

'Sesame Street' uses Muppet to address child homelessness

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For the first time, a Sesame Street character will experience homelessness.

Lily, a pink Muppet who is a 7-year-old child with red hair and a purple nose, must move with her family to the home of friends. It's a living situation that has become all too common throughout the United States, and in Philadelphia, as people in poverty double and triple up with others.

The character is meant to "offer help and hope to the growing number of young children across the United States who are experiencing homelessness," according to a statement from Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organization that creates Sesame Street.

The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that 2.5 million children are homeless each year in America, or one out of every 30 U.S. children. The Office of Head Start reports that this is a record number, representing a 100 percent increase in enrollment of children experiencing homelessness in Head Start and Early Head Start programs over the last decade. Children are homeless in every city and county in the nation, federal figures show.

"Children experiencing homelessness are often caught up in a devastating cycle of trauma," Sherrie Westin, president of global impact and philanthropy at Sesame Workshop, said in a statement.

Starting this week, Lily will appear in videos, a storybook, and other digital content that will be made available to service providers who help people living in homelessness, as well as to parents and teachers. She will not be seen on televised episodes of Sesame Street. She can be seen at sesamestreetincommunities.org.

Lily first appeared on Sesame Street in 2011 as a character who didn't always have enough food to eat, said Samantha Miller, a publicist for Sesame Workshop. "She's returning for children to understand homelessness."

In Philadelphia, the number of children experiencing homelessness nearly doubled in 12 years, rising from 3,446 in 2005 to 6,583 in 2017, according to figures from the School District of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

The Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, which measures homelessness differently from the district and the state, listed the number of homeless children in the city in fiscal year 2018 as 4,893. And, said Liz Hersh, director of the Office of Homeless Services, "the number hasn't changed in two years."

It's not unusual for various agencies to count people who are homeless differently, and it often makes for confusion. Hersh said the city totes up the number of people who "touch" its system — for example,

asking to enter a shelter. The School District, on the other hand, derives its data by asking children in school whether they're homeless.

Government agencies tend to count people as homeless only if they're living in a place not fit for human habitation, while social service agencies say people are homeless if they've moved in with others and no longer have a home of their own, like Lily, said Trish Downey, manager of external communications for People's Emergency Center in West Philadelphia, which provides social services to people experiencing homelessness.

Overall, 10,000 to 15,000 people enter Philadelphia homeless shelters in a year, with 799 living on the streets, according to Project HOME, an organization that serves the homeless.

Regardless of the precision of the homeless counts, Hersh said, "one homeless child is one too many."

Mariana Chilton, director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexel University's School of Public Health, agreed. In 2010, Chilton, an expert on childhood hunger, was a consultant for Sesame Workshop when the character Big Bird went to a food pantry. About 10,000 copies of a compact disc that included Big Bird's visit were distributed throughout Philadelphia at the time, Chilton said.

"Sesame Workshop is a powerful force in our society," Chilton said. "And Lily is a beautiful character, sweet and struggling."

Laura Weinbaum, spokesperson for Project HOME, said Lily will be an important character to combat the stigma of homelessness "that really does stick with kids."

Whenever people contemplate childhood homelessness, experts say, it's important to understand that such kids are usually experiencing extreme toxic stress that can hinder brain growth and the development of other organs.

"That makes homelessness such a serious issue for the health of children," Chilton said. "Thank God for Sesame Street. I love those people."

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