991 Program Information Report (PIR), 541 agencies responded that, in some manner, homeless children were being served. In addition, the Migrant Head Start program has had years of experience in working with migrant children and families. Working with migrant families poses many of the same challenges to Head Start as working with homeless families, such as issues of mobility, attendance, and medical needs. Thus, this model can offer insight into these areas for other Head Start program.

Head Start agencies relate that homeless children have one or more of the following characteristics: developmental delays; poor self-esteem; anxieties around food and possessions; behaving in an overly compliant manner with any adult person, thus making the child vulnerable to abuse; overly aware of parental responsibilities and problems; depression; and not displaying normal reactions to change. Grantees also report that homeless children were more likely than their peers to be in ill health and under immunized.

Most homeless parents have an intense desire to make life better for their families. In addition, they are committed to their children, and to maintaining the sense of family. Their efforts to achieve all this can be overwhelming to the parents and, as a result, they may have little energy to focus on the particular needs of the child. Some parents may be depressed, overly dependent on the child, or not understand the importance of an early childhood program. Other parents take their frustration out on the Head Start staff. In most cases, it will take time to develop trust and build a relationship with the parent.

The duration of a family's homelessness depends primarily on the availability of low cost housing, jobs and services for the family. Thus, for some families, a permanent home may be found quickly. Other families may move from shelter to shelter or

move back with friends or relatives before finding a home. Whatever the situation, Head Start needs to support the family during the period of homelessness, through the transition to permanent housing and after the family is housed.

Based on various Head Start grantees' experiences with homeless children, the migrant model, the current research, and the philosophy of Head Start program to adapt to the changing needs of its clientele, the following guidance is offered for working with this special population:

Strong support for the staff: Working with homeless children is difficult, even for the most skilled teachers and home visitors. The basic human desire is to eliminate all of the pain that the child has experienced. While this is a worthy goal, it is not realistic. In addition, working with parents who may not be able to be fully involved in their child's life adds to this frustration. However, setting achievable goals, i.e., providing each child (and parent) with positive experiences, and providing training and support to staff will help them in their work.

Strong mental health component: In addition to the staff, the children and the parents may have intense mental health needs. It is necessary to have the services of a mental health professional who can address the particular needs of staff, children and parents, or make arrangements with the local mental health agency for assistance. This will assure less staff burnout and better services to children and families caught in a transitory life.

Provide a safe, reassuring environment through a structured daily environment: The preschool classroom may be the only source of stability for the homeless child. To achieve this type of environment, reduce levels of stimulation in the room(s). Maintain a simple schedule for the children so each child knows what to expect throughout the day. Limit the choices (not the quantity) of toys and activities the children have, and introduce new toys gradually over the year. Plan for smaller class sizes in order for the children to receive more individual attention, and/or use more volunteers sensitive to the characteristics and needs of homeless children. Use volunteers to form smaller groups within the larger classroom or for one-on-one attention. Allow for personal areas for each individual child so that every child has a private space. These personal areas could be a cubicle or a box, decorated by the child with his or her name. Set up a quiet area for those children who may need to rest or need some privacy during the day because of all the anxiety in their life.

Meal times can be stressful for homeless children. Keep reassuring the children, they will get enough to eat. The Santa Clara county, California grantee has a small refrigerator in the classroom with finger foods that is available to the children to help themselves throughout the day. This can be seen as a mental health response in addressing anxieties about food.

Flexibility: While it is important to have structure for these children, flexibility needs to be built into the schedule because of the nature of homelessness. For example, programs working with homeless children must deal with children leaving unexpectedly, which is difficult to understand for both children and staff. The staff will need to incorporate activities into the schedule to help the children cope when this happens. The Beverly, Massachusetts grantee has developed a special goodbye routine which includes a song, book and discussion that is used to help the children understand this process.

Transportation: The Head Start agency should offer transportation services to its homeless families to ensure access to the program. This transportation is important to keep the child in Head Start, particularly if the child's living arrangement is unstable and the family is moved around in the search for permanent housing. It is very important to try to track and keep the child in the same Head Start program so that the child has some stability/continuity in his/her life. In addition, some Head Start agencies working with the homeless have used the transportation system to help families with food shopping and appointments with social service agencies or medical providers.

Collaborate with the community: Working with other Community and State agencies and resources are a critical role for Head Start grantees working with the homeless. In fact, it is important to recognize that the Head Start agency alone cannot address all the problems of homeless families. By teaming with other service agencies within the community, Head Start grantees can help make the community aware of the problem, participate in the solution, and offer comprehensive assistance. For example, establishing relationships with shelters/transitional housing will assist the Head Start agency with recruitment, understanding the homeless population in the particular area and the coordination of services. Strengthening the connection with the local JOBS, JTPA and literacy agencies will support the family. Working with the local housing coalition can also assist in creating affordable housing for Head Start families. To assist the grantee in establishing these linkages, an attachment has been prepared on federally supported programs for the homeless.

Parental responsibilities/involvement: The philosophy of Head Start is that the parents, even parents who are homeless, are the primary nurturers and teachers of their children. The Head Start staff should focus and build on the family's strengths, and enable the parents to build their capacity to cope with their life stresses. As a result of this support, the parents will be better able to nurture their children. In addition, the Social Services Coordinator, and Home Visitor in the home based option, should play an important role in advocating for the family and connecting them with needed services.

To further the parents' development, it is important to emphasize to them the importance of their participation in activities which will enable them to better nurture and protect their children, such as health, nutrition and education. To increase participation, it is important to design the activity around the parents' most pressing needs which may include issues of self-esteem, empowerment, and how to set and meet personal goals. The Head Start agency should also time the activity when the homeless parents will be most able to participate. The Conway, Arkansas migrant grantee developed a survey to determine the parents' needs and arrange monthly meetings based on this feedback. Some grantees meet around a meal, while others offer "door" prizes such as bus tokens, calendars and other simple, but useful items to encourage attendance. Other grantees have established parent support groups for their homeless parents. Homeless parents also need to be involved in the decision making process. This means that homeless parents should be represented on Policy Councils and their needs and concerns reflected in the daily operation of the Head Start program. The Head Start staff may need to provide special efforts in order to enable these parents to be involved such as providing transportation; finding another parent who will be a "mentor" or "buddy"; providing extra support and encouragement; and offering child care.

Make health screenings a priority for homeless families: Head Start grantees report that homeless children are under immunized and not as healthy as their peers. The lack of immunization or documentation can delay the child from actually attending the program. In the Gladstone, Oregon migrant grantee, immediate medical screenings are made a priority because of the mobility of the families. Staffs refer the family as soon as they are enrolled to a local provider for the medical appointment and provide transportation. If there are still children who have not been screened, the grantee brings medical personnel to the center. This is an ongoing activity.

Flexible hours of operation: For those agencies that operate some classrooms in which all children are homeless, the days and hours of operation should be tailored to meet their specific needs. For example, a Washington, D.C. grantee found that having early morning programs did not work for the homeless families. Because of the active night life of the motel where they were housed, the morning hours were typically the time, the children slept.

Plan for a “mixed” classroom: Since Head Start programs should not be establishing classrooms exclusively for homeless children, it is likely that there may be a few homeless children in several classrooms. Having both homeless and non homeless children in the classroom or group socialization experience will provide some stability for the program, and having both groups in a program will contribute to everyone’s opportunity to learn. Thus, it is important for all staff to understand how homelessness affects preschoolers, that these children and parents will need extra support, and what resources are available in the community to assist them.

2. CONCERNS RELATED TO ACCESS TO HEAD START FOR THE HOMELESS

Under a contract with the Department of Health and Human Services, Macro Systems, Inc. examined the service system for homeless families and children and conducted site visits in five cities. One result of this study was the identification of perceived barriers to Head Start for homeless families. This section clarifies the Head Start policy in regard to these concerns.

Average Daily Attendance: Many grantees are reluctant to serve homeless children because they believe that every program must maintain an 85% average daily attendance (ADA), which may be difficult when serving homeless children.

Response: This is an incorrect interpretation of Head Start policy. The policy states that, when the ADA drops below 85%, the Head Start program must analyze the causes of absenteeism, and initiate action based on the results of the analysis. The policy also differentiates between an “excused” absence and an “unexcused” absence. An excused absence, such as an illness, does not require any special intervention. However, if it is an unexcused absence, such as one resulting from a familial problem like homelessness, the agency must institute appropriate family support for all children and families with three or more consecutive unexcused absences. Thus, the policy concerning 85% ADA is a management tool to assist the staff to investigate why children are not attending the program and, where necessary, provide support to the family to enable the child to be present. There is no requirement that 85% ADA must be maintained.

Health Screenings: Similar to the misunderstanding regarding ADA, there is a belief in some programs that if health screenings and follow-up are not provided to all enrolled homeless children, funding will be denied.

Response: Since homeless children are with the program for varying lengths of time and can be difficult to track, all of these children may not receive complete health screenings and follow-up services before they move on. This does not result in the program being out of compliance with the Performance Standards if every effort was made to provide services to the child while enrolled in the program, attendance was encouraged and supported and, where possible, efforts were made to link the family with other Head Start agencies or preschool programs in the area of their new home. The Regional Offices need to be kept apprized of these types of situations and provided with information in an ongoing, timely manner.

Recruitment: The issue of recruitment has been a problem among homeless families, either because homeless families are not readily identified through the recruitment activities that grantees normally undertake or because grantees elect not to give homeless families that are identified priority for enrollment because the grantees feel they will be more difficult to serve.

Response: Recruitment must be an ongoing activity to assure that vacancies are filled promptly. This is particularly important when working with homeless children and families because of their transient nature. In addition, Head Start recruiters should not accept or reject a family solely on the recruiter's judgement of the likelihood of the child's attendance.

In order to recruit homeless children, the Head Start agency should contact staff at the local shelter, transitional housing facility, motel and any other agency that serves homeless families as well as visit places where homeless families are found in the community. In addition, the Head Start agency must be sensitive to cultural, ethnic and language differences when recruiting homeless families, and should provide training to any staff involved in recruiting. Understanding this population and developing relationships with homeless providers will assist the Head Start agency to serve some of the neediest families in the community.

Waiting Lists: Long waiting lists were cited as a barrier to serving homeless families and children. In some cases, if a family becomes homeless during the year and the child is not already on the waiting list, the child may not have access to a Head Start program.

Response: Head Start agencies are expected to manage their waiting list throughout the year and place children on the list based on the priorities set by their Policy Council and Board of Directors as identified through the community needs assessment. (This assessment is to be reviewed annually.) Thus, it is critical when conducting the Community needs assessment to look at the problem of homelessness in the grantee's service area and to make it a priority for recruitment if a high incidence of homelessness in the community is determined.

To meet the needs of homeless families in the community, some Head Start agencies reserve slots for homeless children, set a percentage of slots for the homeless or give priority to these children when a space becomes available.

Full Day/Full Year Services: The lack of full day, full year services is a frequently mentioned barrier for homeless families since some homeless families need quality care for their children while they search for housing or a job, go to work or visit social service agencies.

Response: The policy of Head Start is that a grantee may provide full-day services to those children who need such services. This includes children with special needs, who are from homes where there is severe stress, and where the parent is employed, in job training or in school. Head Start funds can only be used when there are no other funds available in the community to meet the full day needs of Head Start families, and where there are no services available.

Transportation: The lack of transportation has been cited as a barrier to the homeless in receiving services and in accessing the Head Start program.

Response: Many Head Start grantees already provide transportation for their children. For those grantees which do not provide transportation and would like to serve the homeless population, the grantee should plan to provide transportation and would like to serve the homeless population, the grantee should plan to provide transportation for the children to ensure regular attendance. The Head Start agency should investigate whether other existing transportation systems, such as the public school system, can be utilized to meet this need.

Costs: Serving homeless children and families may be more costly due to their greater mental health, social services, transportation and medical needs.

Response: Homeless children may need to be in a classroom with fewer children or require special services. The child and the family may need more individualized services which may mean bringing on new staff or training staff to develop stronger case management skills. In addition, the staff may need extra support in their work with homeless families since staff burn out is frequently reported by grantees. Collaborating with other agencies or professionals in the provision of services may keep costs down and provide much needed services. When this is not possible or services are not available through community/public agencies, higher costs are acceptable as long as the grantee can provide sufficient justification in its application.

In some cases, programs may wish to consider serving fewer children in order to meet higher costs. Such changes should be discussed with the program's Regional Office. In addition, programs should consider using the Quality Improvement Funds to address such costs.

Conclusion: Head Start is committed to meeting the needs of homeless children and families. Homeless children can and are benefitting from the Head Start experience. Their lives, and the lives of the other children and the staff. It is hoped that this guidance, the attached references and the federally supported homeless program listings as well as the knowledge already gained from the Head Start community will provide other Head Start agencies with the resources and support necessary to serve this special population.

References

Federally Supported Programs for the Homeless

Research

DiBiase, Rosemary, Ph.D. and Sandra Waddell. "Homelessness in Head Start Preschoolers: Preliminary Research and Future Directions" presented on 06/24/91 at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)/Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) Conference - New Directions in Child and Family Research: Shaping Head Start in the Nineties.

This research documents that homeless children generally perceive themselves as being less cognitively, socially and physically competent than their non homeless peers and perceive themselves as being less well accepted by their moms than peers. The homeless child also shows significantly more deviant behaviors, specifically more depression. Homeless boys are more socially withdrawn and schizoid. Finally, both homeless and non homeless Head Start children experience a high level of violence in their lives.

Koblinsky, Sally A. and Martha Taylor. "Developmental Skills and Social-Emotional Behavior of Young Homeless Children" presented on 06/24/91 at the HHS/ACYF Conference - New Directions in Child and Family Research: Shaping Head Start in the Nineties.

The study compared the social, cognitive and physical development of homeless preschoolers living in emergency and transitional housing in Baltimore, Maryland, and examined whether homeless preschoolers' skills and behaviors were related to gender/age/duration of homelessness/enrollment (or lack of) in preschool and mother's attitudes about parenting and teaching. The study found that the physical and psychological conditions under which homeless preschoolers children live place them at increased risk for behavioral disturbances and developmental problems. It also found a significant relationship between preschool attendance and children's performance on the developmental screening measure.

Molnar, Janice et al. *Ill Fares the Land: The Consequences of Homelessness and Chronic Poverty for Children and Families in New York City*. New York: Bank Street College of Education, 1991.

This study involved a sample of New York City children age three to five: one group was homeless and living in emergency shelter facilities; the other group was housed, but dependent on public assistance. One key finding was that children with access to early childhood education exhibited more age appropriate behaviors than those who do not have access to such programs. The study also found that children living in emergency shelters exhibited more emotional problems and behaviors and that many of the children needed mental health intervention.

Molnar, Janice, William Rath and Tovah P. Klein. "Constantly Compromised: The Impact of Homelessness on Children," Journal of Social Issues, Vol. 46, No. 4, 1990.

This article provides a summary of research and literature on the effects of homelessness on children, specifically the impact on health, development and education, and also outlines the implications for policy.

Rafferty, Yvonne, Ph.D. "Educating Homeless Children - Current Research, Ideas and Directions." Presented on 06/24/91 at the HHS/ACYF Conference - New Directions in Child and Family Research: Shaping Head Start in the Nineties.

This paper documents how important school is to the homeless child and demonstrates that homeless children are more likely to score poorly on standardized Math and Reading tests and are more likely to repeat a grade.

The study found several factors that appear to mediate the educational achievement of homeless children such as school attendance, unstable shelter placement, inadequate shelter conditions, and inadequate educational services.

Rafferty, Yvonne and Marybeth Shin. "The Impact of Homelessness on Children," *American Psychologist*, November 1991, Vol. 46, No. 11.

The authors review and critique research on the effects of homelessness on children. Overall, they found that homeless children confront serious threats to their well being. These problems include health problems, hunger, poor nutrition, developmental delays, anxiety, depression, behavioral problems and educational under achievement. The article also addresses factors that may contribute to the problem, such as inadequate shelter conditions, inadequate services, and barriers to accessing services.

Stanford Center for the Study of Families, Children and Youth. "Stanford Studies on Homeless Families, Children and Youth," 1991.

Nine interconnected studies provided different perspectives on homeless families. Included in the study were homeless families, formerly homeless families, poor families at risk of homelessness, homeless children living in shelters, and service agency officials. The study provided information on the characteristics of homeless families, how families become homeless, the physical and mental health of families, the effect on children, the education of homeless children, services provided and how families break the cycle of homelessness.

Manuals/Curriculum on How to Serve the Homeless

Children's Service Department. **A Guide to Provide Comprehensive and Quality Services to Homeless Children and their Families.** Santa Clara County Office of Education, 1989.
Contact: Yolanda Garcia (408) 453-6947

This book shares the Santa Clara County experience in serving homeless families and preschoolers. The manual provides details on the key elements of establishing a program, the service components and strategies for working with the children.

Klein, Tovah, Calley Bittel and Janice Molnar. **No Place to Call Home: Support the Needs of Homeless Children in the Early Childhood Classroom.** Young Children, (in print).

This resource describes the principles behind an early childhood curriculum for homeless children. The authors focus on these seven aspects of the classroom program that require special emphasis: routines, materials and activities, adult-child groupings, space, comings and goings, parents, and staff support.

North Shore Community Action Programs, Inc. (NSCAP) Head Start. **Head Start Helps the Homeless: A Manual for Creating A Head Start Homeless Classroom.**
Contact: Sandra Wadell, Beverly, Massachusetts (508) 927-8109

This manual is based on the agency's experience in operating an innovative project in 1985. It includes the history of the development of the project including staff selection, recruitment, site, program format, education, administration, social services, mental health problems, issues of the parents, children and teachers, research and conclusions. The manual also includes forms, questionnaires, and policies that are used in the program.

Contacts in Head Start Programs Currently Serving the Homeless

Salvation Army, Chicago, Illinois

This was a 1985 innovative project to provide Head Start to homeless children which is still in operation. Staff can provide major observations regarding a home-based program serving homeless children and their families.
Contact: Rebekah Baker, (312) 733-2533

Bucks County Head Start, Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania.

Currently, this Head Start agency is in the second year of operating a home-based program for homeless children and families.
Contact: Nancy Hunzike, (215) 943-1140

Migrant and Indian Coalition, Gladstone, Oregon.

The migrant model of Head Start can offer insights into working with a highly mobile population.
Contact: Juanita Santana, (503) 981-0135

NSCAP Head Start, Beverly, Massachusetts.

See reference under section on manuals.
Contact: Sandra Waddell, (508) 927-8109

Santa Clara County, Office of Education, San Jose, California

See reference under section on manuals.
Contact: Yolanda Garcia, (408) 453-6947

Warren County Community Services, Lebanon, Ohio

“Family Support Project - To Develop Comprehensive Services Which Will Reduce and Prevent Homelessness Among Head Start Families.”

This project is a cooperative effort between the Head Start program and the Family Services Department of Warren County. The goals are to strengthen the case management capacity which includes the identification of families; the development of case management and family service tracking system; the development of an individual service plan for families; and the provision of weekly support services.
Contact: Lisa Cayard, (513) 933-2214

Mahube Community Council, Detroit Lakes, Minnesota.

This agency is dealing with homelessness in a rural setting.
Contact: Leah Pigatti, (218) 847-1385

Federally Supported Programs for the Homeless

The following is a list of Federally supported programs with which Head Start grantees should consider establishing linkages in order to effectively serve the homeless population.

- ▶ **The Supportive Housing Program (HUD)** - This program includes a transitional housing component which is designed to encourage the development of housing and supportive services that will enable participants, including homeless families, make the transition to independent living within 24 months. Contact either the office of Community Planning and Development in your local HUD field office or the office of Special Needs Housing at (202) 708-2140 or (202) 708-1150.

- ▶ **Supplemental Assistance for Facilities to Assist the Homeless (SAFAH) (HUD)** - The SAFAH program provides grants for facilities to house and provide support services to meet the immediate and long-term needs of the homeless. Contact either the Office of Community Planning and Development in your local HUD field office or the Office of Special Needs Housing at (202) 708-2140 or (202) 708-1150.

- ▶ **Community Action Agencies (HHS)** - Many of the over 980 Community Action Agencies provide a wide range of emergency and preventive services to homeless families from targeted McKinney Emergency Community Services grants and Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) funds.

- ▶ **Health Care for the Homeless (HHS)** - This program supports 109 grantees providing primary care and substance abuse services, emergency health services and referrals to necessary hospital services, mental health services, outreach and case management services, and aid in establishing eligibility for, and obtaining services under, entitlement programs. Contact either the Public Health Service Regional Office or the Division of Special Populations Program Development, (301) 443-2512.

- ▶ **Community and Migrant Health Centers (HHS)** - This program was established to provide accessible and affordable community-based primary care to individuals and families who otherwise would not have the benefits of such care. Contact the Division of Primary Care Services at (301) 443-2260.

Other Resources Regarding Homeless Children and Families

Boxhill, Nancy. **Homeless Children: The Watchers and the Waiters.** Haworth Press, 1990.

Kozol, Jonathan. **Rachel and Her Children.** New York: Crown Publishers, 1988.

Mihaly, Lisa Klee. **Homeless Families: Failed Policies and Young Victims.** Washington, D.C. Children's Defense Fund, 1991.