Access to Early Childhood Programs for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness: A Survey Report

Staci Perlman, MSW, PhD University of Delaware
in collaboration with the NAEHCY Early Childhood Committee

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this brief is to share findings from a national survey focused on developing an understanding of the barriers and facilitators of access to early childhood services among young children and families experiencing homelessness. This first brief will focus on the overall survey findings, with future briefs focusing on specific program types.

Approximately half of children living in federally-funded emergency and transitional housing programs are age five or younger[i]. In fact, the age at which a person in the United States is most likely to stay in a homeless shelter is in infancy[ii]. In addition to homelessness, these young children are disproportionately more likely than their stably housed peers to experience an array of risk factors-including child maltreatment, lead toxicity, chronic health conditions, and food insecurity[iii,iv,v,vi,vii,viii,ix,x]. The cumulative effect of these risks in combination with homelessness is associated with poor early development and educational well-being.

Research shows that experiences of homelessness in early childhood are associated with an increased likelihood of developmental delays. For instance, a quarter of infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness have been found to evidence social emotional delays (compared to approximately 10% of the general population)[xi,xii]. Similarly, Grant and colleagues found that 19% of infants and toddlers and 41% of school age children experiencing homelessness were diagnosed with developmental delays.

Children experiencing homelessness in the earliest years of life are also vulnerable to poor early educational well-being. For example, students who experienced homelessness as very young children are more likely than their stably housed peers to score poorly on standardized assessments across an array of content areas including math, reading, science, and language in early elementary school[xiv]. Additionally, young children who are homeless are less likely than their stably housed peers to demonstrate positive classroom engagement competencies such as social skills and learning behaviors[xv] and are more likely to miss more days of school[xvi,xvii]. A recent study found that compared to children who were living in poverty but stably housed, children who were homeless were more likely to evidence poor classroom social skills[xviii]. Further, in the context of what we now know about early brain development, homelessness has an effect on the very architecture of the brain such that it can impact young children's health and potential for the rest of their lives.

Connections to quality early childhood services can help me-diate the adverse influence of early homelessness experiences on early well-being. Quality early educational experiences, such as Early Head Start and Head Start, contribute to narrowing the achievement gap prior to kindergarten entry or vulnerable young children. Early intervention services work with families to address the challenges associated with developmental delays and disabilities. In recognition of the benefits associated with positive early childhood experiences, many early childhood services are beginning to prioritize the needs of young children who are homeless.

While early childhood services are associated with improved well-being for young children who are homeless, rates of access/enrollment among this population remain disproportionately low.

THE SURVEY

In the spring/summer of 2013, The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth administered a survey to school district liaisons, homeless housing providers, and early care/education providers (including Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS), child care, preschool, Early Intervention (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part C), and Preschool Special Education providers (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part B).
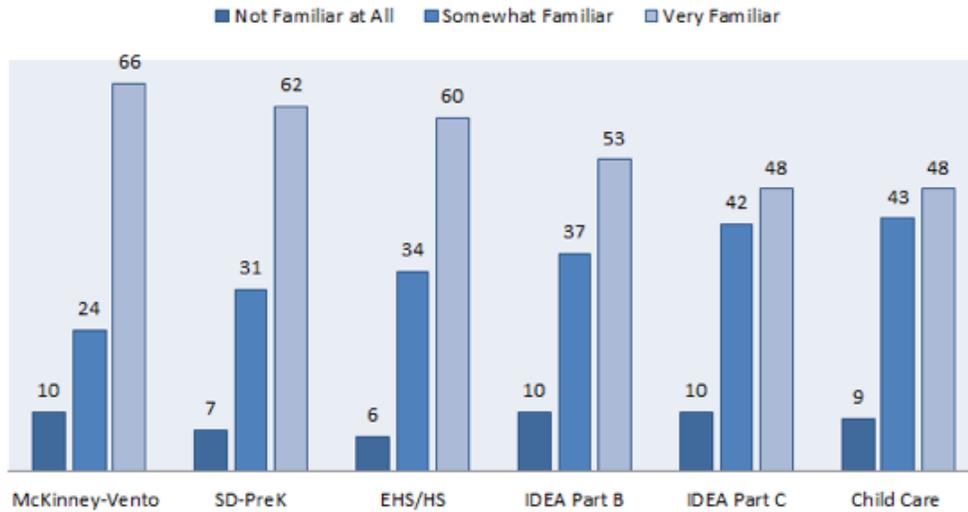
The survey had three primary objectives:

1. To understand the barriers families with young children experiencing homelessness face when trying to access early childhood services;
2. To identify successful strategies for addressing those barriers;
3. To assess the degree of collaboration among early care and education programs.

Respondents

The survey was completed by 970 respondents. Forty-six percent of the respondents were McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaisons, 27% were Early Head Start/Head Start professionals, 12% were child care providers, 11% were homeless housing providers, and the remaining respondents were PreK Local Education Agencies (LEAs).

The following section presents the survey findings.

Figure 1: Knowledge of Programs & Laws
(percents)

■ Not Familiar at All ■ Somewhat Familiar ☐ Very Familiar

	Not Familiar at All	Somewhat Familiar	Very Familiar
McKinney-Vento	10	24	66
SD-PreK	7	31	62
EHS/HS	6	34	60
IDEA Part B	10	37	53
IDEA Part C	10	42	48
Child Care	9	43	48

Given the low rates of access and enrollment in early childhood services by young children experiencing homelessness, respondents were asked about what they perceive as the barriers children/families face. As shown in Figure 2, respondents identified transportation (27%) and not having enough slots/space (25%) as the two most salient barriers homeless families face in accessing early childhood services. Other barriers include eligibility (18%), lack of awareness on how to find homeless families (17%), and enrollment requirements (17%).
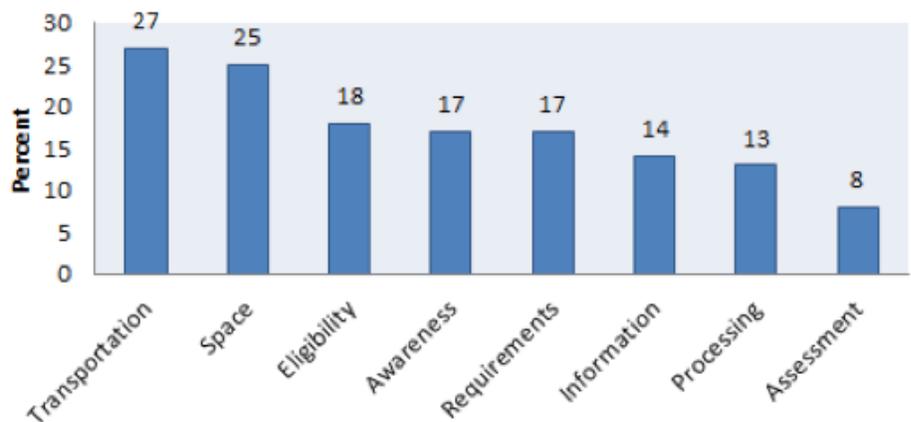
KNOWLEDGE AND BARRIERS

Knowledge of Programs and Laws

Respondents were asked about their level of knowledge of programs and laws that address the early well-being of young children experiencing homelessness. Figure 1 presents the results from this question. Most respondents reported that they were somewhat or very familiar with applicable laws and policies in their communities that serve young children experiencing homelessness. Respondents were most familiar with the educational provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (66%), school district operated preschool programs (62%), and Early Head Start/Head Start programs (60%). Though most respondents were familiar with programs/laws addressing the needs of young children experiencing homelessness, a small percentage reported that there were programs/laws that they were not familiar with at all. Ten percent of respondents said that they were not at all familiar with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, IDEA Part C, or IDEA Part B. Overall, findings from this question suggest that professionals serving young children who are homeless are least familiar with early intervention programs/policies.

Respondents had the option of writing in responses as well. Several survey respondents followed up to explain more about the challenges associated with transportation. Respondents noted that transportation for early childhood programs was not offered or covered by McKinney-Vento. For instance, one respondent said, "Preschool is not covered under transportation by the McKinney-Vento Act. If there is an older child in the district that they can bus, then the preschool child can bus. However, if it is only a preschool child, they will not transport." Other respondents spoke to the challenges associated with transportation and access specifically in rural areas. One respondent described what happened when her

Figure 2: Barriers for Accessing Early Childhood Services

Barrier	Percent
Transportation	27
Space	25
Eligibility	18
Awareness	17
Requirements	17
Information	14
Processing	13
Assessment	8

Head Start cut access to transportation, "I work for a school district in a rural area. Our local Head Start program stopped providing transportation. As a result, their enrollment dropped significantly and the center in our community was closed. Now the nearest Head Start program is 30 minutes away which is impossible for our families to access."

> ## "Rural poor are forgotten and for the most part are not on the radar of the general public."
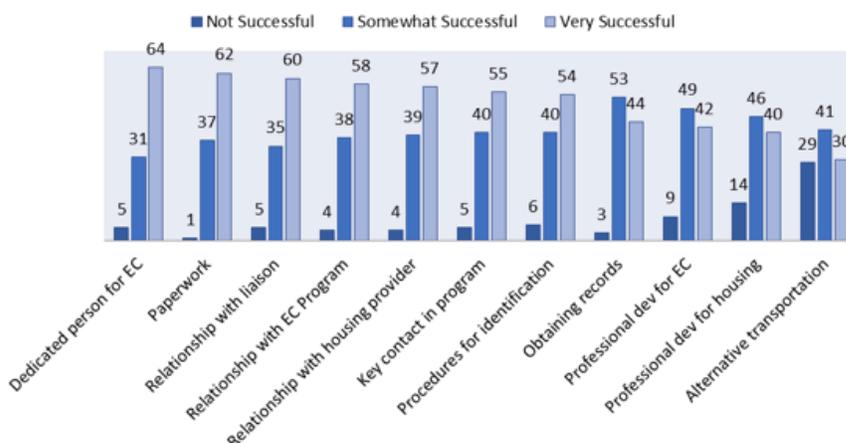
In addition to the options included in the survey, respondents were able to provide their own perceptions on the barriers experienced by families who are homeless when trying to access early childhood services. General themes included mobility and communication challenges, funding, and competing demands on families. Several respondents noted that residential mobility of families experiencing homelessness was a barrier for accessing services because of transportation, as noted previously, but also due to challenges in maintaining contact with families. One respondent said this about working with families in rural areas, "Ability to communicate with families due to lack of phones and phone coverage in rural areas. This applies to all programs in rural areas. There is also a lack of ability to disseminate information regarding programs to families who are isolated geographically. Rural poor are forgotten and for the most part are not on the radar of the general public."

The issue of communication/mobility was particularly salient with regard to services that include home visiting-such as Early Head Start and early intervention. For instance, one respondent said this about accessing Early Head Start, "The biggest barrier is communication. Most homeless families don't have a working number or it changes every other week. By the time they find us/someone calls/tries to schedule a home visit (Early Head Start) and so on, they have a new number or it's disconnected or it's temporarily out of service. Even with message numbers. People we can leave a message with if we can't reach them; it's hard to know what is going with the family or where they are from day to day or week to week." Another respondent gave a similar response for accessing early intervention, "The barriers in the IDEA is due largely to

the transient nature of families, who are hard to contact often—so the staffing it takes to connect to these families—is not readily available in those programs. The cases get 'closed'".

In addition to challenges associated with mobility, respondents also noted that funding is an issue for many families who are homeless and trying to access early childhood services. Challenges with funding included both systems level funding influencing the availability of services, as well as families being able to access funding and child care subsidies. Systems level funding included issues related to programs being de-funded and closed. One respondent said, "While McKinney-Vento states that young children should have access to preschool programs, there is not enough funding to provide this service. There are waiting lists for Head Start and Title 1 preschools. The children may still need to wait although they should be able to be immediately enrolled. Preschool services should be available to ALL children." Family level funding barriers included waitlists and the process for accessing funding. Other respondents cited the lack of funding. One respondent simply said that there is a "lack of child care subsidy to cover the cost of daycare." Another said, "Many families need childcare but do not qualify for assistance from the state." Finally, several respondents identified the competing demands facing many families experiencing homelessness as a barrier for accessing early childhood services. These demands include accessing housing, food, and employment. Families experiencing homelessness, "often have very chaotic, 'putting out fires' lives and don't often prioritize their child's education when they're concerned about housing, feeding and clothing, and finding a job." Furthermore there is often a disconnect between parents' work schedules and the schedules/hours of child care/early childhood programs.

Figure 3: Successful Strategies for Connecting Families to Early Childhood Services
(percent)

Legend: ■ Not Successful ■ Somewhat Successful ■ Very Successful

Strategy	Not Successful	Somewhat Successful	Very Successful
Dedicated person for EC	5	31	64
Paperwork	1	37	62
Relationship with liaison	5	35	60
Relationship with EC Program	4	38	58
Relationship with housing provider	4	39	57
Key contact in program	5	40	55
Procedures for identification	6	40	54
Obtaining records	3	53	44
Professional dev for EC	9	49	42
Professional dev for housing	14	46	40
Alternative transportation	29	41	30

In addition to identifying barriers families who are homeless face in accessing services, respondents also were asked to identify the degree to which specific strategies are successful at helping families to access early childhood services. Figure 3 presents the findings from this question. The three strategies identified as being most successful speak to the importance of working with someone to navigate the process of accessing services both at the family and professional levels. These strategies were: having a dedicated staff person for early childhood issues (64%), helping families fill out paperwork (62%), and having a relationship with McKinney-Vento Liaisons in the community (60%).

Notably, given the barriers identified above, the strategy identified most frequently as not being successful was the identification of alternative forms of transportation (29%). A review of open-ended feedback suggests that this discrepancy is not due to the belief that transportation would not be helpful, rather that it is simply not available as an option.

CROSS-SYSTEM COLLABORATION

The final set of survey questions asked respondents to consider their level of collaboration across early childhood programs. Respondents rated their involvement with each program on a four-point scale. Ratings of "no working relationship" indicate that the respondent had little or no contact with a program. Ratings of "co-operation" indicate that the respondent exchanged information with a program. Ratings of "coordination" indicate that the respondent worked with the program on projects or activities. And, finally, ratings of "collaboration" indicate that the respondent shared resources and/or had formal written agreements with a program. As indicated in Figure 4, Preschool programs administered by school districts and Preschool special education programs (IDEA Part B) had the highest reported rates of collaboration (49% and 51%, respectively). Respondents most frequently identified having no working relationship with child care (28%) and McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaisons (26%).

When asked what service providers could do to better serve families and young children experiencing home-lessness, many cited the

> ## "Collaboration is key! I find that if I lack the funding for a service, there may be another agency that does have the funding."

importance of cross-systems collaboration. One respondent said, "More community collaboration on how [...] services are distributed [is needed]. Families need one resource to stop at in the community rather than randomly dialing all the services that are available." Another mentioned cross-systems collaboration as a means of addressing funding restrictions, "Collaboration is key! I find that if I lack the funding for a service, there may be another agency that does have the funding." Several others noted that resource fairs with other providers in the community were useful for under-standing the array of services available. Finally, one respondent noted the importance of cross-systems collaboration and communication at both systems- and family-levels, "Identification of children and families experiencing homelessness is huge. There are system barriers that include the lack of coordination and collaboration on behalf of families and children across systems including Public Welfare, Children Youth and Families Child Protective services, Mental Health, Education etc. We lack the capacity to communicate effectively with each other, let alone family members. This is frightening to me. Ultimately, this lack of collab-oration and communication affects every program that is available for young children."

Figure 4: Level of Collaboration
(Percent)

■ No Working Relationship ■ Cooperation ▪ Coordination ▫ Collaboration
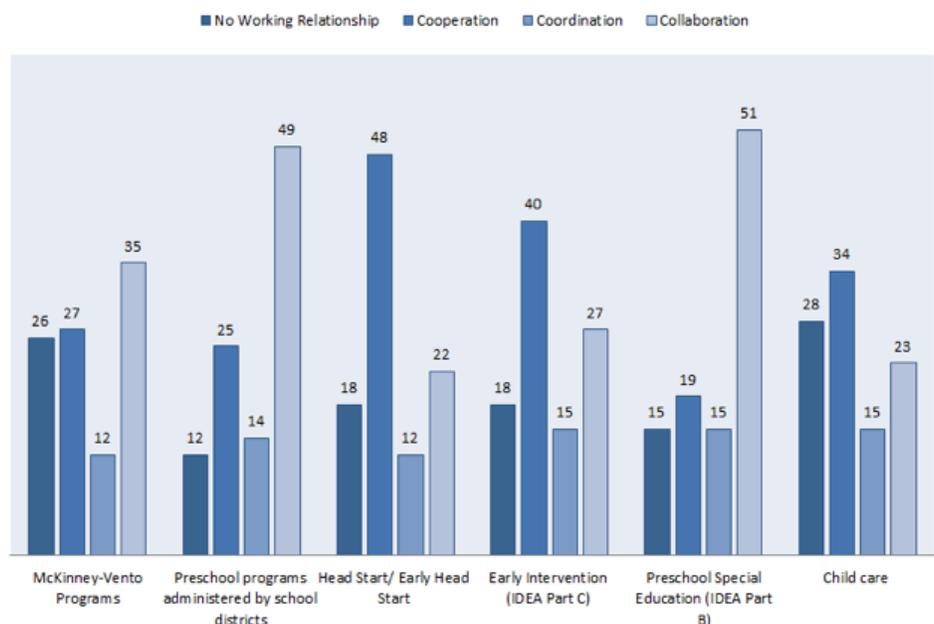
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey results illuminate the specific challenges associated with identifying, enrolling, and serving young children experiencing homelessness and their families. They also provide information on promising practices for early care and homeless programs to respond to those challenges–notably the importance of cross-systems collaboration and professional development/training. The five policy and practice recommendations listed below identify opportunities to improve access to early care and education for young children experiencing homelessness through greater focus on raising awareness, building capacity, and improving cross-sector collaboration. Future NAEHCY briefs will focus on specific services and provide more detailed recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 1: *Increase awareness of the impact of homelessness on young children among early childhood providers, homeless service providers, and the general public.* Unfortunately, family homelessness too often flies under the radar. Many providers, advocates, and policy-makers, as well as the general public, lack awareness of the true scope of the problem and the critical impact homelessness can have on the health, development, and well-being of very young children. It is crucial to increase the visibility of young children experiencing homelessness and their families in order to effectively advance an agenda that addresses their needs. Ideas for increasing awareness include:

- Distribute an informational memorandum created by the Administration for Children and Families for providers that addresses the importance of connecting young children who are homeless to early intervention, home visiting, and high quality early childhood education (ACF memoranda);

- Include information about family homelessness in organizational newsletters, write a letter to the editor for your local newspaper, or recruit local media to publish or air stories on family homelessness;

- Ensure websites and other public-facing materials for homeless service organizations are reflective of young children and families;

- Develop a public awareness campaign, including use of social media, to increase visibility of young children experiencing homelessness.

RECOMMENDATION 2: *Provide regular training for McKinney-Vento Liaisons, homeless service providers, and early childhood providers to support their ability to collaborate to meet the needs of young children experiencing homelessness.* McKinney-Vento Liaisons, homeless service providers, and early care and education providers are often best positioned to ensure that young children experiencing homelessness are able to access and benefit from the full array of programs and services designed to support healthy child development. Unfortunately, providers often do not receive the training they need in order to understand and navigate the services available, identify and refer children who are eligible, and support the children once they are enrolled in programs. Specific recommendations for improving training include:

- Provide training for housing providers and McKinney-Vento Liaisons on the array of federal early care and education programs available to young children who are homeless;

- Increase training for early childhood professionals targeting improved identification of young children who are homeless by all early care and education programs;

- Facilitate regular community-wide cross-systems training for McKinney-Vento Liaisons, early childhood service providers and housing providers;

- Provide training for early care and education providers on how to respond to the unique needs of young children experiencing homelessness in early childhood settings and promote full inclusion in services;

- Maximize opportunities to share existing training with other professionals. For example, Local Education Agencies or State Education Agencies could invite early childhood and homeless services providers to attend training provided to McKinney-Vento Liaisons;

- Leverage existing training resources by integrating them into current training. Resources include the Office of Head Start, NAEHCY's early childhood website, the National Center on Homeless Education, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' early childhood website.

RECOMMENDATION 3: *Implement strategies to increase connections to families experiencing homelessness and support effective cross-sector collaboration.* We know that families experiencing homelessness often interact with numerous service systems. One of the most effective ways to maintain connections to these families is through dedicating resources to intentional cross-sector collaboration. Survey findings demonstrate that conventional communication methods, such as phone calls and mail, are often ineffective with families experiencing homelessness; new, creative ways to stay in touch with families are needed. Strategies to explore include:

- Designate a trained staff person within homeless service organizations to focus on early childhood, including maintaining relationships with early childhood programs in the community, referring children and families to early childhood programs, and ensuring space is provided for any home-based early childhood services;

- Designate a trained liaison within all early care and education programs to focus on homelessness. This liaison could be responsible for maintaining relationships with homeless services agencies, school-based McKinney-Vento Liaisons, and other places where homeless families can be found, such as motels and campgrounds, in the community. In addition, this liaison could lead outreach efforts to homeless families and support other early childhood staff in identifying homeless children already enrolled in their programs;

- Capture information about younger siblings in families identified by McKinney-Vento Liaisons in schools, and make referrals to early childhood programs;

- Implement creative and innovative strategies for communicating with families, such as social media, email, and texting.

RECOMMENDATION 4: *Advocate for policies and funding to increase access to early childhood programs and services for young children experiencing homelessness.* Universal access to early care and education is not yet a reality, which means there are not enough spaces in early childhood programs to serve all families who need services. Policies and funding decisions can make the difference in whether or not children experiencing homelessness can take advantage of early childhood programs. We can advocate for policies that remove barriers to early care and education, prioritize families experiencing homelessness for services, and increase the overall capacity of the early childhood system. Important policy and funding recommendations include:

- Amend the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth program to strengthen its protections, including transportation, for young children;

- Increase federal funding for early care and education programs, including the McKinney-Vento Act, to provide more slots and greater capacity to serve all families experiencing homelessness;

- Include requirements to prioritize families experiencing homelessness in all federal early childhood initiatives, including child care, the Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV), federally funded preschool, and Race to the Top Grants;

- Ensure that MIECHV and early care and education state plans clearly describe how the needs of infants, toddlers and preschoolers and their families will be integrated and addressed, in consultation with McKinney-Vento State Coordinators, Head Start State Collaboration offices, and state IDEA Parts C and B State Leads, and State Child Care Administrators.

RECOMMENDATION 5: *Increase representation of young children who experience homelessness in local and state homelessness and early education planning efforts.* State and local planning bodies often have the power to make decisions that drive if and how services and resources reach families. In order to ensure that those decisions are made with young children experiencing homelessness in mind, it is imperative that their needs are represented in local and state planning efforts. Specific ideas for increasing their representation include:

- Require inclusion of early childhood professionals on local homeless coalitions and Continuums of Care;

- Require inclusion of parents of young children who are homeless on consumer advisory boards for homeless coalitions and Continuums of Care, as well as those associated with early care and education, such as Head Start Policy Councils;

- Require inclusion of the McKinney-Vento State Coordinator on Interagency Coordinating Councils for Early Intervention, Early Childhood State Advisory Councils, MIECHV State Advisories, and state-level interagency councils on homelessness;

- Require inclusion of local McKinney-Vento liaisons on local homeless coalitions and Continuums of Care, as well as local early childhood collaborations.

CONCLUSION

This brief presented the results of a national survey focused on understanding the barriers and facilitators of access to early childhood services among young children and families experiencing homelessness, as well as identifying strategies for addressing barriers and increasing access. Notably, transportation and variants of cross-systems collaboration were cited as the most successful strategies for increasing access to early childhood services. Future briefs will provide detailed case studies focused on communities which are successfully implementing these strategies. Additionally, future brief s will also provide a more in-depth focus on access to specific types of early childhood services (e.g. child care and early intervention).

ABOUT NAEHCY

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) is a national membership association dedicated to educational excellence for children and youth experiencing homelessness. Through state and federal policy and technical assistance to our members, students, and the public, we change systems so all children and youth can learn, succeed academically, and achieve their dreams. Early Childhood Committee works to raise awareness of the impact of homelessness on very young children; influence early childhood policy development and implementation at the federal, state, and local levels; build early care and education competency among NAEHCY membership; and develop resources to support practitioners in serving and advocating for young children experiencing homelessness.

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