



Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) Project: Learnings from Focus Groups on Increasing Access to Quality Early Childhood Education for Families and Children Experiencing Homelessness

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ABSTRACT

Many challenges are faced by parents who experience homelessness in accessing quality early childhood education for their infants and preschool aged children. This report explores these experiences as reported by both parents who experience homelessness and community-based homeless services and early childhood education providers in a series of related focus-groups conducted in Philadelphia, PA in Fall, 2016. Thirty-three homeless parents, twelve emergency housing providers, and seven early childhood education providers participated in seven parallel groups designed to facilitate dialogue that would provide direct insights into systemic issues and both personal and professional perspectives regarding access to and availability of quality early childhood care for families experiencing homelessness. Analysis of these dialogues identifies a series of key personal attitudes, systemic factors, and practical and logistical concerns that inform and influence related parental and provider behaviors. Based on these findings, this report then offers a series of recommendations for consideration in shaping local policy, practice, and training going forward.

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2016, a creative partnership linking homeless family services providers, early childhood educators, and childhood development experts launched a community-wide project to support families and young children experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia, PA – Building Early Links for Learning (BELL). The two main goals of the BELL project were to (1) enhance the developmental-friendliness of emergency housing settings serving families in homelessness and (2) better understand and address barriers that keep young children in homeless families from reaping the benefits of quality early childhood education. This initiative has been working creatively and collaboratively across the community's homeless response system to promote strategies that support early childhood development while expanding active links between temporary housing sites and early childhood education programs.

As partners in this multi-pronged project, subject matter experts from The Cloudburst Group designed and conducted a series of focus groups during Fall, 2016 that allowed for the gathering of unique parental and provider perspectives on core project concerns. Participants included thirty-three homeless parents/guardians of children aged 0-5 who were temporarily residing in local Emergency Shelter (ES) and Transitional Housing (TH) settings, as well as nineteen homeless services and early childhood education providers from multiple programs in the community. Analysis of these dialogues then generated themes and insights that could be applied to help inform activities and commitments of the larger BELL project – both those aimed at increasing enrollment in quality early childhood education (ECE) programs by young children staying in crisis housing and those focused on enhancing training and support for local services providers.

INTENT/DESIGN OF FOCUS GROUPS

Objectives

In the context of the broader BELL Project, The Cloudburst Group was tasked to: a) design and conduct a series of focus groups with parents/guardians of young children living in Emergency Shelter (ES) and Transitional Housing (TH) programs to help identify barriers and/or facilitative factors associated with their accessing high quality ECE programs; b) design and conduct a series of focus groups of Philadelphia-based ECE and ES/TH providers to help assess the levels of collaboration across community systems and to help identify systemic barriers in promoting homeless families' access to high quality ECE; and (c) consult with the broader project team in developing:

- **Cross-systems protocols** for increasing access and retention of young children experiencing homelessness in high quality child care settings;
- **Policies and practices** that promote cross-systems collaboration between the emergency housing system and early childhood agencies; and
- **Training modules** for professionals in the housing and early childhood education sectors that provide background, context, and supports for enhancing referrals and connecting families to ECE resources.

Background and Design of Process

Much of this focus group study is grounded in prior explorations of the experience of homeless families in considering enrollment of their children (0-5) in quality early childhood care. A recently published companion report from the BELL Project on the current local “landscape” of early childhood education titled *Best Practices in Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*¹ provides an overview of institutional and systems policies and practices pertaining to this investigation.



A prior research project published by The Cloudburst Group in 2016 (*A Qualitative Assessment of Parental Preschool Choices and Challenges Among Families Experiencing Homelessness: Policy and Practice Implications*²) established a working model both for the process used and for the dynamics explored in this BELL study.

At the same time, an article co-authored by several of the BELL project’s principals (*Access to Early Childhood Services for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*³) provided a conceptual model outlining key themes from both parent and provider perspectives that helped shape and inform the issues that these focus groups in Philadelphia would explore more fully. Many directly related concerns have also been documented by Brown, Shinn, and Khadduri in *Well-being of*

*Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness*⁴, a companion to a recently published and seminal nationwide investigation of housing strategies for families exiting the emergency housing system (*Family Options Study*⁵).

¹ Curran-Groome, W., & Atkinson, A. (2017). *Best Practices in Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*. Public Health Management Corporation.

² Stillman, L., Hurd, K., Kieffer, C., Taylor, J. & Gibson, B. (2016). *A Qualitative Assessment of Parental Preschool Choices and Challenges Among Families Experiencing Homelessness: Policy and Practice Implications*. Retrieved from: <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/homeless/qualitative-assessment-preschool.html>

³ Perlman, S., Shaw, S., Kieffer, C., Whitney, G., and Bires, C. (2017). *Access to Early Childhood Services for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*. In Haskett, M. (Ed.) *Child and Family Well-Being and Homelessness* (pp. 65-82). New York, NY: Springer International Publishing.

⁴ Brown, S., Shinn, M., & Khadduri, J. (2017). *Well-being of Young Children After Experiencing Homelessness*. Retrieved from: <http://www.abtassociates.com/articles/2017/well-being-of-young-children-after-experiencing-ho.aspx>

⁵*The Family Options Study*. <http://abtassociates.com/Projects/2015/The-Family-Options-Study-Finding-the-Best-Interven.aspx>

Cloudburst’s approach to this project built on a commitment to focused dialogue and subsequent qualitative analysis of input from both homeless parents and homeless service and early childhood education providers in Philadelphia. Qualitative methods at the heart of this study were intended to give homeless parents a direct voice in illuminating their individual and collective experiences, as well as to capture and reflect upon the perspectives of homeless services and early childhood education providers regarding parental engagement, program and services design, and cross-systems concerns. Multiple focus groups helped to draw out the direct histories and personal perceptions of homeless parents – providing insights into the challenges commonly faced in accessing quality preschool education and the impact of formal and informal social and systemic supports in addressing those obstacles. At the same time, several focus groups among service providers illuminated complementary views of these same concerns. Each group lasted approximately 90 minutes. All groups were tape recorded and then transcribed, supporting later in-depth analysis. In addition, on-the-spot notes were generated in real time to help capture key issues, key themes, and emotional tone in each of the groups

All study protocols were reviewed and approved in advance by a formal Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University, and appropriate written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Reporting on results ensures anonymity of all participants, and any use of names has been camouflaged to protect consumer privacy.

Recruitment of Participants

Only families with children under five years of age were recruited to participate. For initial parent recruitment, an introductory email was sent to housing provider contacts at several local emergency housing providers – including Red Shield Family Residence, Families Forward Philadelphia, Friends Rehabilitation Program Transitional Housing, Woodstock Family Center, and People’s Emergency Center (PEC).



The email’s purpose was to schedule a phone call to discuss parent recruitment in more detail and the specifics associated with each site. Initial phone calls with site contacts (either a program director, case manager, or early childhood coordinator) identified best strategies for site-specific recruitment of families. Project staff distributed common recruitment flyers and sign-up sheets for use in community meetings, and then followed up with phone calls and emails to iron out additional details of recruitment, including making arrangements for transportation for participating families. As an acknowledgement for parental participation,

heads of household were each offered a gift card (worth \$35), shared following completion of each focus group.

In recruiting homeless service providers, staff emailed invitations to 18 ES/TH programs who were participating in the BELL project. Invitations were also sent to ECE providers who had been engaged in BELL, as well as ECE providers whose contact information was provided by other BELL project members. Providers were also recruited during a Philadelphia Children's Workgroup meeting. No participation incentives were offered to professional staff volunteering to contribute.

Description of Focus Group Participants

Ultimately, Cloudburst staff facilitated 7 focus groups over a three-day period in early Fall, 2016. Four of these groups engaged 33 homeless parents or guardians from multiple homeless services settings, and three engaged 19 staff members from twelve different homeless services and/or early childhood education programs in Philadelphia.

Of the 33 parents or guardians who participated in the four focus groups, 88% were female, 82% were African American, 67% were 20-29 years old, and 97% were single or had never been married. Additionally, 94% were receiving food stamps and 81% were unemployed. A summary of key demographic characteristics of the homeless parents/guardians who participated in the study is presented in Table 1, below.

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	29	88%
Male	4	12%
Race		
African American	27	82%
Caucasian	2	6%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2	6%
Asian	1	3%
Unknown	1	3%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	2	7%
Not Hispanic or Latino	27	93%
Age		
19 or younger	3	9%
20-24	14	43%
25-29	8	24%
30-39	6	18%
40-49	0	0%
50-59	1	3%
60 and older	1	3%
Marital Status		
Single-Never Married	30	97%
Separated or Divorced	1	3%

Highest Education Completed		
7 th to 12 th grade – no diploma	12	36%
High school diploma	12	36%
High school equivalent - GED	2	6%
Some college	4	12%
Technical college/Associates degree	4	12%
Housing Status (immediately prior to entering shelter)		
A house or apartment that you owned or rented	5	16%
Staying with a partner	1	3%
Staying with a friend or relative	6	20%
A permanent housing program with services to help keep housing	1	3%
Transitional housing program	8	26%
Jail or prison	1	3%
Domestic violence shelter	1	3%
Emergency shelter	6	20%
An abandoned building	1	3%
Anywhere outside	1	3%
Financial Information		
Received Food Stamps	29	94%
Enrolled in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	16	52%
Enrolled in Child Support	5	16%
Enrolled in Women, Infants Children (WIC)	15	48%
Enrolled in Medicaid	10	32%
Enrolled in State Children’s Health Insurance Program	2	6%
Enrolled in Child Care Assistance	11	35%
Current Employment Status		
Working – Full Time (35+ hours/week)	1	3%
Working – Part Time (less than 35 hours/week)	5	16%
Not Working	25	81%
Number of children (0-17 years old) residing in current household		
0-2 year olds	22	64%
3-5 year olds	18	42%
6-12 year olds	3	9%
13-17 year olds	4	9%

KEY FINDINGS

In-depth analysis of focus group transcripts revealed a wide array of important themes, all with significant implications for community practice and policy. The sections below will share highlights of that analysis. Reporting on these findings is initially broken out differentially for parent and provider groups. Sections later in this report will then identify key practice and training recommendations emergent from this topical analysis.

Parent Focus Groups

Parents and guardians participating in these groups were universally vocal and forthcoming with their input. As with any population, there was a diversity of perspectives on key concerns

and varying intensity of emphasis on different issues explored. There was, however, a notable commonality of several key themes across these parental dialogues.



Parental Perspectives on Quality Care

◀ Focus on Early Learning

It was evident that many parents are cognizant of the early learning needs of their young children.

Really, the earlier you start, as long as you keep it going, they'll catch on – even as babies. They say when they [still] in your stomach, you can read to them, and some babies actually respond to it when they in your stomach. (Parent 2)

I started (my baby) at day care at four months, and basically what some of the other people are saying here – the earlier you start, the better. (Parent 3)

They have a vested interest in and demonstrate focus on ways in which the early care settings that their children are in either do, or do not, promote early learning. (See quotes in “call-out” box.)

Most homeless parents interviewed had an intuitive sense of the characteristics that define “quality” in ECE & child care. These parents revealed surprisingly sophisticated perspectives regarding family investment in obtaining high quality care. Among their many concerns, they spoke frequently to issues of safety, security, cleanliness, hygiene, attentiveness to children, and caregiver responsiveness to their children’s needs.

I want you to be able to interact with my child the way I do. Basically, that means making sure that you’re doing things like reading to her...[or] like redirecting her when she’s trying to get into something that she’s not supposed to try to get at. (Parent 1)

You got some day cares that only does...coloring or... playing with the toys. And, it’s like some people choose certain day cares because it’s convenient to the parent. Now me, I’m in West Philly, and my daughter went to [day care] in [Upper Northern Philadelphia]...I traveled all the way up there to take her to that school because she was getting the type of education that she needed. (Parent 2)

I would like them to piggy-back off what I’m already doing, as far as reading to her every day. I go over ABC’s and colors with her every day. We go over shapes every day. We talk – I talk to her in regular [vocabulary], I don’t talk in “goo-goo ga-ga” talk. I talk to her regular. (Parent 1)

I feel bad because I didn’t let [my son] go to day cares when he was younger, so now that he’s in pre-school, he doesn’t know as much as the other kids. (Parent 4)

What I was looking for out of child care is for my son to be able to learn. (Parent 5)

Several parents also referenced the importance of home-based early intervention or Early Head Start in supporting age-appropriate development of their younger children.

I got into the Early Head Start from the [shelter]...I thought it would be a good program because in the program, they actually [are] teaching something...and that was good for my two-year old because he was at a stage where he wants to do different things... He's very, very smart, my two-year-old. He knows a lot for his age...and I think I owe it a lot to Early Head Start. (Parent 6)

I had [home-based early intervention] with my daughter, and she's 4 now.... Because she was like a slow learner, like she wasn't walking, she wasn't talking at the proper age that she's supposed to be so they like came out and...helped a lot. (Parent 22)

Consistently, parents are able to identify many of the concrete and important outcomes that early intervention affords.

Yeah, my son had the same thing and it helped him out a lot. He's talking a lot better, way better. He just turned two so he's talking a lot and saying more words...he knows colors, ABC's so it helped a lot. (Parent 23)

Structure in ECE Curriculum

Parents generally agreed that structure in the classroom and curriculum plays a significant part in their child's development and success. Their comments reflected a further appreciation of the importance and centrality of early learning and the essential role of high quality early childhood education settings in addressing early learning needs.

It's not all play, and instruction is there, and...they have structure within the classroom. It's about how the classroom looks, too. And if the teacher lets the kids participate in decorating. [Quality's] a whole bunch of different things for me. (Parent 4)

Parents also generally understood, and could give voice to, other insights concerning the importance of structure in early childhood settings.

The day care they in now, I like the day care, but as far as the work – it's not structured...My oldest – she's very smart, and she's learning, but I could tell she needs to look for a better school for her. (Parent 2)

In addition, parents frequently referenced searching for settings that might best ensure appropriate disciplinary and classroom management strategies.



I can tell you what it means to me. I don't want to send my kid to school, and come home every day ...where he's hit, or be smacked – that's not quality education.... But, I get notes from the nurse that he was hit, beat, punched, scratched, bit – and I mean this is every day, or every other day. I can't have this anymore. (Parent 7)

[Curriculum]...that's big-time important...I don't want to leave my child somewhere and she's basically just running around all day. I want her to have some type of structure, and I also want her to be able to interact with other children without hitting, without fighting. (Parent 1)

Just take care of my child the way I would. Don't treat my child any different. Take care of my child better than I would...Just don't treat my child any way because he's not yours. (Parent 15)

Size and Structure of Classroom Settings

Several parents discussed the importance of and their desire to have smaller classroom settings, as well as how larger classrooms with fewer teachers apparently affected their children's educational experience.

Kids always get left by the wayside when there's that many kids and one teacher...There's 20 kids in that classroom, and one teacher. I'm not happy with it. I got to get him out, and put him some place where it's going to be...more structured, and where the teacher can watch and see what the heck is going on. That's what I'm looking for. (Parent 7)

The supervision-child ratio. That's very important... I asked them to switch classrooms [for my child] because the one classroom he was in initially had 13 kids and there was two of them [teachers], but the other classroom across the hall only had like 7 kids. I'm like, "Well, can you just switch his class?" Because he gets a little bit more education, a little bit more one-on-one time, a little bit more help, a little bit more understanding and patience, I guess. That's really important when someone else is dealing with your child. (Parent 4)

Parents were concerned not only with the size of classroom settings, but also with the ways in which teachers engaged their students in those settings. Many parents clearly understand that a challenging and engaging learning environment supports success in their children's education.

We need to get her out to a school that's going to challenge her, because she gets in trouble. She starts to talk because she's bored. (Parent 2)



Also, making learning fun for the children... because trying to teach my daughter how to do certain things – it was like, “okay, it’s not working with her”, so I asked her teacher how do you do things in the classroom because when she come home, she singing little learning songs, so maybe I need to do what you’re doing. And she said “Oh, she loves to learn. Her eyes is always focused on the teacher, she’s always raising her hand to participate.” But, then it’s like okay, they’re making...learning fun. (Parent 8)

Approach of Providers in Addressing Behavioral Challenges

Children from families experiencing homelessness are frequently impacted by traumatic life events, which are often manifest in challenging behaviors. Many of the parents participating in these focus groups acknowledged their children’s difficult-to-manage behaviors and the subsequent need for more attentive and supportive educational environments.

The struggle for [my daughter] right now is trying to find a school that can handle her behavior, and also be able to teach her at the same time. A couple schools last year that she was in, they was just letting her run around and do whatever she wanted, and then, that’s why she got kicked out of like four schools last year and all this other stuff. (Parent 10)

I’m kind of working on her behavior issues because she has a tendency to be a bully – especially towards the boys at her day care...So, I’m trying to get her somewhere where she could settle down, learn, and to control her behavior. (Parent 9)

Another thing that’s important with all that is not just punishing, “Oh, you have to sit in the corner because you did this.” Redirect it. “Why did you do this?” To get to the bottom of it. That’s important, too. (Parent 4)

In addition to frequently mentioning the general challenge of child behavior problems, parents also referred more specifically to the prevalence and impact of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)-based behavioral issues among their children. (See quotes in “call-out” box.)

My son...as far as his work, he’s pretty good, but his behavior, not so well. I believe he has ADHD, but he hasn’t been evaluated yet. But, he just can’t stay still. He’ll listen, and understand what you’re saying, but he’s on the other side of the room doing this and that. (Parent 11)

With my son, you have to keep his attention because like I said before, he doesn’t stay still. it’s hard to teach him if he’s not staying still.....it’s like he’s walking, and touching, and doing this, but like I said, I know he’s listening because if you ask him what did you say, he’s able to tell me, but he will not stay still. (Parent 12)

A lot of kids – especially with my son – now, he has ADHD, but I can tell you this... if he’s not challenged, there’s a problem in the classroom. If he’s bored, there’s a problem in the classroom. (Parent 7)

There was also, in turn, a notable recognition of the importance of classroom structure and strategy in helping to manage these behaviors.

I think that's the problem that he's dealing with in school as well...keeping him still is not going to work. If you keep him still, tell him to sit down, he still going to be like, and that's just going to make it worse because now he's not listening. He's going to purposely not listen because he doesn't want to sit still. So, when you let him move, he listens. (Parent 12)

Special Challenges Facing Homeless Parents and Children

◀ Sense of Vulnerability – Fear and Safety Concerns

As parents discussed what they were looking for in early childhood settings, the issue of safety of the children and security of the building was almost always of paramount importance.

So [concern for] neglect and abuse is two big things for me with putting my child in day care, you know. I want them to be attended to and I want them to be safe, you know. (Parent 14)

Particularly when it concerned participation of infants, there was a near universal response by parents surrounding the need for safety, quality and trustworthy care. Often, parents voiced distrust of educational staff and child care settings in general, which, in turn, severely limited their comfort in use of available early childhood facilities.

It's me letting go. I'm just trying to find somewhere that – I know no one's going to take care of her like I do, but I'm looking for someone that can kind of attempt to. That's the hard part...They're not understanding where I'm coming from as far as trying to find somewhere to put my child. I'm not going to just put her just anywhere. I won't do it. They're not understanding that I've never dealt with child care situations ever. I'm new to all this...Working isn't the problem. It's me leaving her with someone...that's my problem...I don't want to leave her with just – just find somewhere and put her in there; it's like, "No." (Parent 1)

My baby can't talk. She can't tell me what's going on, what kids are doing to her, everything. That's why I'm not putting her in day care yet. I'd rather for her dad to watch her while we're working than her being at day care with people that she doesn't know. (Parent 15)

In this context, several parents mentioned the importance of conducting background checks for both staff and others in early childhood settings. Parents were particularly invested in finding out the qualifications of any adults who might be around their children during the day.

Another thing with safety, I want to make sure you can clear all the clearances. ...I don't want you just to be able to be hired off the street. I want you to have to go through some type of channels in order to get into the child care facility...If you're working, I really feel as though you should have to go through all the background checks. They got to be current. Not two years old, because things happen. (Parent 1)

I had got a funny look when I had asked if they have, like with the maintenance people, I said, "Do you have a regular guy or do you have someone random that just comes in at any time?" ...I want to know who is going to be around my child. (Parent 19)

Many parents discussed personal prior experiences which generated and perpetuated this sense of fearfulness and vulnerability in child care or early childhood education settings. There was a strikingly powerful common sense of a type of "post-traumatic stress" shared among many of the parents and their children. This was true both in parents' recollections of their past personal lives and in their reporting on more recent histories with their own children.



[I had] such a bad experience with [my older son], I just, I wouldn't put [my younger son] in. (Parent 4)

See I kind of don't like day care because another thing my niece, on her first day of day care, they dropped her...on the pavement. So we don't do day care. (Parent 10)

Collectively, then, parents reflected a generalized sense of anxiety about handing their young children over to circumstances that were both unfamiliar and beyond their control.

I know all might not be the same, but I don't trust day cares. What we see on social media, on the news, about day cares – you can't trust no one. (Parent 16)



Impact of Transience and Desire for Stability

It became clear during focus group discussions that parents are painfully cognizant of the impact of extended transience on their children.

I try to put as much structure as I can...I left [my son] back in kindergarten because it's like he's not comprehending what's going on. But, a lot of ways, that's my fault from living in different environments, and doing things that wasn't necessary, and living with a lot of different people 'till finally I got settled. (Parent 12)

At the same time, I'm scared to take her out because I'm tired of changing. When things change, she's shy. She won't talk, she's shy, she'll isolate herself. It scares me because people think that "oh, do she have like a mental problem"? Is she not ahead



My son wasn't in school, didn't start school because they wanted me to get him a physical, which he already had but I just couldn't find the paperwork and they thought, "Well we can't give him another physical just right now because I just had [done this] like two weeks ago."
(Parent 21)

They ask so many of the same questions in a different way. Pretty much all they do, they ask the same questions in a different way, trying to get me to put something wrong there.
(Parent 22)

and stuff? She's just shy, you got to give her time to get used to it. I don't want to keep going through that over, and over, and over again. (Parent 8)

As a result, they appear to be looking for stability in school settings, and also are willing to make that desire a priority despite other sacrifices that they may need to make in its service.

I would keep my kids there just until I find a good Head Start program for her – only because I know how change affects the kids. So, I'll keep them there just until I find the best school. And, depending on the best school, if it's a long distance or not, I'll be willing to travel to take them to school – only because it's so hard to find a good school. So, I'd just sacrifice, and just take them there. It's tiring, it's a lot. (Parent 11)

Challenges in Dealing with Early Childhood Education System and Protocols

Enrollment Procedures

Many parents expressed frustration with the cumbersomeness of early childhood enrollment procedures – including frequent experiences with long wait list times that impede access to needed care.

But it might take you, it might take you about 10 day cares or preschools before you get to your one because there's no [openings in] enrollment. (Parent 20)

In addition to a shortage of open slots and long wait lists for potential subsidized slots, many parents also referred to excessive paperwork and documentation requirements, and spoke of frustrations with duplication of effort in filling out forms. In this vein, many participants spoke of the burdensome need for providing copies of immunization records and other documentation. Retrieving this documentation takes time and effort that many of these parents can ill afford, and, in turn, can significantly delay enrollment – especially as parents are often needing to submit applications to multiple settings before finding an opening that “fits”. (See quotes in “call-out” box.)

Need for More Flexible Scheduling

Many parents describe distress in confronting difficulties with hours of availability in the ECE programs that they seek. There were frequent references to especially difficult challenges in finding care on weekends, after general business hours, and on public holidays – all of which are times in which this population often requires assistance.

Even on a bank job [that] I used to work at ... sometimes the bank – the day cares usually close at six, that's usually the last pick up time. Thursdays and Fridays at [the bank] they don't close until six. And then I'd have to do evening shutdown, so who's picking up my kids? And I had to work these hours. (Parent 4)

But where can I find a day care center that has those type of hours? ... I have to find a job that's in between this time and this time. And then finding a job that is understanding that day care centers close. I don't have a backup plan. I have no one. No family, no friends, no nothing ... Weekends are dead. That's done. (Parent 1)

These limitations, in turn, often have adverse impact on a parent's ability to work or complete schooling. When parents do not have the funds to pay for pre- or after-hours care, and they have no family or friends to rely on for help in off-hours, then parents are often simply “out of luck”.

Jobs need [you to have] open availability ... in order for them to hire you ... They'll go through the applicants and type in the filters, they'll say, “Open Availability,” and that will be their first pull. (Parent 4)

But with the day cares and stuff, it's like – I got job offers. I even got a job offer at Saks Fifth Avenue, but the problem was that because of her day care schedule – they open at six, they close at six – I couldn't do it. It was a full-time, \$15.00 an hour job and I had to turn them down because of the day care, and it really crushed me ... So, I just hope wherever I go, there's a well-balanced day care that I can actually go to work, and go to school. (Parent 8)

Challenges with Transportation

A large number of parents cited the lack of access to affordable transportation as a major concern.

It's a huge problem. For me, it's a huge problem because when I was in the shelter, I had to get up at 4:45 AM, and be out by 5:00 just to take my daughter to her dad, so I could go back to school, so it was a lot. I didn't have a car, so it was a lot. And, now that I'm back in nursing school... it still plays a huge role. Transportation play a huge role in all that. You can't say I'll go here if you got to be here a certain time. You got to leave while it's dark. So, it plays a major part, but I think if you just plan your time out, and prioritize, it can be done...It's more of an inconvenience. (Parent 8)

Many of these parents were willing to sacrifice both time and resources to get their children into and keep them in quality settings, but their needs associated with transportation represent a significant barrier to finding and maintaining the early care that their children need.

That's what I'm saying. If I have to go, if I've got to go all the way to Northville, or whatever the case may be, to get to work, okay, that's fine. But I don't want to have to go to one side of the city to drop her off for day care, and I live on the other side of the city.... and then I got to go on a whole other side of the city to go to work. I don't want to have to do that. (Parent 1)

That's what I did, then it got too much, and I got myself a car. I see the difference. Oh my goodness. I see the difference...But, the school is the best, and I'll recommend that school to anyone.... I had my case manager say well why won't you put her in a school that's close...Because I got to think about her education. (Parent 2)

Need for Infant Care

Focus group participants also expressed a particular need for and lack of access to infant care slots – referencing a stark lack of availability of programs for children ages 0-2.

It's [really] harder [to find care] for the younger kids. (Parent 24)

I've been looking for a better day care – a more challenging day care. I'm trying to find a Head Start program that also allows infants, so that...both [my children] can be in one place. (Parent 2)

However, it should be noted that given parents' lack of trust in infant care, as mentioned earlier, parents were also reticent to utilize even those programs that are available to infants.

I know that [my child] has been on a waitlist for this one particular ... center. She's been on this waitlist since she was 4-months-old. And she'll be 14-months-old. And she's still waiting. By the time she gets in, she will age out. (Parent 25)

Identifying and Accessing Options for Quality Early Childhood Education

Limited Sources of Information for Referral

For the most part, parents indicated that finding information pertaining to quality early child care education options was pretty much “up to them”. They described themselves as being left to their own devices in exploring alternatives, without much by way of meaningful assistance either from homeless services providers or from early childhood providers.

Word of mouth was most frequently relied upon as a means to gather helpful information; moreover, parents seemed to trust information from their peers more so than what they heard from community-based agencies.

I'd rather get information from other parents because I feel like with CCIS... I feel like they got a quota to meet, so they don't really look out for like the best interest of the child. They look at "Oh, I know this place needs kids of this age and blah blah blah." So, I'd rather listen to like parents, and older parents who have kids that already been through that whole toddler phase, so they know which schools to go to. And, I'll look up those schools, and check the reviews on those schools. And, I'll go from there. But for me, I really like word of mouth. (Parent 3)

[There is] one day care I really do want her to go to, and I'm hoping that I could move back down to South Philly for it...I hear very good things about that day care – like one of my friend's sons – he was having behavioral issues, but once he got there, his whole attitude changed. He was listening, he was learning. (Parent 9)

In addition to relying on peer-to-peer supports, parents mentioned surfing the internet as another way to find valuable information about early care options.



Well, literally I would search everything on Google. If I hear something, hear someone talking and I'm not even in the conversation, I'll research it myself, so that's the main thing I would do, ...most of the stuff I heard, I researched myself. (Parent 17)

I went online trying to find local Pre-Ks for [my kids], and then I called the Early Childhood Education with the Philadelphia Public School District. When I didn't get a reply from her in a couple days, I talked to the people [in the shelter program]. (Parent 4)

Strikingly few parents could recall times when early childhood education providers reached out or reached in to ES/TH programs to offer information and assistance helpful to understanding options and enrollment procedures. Some parents indicated that a few programs appeared to have brought informational flyers into shelter settings, but most programs apparently do not.

So they need to come out and actually show what they can do so that people can say, "Oh, okay, so I like this program." (Parent 10)



"Pop-Ups" as Parental Strategy for Information Gathering

Both among parents who had their children already enrolled in care and among those still searching for options, several referenced a strategy of just "popping up" and "dropping in" to do unannounced observation of early childhood programs.

I've basically just been walking into day care centers. I've just been walking in and asking questions. (Parent 1)

This method was used as an informal way to assess both the quality of care of the settings that their children were already in, and as a means of "scouting out" options for those not yet enrolled.



I do pop ups at day care.... They never expect it. So, [this way], you know what they really doing. You can't trust everybody, so you got to just show up out of nowhere to see your true colors. (Parent 9)

I also did a walk-around at schools in the neighborhood that I either lived in, or that I worked in...I'd go in at least five to ten schools, in both areas, and I did the walk in. It's like she said, the pop-ups. I feel as though if you call and try to make an appointment, they'd have everything clean. But, no, I need to see it – like walk in at any time. Walk in and see what you're doing at any time. I also asked about the curriculum – what they're going to be learning – how are they going to challenge my daughter? (Parent 8)

Challenges with Community-Based Systems and Providers

◀ Frustrations with Child Care Information System (CCIS)

While the Child Care Information System (CCIS) is the core public system in the community intended to support low-income families in accessing ECE, most parents referred to their experiences with this system in tones that conveyed both consternation and dismay. Dialogue in the parental focus groups frequently reflected a sense of frustration with CCIS policies and requirements – in particular, problems that create a sort of “Catch 22” regarding income and eligibility.

I feel like CCIS don't want you to succeed because you can only work a certain amount of hours to be eligible for CCIS. And, if you want to do more, which is beneficial for you, you'll be cut off... I don't even want to tell CCIS that I'm in school because they going to cut my hours down even more. (Parent 12)

I'm thinking [with] CCIS, you can't be working. A lot of people who are working can't qualify for CCIS unless they quit their job, and do the cash, but then you have – well, the people who don't have CCIS, where can they go if they have children under five, because paying all that money out of pocket, that's a “no-no.” (Parent 2)

Many parents shared complaints about dealing with CCIS – including an absence of systemic responsiveness and ongoing burdens in dealing with its paperwork. (See quotes in “call-out” box.)

Yeah, I keep calling and leaving a message but they don't even call you back, I don't think they check their messages... I tried to on Friday, and their message inbox was full. And that's the one the address is on, and I was like.... “why is your box full”? (Parent 10)

What I don't like about CCIS, is that they already know my son's condition, and they got paperwork and everything. So say he do stay out of day care for about five days, they'll cut him off. But my thing is, if the day care got the information, y'all also got the information, and y'all know what my son is going through, why cut him off? And then I have to re-apply over and over again. And then he gets sick again and I got to start all over. (Parent 18)

While CCIS seemingly should be functioning as homeless parents' "go to" resource, focus group participants, instead, reflected an array of difficulties with this system.

If you go on your own without the CCIS, it's going to be harder for you to get the child into day care. Or, you know... CCIS, I guess, got the upper hand and can place them real quick. But if we just go, and say, "Oh, I want to put my three kids in day care," it's going to be a long process. A very long process. (Parent 17)



Role of ES/TH Providers in Assisting with ECE Access and Child Development Issues

Many parents spoke to the absence of meaningful support from case managers and programs in the housing crisis response system in their efforts to identify and access quality ECE. While some parents could point to specific workers who had been particularly helpful, most conveyed a deep sense of frustration with the relative absence of assistance from their emergency housing assistance providers.

My case manager, I could text her right now, and if I needed a resource, or anything, she would text me back, or e-mail me by tomorrow morning and give me the information that I need. She's a really big help. But, I can't say that about all of the workers [I have experienced] because I just got her. My first case manager, I wouldn't be able to go to her about anything. (Parent 8)

In general, there did not appear to be any readily identifiable systemic or programmatic protocols or practices focused on assisting with families' early childhood education needs. Parents strongly indicated that they would love to be able to find more help from shelter providers and case managers, but expressed difficulty in being able to do so.

Case managers don't really help – at least not me. (Parent 3)

As far as helping with child care?...they keep saying they trying to help us, but where's the help? (Parent 8)

Several parents suggested that case managers should be better prepared to assist actively in dealing with early childhood development concerns.

As far as the case worker's concerned, I didn't get much response from them, if any at all...No. Hell no. Case workers they have over there, they have nothing to do with early intervention, or any of that because what chance do you have? So, they have no knowledge of child care or child development. (Parent 7)

I personally think it would be good if the case managers had education on early childhood education because my case manager actually has a degree in early childhood development, so she was asking me questions about the kids that I never asked myself. I never had the topic. So, my personal case manager, I think helped me a lot, only because she was familiar with certain information about early childhood. (Parent 8)

And in a similar vein, many parents made explicit – and somewhat pointed – reference to the need for greater empathy on the part of housing crisis provider staff.

For one, I'd tell them to switch places, so they know what it feels like. (Parent 8)



I'd say every family went through different trauma. You never know what somebody went through, and what their kids were in. So, I'd definitely say everyone's unique, and different, and some empathy [would help] ...Some...need to be more considerate of other people's feelings – in shelters at least. (Parent 11)

For me, I feel like they need to understand that every child is not the same. Every family is not the same. Every family and child have different needs so, they should be able to help us and accommodate us, and they should be able to have that experience, and knowledge on how to deal with each family. (Parent 2)

I say, again, that they can have more compassion, and realize that we don't want to be stuck in this situation. It's no fun. They might think that it is, but it's not. It's not an easy thing, right? (Parent 3)

Implicit in much of this feedback from parents is a strong sense that better training and preparation of ES/TH staff can be critically important.

Now, at the shelter...all they was about is savings, money, savings, money, but when you really need help with something, and try to better yourself, and for your kids – it's like they don't care...And, that's the one thing I hate about the shelter – is the people who work there...like I don't want to talk to them because they got an attitude problem. (Parent 11)

I need them to be conscious of what they're doing and what they're saying...Don't recommend me to a place that you've never seen...You've never seen this place before, but you'll recommend this place to me...When I go to this place and it's shut down for whatever reason, but you recommended me to this place and you told me how good it is...So can you please know what you're talking about! (Parent 1)

Provider Focus Groups

The section below shares key elements of feedback received from both ES/TH and ECE providers participating in their own parallel focus groups (separate from the parental focus groups referenced and analyzed above). For the most part, provider input mirrored the issues articulated in the parent groups. Not surprisingly, though, some aspects of this dialogue appear to conflict with the perspectives shared by homeless parents. Cataloguing this diverse array of inputs helps to open up opportunity for broadening our understanding of the landscape in which the challenges of promoting engagement of homeless families in early childhood education can be more effectively addressed, and the objectives of promoting early childhood development through quality ECE can be advanced.



Provider Perspectives on Homeless Family Access to Quality Early Childhood Care

◀ Availability of Early Childhood Slots

As one area in which contrast with parental perspectives was of note, many ECE providers and homeless service providers seemed to indicate a belief that the community might well be providing an adequate number of child care slots for children experiencing homelessness.

There's a child care provider on every corner nowadays. Heck, there's four on a block. You know what I mean? So the slots are not the issue... (Housing Provider 1)

That perspective was tempered, however, with a companion recognition of the difficulties associated in accessing those opportunities.

The slots are there, it's just how to take advantage of the slots. That's the key because they are there. (ECE Provider 2)

At the same time, providers were aware of the dilemmas that homeless parents face in finding openings in the settings they most desire at the time of year that that they are most needed.

So if somebody is experiencing homelessness and applied, once the roll is set and kids have started school...they couldn't automatically jump over that... Right now if we had ten children that were experiencing homelessness and we had to get them to school, I don't think I could do that today, tomorrow, the next day. We could maybe get one in. And it would be sort of a rolling admissions thing where when one student leaves or transfers then now we have a spot for you. And so [while] the need is...immediate for the family...the immediate response would not be available. (ECE Provider 3)

While group discussions were primarily focused on early childhood education in general, a few providers did bring up concerns specific to accessing – or sustaining – participation in the Head Start/Early Head Start program. (See quotes in “call-out” box.)

◀ Provider Perspectives on Parental Attitudes

Providers in these groups seemed strikingly unaware of the level of commitment many homeless parents shared regarding investment

I found in other shelters...a lot of people don't even know about Head Start.
(ECE Provider 10)

[Homeless parents are only eligible to move to a new Head Start site] if there is availability. [But] they will get that slot before somebody that's newly applying to the site.
(ECE Provider 4)

They [also] didn't know that we had other locations in the area, which is an easy transfer. You know, they just assume, like, since I moved, you can't go there anymore. We can make a phone call somewhere else, just in case. Like where you move, we might have a Head Start site a block away. The services don't have to stop.
(ECE Provider 4)

in obtaining quality early childhood education for their children. Contrary to the perspectives articulated in the parent focus groups, providers seemed to feel that because parents experiencing homelessness were going through difficult practical times, education of their children may not be at the top of their list of priorities.

Because the parents are so preoccupied with other things, and either they are undereducated or under-skilled...care for the child becomes way behind, way on the back burner. (Housing Provider 1)

Like I said, it's not a priority when you're trying to get your life together or whatever...When parents are trying to find ways to find shelter and find work or what have you, to get their stability, child care I don't think is a priority. (ECE Provider 5)

Problematically, perhaps, some providers participating in these focus groups reflected a somewhat judgmental attitude towards the homeless family population – sharing comments that implied that parents were simply uninterested, un-invested, or unmotivated enough to pursue and find quality care for their children.

So lack of interest...motivation is not there. It's really a challenge to get the women to engage, whether it's our on-site day care service or taking the children out to their Head Start. It's a challenge. (Housing Provider 6)

I also think that depression plays a role, [some simply] not wanting to get out of bed, I have no home, I'm depressed, I have no reason to get up. And so you see that a lot as well... there's some mental health issues that are impeding [access]. There's a lot of things going on. (ECE Provider 7)

It was, to some degree, striking to see the contrast between perspectives shared by providers regarding parent motivation and those voiced directly by parents themselves (reflected in the section above).

There are child care centers on every corner. But [these parents] are not educated enough to take the time to go in, or are not skilled enough to go in and see these providers and have this conversation with these providers and get the information that they need. (ECE Provider 2)

You should want the whole package. And I feel like if parents don't understand that, they don't care. Because they're like, "This place looks clean, whatever, whatever." "My baby's not screaming and hollering all day, [so it's okay]"...They wanted to find somewhere that was safe, clean...or what have you. Not how can my children be ready for kindergarten or how can they be school ready and stuff like that. (ECE Provider 5)

While some of these comments indicate a belief that some combination of stress and/or personal inclination may be at the core of these concerns, the fact that these provider attitudes are as explicit as they are – and so clearly in conflict with the comments shared directly by parents and guardians – is notable as a finding in and of itself.

Special Challenges Facing Homeless Parents

Access to Needed Services

Most providers acknowledged that homeless parents, indeed, faced certain challenges while trying to enroll their children in ECE programs and complementary services.

I have to say, access to medical care can be very difficult for our families. You know, to schedule a physical, it's months in advance because there's only so many providers. And that does put up a barrier [for] those children that are going to school because they won't let them start without the physical, or they have to have it in a certain amount of time, and the parent will try to get an appointment at a clinic and it would be like – like if I tried to make an appointment today, it would be three months [before I could be seen]. (ECE Provider 7)

At the same time, providers – particularly early education staff – shared their own beliefs that the broader system is appropriately set up to support parents in meeting those challenges – including completing required enrollment paperwork and accessing necessary medical care.

If we knew that someone was homeless, we would put a priority on making sure they got into our systems. In Head Start, [where] there's actually 19 students in a classroom that is [capped at] 20, we could fill that 20th spot with a homeless student... We wouldn't give it to anybody else. We also [try to] remove the barriers. So in order to get into a classroom in the District of Philadelphia, you need to have a physical. You need to have a dental. You need to have all these things. For someone experiencing homelessness, we wouldn't have those same stipulations. And so we would just get them into the program. (ECE Provider 3)

Providers also were aware of the additional challenge of forcing parents experiencing homelessness to repeatedly be subjecting themselves to inquiry that they experienced as demeaning.

When you apply to these places, you have to tell the family service worker your situation. And I know when you have a difficult situation; it's hard to repeat it over and over again. So if you have a history of drug abuse or this or that and you have to go in and tell your story over and over and over again, that could be a barrier. I don't want to like relive this again, and so I don't want to have to tell it again. (ECE Provider 7)

[While] in some ways you [could] qualify [for] more, people don't want to “brag” about being homeless...It's pride. And it's understandable. So that's another barrier – that a lot of people are not going to come and say, “Hey, I'm homeless. I need child care, whatever.” And so sometimes it's just more desperate. (ECE Provider 5)

Impact of Parental and Childhood Trauma

When speaking of the challenges parents experiencing homelessness face, many providers discussed the prevalence of parental trauma and how that impacts parents' search for early



I think another piece that would be good to include in this conversation is on the role of early childhood providers – in terms of education about the impact of trauma...if a child can access high-quality care. I just was dealing with somebody not too long ago, a couple weeks ago. They're able to get their child in kindergarten in a really good school, but because of his exposure to trauma and [then his] subsequent behavioral issues, she was asked to withdraw the child before the end of September....If we connect our participants to high-quality early childhood education programs, but then they're not able to have the child stay, either because of the child's issues of trauma and the way they're acting them out, or the parent's issues with trauma, and the mom is being asked not to return because of her own [behaviors], then we have an issue.
(Housing Provider 8)

childhood care for their children. There appears to be an emerging recognition among providers of the impact of both parental and childhood trauma on the system's ability to provide stable, consistent, quality care. (See quote in "call-out" box.)

It may be the level of trauma....it may be something that they just can't bring themselves to take their child out of the building, especially if this is a domestic violence issue. They may just [think], "I'm not going out. I don't feel comfortable. I'm scared. I'm traumatized...". So I think sometimes having a site-based program inside [a homeless services setting], or collaboration with the Head Start or something like that in the building would be a great tool for [our] parents. (ECE Provider 2)

Some also were quick to link the issues of family transience and the significance of ensuring provision of appropriately trauma-informed care.

*When you have... people...going in and out of programs and children are being transferred a lot, they're in school, they're out of school, they're in a different school, and particularly for children who've experienced trauma. It continues to make it very difficult...when they can't settle into one place and you see things like aggression, toilet training problems, that kind of stuff because there's so much inconsistency.
(Housing Provider 9)*

Transportation Barriers

Many providers echoed parental concerns regarding how transportation remains a substantial barrier in accessing early childhood education opportunities for their children. For both parents and providers alike, the issue of transportation is among the most consistently referenced of logistical barriers.

Yeah, I think the transportation's a big thing, having the facility near where the shelter is located. (ECE Provider 3)

*Mom's unable to have access to transportation to get to these Head Start programs. That has definitely been a barrier.
(Housing Provider 8)*

Given the transient nature of this population, along with the difficulty of identifying quality slots in proximity to families' longer-term housing options, providers noted how frequently parents would

take steps to enroll their children in care, but then later need to move and, in turn, have difficulty maintaining stability in that same place of enrollment.

I saw many times [how] homeless people are moving from different shelters and so they will be at one school and then they have to go somewhere else and they are [then] too far for that school [to remain a viable option]. We have a network of schools....so if you move out of my area, and even though we'll let you stay, you can't get there. It's two busses, I've got to walk, you know, the weather is poor. And so the closer the school is, usually, the better the attendance is. (ECE Provider 7)

Providers also discussed attempts to ameliorate the impact of transportation needs by assisting parents with bus tokens, but still were unable to provide enough to cover the actual costs of consistent support.

It's the same thing, whether day care or regular school.... it gets to be a transportation issue when you want to stay in the neighborhood you were in. And especially for our moms that only have one or two children, and income is really, really limited. For parents that may have SSI, or...employment income, it's not as much of a challenge. They can manage it in their budget better. And for our other families, it's really challenging, and we can provide some token assistance, but we certainly can't do, you know, at five days a week, and for who knows how long the family will be there. (Housing Provider 11)

Other Financial Issues and Limitations

In addition to the challenge of addressing transportation costs mentioned above, many providers also discussed the high cost of tuition for quality early childhood care and the financial limitations of families experiencing homelessness as being very much at the core of their difficulty in stably linking these families with quality care.

That's our biggest challenge we have...the lack of being able to pay for [quality ECE] because of the limited number of subsidized slots. (Housing Provider 11)

While Child Care Information Services (CCIS) exists as a primary systemic source for financial assistance for this population, both providers and consumers reference common frustrations with this system – i.e., it is experienced as overly demanding, constraining, and often difficult to navigate due to conflicting rules and regulations.

The rules that govern the CCIS that pay for child care are very – I don't know, it's a barrier for people to get care if they can't get into Early Head Start or Head Start. It's much more difficult to not only get, but to maintain [quality] care because CCIS will [so easily] give you the boot...So I think that that's an area where a lot of difficulties for homeless parents.... come from, because navigating that CCIS application procedure and those kinds of things, it's not as friendly to the families as maybe Head Start is. (ECE Provider 7)



For the mother that's pregnant that is not working or isn't enrolled in school, they're ineligible for CCIS. So there's no funding for child care. So then what do we do to...bridge that gap? [While] the child would definitely benefit from care...[and] from being around same-age peers and developmental tools...if it can't be funded, then we're kind of depending on Mom to pay out-of-pocket. (Housing Provider 12)

There seems to be a shared recognition that this system is built for failure, rather than success. As such, providers have fundamentally identified this as a critical area of focus for desired systems change.

As far as CCIS is concerned, this whole system is designed to fail these mothers. If they have a quality day care, they're gone to work, it's like the system doesn't give them ample enough time before cutting their benefits to even get their feet wet. So say they had a quality facility, they were able to work, as soon as they worked, CCIS is cut off and then it's a whole other – it's like back to the drawing board to find a place that you can even afford at that point, let alone quality... They give these [women] no time to get in to their jobs to even earn a paycheck before cutting them off. As you...know, if you start employment, you don't even get paid for your first week. It's about three weeks before you even get a paycheck, and if you're able to find a facility, now you have to pay for it. So now, they're absolutely broke, heartbroken, and it's just a vicious cycle. (Housing Provider 11)

While we know that we can consistently get children who are eligible into Head Start programs, we have not, to the best of my knowledge been doing that for Early Head Start-aged kids. And some of the mothers are definitely interested. (Housing Provider 9)

Well, like most centers, it's first come, first served...but we only have one infant room. We have one for young toddlers. We have one for older toddlers. That's it. So we have three classrooms that constantly, once they're full, unless a child transfers or moves away, whatever, we don't have...space available. And most of the time if the parents are not getting subsidies, CCIS or anything, they can't afford it. I know I can barely afford \$270. Well, I know \$279 for an infant, and \$263 for a toddler. So those prices are really steep for families that need services. (ECE Provider 5)

Challenges in Broader Structure of Early Childhood Education System

◀ Need for Increased Numbers of Slots in Programs for Children 0-3

In discussing availability and accessibility of early childhood education, both providers and parents noted somewhat easier access to programs and facilities for children 3-5 years old. When asked more specifically about availability of programs for children in infancy through age 3, however, both groups spoke directly to the dilemma that the options were much more limited and constituted an area of critical need. (See quotes in “call-out box.)

And even if costs were not so steep, the number of infant slots available is still severely constrained.

Well, [when] I think [of needs] from 0 to 3, I [am] flooded and don't have enough space. So families [are often] disappointed and frustrated. (ECE Provider 5)

In terms of Early Head Start for infants and toddlers, I think some of our families are getting services here at the shelter, but my understanding is that there are no available slots. (Housing Provider 9)

For the Early Head Start programs, as you know, [those that are] center-based, it is very challenging. Like I said, I only know three in the whole city of Philadelphia, three. There are probably more, but they are probably inside child care centers. (ECE Provider 2)

Need for More Flexible Early Childhood Education Hours

When discussing the needs and challenges parents experiencing homelessness face, the issue of limited availability of child care center hours – generally restricted to “normal business hours” – was highlighted both by providers and parents. Providers are keenly aware that parents have a need for affordable, quality before- and after-hours care for their children, throughout the year, though few have the capacity to address this.

The issue is, like you said, the [availability] of hours, because some of these parents who are in shelters, they are probably getting work early, early in the morning or working later, later hours. So the issue is [that hours are limited to] 9:00 to 3:00. “But I've got to be to work at 7:00 AM and I don't get off until 5:00 PM.” So what do you do? (ECE Provider 2)

There's definitely a need for full-day, full-year [care], which we do not...provide. That's a big problem. If you only provide services during the traditional school year, then people who work in the summertime are left scrambling, and that's universal whether you're homeless or not. (ECE Provider 7)

While this dilemma is characteristic across the early childhood care system, it is especially notable for parents seeking to participate in Head Start/Early Head Start programming.

[While] there's a home visitor program and there's a center-based program [Early Head Start]...they need more center-based [slots] for working parents [with infants]. And it's very difficult to find a center that (a) has the Early Head Start program, and (b) has before- and after-care. Because it's one thing to have Early Head Start and it just runs from 9:00 to 3:00 usually or 8:30 to 2:30, but then those before and after slots become a problem. (ECE Provider 7)

For our program within the district...we follow the school calendar. So we're off in the summer. So if someone was experiencing a hardship in the summer we would not have opportunities for them within the school district of Philadelphia because we're a ten-month program. So for those two months we wouldn't have anything. (ECE Provider 3)

Need for Better Qualified Staff and Enhanced Staff Training

In still another parallel linking perspectives of both providers and parents, workers both in early childhood education and in homeless services programs acknowledged a critical need for better-trained and more highly qualified staff.

Early Head Start has strict rules about the education of the practitioners that work there. And I find in my daily work that there is a shortage of qualified people to run these classes. I teach part-time at community college and...I prepare people with a Child Development Associates (CDA) credential...There's many, many, many practitioners that don't have the credential that they need to be hired. So it's a problem, a big problem, finding qualified staff. (ECE Provider 7)

I do think it comes down to money...People are getting paid \$7.00 an hour to do this job. How much are they going to invest?... In order to have quality you have to pay people like they're qualified. (ECE Provider 3)

Providers discussed not only the need for hiring more qualified staff but also the on-going challenge of better training staff already in place. Both housing providers and early childhood educators share a crosscutting demand to be educated in the specific and unique needs of families experiencing homelessness and the multitude of challenges that they face.

For many services providers, this concern is focused on the “basics” of cross systems navigation.

I think the [housing] staff are limited in their capacity [re: early childhood concerns] and will say so...A lot of the [early childhood] information is word of mouth. Really, participants get it from the Department of Public Welfare (DPW), and then they're just telling each other. And then the staff don't have the tools [that they need to be effective]. They don't have Internet access...even to be able to find [information] that you want that's particular to that subject matter, and/or to be able to give your client good information. People really don't have that. (Housing Provider 13)

For others, this is a concern tied to sensitivity to “trauma-informed” practice.

So right now there's a big push for the staff to understand about trauma and how trauma affects children. And not just homeless children, but all children who live in poverty, the things that happen to these little people early on in their life affect their development. (ECE Provider 7)

And...that's another suggestion that I would have, speaking to what is it like to be in shelter. I know at [our program]... staff or interns are expected and encouraged to visit the intake department to get a feel as to what families go through when they are in this intake process, because it's grueling. [The room] is very tight, it's very small. It's a lot of questions, it's a lot of time. And then ...at the end of that day, they may [be]

unable to place the family. So all of that – you talk about trauma, you know what I mean? It's very traumatic...So that's another way to kind of get a sense as to what they may be going through. And by the time they get to us, can you understand why they are a little agitated, frustrated or whatever? Yeah, you can. (Housing Provider 1)

In other instances, providers referenced the need for general training in childhood development, parenting, and special needs.



Now don't ask me the last time we've been through...specific training... I mean, we're not constantly engaged in training in reference to child development. However, periodically, we will have a parenting workshop....But again, it's not consistent.
(Housing Provider 1)

The staff people definitely have to get training on special education, [on] working with children...how to make...interactions meaningful and purposeful and stuff like that. So a lot of centers, shelters, the staff don't have – they have a high school diploma and they're able to work...But I'm saying they don't have the skills or knowledge to understand what is quality..
(ECE Provider 5)

And both ECE and housing services providers are cognizant of the importance of increasing empathy and multi-cultural competence.

People do not realize...I might be a teacher in a center working with a family that's homeless, but I don't really know what that means...and I don't really know that they had to go through all this stuff to even get in the shelter. And I think that you can't generate a sense of empathy if you don't know what it is. (ECE Provider 7)

I think [we need] a lot of education around diversity, specifically...racial disparity because I think that boys of color – children of color...I think their behavior is interpreted differently and therefore the outcomes in terms of expulsions may be higher. The way people respond to them is different. I think some of that has to do with the way we are socialized and we're educated. It's a cultural issue. I think it would be helpful for...training to occur in that. Not the standard cultural diversity training that people get, but really specific conversations around the disparity in treatment between...boys of color and their Caucasian counterparts. (Housing Provider 13)

Role of Housing Services and Early Childhood Education Providers in Systems Change and Enhancement

◀ Need for More Open Cross-Systems Communication

Most providers admitted that they were not overly knowledgeable about systems outside of their own. That is, early education providers did not know much about homeless services

programs and criteria, and likewise, homeless service providers had limited knowledge of early childhood education systems and protocols.

I think there's probably a lack of communication between their organizations and our organizations...We have the same goals for kids and families to be successful. So we need to bridge that gap. (ECE Provider 3)

I think that the entities connect up here [at the administrative level] but not down here [among line staff]...The "big wigs" probably know about this meeting and...perhaps our boss or our boss' boss is already going to this meeting, but we don't even know it exists. So I think that that's a piece, too, that we're not connecting on the level that's going to be most helpful for children. It's too high up the chain. (ECE Provider 7)

However, all providers agreed that one of the best remedies to this circumstance would be to support more open communication across those systems.

The meeting [BELL community forum]...where you had the early childhood providers and emergency housing providers together, I think that was a good start. That would be good if something like that happened quarterly or twice a year for people to come together. [At] the table I was sitting at... we were talking about the whole trauma thing. And they were talking about how...that training...caused them to view certain things through a different lens, which really informed their practice. It completely changed their response. I think that is something that could be done on limited resources. (Housing Provider 13)

I would definitely, again, look into the Office of Homeless Services (OHS), like some kind of way networking with OHS...In my opinion, the best way to begin this is the providers from shelters attend these quarterly meetings, [with a] representative from each of your [early childhood] agencies. It would be phenomenal. I think it would be a great....way to convey and share information. (Housing Provider 1)

Providers clearly recognized the extent of disconnect between the housing crisis response system and the early childhood education system. Several pointed out that not only would expanding communication, in general, between these systems be of value, but also creating tools and/or protocols that would help in "standardizing" systems-wide information-sharing. (See quotes in "call-out" box.)



It would be great to have something as simple as a provider listing. So [you would know that] within x-number of feet or miles, you have this many providers around you. (Housing Provider 12)

[It would help] knowing about the opportunities – like CCIS and Head Start funding, and the Pre-K Counts funding... I'm sure many people don't know. They don't have access to a telephone...and computers and all those things. So how do we get that information to them? (ECE Provider 3)

So is there some type of "app" that we could use to communicate where a vacancy would be.... between the school district people and the liaisons at the homeless shelter? ...When you think about one of the barriers [as communication], technology overcomes a lot of those barriers. (ECE Provider 3)

Ratcheting this notion up a notch, one participant suggested the importance of “institutionalizing” commitments to a much more interactive model for cross-systems exchange.

There needs to be some coordinating effort, and there needs to be some entity that has the authority to bring all of these groups together....I think there has to be...some type of commission and somebody has to have the authority to have all these groups come together, give them the resources as well to do it. But it would have to be a larger systems effort. (Housing Provider 11)

Collaborative Cross-Systems Partnerships

When discussing the roles and services of provider systems in facilitating young children’s engagement in early childhood programs, providers acknowledged that families experiencing homelessness would directly benefit from their nurturing more strategic partnerships and cross-systems collaborations. In many cases, providers suggested highly complementary versions of more highly personal and/or direct staff-to-staff strategies for cross-systems interchange.

I think that it sounds to me like some of the best things that we have right now, which are really helping us get people connected are just these person-to-person connections between organizations. Having somebody at the schools who’s coordinating with the shelters and ...having the organizations around you being available and wanting to offer their resources, like us, someone calling and saying, “Hey, we have Head Start slots.” I think that’s really where some of the best things happen that we have going on right now. (Housing Provider 9)

We have a school about two blocks from our shelter, and it also has a Head Start program. So we’re really connected. I speak to the principal all the time. The counselor comes down. We have meeting about IEPs and teachers even come down. Certain teachers come down when certain students are in trouble, or things like that. But they are advocates for pre-K in our facility all the time, and she walks right up to the school, and she’s communicating back and forth, if we have any kind of borders, or hurdles that we need to cross for the parents to get their children into those spots. So we’ve been really connected. That and it’s been years that they just know our children. I’ll make sure I walk up there and let them know, that’s mine, that’s mine – who belongs to us, things like that. (Housing Provider 15)

The woman that we are in contact with...has a great relationship with [our case manager]. She’ll come straight to the site to check on students. She’ll speak directly with the case manager. I’ll call the classroom if a kid is acting up – I’ll get a quick email or text message...It’s great to have that extra set of eyes. It definitely helps out, creating this idea of a community school. Especially when the educator respects the process that the child is going through. As far as our early childhood providers, a lot of our outreach is through our case management team. They will connect with different

day care centers or providers to have them come in and do workshops or enroll parents into their program. (Housing Provider 12)

Clarification and/or Standardization in Ratings of “Quality” Early Childhood Care

As a final related note, concerning references to the concept of “quality” in the early childhood education system, providers spoke to their desire to see a more standardized rating system to help staff assess the quality of early childhood settings and provide more helpful recommendations to parents. In their efforts to refer parents most appropriately and effectively to “quality” care, they identified this as still another strategy that might well have meaningful impact.

The [early childhood] programs aren’t well-vetted. You try to do as much as you can yourself if you’re referring someone, but just overall, from a state and local perspective, we don’t have a reliable entity that says it’s this good or it’s not this good. (Housing Provider 15)

I thought that the way that most facilities got the Keystone rating depended on the number of credentialed educators that they have there. They can have credentialed educators, but I think there used to be other factors.....other than just the stars system. Because sometimes you can have an excellent program, you may not have credentialed educators, but the children still may benefit. I just wanted to open that up [for conversation]. (Housing Provider 16)

I don’t know whether the same kind of records are kept for young children as they are for school-age children. I know that, I certainly hear a lot of data about things like how frequently school-age children are changing schools, how frequently they’re missing days. I don’t know that we, or that anyone is collecting that information about like how many times are young children in, being moved from one day to another, when did they drop out, when did they go back, what’s the quality of the day cares they’re in, who’s getting expelled. (Housing Provider 9)

DISCUSSION

It is clear from parental comments compiled in these focus groups that most of these families understand, appreciate, and strongly believe in the importance of quality early childhood education in helping to prepare their children for success in later educational experiences. **While actively struggling with the impacts of transience and trauma associated with the experience of homelessness, these parents find great value in early childhood education for their children, and many are committed to finding quality care, despite the complexity of the logistical obstacles they may face.** They appear to have an intuitive sense of what constitutes “quality” in early childhood care – i.e., providing thoughtful, structured, caring, attentive, and child-focused engagement in settings that are affordable, accessible, and available in times that are most critical for pursuit of familial, economic, and housing stability.

In that context, it is significant how little information regarding quality settings has been conveyed to these families through either the housing crisis response network or early childhood education provider systems.

Families describe themselves as being left pretty much “on their own” in ferreting out information about sites, slots, and resources that are responsive to and supportive of their needs.

Concerns commonly voiced by both parents and providers help shed light on the many barriers to accessing early childhood education confronting families experiencing homelessness. **Key impediments identified by parents include the relative absence of active outreach and information-sharing by early childhood settings, the difficulties associated with a scarcity of open early childhood slots – particularly spaces for infants and toddlers (0-3) – and the need for increased and easier access to financial subsidies for spots that they may find. Parents also speak broadly and consistently of the challenges associated with needs for transportation supports and greater flexibility in program scheduling –** as they confront the basic day-to-day dilemmas of finding openings “close to home” in hours that allow for full and unfettered participation in work or training and education programs. For the most part, these same concerns are echoed in focus group inputs from both homeless services and early education systems providers.

Among the many critical issues that these dialogues enumerate (both with parents and with providers) is the **critical importance of nurturing more fully “trauma-informed” practice – especially among early childhood program staff.** Creating and sustaining learning environments that have the capacity to provide the kind of stability and empathic caring that these families and children both desire and require is among providers’ most significant



challenges. It is also readily apparent that parents are profoundly concerned with issues of safety, security, and appropriate behavior management in early childhood settings.

More telling, perhaps, are the many comments from early childhood providers that convey a judgmental and sometimes dismissive perspective regarding perceived attitudes and behaviors of the homeless parents they serve. While both housing services and early childhood care providers appear to have an intellectual appreciation of the many issues and concerns described and discussed by parents in this study sample, these providers also can be characterized as experiencing a bit of an “empathy gap” in their own reflections on working with homeless families and children. This is an area where further staff training and support could be especially pertinent and consequential.

With regard to related information sharing and dissemination, even though many early childhood education programs, particularly Head Start and Early Head Start, have services available that could be of benefit to homeless families and children, a more active and consistent working connection between homeless service providers and both Head Start and other early childhood education settings seemed to be lacking. Although some homeless service providers described identifiably positive connections with local Head Start and early childhood education programs, comments both from parents and providers themselves reveal a more general disconnect among key systems in providing families with more fully informed assistance in finding affordable and accessible quality early childhood care, particularly as they are transitioning out of ES/TH programs and into more stable permanent housing.

Constructing more active linkages between the early childhood education system and the homeless service provider system is likely to help to address many of the barriers that both families and providers have articulated regarding learning about, enrolling in, and sustaining participation in early childhood education programs. Comments from at least some providers participating in these focus groups who had also participated in other facets of the BELL project – especially the BELL community kickoff forum – indicate that the simple act of bringing together key systems actors to share experiences and information can have positive impact on both provider perspectives and practices.

Insights obtained from both parents and providers in this series of focus groups further underscore the importance of encouraging both early childhood education and homeless service providers to focus practically and strategically on the many needs of homeless families for increased support in navigating the complex logistics associated with timely and stable participation in quality early childhood settings. They also help to illuminate the array of programmatic, systemic, and staff-specific challenges that the broader community will need to attend to and resolve in order to ensure that families experiencing homelessness can more consistently and stably access affordable quality care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from focus groups, explored above, we can point to several key implications and recommendations for potential application to community policy and practice. For both clarity and simplicity's sake, we categorize these in accord with the provider system with which they most closely align – i.e., Housing Crisis Services Providers, ECE Providers, and/or the broader Continuum of Care (CoC) and Community Homeless Response System.

1

Housing Crisis Services Providers

A

In our findings, it was clear that the day-to-day challenges and practicalities of work, education, housing search, and family problem resolution confronting homeless parents would benefit from access to ECE settings that do not require such extreme efforts to negotiate (e.g., parents leaving shelters or temporary housing at 5:00 AM to escort and drop off children across town at a child care site by 7:00 AM in order to be at work by 8:00 AM – and then repeating that cycle later in the day). In this light, housing crisis service providers should more **actively work to address the needs of families for access to quality early childhood education options close to “home”** (wherever a family temporarily resides or is relocating). Especially considering the realities of limited parental access to transportation, housing crisis providers will need to intensify creative efforts to help families identify and then successfully connect to quality care in more functional proximity to parental worksites, training sites, and places of residence.

B

Few homeless consumers interviewed were able to describe access to meaningful information needed for thoughtful consideration of ECE options. As such, housing crisis service providers should be working to **find ways to better address families' needs for access to more user-friendly, comprehensive, and up-to-date information about quality early childhood education alternatives and related resources**. Strategies that support this objective might include:

- Enhancing efforts to bring local ECE providers into shelter and transitional housing settings to share critical information more fully and directly with families; and
- Developing informational materials and information-exchange practices that help to increase parents' understanding of enrollment requirements and systemic supports available to assist with ECE participation.

C

Both by their own admission and as described by parents experiencing homelessness, housing crisis service providers did not appear to be sufficiently well equipped or informed to provide the kind of knowledgeable and practical assistance regarding ECE programs and enrollment protocols that homeless families require. In that light, housing crisis services providers should **create and implement more active and ongoing staff development training for program administrators and case managers that enhance staff understanding of early childhood education issues, supportive resources, and systems**

protocols. This should include strategies that help keep providers more fully up-to-date with regard to evolving community-based ECE options and alternatives. This should also include sensitivity to the importance of identifying ECE programs that reflect appropriately “trauma-informed” skills, insights, and practices.

D Housing crisis service providers have a unique opportunity to engage parents in cultivating skills that support their children’s early learning, cognitive development, and pro-social development while families are engaged in ES/TH facilities. Especially in light of parents’ broadly articulated recognition of the importance of early learning for their children’s later success, homeless services providers should **work diligently to help nurture parental competencies in working with their own children on both cognitive learning supports and social-emotional development concerns.** This should include the creation or expansion of family-friendly spaces in housing crisis settings that facilitate both positive parent-child interaction and more active parent-to-parent peer supports.

E Emergency shelter and transitional housing providers are particularly well-positioned to **incorporate ECE-focused supports and interventions into family action plans and family-centered case management.** In a similar vein, housing crisis service programs should more consistently **employ both the *Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters*⁶ and other related assessment and referral protocols in order to enhance the sensitivity of their settings to early childhood concerns and promote parental access to affordable, accessible, quality early childhood education.** This includes making a companion commitment to continuous improvement of housing crisis intervention practices and modification of housing crisis services facilities and protocols in accord with insights generated through reflection on *Self-Assessment Tool* findings.

2 Early Childhood Education Providers

A Early childhood education providers should **respond to and address the multitude of challenges identified and articulated by parents experiencing homelessness in dealing with entry, enrollment and sustained participation in the early childhood education system.** This might consist of help that includes:

- Simplifying and de-duplicating required enrollment documentation, including medical records and enrollment paperwork;
- Expanding flexibility in program scheduling to support familial needs for access to early childhood care in “off hours” to help support parental success in employment and/or education; and

⁶ *Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/interagency-projects/ece-services-for-homeless-children/self-assessment-tool-family-shelters>

- Increasing the number of child care slots targeted for children aged 0-3, particularly infants, in responding to a frequently referenced and critical gap in systems capacity.

B Early childhood education providers should **recognize, respect, and respond more expansively to the centrality of trauma in shaping homeless families’ and children’s lives, choices, and behaviors.** Appropriate and helpful ECE response might then alter programmatic practices in a number of related ways, including:

- Ensuring staff-training and development necessary to cultivate skills for and focus on effective trauma-informed care;
- Increasing attention to the impact of classroom structure, curriculum development, child behavior management strategies, and parental engagement in creating more responsive and effective learning environments;
- Ensuring provision of staff-to-student ratios that support effective classroom management as well as enhanced capacity for addressing behavioral difficulties; and
- Responding to profound and pervasive parental concerns for child safety by establishing more rigorous facilities security protocols.

C Parents experiencing homelessness frequently expressed concerns that staff in ECE settings did not sufficiently demonstrate the kind of maturity, skill, knowledge, or professionalism required to ensure the kind of structure or classroom management strategies necessary to facilitate effective child learning. In this context:

- ECE programs should more actively pursue and **ensure the hiring of well-qualified, appropriately certified, and adequately prepared staff;** and
- Ongoing ECE staff development and training should **focus on helping providers better understand the structure and protocols of the housing crisis response system, the impact of homelessness on daily life patterns and dynamics among homeless families and children, and the community-wide resource network that is evolving to assist children and families experiencing homelessness.**

D Parents in these focus groups were eager to be seen and respected as critical partners in promoting early childhood learning, but seemed often to feel “left out of the loop” by the ECE provider community. As such, early childhood educators should **ensure more active, direct, and ongoing communication with homeless families participating in their early childhood education programs.** While more assertive outreach is essential to helping families in ES/TH programs in initially accessing quality care, ongoing communication with homeless parents/guardians is also needed to help these same families in addressing ongoing early childhood development and education issues and concerns.

E Both homeless parents and housing crisis services providers described a paralyzing lack of knowledge regarding early childhood education options,

requirements, and resources available to them. It is in this context that early childhood educators should **provide more pro-active community outreach and shelter in-reach activities to help inform homeless families of available alternatives and resources**, thereby enabling and supporting more thoughtful and sustainable family choices. In this same vein, enhancing early childhood provider outreach directed at the housing crisis services provider community will help in establishing a more fluent and responsive community-wide homeless assistance system.

3

Continuum of Care (CoC) and Community-Wide Homeless Response System

A

It is both striking and encouraging to see how heavily invested the homeless parents participating in these focus groups were in identifying and accessing quality early childhood care – especially for their infants and young toddlers. In this context, the CoC and Community-Wide Homeless Response System should work collaboratively to **increase the numbers of safe, secure, and affordable early childhood slots available to homeless families – especially openings in infant care, and slots for homeless children 0-3, in general.**

B

All community-based providers should **recognize and respond to widely shared parental concerns about the availability, accessibility, and affordability of quality early childhood care.** This includes respecting the depth of fear and concerns for child safety that particularly impact the lives of homeless families, as well as understanding and then working to mitigate the impact of transience in their lives (e.g., minimizing social/economic instability in the household, increasing dissemination of information facilitating sustainable access to quality early childhood education settings, addressing logistical barriers to accessing ECE, expediting and supporting movement to permanent housing, etc.).

C

Most parents experiencing homelessness describe a frustratingly difficult lack of transportation resources necessary to navigate the logistics of travel to and from ECE settings, work sites, school, and/or other family services/health programs. In this light, the CoC and Community-Wide Homeless Response System should seek to **increase ease of access to transportation assistance needed to support stable participation in early childhood education** among families with young children experiencing homelessness – including support for transportation to these other auxiliary/complementary sites.

D

Virtually all of the parents participating in these focus groups discuss the debilitating impact of a shortfall in financial resources needed to secure slots in the kinds of quality ECE settings they most desire for the educational success and well-being of their infants and toddlers. The CoC and Community-Wide Homeless Response System should strive to **increase access to financial supports and subsidies necessary to support full**

participation of homeless families in quality early childhood education. Families experiencing homelessness are currently limited by insufficient numbers of slots provided through the Head Start program and insufficient resources provided through Pennsylvania’s Child Care Information Services (CCIS) system.

E The CoC and associated Community Homeless Response System should **assess and address the impact of broader mainstream systems on family participation in quality early childhood education**, including challenges created by CCIS policy and practice, and difficulties in establishing linkages with McKinney-Vento Homeless Education resources. Other systemic challenges that might more meaningfully be addressed by the CoC and Homeless Response System include confronting maximum work hour stipulations, timeliness and flexibility in local systems response to family needs, and minimizing duplication and burdensomeness in dealing with required documentation and paperwork.

F Both housing crisis services and ECE providers anecdotally describe the difficulties that each of their systems confronts in responding to families and children experiencing homelessness, but neither of these provider systems has developed the kind of data or documentation needed to help more strategically inform and drive local policy and practice. The CoC and Community-Wide Homeless Response System should, in turn, **make efforts to enhance cross-systems documentation of both parental needs and systems challenges associated with increasing access to quality early childhood education.** This might include exploring more creative use of the CoC’s Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), and/or creating related data development strategies that might be compiled through the community’s Coordinated Entry System.

The William Penn Foundation, founded in 1945 by Otto and Phoebe Haas, is dedicated to improving the quality of life in the Greater Philadelphia region through efforts that increase educational opportunities for children from low-income families, ensure a sustainable environment, foster creativity that enhances civic life, and advance philanthropy in the Philadelphia region. In partnership with others, the Foundation works to advance opportunity, ensure sustainability, and enable effective solutions. Since inception, the Foundation has made nearly 10,000 grants totally over \$1.6 billion.

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For further information on the BELL Project, please address inquiries to the People’s Emergency Center, by email (policy@pec-cares.org), or by telephone (267-777-5851).

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