

The Word Homeless

Director Khari M. Garvin: Hi, I'm Khari Garvin, the Director of the Office of Head Start. I'm glad you're here. Before I get into some real talk on the word "homeless," I want to make sure you understand what we mean at the Office of Head Start by "Home at Head Start." "Home at Head Start" means that the comprehensive services we provide in Head Start offers the stability, care, and supports that children and families experiencing homeless need and deserve. There is a famous quote from Maya Angelou that says, "people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel." "The word "homeless" can have negative connotations, and in some communities, it may even be considered offensive. Some Tribal leaders, for instance, have shared with me that there is no such thing as homelessness, since their Tribe takes care of each other especially when there is a lack of available places to live. Many communities feel similarly.

Now we have a law that says, among other things, that we must prioritize children and families experiencing homelessness for Head Start and that we must use the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness to identify, recruit, and enroll children and families. But I want you to know that you don't have to use the word "homeless" in your interactions with families, when you are conducting outreach, recruitment, and intake and providing supportive services. In fact, one action that everyone can start right away is to consider the language you are using and how it may make families feel. Again, you don't have to use the word "homeless" in your interactions with families. Instead, you can use words like "in transition, McKinney-Vento eligible, or displaced, temporary living circumstances, unsafe living space" and many others.

I encourage you to make this a new practice for all staff, parent leaders, Policy Councils and Governing Boards. And I don't want to leave you without letting you know about available tools. Check out the great resources that our National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement developed to support you in this practice. The "Caring Conversations" resource will help you enroll and engage families while respecting the language they use to describe their own lives and living circumstances.

Narrator: For more information about caring conversations about McKinney-Vento eligibility, please visit <https://bit.ly/4b117rk>. Produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.