



Reserving Slots in Head Start Programs for Children Experiencing Homelessness

Background

On December 12, 2007, the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act* was signed into law by then president George W. Bush. The Head Start law included several new provisions, including the designation of children and families experiencing homelessness as categorically eligible for enrollment [Section 645(B)(ii)] and the additional requirement for these families to be identified and prioritized for enrollment [Section 640 (m)(1)].

In addition, the new Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) released in November 2016 include a provision [§1302.15(c)] allowing Head Start and Early Head Start programs to reserve one or more enrollment slots (up to 3% of the funded enrollment) for pregnant women and children experiencing homelessness in their service areas for a period of 30 days when a vacancy occurs. This provision complements the afore-mentioned regulations of the Head Start Act and can serve as one part of a program's broader strategy for serving children and families experiencing homelessness. This Standard does not simply refer to vacancies at the beginning of the program year, but also applies to vacancies that might occur *during the year* because of children leaving or "dropping" from the program.

This document is designed to support Early Head Start and Head Start programs in strategically leveraging the new provision allowing programs to reserve slots for children and families experiencing homelessness. Read on for a description of how programs can lay the foundation needed to ensure families can benefit from this new provision; a step-by-step guide for implementing the new provision; and an illustrative example of what reserving slots may look like in practice.

Maximizing opportunities to serve children experiencing homelessness in Early/Head Start

Reserving slots is most effective when it is regarded as one part of a multi-pronged strategy to give enrollment priority to children experiencing homelessness. Reserving slots also gives programs the ability to better ensure program placements for children and families of greatest need (as defined by the Head Start Act), who are commonly very difficult to find during regular recruitment activities. The most effective strategy for enrolling and serving children and families experiencing homelessness must include efforts to intentionally identify, actively recruit, and prioritize these families for available slots.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs must keep in mind that the Head Start Act requires that they use the same definition for "homeless" as used in the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (i.e. "families that lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence"). This definition is quite broad and includes, but is not limited to, children and families living in a situation commonly referred to as "doubled-up." Families in this situation are actually living in the homes of other families (sometimes even

relatives), but due to economic hardship or some other crisis circumstance. In fact, data from the US Department of Education indicate a trend over the last several years that the overwhelming majority of children and families experiencing homelessness are in this category. Another essential step for programs is to modify the questions they ask prospective Head Start families at intake to increase the likelihood of identifying those that are experiencing homelessness as a result of being “doubled-up.” It is much more likely that programs will identify these families by asking the right kinds of questions during the intake process. For example, programs might ask families:

- “How often have you moved within the last 12 months?”
- “Are you currently living with friends or other family members? If so, what are the circumstances of your living with another family?”
- “Is your name on the lease of the place where you are living?”
- “Could you at any time be asked to leave the place where you are living?”

Questions like these begin an important dialogue with families that assists programs’ ability to make determinations about whether a family is experiencing homelessness based on the legal definition. Notice also that absent from the examples is the question: “Are you homeless?” Not only can this question be stigmatizing; but some families (and especially those living in “doubled-up” situations) may not *consider themselves* as being “homeless,” even though their situation meets the legal definition. Remember that through this process, we are not trying to convince families that they are homeless! We are only trying to collect sufficient information about a family’s living situation and circumstances so that we can make proper enrollment decisions based on the law.

In addition, programs should expand their effort to recruit homeless children and families for enrollment in ways that include collaborating with and soliciting referrals from McKinney-Vento liaisons at their local school districts and other key partners like the staff at local homeless shelters or motels. Furthermore, recruitment efforts should be ongoing and occur regularly throughout the year. This is especially true when trying to identify families experiencing homelessness, who tend to be highly mobile and move around a lot for many reasons.

Finally, programs must prioritize children experiencing homelessness for enrollment. One way to prioritize families is for the program to ensure that the program’s selection criteria awards homeless children and families sufficient points to distinguish them from other applicants seeking enrollment into the program. Additional strategies for prioritizing families may include making efforts to expedite application and enrollment processes and reserving slots.

Reserving slots in Head Start and Early Head Start programs

Once your program is identifying and actively recruiting children experiencing homelessness, you are ready to fully take advantage of the opportunity presented in the new HSPPS to reserve slots for this population. In addition to prioritizing these families through your program’s selection criteria, reserving slots is another way to give enrollment priority to children and families experiencing homelessness. Following is a step-by-step guide for putting this strategy into practice as you prepare for filling vacancies for the upcoming 2017-18 program year.

Step 1: **RECRUIT**

Using data from your Community Assessment, your recruitment efforts should target those locations in your service area where children and families experiencing homelessness tend to be. In addition, find out who the Homeless Liaison (sometimes referred to as the McKinney-Vento Liaison) is in your local school district to get referrals of age-eligible children. Every school district in the country is required to have someone fill this role. Although these individuals typically work with school-aged students from Kindergarten–12th grade, some of the students they work with may have younger siblings age birth to five. Make sure also to collaborate with the staff at local homeless shelters, hotels, and motels for recruitment, as families with age-eligible children living in these places would also meet the legal definition of “homeless” and would be categorically eligible for enrollment.

Programs should not expect that their job to recruit homeless families is complete simply by reserving slots! They must remain actively engaged in recruiting children and families. Also, Head Start and Early Head Start programs should not limit themselves to *only* serving a fixed number of homeless children equal to the number of slots that they reserve. Programs should make the effort to recruit and serve as many children and families experiencing homelessness in their service area as possible! The slots that are set aside should be regarded as an additional opportunity to serve homeless children above and beyond the number of homeless children programs will identify and serve through their regular recruitment activities.

Step 2: **ENROLL**

As you recruit children and families experiencing homelessness during the summer and throughout the year, make sure to enroll them as quickly as possible. If the program year has not yet begun, then families should be enrolled and begin attending on the first day. If the program year has already begun, then homeless families should be enrolled and begin attending immediately (even if they do not have all of the required paperwork for enrollment like proof of age or immunization records). §1302.16(c)(1) allows children experiencing homelessness to attend a Head Start or Early Head Start program for up to 90 days (or as long as allowed under State licensing requirements) without having immunizations and required enrollment paperwork. In the meantime, program staff must work with families to get children immunized and to obtain other required paperwork.

STEP 3: **RESERVE**

Once again, §1302.15(c) allows Head Start and Early Head Start programs to reserve one or more slots for children and families experiencing homelessness in their service area. Programs should make a determination before the beginning of the program year (perhaps during the summer) about the number of slots that they will reserve. A program can set aside up to 3% of its slots based on its funded enrollment for this purpose. Additionally, the slots should be scattered across several classrooms in the program if possible, to avoid creating “self-contained” classrooms with primarily homeless children.

Pulling it all together: A case scenario

Consider the example of a program that is funded to serve 170 children and will begin services on the Tuesday after Labor Day, September 5, 2017. Per Head Start Program Performance Standards, this program may reserve up to 5 slots for children experiencing homelessness (3% of its funded enrollment).

Based on this program's ongoing recruitment effort, it has already identified 10 children experiencing homelessness and has completed enrollment paperwork for them. These 10 children will begin attending the Head Start program on the first day of service, scheduled for September 5, 2017. But remember that this program has also planned to reserve 5 slots exclusively for children experiencing homelessness, as part of its strategy for prioritizing these families for enrollment. So, the program will begin the year with 165/170 children enrolled. And starting September 5th, the program will hold five slots open for additional children experiencing homelessness who the program will recruit for up to 30 days. In the meantime, this program will not simply wait, hoping that a homeless family will walk through its doors. Instead, program staff will continue working hard over those 30 days to recruit homeless families into the 5 slots that the program is setting aside. Hopefully the program will be successful with meeting this goal. But if by October 5, 2017 (30 days later), the program has not filled the slots with children experiencing homelessness, then any unfilled slot(s) will become an official vacancy and the program will have to fill them within another 30 days with the child(ren) on the waiting list of greatest need based on the selection criteria. In other words, the unfilled reserved slots must be filled by no later than November 4, 2017.

Conclusion

Now, more than ever, it is critically important to ensure children and families who experience homelessness can access all the support that Early Head Start and Head Start programs have to offer. An enrollment opportunity at a Head Start program, with its comprehensive services, can often be one of the few sources of stability in the life of a child and family experiencing homelessness. The new Head Start Program Performance Standards provide an incredible opportunity for programs to truly maximize their impact and make a difference in these families' lives. This guidance document provides a beginning, but programs are encouraged to learn more about where family homelessness fits in to the new HSPPSs. For more information and support, programs should reach out to their State Head Start Collaboration Office and consult the links below:

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: www.naehcy.org
- National Center for Homeless Education: <http://nche.ed.gov/>
- ECLKC Parent, Family, and Community Engagement TA resources: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/family/Homelessness>
- Administration for Children and Families Homelessness Resource Page: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/interagency-projects/ece-services-for-homeless-children>