



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Office of the Assistant Secretary, Suite 600
370 L'Enfant Promenade, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20447

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Dear Colleagues,

We are writing you today to stress the importance of providing early care and education (ECE) services to homeless children. Ensuring the well-being of our youngest children is essential to the work of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and is especially urgent when considering the vulnerability of young children experiencing homelessness.

More than 1.6 million children in the United States live on the streets or in homeless shelters. Forty-two percent of these children are under the age of six. The numbers of homeless children are even higher when also counting families who are temporarily doubling up with others, living in campgrounds or otherwise without a stable home. A family's housing circumstances can change very suddenly as evidenced when natural disasters cause families to be at least temporarily homeless. Research shows that children who experience homelessness also experience higher rates of chronic illness, developmental delays, anxiety and depression than children who live in stable homes.

However, the numbers only tell part of the story. You have no doubt met families experiencing homelessness and understand the extent of the challenges these families face on a daily basis. Given what we know about the positive impact of a quality early care and education experience on both family stability and on a child's long-term health and development, it is critical that we prioritize this vulnerable population and reduce barriers to ensure they have access to available services. Additionally, given their unstable housing situations, it is also particularly important that homeless children have as much continuity and stability in their ECE settings as possible.

Whether you are in a Head Start program, administer the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), or work in another program that receives ACF funds, please reexamine how your programs are administered. Take a look at the ways you are already identifying and serving homeless children and identify additional strategies to do so. Through our training and technical assistance programs, we stand ready to help you provide homeless children with more quality experiences in ECE.

To help, listed below are recommendations, some of which are required for Head Start, for increasing ECE services for homeless children:

- **Prioritize Access to Services for Homeless Families:** When deciding eligibility for enrollment in your ECE programs, give homeless families priority status. Head Start already has a requirement to prioritize homeless families, and while this is not a federal requirement for CCDF, we strongly encourage States to use their flexibility to prioritize homeless families.
- **Have Policies in Place for Families who are Temporarily Homeless after a Disaster:** Policies and procedures should ensure that these families have streamlined access to services that are essential to recovery in an emergency situation. For Head Start, any age-eligible child from a family that has had to abandon their home because of a disaster, such as from a hurricane, is considered homeless. In CCDF, each State has the flexibility to prioritize families made homeless by a disaster and to provide flexibility around necessary documentation.

- **Offer Flexibility to Homeless Families:** Examine the documentation required to enroll in an ECE program and, where appropriate, provide “grace periods” that give families sufficient opportunity to gather the required documentation, such as for immunization, within a reasonable time frame.
- **Coordinate with Homeless Education State Coordinators and Local Liaisons:** Per the McKinney-Vento Act, each State Educational Agency (SEA) designates a State Coordinator of Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY State Coordinators) and local liaisons are designated by all Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in the State. Programs should work with these State Coordinators and local liaisons to reach out to homeless children and families and connect them to the available ECE resources as well as health and social services.
- **Work with Homeless Coalitions:** The ECE community should participate on homeless coalitions which bring together homeless programs with other community organizations. The purpose of these coalitions is to ensure that services available to homeless families (particularly support services beyond housing) reflect the needs of the community. ECE participation on these coalitions will ensure that the unique needs of young children are well represented.
- **Coordinate between Head Start and CCDF Policies:** Given the significant overlap between Head Start and CCDF children, many states consider it effective policy to align the regulations between the two programs to ensure that services to these vulnerable families are delivered in a consistent and family-friendly manner. While Head Start and CCDF are administered differently and have different requirements, the goals are the same: provide quality early care and education for all children. Therefore, to the extent possible, we encourage states to align policies to increase the opportunities for all homeless children to receive high quality ECE.

We have attached to this letter some materials to help you increase and improve ECE services for homeless children. They include fact sheets on: strategies/action steps, resources and relevant Head Start and CCDF laws, regulations, and policies.

The well-being of our youngest children is essential, not only for the development of the child and the stability of the family, but for the ongoing success of our nation. We thank you for your tireless efforts to serve our most vulnerable children and stand committed to supporting your work to further ensure that young homeless children and families have access to high-quality early care and education services.

Sincerely,

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