

Policy Council Vlog 2019

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Policy Council! Thank you so much for taking some time out of your meeting to join me. I wish I were there with you in person, but this will have to do. And hopefully, together we can have a discussion of sorts about a topic that has really risen to the surface over the last couple of months. When I do these what I call vlogs, I like to start off with something called a love note. So, that's just a shout out. But this love note today is going to go to all of our parents in Head Start, particularly those of you who step up and serve on Policy Council and take the time and effort to learn how to be an advocate for your child and other children, for your Head Start program. I think the Policy Council experience is one that is unlike any other you're going to have as a parent. And you're going to use this experience ongoing, I think, well beyond Head Start. So, good for you for taking this initiative and making this a priority.

Now, back in the fall, I was doing some work, and in that work had a conversation that exposed me to a statistic. And I knew it, but it wasn't in the front of my mind. And that is that in the United States, over a million children under the age of 6 are classified homeless. I thought about that and thought, now we can't fix that problem entirely through Head Start. But certainly, we shouldn't have a single empty seat. Not one slot should be empty. In fact, we should have a waiting list in every Head Start center based on a statistic like that. Because every one of those children is categorically eligible for Head Start.

So, it really got me thinking if there's something -- I know that we enroll children who are classified homeless. And I know that it's a priority of sorts. But I don't know that we've really focused on it. So, it was something that I decided to bring some folks together and say, "Hey. Can we do some kind of an effort?" I don't want to call it a campaign particularly, because that sounds temporary. This should be permanent. And so, we got together, and we -- why don't we wrap some messaging around this? I did a vlog back in January and then, also, in February for Head Start directors and teachers around homelessness. We encourage folks to complete the training on the ECLKC website -- which is wonderful, by the way. Policy Council, you guys should complete it, as well. And, in one of our meetings, somebody said, "You know, why don't we wrap the Policy Council into this?" I mean, especially the parents. And I just loved this idea.

So -- so, the campaign's name Home in Head Start and the idea is that a child can always find a home at Head Start. And that regardless of how chaotic their life might be when they go home, at Head Start, things can be consistent. They can have a teacher they can count on. They have their space on the rug that's the same every day. The cubby where their coat goes. Those kinds of consistencies and predictability for children -- especially children who are struggling, whose families are struggling -- is really important. So, that's the idea. So, why am I bringing you into this conversation? And I guess I want you to do know that it's from a place of gratitude that I'm doing this. I see -- as I said in the beginning -- parents, Policy Council, parents particularly as being so important in all that we do at Head Start. And what a better initiative, what a better charge to give parents than to say, "Hey. Can you reach out in the community and make sure that anybody struggling with homelessness -- with not having permanent housing -- knows that Head Start is a place they can come?" That everybody knows that any child under the age of 6 living in that environment is categorically eligible for Head Start. You could be the real liaison between the center and the community in this particular effort to make the difference.

So, the sense of urgency at this time kind of came from two things. I shared this statistic with you. But there's another side to it. And that is Head Start does have empty slots. Now, we're 98-plus percent fully enrolled. So, it's not like we have these gaping availability throughout the country. But there are slots

available. And to me, there shouldn't be one. So, I'm charging you with the job, with the responsibility, with the honor of being that conduit between your center and your community to find those families whose situations may have changed. You know, one of the things that we often do is that we enroll families, we enroll children, and then we learn about their family, and we might find out, "Oh. Based on McKinney-Vento, this child is homeless," and we categorize them as, as homeless. But I'm arguing that we should be doing this differently. We should be going out and finding families who are struggling with not having permanent housing and invite them into the Head Start community.

Now, you may or may not be aware of the McKinney-Vento Act, but just to give you a little background, it kind of changed the way education, Head Start included, treats children who are living in a situation where their permanent -- where their housing is not permanent. So, unlike HUD, which defines homelessness very narrowly in terms of whether you have a place to be, we know in the world of child development that it isn't just important to have a roof over your head, and to be safe from the environment outside. But it's important to have stability in that housing. So, doubling up, for example, is eligibility for Head Start, because, under McKinney-Vento, that is a child living with homelessness. So, that means that they do not have their own permanent housing. So, let's say you are talking to someone in your community who got evicted, and they're living in someone's basement. Someone gave them a place to sleep. That would be categorically homeless based on McKinney-Vento. I encourage you all to go to the ECLKC modules -- and I'm going to provide you the link to those. There are eight modules. Really, completing all of them would be wonderful. But if you just complete the one that will give you the background on McKinney-Vento, it will really help you understand the breadth of its definition and the reach that it has. And this may be something that would be new to you, and -- and something that would help you better understand who we're talking about.

We have a lot of families who will have an immediate shift in say employment. They lose their jobs. A parent loses his or her job and they end up not being able to afford their rent, and they find somewhere to live temporarily. That's an example of a McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness for a child. We also have another issue here, and that is that a lot of families in those situations -- they don't think of themselves as homeless, per se. We have a connotation with the word "homeless" that is kind of negative and brings with it a lot of baggage. And I think that's part of what we're dealing with in terms of being able to communicate to the community about Head Start being there for children who don't have permanent housing.

So, looking for different ways of -- of labeling this might help, as well, so that folks don't say, "Well, I'm not homeless. I live in my uncle's basement." McKinney-Vento would say that your child doesn't have permanent, stable housing and therefore, has a right to certain educational benefits. And those are things that we want folks to know about so that their children can benefit from that definition. And there's a reason that that definition exists. Like I said, young children, in particular, have got to have some stability in their lives. So, I am asking you to reach out to your community, particularly parents -- I'm talking to you on Policy Council -- I want you to welcome families who are experiencing homelessness into the Head Start community and be that conduit, that liaison between the center and the community. Work with your center director to figure out how you can be that person, how you can be those people who are out there. Pay attention to conversations in casual environments, and see if there are folks who could really benefit from you reaching out to them.

And you know, the reason I'm asking you to engage with me is just because across the country, I -- Head Start just has too many slots available to hear a statistic like a million children under the age of 6 are categorically homeless. So, my goal really -- I put out a goal that I wanted to enroll 10,000 children living

with homelessness through this campaign. So, by the end of the school year. But really in my heart, I want to fill every spot. I want people to call me and say, "We have a waiting list, and I've got families who are looking for support, who don't have permanent housing," so that then, we can become that resource, that known resource in the community on this issue.

Some questions you might want to talk about when we're finished here. What does your community assessment plans say about family homelessness in your community? Is it accurate? Is it up-to-date? That's really important to know. And remember, using the McKinney-Vento definition, not HUD's. Does your council know and understand these differences and definitions? And like I said, please take advantage of the resources that we have provided, really, anybody in the public on ECLKC. You got the link here.

How do you -- outreach. What are ways that you can be creative in terms of reaching these families? And proactively not retroactively. Not we bring someone in, register them, and then learn about their housing situation. I want to know they have the need and bring them in a proactive way, and I think you are the key to do that.

Which coming to partners can help you. Are there specific partners in your community? Homeless shelters. Transitional housing. I talk a lot about Family Promise because they are so broadly representative -- represented in the United States. Family Promise is an organization that has faith-based affiliates -- 2000 of them -- throughout the US that will bring families in and give them temporary housing. Do you have one in your neighborhood? And if so, do they know Head Start is there? Just linking with those kinds of organizations. And really, any church, synagogue, mosque. Any faith-based building is usually doing something for needy families in the community. So, make sure Head Start is connected.

And what is one thing you can do? Either as a parent or as program management, to ensure more children and families have a home at Head Start. That's what I want you to talk about when you're done watching this video. And put your thinking caps on. Conversations are going to be different, depending on where you're located, depending on your community. You might finish watching this video and say, "Hey. We got a waiting list. Why would we proactively go out and seek more children?" What I'm asking you to do is to seek our most vulnerable children, which is really the job of Head Start. So, I would say even if you have a waiting list, I'd like to see you reach out and proactively make sure Head Start is there for these children. If we end up with waiting lists in every center, as I would think we should, then that's a different problem, and that's something that requires a different solution, and you'll have an advocate here in terms of seeking that out. So, my email is OHSdirector@ACF.HHS.gov. I'm going to give you that, as well, and that's a direct line to me. I would like you to share with me what you're doing. If you do an event, you want to take a picture, send me a picture. Any information you want to share with me about some creative solutions. If you're really having a challenge and you want help solving a problem, send me that, as well. I'm happy to work with folks on the ground. So, you're the key.

I appreciate, again, you taking the time here to listen and to have this conversation. And I always end my vlogs with an "In case you didn't know." So, here's an "In case you didn't know." Sesame Street launched Lily back in the fall. Lily is a homeless Muppet, or a Muppet living with homelessness. And you might check out Sesame Place -- Sesame Street's resources. They've got video vignettes for Lily, resources that you can tap into as a parent, as a Policy Council. And I'm going to give you that link here, too. So, you might check out Sesame Street and see if some of those resources might be ones that you want to use as you bring families into the fold. So, there's lots of good stuff out there. A lot of good

people trying to do good work. So, I'm convinced that if we get together on this, we can really make a difference. For making sure that every child who is living with homelessness can find a home at Head Start.

Thank you.