



Recommendations To Expand Access to Quality Early Learning for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

*The following recommendations were developed in collaboration with the **Children’s Work Group (CWG) of the City of Philadelphia** is a collaboration of nonprofit, public and private agencies serving children experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity across Philadelphia. Founded in 2009, the goal of CWG is to unify efforts to effectively serve children through cross-systems collaborations and trainings,¹ the development of city and state policy recommendations and undertaking pilot projects to identify evidence-based practices that can be replicated citywide. In addition to the work of the Education Committee, CWG’s Early Intervention (EI) Subcommittee focuses on expanding access to EI services and quality early learning opportunities for families in emergency and transitional housing. These recommendations were developed by the Education Law Center with input from a focus group of CWG shelter providers who grapple with these issues on a daily basis. We appreciate this opportunity to share these recommendations with the State Interagency Coordinating Council on Early Intervention.*

Doing What Works: Our Recommendations

- 1. Ensure that children who are homeless are prioritized for Head Start, Early Head Start, quality early childhood programs and Pre-K Counts in a systemic way.** We recommend that programs “save slots” for children experiencing homelessness and that programs are not penalized when a young child moves out of a program.
- 2. Remove bureaucratic barriers to accessing quality early learning opportunities.** There are long waiting lists for Child Care Information Services (CCIS) subsidies. The eligibility criterion, cost and process are overly burdensome, particularly for highly mobile families experiencing homelessness. For example, you must complete the process at a designated CCIS office where waiting is an all-day affair; if a mother moves, she loses her spot on the waitlist and must start all over. Many families experiencing homelessness are lost in this system. In addition, they are often unable to pay the difference between CCIS and real child care center costs. Unanticipated/unplanned changes amount of co-pay for child care. We recommend reviewing CCIS eligibility criterion, waiving certain expenses for families who are homeless, eliminating bureaucratic barriers in part by designating a CCIS representative at TANF offices to assist families to promptly access CCIS subsidies.
- 3. Ensure access to the full range of EI services for young children experiencing homelessness.** Children who are homeless should be automatically screened and, if appropriate, tracked and evaluated for EI services. Homelessness should be added to the list of “automatic qualifiers” for

¹ In 2013, CWG provided 61 citywide trainings on 13 different topics for emergency and transitional housing programs serving families with children.

screening. In Philadelphia, the Office of Supportive Housing (OSH) requires all contracted shelter and transitional housing providers to conduct the ASQ on all children ages 0-3 admitted to their programs. With support from the Pew Foundation, screenings have been conducted and Philadelphia is expanding the reach of these screenings to children ages 3-5. Providers need to collaborate closely with EI providers to understand and identify developmental milestones. Parents need to a better understanding of the value of EI and their rights in the EI system.

- 4. *Strategically locate quality early learning programs to serve at-risk children and offer expanded hours & transportation.*** Parents may have a limited understanding of what constitutes quality child care and may make decisions based on convenience alone. In many areas, families experiencing homelessness are located in “quality child care deserts” where early learning opportunities do not exist. We need to locate high quality learning centers in close proximity to shelters and transitional housing, incentivize the creation of quality programs in these areas and offer expanded hours to serve working parents. Shelters themselves and transitional housing programs need to offer high quality learning opportunities on site. In addition, we need a statewide campaign to explain the importance of quality early childhood education, help parents to know what to look for in a program and support their involvement in their child’s early learning experience.
- 5. *Data.*** We recommend creating a state-level integrated data system that: (1) tracks highly mobile young children and other at-risk groups to ensure that these vulnerable children experiencing homelessness are screened and tracked in the EI system and transition between systems; and (2) maps the location and availability of quality early learning programs to expand access to quality early learning programs.
- 6. *Incentivize the inclusion of children experiencing homelessness in quality Keystone Stars programs.*** Feedback from the focus groups reflected that in addition to access issues, families experiencing homelessness often felt very alienated by programs when they should have felt welcomed and safe. We recommend encouraging greater cultural sensitivity and a deeper understanding of the needs of homeless families among quality programs through cross-systems professional development. In addition, we suggest that Keystone Stars performance factors be revised to prioritize and incentivize the inclusion of young children experiencing homelessness in these high quality programs.
- 7. *Offer trauma-informed trainings to early learning program staff.*** Young children who are homeless have often experienced significant trauma. A child’s reaction to trauma commonly interferes with brain development, learning, and behavior. Child care staff may not know how to address this. We recommend that staff be training on the impact of trauma and that early childhood programs be certified for providing “trauma-informed” care. By understanding and responding to trauma, early learning providers can reduce its negative impact, support critical learning and create a more positive outcomes for children that will increase their life-long attachment to learning.