

Home at Head Start

TO: Policy Council Members

FROM: Dr. Deborah Bergeron, director, Office of Head Start

SUBJECT: Policy Council Discussion: Enrolling Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness

Thank you for volunteering as a Policy Council leader! You make all the difference in making sure our programs respond effectively to families and communities. You help us to continue to improve Head Start services every day.

It is from this place of gratitude that I invite you to join the Home at Head Start effort. More than 1 million children ages birth to 6 experience homelessness, and their families are eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start! Will your program accept my challenge to increase enrollment of our most vulnerable children? If you don't have open slots now, develop a plan for serving more children and families in the future. *Let's give 10,000 children a home at Head Start by the end of this program year!*

Why the urgency? Head Start and Early Head Start give kids a welcoming and stable place to go each day. I think at the gut level, we can each imagine how incredibly stressful it would be to see your child without a consistent place to call home. Parents report feeling frightened and overwhelmed by how hard it can be to get help. And of course, children don't stop needing parents to keep it together; in fact, they need parents even more as the whole family deals with the stress of an uncertain future.

Many parents who experience homelessness may need care and education for their child. Head Start and Early Head Start help families, too! In addition to a secure learning environment, our family services staff support parents emotionally as they deal with stress. They can help parents achieve major goals, like finding housing and work. Head Start is a lifeline!

I hope your Policy Council will review current outreach and recruitment plans and think creatively about how to reach local families who may be experiencing homelessness. This isn't just about families living in shelters or motels. Think about friends, family, and neighbors who may live with others due to the loss of housing or a job, or who are just struggling to find a stable home with their children. Head Start and Early Head Start parent leaders are part of the solution.

I'm asking you to engage because, across the country, we have too many openings where children should be enrolled. Now, I realize that your program might be full—and of course, that is the goal!—but please review your community assessment data and selection criteria. Make sure you have the best representation of families in your community enrolling in your program. If your program has open slots, this is an opportunity to really sharpen your focus.

Head Start uses the McKinney Vento definition of homelessness to determine eligibility. This definition refers to children who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. In addition to families who are staying in motels, shelters, cars, or public spaces, it includes situations in which families share the housing of others due to the loss of housing and economic hardships.

You might start a "Parent-to-Parent" Home at Head Start effort, where parents extend a Head Start welcome to other parents. Think about messages that work for your community, such as:

- Head Start wants to welcome families experiencing homelessness.
- The causes of homelessness are complicated, and not something about which to be ashamed. More than 1 million young children experience homelessness. Infants are at the highest risk.¹
- You can lean on Head Start when times get tough for your family.
- Head Start provides a safe, nurturing, educational environment for your child. Knowing your child is safe and happy can reduce your stress.
- Homelessness is temporary. Our staff can help you achieve a more secure future.

You may not want to use the word "homeless." Instead, we can talk about families who are doubled up with others or in temporary situations. We can invite families to talk about their living circumstances in non-judgmental ways. Every parent wants the best for their child. Ask about parents' housing goals.

Here are some questions to help guide your Policy Council discussions.

Policy Council Discussion Questions

1. What does your [community assessment](#) say about family homelessness in your service area?
2. Does your Policy Council [know and understand the definition of "homelessness"](#) that is part of the McKinney-Vento law and Head Start requirements?
3. How does your outreach plan reach families experiencing homelessness?
4. Which community partners can help you identify and enroll children?
5. What is one thing you can do—either as a parent or as a program manager—to ensure more children and families have a home at Head Start?
6. How can staff and parents help children experiencing homelessness feel safe and secure every day?

*Thank you, Policy Council, for being a vital part of Head Start and Early Head Start!
Your vision, leadership, oversight, and input helps our programs respond to
the needs of children, families, and communities.*

Parent leaders, since 1965 ..., you have helped 32 million Head Start "graduates" thrive!

With gratitude,



*Dr. Deborah Bergeron
Director
Office of Head Start*

¹ Source: 2012 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (HUD, 2012) and Census Data