**Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) Project: Learnings from Focus Groups on Increasing Access to Quality Early Childhood Education for Families and Children Experiencing Homelessness**

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***Full report available at:***

<http://www.pec-cares.org/clientfolders/pdf/BELL%20Focus%20Group%20Report_Full%20Report_FINALupdated.pdf>

**Main Goal:**

Identify and apply lessons from focus groups to enhance cross-systems policies, practice and training.

**Methods:**

* Series of 7 focus groups in Philadelphia, Fall, 2016
* 33 parents/guardians of children age 0 to 5 staying in emergency or transitional housing
* 19 homeless services and early childhood education providers
* Analysis of key/recurring themes

**Key Findings:**

* Parents greatly value ECE and are committed to finding quality care despite logistical obstacles
* Parents receive little information from either emergency housing or ECE systems
* Key impediments identified by parents: Transportation, flexibility in program scheduling (e.g., lack of extended day programs), lack of outreach and information from ECE settings, scarcity of open ECE program slots (especially for infants), access to financial subsidies for ECE
* Parents and providers emphasize a need for more empathic and trauma-informed practice
* Systems disconnects in learning about, enrolling in, and sustaining participation in ECE

**Key Recommendations:**

*Emergency housing providers:*

* Actively promote information sharing and access to quality ECE to families
* Develop informational materials for families and workshops about available ECE options
* Create and implement staff training to enhance understanding of quality ECE
* Nurture parent competences to encourage positive development in their own children
* Regularly employ the *ACF Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters*

*ECE providers:*

* Address practical challenges of entry, enrollment, and sustained participation
  + Simplify enrollment documentation; Expand flexibility in program scheduling (extended hours); Increase capacity for very young children (0 to 3)
* Encourage trauma-informed care through staff training and program implementation
* Include information about homelessness and emergency housing in staff training
* Actively communicate with local emergency housing facilities and engage in outreach

*Community-wide homeless response system:*

* Respond to concerns about availability, accessibility, affordability, and safety of ECE for families
* Increase transportation assistance, ECE subsidies, and available slots (especially for 0 to 3 year olds)
* Coordinate existing mainstream services to encourage sustained participation in ECE
* Capture cross-systems data to further illuminate barriers and successes regarding ECE participation

**Best Practices in Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness**

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***Full report available at:***

<http://www.phmcresearch.org/images_specific/images_specific/ChildHomelessness.pdf>

In late 2016, the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Education (ED) published a joint policy statement concerning the needs of young children experiencing and at risk of homelessness and their families.[5] The statement summarizes the large and growing body of evidence quantifying the negative impacts homelessness and unstable housing have on young children’s development, and suggests potential strategies for better serving these children and their families.

Building on this and other recent work relating to young children experiencing homelessness, this report explores organizations’, municipalities’, and states’ practices and policies for addressing the educational and related needs of young children experiencing homelessness and their families. This paper also considers the scope of early childhood homelessness in Philadelphia, and the landscape of existing housing and educational services available to young children experiencing homelessness, with the goal of providing organizational leaders, advocates, and policymakers in Philadelphia and across the Commonwealth with new approaches to better serve the needs of some of our most disadvantaged children and their families.

Interviews and a review of the literature highlighted many promising and novel strategies. At the organizational level, providers discussed the importance of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and strong interpersonal relationships between staff to creating long-lasting collaborations and productive cross-training sessions. At the systems level, policies for prioritizing homeless children for services featured prominently; interviewees also discussed the importance of hiring dedicated staff to facilitate integration and to ensure that children and their families receive comprehensive supports and can make smooth transitions between programs. At the municipal level, cities are pioneering integrated referral and tracking systems and are conducting outreach and education around homelessness to underidentified populations, while working with relevant staff to increase identification rates. At the state level, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has numerous avenues through which it can better connect young children experiencing homelessness to high-quality early care and education (ECE), including modifying guidelines for Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies to prioritize and better serve children experiencing homelessness; and revising eligibility criteria for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services to make children experiencing homelessness categorically eligible. Examples from Oregon, which has created regional hubs to integrate services relevant to homeless families with young children, and 2 Massachusetts, which has emphasized building formal and personal relationships between ECE and homeless-serving organizations and staff, may also inform future state-level work in Pennsylvania.

Although federal legislation, funding requirements, and regulation create much of the framework for state- and local-level work relating to early childhood homelessness, there exist significant opportunities for homeless-serving and ECE organizations in Philadelphia, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and the City of Philadelphia government, state agencies, and the Pennsylvania legislature to institute new policies and develop and expand new programs in order to better serve young children experiencing homelessness.