

Helping Homeless Families Meet the Child Care and Educational Needs of their School-aged and Preschool-aged Children

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Head Start Legislation and Regulations

- Head Start is designed “to promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of low-income children through the provision, to low-income children and their families, of health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services that are determined, based on family needs assessments, to be necessary.” The Head Start Act and the program regulations governing Head Start require Head Start programs to respond to the needs of families by working collaboratively with them to identify and continually access, either directly or through referrals, services and resources that are responsive to each family’s interests and goals.

Head Start Program Information Review Data

- In the program year ending August 2004, 20,514 Head Start families with a total of 23,926 children, ages 0-5, were homeless (2.5 percent of the approximate 968,000 children served).
- Of these families—and with the assistance of Head Start staff in many cases—11,920 or 58 percent found housing within the year (rates vary by State).

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and Head Start: The Connection

- Like the McKinney-Vento Act, Head Start understands that family needs vary tremendously. In Head Start, every child and family has an individualized plan based upon the families’ goals and needs.
- The McKinney-Vento Act recognizes the need to build on existing capacity and on what works—Head Start has been serving children and families successfully for 40 years.
- The McKinney-Vento Act and the Interagency Council on Homelessness work to coordinate Federal programs to address homeless. Head Start also collaborates on national, State, and community levels in order to provide the full range of coordinated services needed to meet the needs of Head Start children and families.

Head Start: Programmatic and Policy Support

There are three main areas where the Head Start Bureau is working to address the needs of homeless families: developing community-wide and statewide collaborations, funding model programs, and providing training and technical assistance. The barriers and recommendations below come from the lessons learned from these projects.

Barriers to Education Faced by Homeless Families with Preschool Children

The following barriers affect a child’s ability to receive consistent, appropriate child development and educational services:

- **Family Instability, Stress, and Anxiety:** Families facing high levels of stress and chaotic living situations often do not have the energy or resources to address the developmental and educational needs of their children.
- **Barriers to Enrollment:** Enrolling homeless families in Head Start is difficult, and requires community outreach and partnerships with shelters and transitional housing programs.
- **Mobility:** As families move, they often move into and out of organizational service area boundaries, limiting a program’s ability to continue to provide consistent services.
- **Lack of Transportation:** The lack of transportation prohibits many families from being able to access services for their children and participate in parent involvement activities.

- **Un- or Underemployment:** The lack of an adequate income limits a family’s ability to pay for basic needs, such as health care; nutritious food; clothing; safe, stable child care, etc.—all of which can affect a child’s ability to learn and grow optimally.
- **Domestic Violence and Substance Abuse:** Working with children and families that have experienced domestic violence or substance abuse requires specialized mental health services and support for the entire family.
- **Lack of Appropriate Social and Emotional Supports:** For optimal development, children need consistency of caregivers and trusting relationships.

Recommendations for Head Start and Others

- **Need for Collaboration:** Community collaboration is essential to addressing the needs of children and families who are homeless. Developing skills in leadership, partnership development, and even conflict resolution are essential to weaving the web of services needed to support these families.
 - Head Start programs need to reach out to shelters and other community groups to make sure they are aware of the importance of and availability of early childhood services and of the value of taking a family perspective in providing services.
 - They need to include community partners, early on, in their planning meetings and staff training and activities and give them representation on their boards and committees.
 - They can consider joint agency case management teams, and even co-locating staff.
 - Given the high staff turnover in shelters, it is often important that efforts at relationship and partnership development occur often.
- **Need for Strategies to Involve Parents:** Successfully collaborating with parents is obviously fundamental. Finding ways to build trust and support parent involvement—one of the cornerstones of the Head Start program—is essential to being able to provide the full range of services that they and their children need.
 - Many programs hire and train formerly homeless parents, who can bring a level of awareness and sensitivity to their work with families.
 - Meetings can be held at times and in locations that fit parents’ schedules, and they might best be structured as social gatherings.
 - Parents might be able to participate in Head Start in different ways, such as by assisting on the bus, or recording books and songs on tape.
 - Parents might be able to be given “credit” in work programs for the time they spend volunteering in Head Start.
- **Need for Focus on Prevention:** Many families are doubled up, and others are at risk of losing housing because of violence or substance abuse in a home.
 - The use of a broader definition of “homeless” would allow Head Start grantees to provide services to at-risk families, allowing them to retain stable housing and remain out of shelters.
- **Need to Include Infants and Toddlers:** Head Start directors report a high percentage of homeless families with very young children. (national statistics report that 40-60 percent of homeless children are between 0-5 years of age).
 - Head Start preschool funds could be used to serve homeless families with children aged 0-3 along with the 3- to 5-year-old homeless children that programs currently serve.
- **Need for Family Assistance with Enrollment:** Head Start programs often have difficulty recruiting, enrolling, and maintaining homeless families. Some measures that are helpful include:
 - Ensuring that other agencies in the community act as referral sources
 - Working with families to navigate the bureaucracy to obtain the appropriate documentation for enrollment
 - Providing families with a 30-day grace period for providing all documentation (with the exception of immunization status)

- Working with local health care organizations to perform expedited and free physical examinations and immunizations for homeless children.
- **Need for Advocacy:** Many organizations working with homeless families do not have expertise in child development, and many communities do not have the full slate of services needed to work with homeless families.
 - Head Start programs are in a prime position to educate community partners about the needs of young children in homeless families as well as to advocate for services for the entire family.
- **Need for Flexibility in Reporting Data:** Children from homeless families have more erratic and lower attendance rates, poorer immunization rates, and lower parent involvement rates. These lower rates affect a program’s ability to meet *Head Start Program Performance Standards* in some areas.
 - Reporting this subset of families separately—as Head Start has chosen to do with migrant and seasonal farmworker families—would recognize the special circumstances faced by homeless families and the challenges of serving them and would not “penalize” Head Start grantees for providing services to them.
- **Need for Flexibility in Service Area Boundaries:** Homeless families may resettle in nearby geographic locations that are outside of the service area that their funding is authorized for, yet maintaining stable, consistent relationships with caregivers and staff is important for both the children and their parents.
 - Waivers to allow programs to continue to work with these families could provide important consistency in the lives of these children.
- **Need for Resources:** The more intensive and specialized services that homeless families require often require funding or community partners to support and sustain them fully. For example, funding or partnerships may be needed in order to offer:
 - *Full-day Head Start programming* of at least 9 hours a day to ensure that children are in a safe and stimulating environment while parents strive to stabilize their family situation
 - *Year-round Head Start services*, which are in high demand from families trying to stabilize their lives (this also provides children with schedule consistency, and continuity in learning and caregivers—all of which are important to their healthy development)
 - *Specialized staff*, such as experts in housing; social workers or other mental health or child development specialists, either in house or through outside consultation; or more case management staff since programs report that a lower than normal staff-to-child ratio is needed to meet the intensive needs of families who are homeless
 - *Training* for all staff on the special needs of children and families who are homeless, including training on strategies for smoothly integrating children from homeless shelters into the classroom, when there can be a “revolving door” syndrome with different-age children coming in and out of the classroom
 - *Offsite Head Start child development services*, such as at a homeless shelter, domestic violence shelter, or transitional housing facility, to improve access to child development programming for these families
 - *Provision of support services* (dental, medical, supplemental child care, adult education or language classes, etc.) at shelters or at Head Start centers to facilitate access to these services for homeless parents who often do not have transportation and are too overwhelmed to negotiate securing services from multiple organizations in multiple locations
 - *Transportation* to ensure that children are able to get to their Head Start programs consistently and parents are able to participate in parent involvement activities.