

Supporting Families Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start. I'm so excited to be with you here today for another vlog. This month, we are focusing on homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis, and I am thrilled to have Barbara Duffield here from Schoolhouse Connections. You probably know Barb and she's a good friend of Head Start, and is here to kind of support this conversation. You know, it's a really difficult time. We've talked a lot about checking in with families and the stability of their current living situation.

So it's particularly important for our families who are experiencing homelessness, and so Barb has agreed to come join us to provide some information to help support that process. I know it's really hard because everything is difficult right now, so sometimes it's easy to let some of our most vulnerable families fall to the wayside because they're a little bit more difficult to find. And so that's part of what we want to talk about today. We want to make sure you're being creative in – in serving families.

So hopefully, we'll have some good ideas for you here. You know, we sent out an e-blast with strategies for supporting families around housing stability and homelessness. Make sure you check that out. I'm going to give you some resources at the bottom of this vlog. And as we always say with Home at Head Start, be sure to include family – families, experiencing homelessness in all of your outreach. So you might have to be a little more creative as to how you're doing that these days. So hopefully, today you'll get some good ideas. So, without further ado, I'm going to allow Barb to say a few words, and then I have some questions for you, Barb, if that works.

Barbara Duffield: That sounds great. Thanks very much for inviting me to be a part of today's vlog. It is a chall – as you said, a challenging time for everybody right now, but particularly for our most vulnerable families. And so, you know, at Schoolhouse Connection, we work from early childhood through postsecondary, and we're seeing the impacts across the spectrum in terms of housing, health, mental health, and access to education. So we know that Head Start is one of the best partners we have and is uniquely able to meet the comprehensive needs of the whole child and the whole family and just embedded with community. So we're really grateful for the opportunity to partner with you.

Dr. Bergeron: Wonderful, me too. You know, one of the things that comes to mind kind of right off the – off the bat here is: What are some of the unique challenges that families experiencing homelessness are facing right now? How is it different now in the middle of this stay-at-home order, in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis? And how do you think Head Start programs can help uniquely at this time?

Barbara: Sure. Well one tremendous challenge is when you don't have a stable place to stay, it's – it's impossible to stay at home. So the shelter-at-home orders have been tremendously difficult for families who are experiencing homelessness. As you know, most families who are

experiencing homelessness aren't in a place like a shelter; they're going – temporarily staying with other people place to place.

So we have reports of many of those situations disrupting and being – they're even more mobile than they were before, being asked to leave because of concerns about health or safety. And we also know that for shelters, many shelters are moving families out because of, again, social distancing, and families may be afraid to even seek shelter right now because of the – the – the risk concerns for contagion. So what that means is that even higher degrees of mobility going from place to place, even more challenging to identify, and again, challenging just to access basic hygiene, food, all the things that any child and every family needs become more challenging when you're even more afraid and more mobile. And of course, the other big piece of this is with school closures.

So the – the one source of stability for many children and families was that school building, not just basic needs, but just a place to be safe and stable, and that's gone now too. So with that comes more trauma. So that whether it's domestic violence or addiction or mental health issues, we're just seeing layers and layers of disruption and trauma. So Head Start programs can be, and are tremendously beneficial. The Head Start Heals campaign and phrase has never been more appropriate.

If – if stability isn't a place, it can be a person. And so, those relationships that Head Start staff have with their families are more critical now than ever to maintain connection. And think about ways of staying in touch, whether that's providing prepaid phone cards or soliciting donations from community agencies to help with those phone cards or extending minutes or the partnerships with the school liaison being more important so that we are maintaining connection and really being proactive about finding families and supporting them wherever they may be.

Dr. Bergeron: Are you seeing shelters do anything different in light of this situation? Whether it's ratios in terms of the number of folks they can take in, or even communication to programs like Head Start from within a shelter have – have they made those kinds of adjustments?

Barbara: Well, the CDC has issued really clear and good guidance for shelters and other congregate settings in terms of both intake and procedures for screening and for literally the layout of the shelters. So those pieces have been put in place, but I think, as you said earlier, people are really focusing on doing what they're doing and our concern is still that shelters may not see children as clients and may not be set up for young children prior to COVID, and particularly right now.

So again, one of the most important things that Head Start programs can do is help to educate shelter and housing partnerships about the needs of young children, help them ... For example, ACF just did the self-assessment tool validated now. We have a check listing tool, and really help them understand, well, how might this arrangement be impacting our young children and what can we do to make sure that there aren't more losses developmentally for them because of the way shelters are now set up. The other thing, too, is that shelters are, in some cases, in some communities placing families in motels. So in those situations, too, again, the motel may not be, you know, it's a motel room and you may have a family with many kids in there.

So having developmentally appropriate activities and toys and looking at that setting, for example, one of my colleagues was telling me about families placed in motel with steps and the steps didn't have a guardrail, you know, so had little kids there. So just having that infant-toddler mind when you're finding more families are actually staying and help other partners understand what young children need.

Dr. Bergeron: So that's really kind of a new form of outreach that Head Start could do, reaching out to these organizations that are housing families, maybe in different ways than they have before and making sure they understand the birth-to-5 variance and appropriate care. That's great. That's a really, really, really good idea. What about from within the program? Do you think ... How do you think we need to be talking to our families about their living circumstances differently, say now than we would have before? And are there any additional supports you would recommend?

Barbara: Well, talking to families about their housing situation always is a matter of sensitivity and Head Start, again, excels at all of – all of – all of these pieces, but recognizing that now the shame and the stigma and the fear that come with not having a permanent place to stay is, has another layer of – of health concern on top of it. Again, there's, if ...

Where a parent or a family is staying doesn't have running water or hygiene supplies, so there's that extra layer of concern. So I think in the – in the COVID-19 context it's more important than ever to describe the living situation, to ask questions, like, you know, "How long are you, can ... Where is ... Can you stay where you're staying?" "How long can you stay there?" Or to ask, for example, "Have you had an eviction deferred?" you know, "Do you have ... Do you know ... ?" So one thing that we're really concerned about is when the eviction moratoria are lifted, then what happens?

So for families who are experiencing homelessness, that's one set of concerns about how we talk about it, but for families who are right on the edge, we need to be thinking about that piece as well. So asking about, kind of, the nature and the duration of the living situation in non-stigmatizing ways is really important because again, families are afraid and yet we need that information. The other piece, too, is we need to be able to anticipate mobility. So a family who is either on the edge or is experiencing homelessness we know that – that, if you know that situation is – is tenuous, then to be able to say, you know, "What is a second contact or a third contact?" And do I have – can I have permission to follow up with that person if – if you're, if I can't reach you the next day?"

So anticipating both by talking to families directly about it, and then even other early childhood programs in the area to make referrals if a family does move is also really important. In terms of the resources piece, you know, the CARES Act does provide additional resources to various agencies. In some places, actually, FEMA has been the better source of assistance.

For example, for motel vouchers for families who need a place to be where they can be – a better ability to – to – to isolate so that, you know, working with the local emergency management agency and raising the issue of families who are homeless there. Certainly the community action agencies, depending on where you are may be receiving some of the CARES Act dollars. And then too, you know, are with the school districts, you know, McKinney-Vento is

still in place, and liaisons are still there. Of course, we're approaching summertime right now, but we know that both with the governor's Education Relief Fund and with the Emergency Education Stabilization Relief Fund, there will be additional dollars going to state and local educational agencies, and they both specifically mentioned homelessness as an eligible use of funds.

So partnering with those education agencies regardless of who administers the Head Start program, is going to be really important in terms of maybe, you know, advocating for young children to be part of that, you know, additional layer of services and staffing.

Dr. Bergeron: That's great, and my next question was around partnerships. So the schools have always been an important partner for Head Start and certainly in – in the, a great connection to finding families who are experiencing homelessness, and we want to see an improvement in that connection.

Sometimes, those are really tight relationships and sometimes they're not. Trying to really tighten those up is more important than ever. Are there other relationships that you can see being really important right now that maybe we wouldn't have thought of before, that might be different? I mean, Head Start's pretty good at partnering – that's kind of what we do – but this is such a different situation. Maybe there are some things we need to be thinking about?

Barbara: Yeah. I think – I think it's kind of thinking about existing partnerships and how to embed homelessness into them. So for example, if it's a partnership around domestic violence, homelessness is directly related to that. If it's a partnership with a – a addiction or mental health agency, homelessness is a part of that. And our faith-based partners are extremely important right now, too.

We're seeing the faith-based organizations really step up and offer comprehensive supports in a way that might be freer and – and – and more comprehensive. So those are all existing partnerships, but just making sure that the specific needs of families who are experiencing homelessness are built into all of those pieces. And of course, with the housing and homeless agencies too. So it's, I think it's kind of, you know, just ramping up all of those pieces and making sure that anything that we're doing doesn't presume that somebody has a stable, safe place to be or reliable transportation or communication. Those are the three things. So whatever we're doing is ...

How is this going to work for somebody who doesn't have a safe, stable place to be? How's this going to work for someone who doesn't have transportation? How's this going to work for somebody who doesn't have access to the internet? Those are really kind of guiding questions we can – we can think about.

Dr. Bergeron: So maybe doing an inventory of existing partnerships and then asking the question, "How am I using this partner to reach families experiencing homelessness and considering transportation, considering communication, considering a safe place to be?" That – that might be a really good activity for folks to do right now, just to make sure they're covering those bases.

Barbara: Yeah, and you know, other things that we hearing too from communities is again, because shelters are either closing down or moving families out, or because families are afraid of shelters, or because there aren't shelters in many rural and suburban areas, we're seeing more families in – in situations like cars and campgrounds. So some of ...

Just to give an example from the K-12 space from liaisons, or, you know, going to motels and going to campgrounds and putting their posting, their notice there, or trying to couple food delivery with notice of educational information and really thinking about where a family's likely to be, and what's the way that we can reach out to them.

And, you know, there was a while where even campgrounds were closed, but I think now campgrounds are opening up, but particularly as we get into warmer weather in the fall to think about places, families who aren't really being served by any agency and the outreach that's necessary for them as well.

Dr. Bergeron: That's great. I – I just think about how it is an opportune time to connect with those liaisons, those school liaisons, and really tighten that relationship if you haven't done so already, because I would imagine working together, you could really make a difference. I, you know, you got the – the Head Start outreach into the community that's really strong, but those school systems have the ability to reach families in unique ways that Head Start may not be able to tap into because their children, they may have older children and there's something about registering a seventh grader, for example, that it just is kind of a natural thing for families to think about. They don't always think about it for their 3 year old. So are there any things you're working on to help facilitate that relationship?

Barbara: Yeah, we're – we're really excited to be working with the National Head Start Association on a template or online automatic referral between Head Start programs and school districts, particularly school district McKinney-Vento. Since we know that the McKinney-Vento liaison has already done the work to identify a family as experiencing homelessness, that's the same definition for home – for Head Start.

That means they're categorically eligible. So a simple, streamlined referral process, done either on the cloud or on an app, could be a way to just automatically, as part of, as a – as a school district is doing its identification to automatically make a referral, if the Head Start program has space, they can accept or make a referral to another agency.

So that's in the works, and we're optimistic to have that piloted very shortly and think that'll – that'll – that'll do a lot in terms of increasing communication, increasing removing enrollment barriers, and really building robust partnerships. And then the second piece is that we've been working with the Head Start State collaborations – collaborations directors around a template for embedding homelessness into the MOUs that Head Start programs have with their school districts. So that's already ...

Dr. Bergeron: All right!

Barbara: obviously required, but really how can we not create something new, but embed homelessness into that, so that we're really intentional in – in anything, both the transition work or just the ongoing work of identification and services. So those are two specific ...

Dr. Bergeron: Those are both exciting Barb. So that's kind of an example of where innovation during crisis, you know, you'd have to think differently, but that's something that will live beyond this. I mean, if we can get an app or something, technologically driven connecting to the homeless liaisons in the school system, that is a game changer ...

Barbara: Yeah.

Dr. Bergeron: for everybody, really, it's a game changer for everybody. That's so exciting. Well, you'll keep us posted on when that will be launched I'm sure ...

Barbara: Absolutely. Yes, I will.

Dr. Bergeron: and we'll get a chance to let folks know to stay tuned. Very good. Well, I know that we've got also some resources we're going to go ahead and put at the bottom of the vlog. So there'll be links to ... We've got their Home at Head Start resources and things you and I have been working on for the better part of a year now. Are there any other resources you want to share with us today?

Barbara: Just the one piece that we'll add as you know, obviously, like a lot of organizations really trying to focus on things that are simple and checklisty. You know, there's a deluge of information right now with COVID-19. So we have a "Five Ways to Protect Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers During COVID-19" with lots of helpful links. So just some of those checklists. And also reconsider, considerations for reopening that we need to be mindful of as well. So, those are just two additional pieces that are pretty hot-off-the-press.

Dr. Bergeron: Oh, good, good. Well, that's exciting. So this has been a great conversation and you know, what we need to make a commitment to come back together, maybe in a couple of months and see where – where the, what the status is, because this is such a changing climate. We're seeing things different day to day, week to week, and we want to make sure we're staying ahead of it, but I think we've – we've provided folks with a lot of really good information today. Really appreciate you coming to talk with me. I can't wait 'til we can sit in the same room and talk.

Barbara: I know! I know!

Dr. Bergeron: It's so hard, but it's great that we have this – this ability to connect this way. So, everyone look for the resources at the bottom of the vlog. Barb is always here to support Head Start, so if you have questions for her, I'm sure she'll make herself available, and just remember Head Start is access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.