A Report on the BELL Summit

BELL recently hosted an audience of 300 stakeholders from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware to consider how Congressional changes to Head Start and child care affected enrollment of children from birth through age 5 years who experience homelessness.

National Leaders Urge Partnership

Dr. Deborah Bergeron of the Office of Head Start and Mr. Matthew Doherty of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness both urged local leaders to serve young children who experience homelessness.

Dr. Bergeron: “We know that homelessness affects young children disproportionately...these conversations around connections between resources is at the absolute center of the conversation.”

Mr. Doherty: “... we need to be able to strive to prevent homelessness whenever possible ... and that means that early childhood care providers and educators, health care workers, and others recognize early on when a family is experiencing a crisis and must be able to connect those families to a wide range of appropriate resources and opportunities to address that crisis.”

“High quality education is necessary for those who experience homelessness because we need structure. We need focus. We need to know that when we come into a place and we give our children to those who we are entrusting them with – because we can’t trust anyone else – that they will learn and grow. And because they were in a place that was safe I was able to finish school...and now I sit on the board of Drueing Center...and my son is now in 5th grade reading at an 11th grade level.”

Nyfisa Hodges-Rabb, parent

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Systems Working Together

At the local level, people organized to themselves to increase enrollment of young children experiencing homelessness.

The Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) Project works with the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services and 18 family emergency / transitional housing programs to link with high quality early education programs. BELL staff offers each housing provider information, trainings, and “Meet and Greet” events that bring together staff from both systems. BELL also pairs these staff each year to complete the ACF Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters. A more comprehensive description of the BELL model and activities was published in the March issue of the journal Zero to Three.

In Montgomery County, the ‘Your Way Home’ Continuum Care program organized the “Sprout” program that connects them with a school district to offer homelessness prevention funding and will support young children to link into early learning programs.

The PA Head Start Collaboration organized a “PA Stakeholders” group comprised of state departments and statewide and regional ECE and housing leadership to discuss coordination at the state level.

In Chester County, the Friends Association hired a shelter manager who worked at Early Head Start as a home visiting social worker; brought in contact with Nurse-Family Partnership for home visiting; has staff complete a child care application within one week of entry into shelter; and assesses for ACE’s, child health and education screening.

What They Said:

Kristen Hoffa, Region 2 ECYEH: “We found that it’s not that folks don’t want to support children, it’s that folks simply aren’t aware of what the criteria are and the eligibility requirements under McKinney Vento… “School districts are in a unique position to be able to catch them and direct them.”

Donna Bibbs, CHOP Early Head Start: “We try to have the same staff go to home visits in shelters… so that families get used to the continuity.”

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: “We know that… programs like Head Start can make a difference, not just for the child, but for the family.”

Audience Member: “Biggest barrier is transportation. Homeless families don’t have transportation to closest Head Start.”

Audience Member: “Important to establish connection and relationship with subsidy office because if not, important resources and policy changes will not trickle down.”

Audience Member: Revoke policies that punish parents for being homeless (children at risk of being taken away).

Audience Member: There is a “… lack of non-traditional hours...
Summit Purpose

Federal policies changed regarding access to early learning programs. This summit asked, “What changes have we seen at the local level for young children who experience homelessness? What are the strengths and challenges when it comes to early learning?”

The summit featured two national keynote speakers, a panel of four experts from the homeless housing system, and four experts from the early learning community.

In addition, United Way’s Suzanne O’Connor and Vanguard Strong Start for Kids’ Rashanda Perryman spoke of the role of funders in helping to increase enrollment of young children experiencing homelessness into Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and other evidence based programs.

What They Said

Kayleigh Silver, Your Way Home, Montgomery County: “…these silos that we’ve been working in for a really long time. Education has its silo, housing has its silo, and we each have our outcomes about educational achievement and housing achievement, but we want to demonstrate that really, if you achieve outcomes in one, you’re going to achieve outcomes in the other.”

Jennifer Lopez, Friends Association, Chester County: “We have not had a child in our shelter that has not had some form of developmental delay, health outcome or issue directly related to their homelessness... The reality is that no one system alone can meet every need of a family experiencing homelessness. Cross-system collaboration is critical and children benefit directly from those cross-agency referrals.”

Suzanne O’Connor, United Way: “There is this science of adversity and this trauma language that I think unites us all.”

Karen Grimm-Thomas, PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning: “We moved beyond this brick and mortar idea where a family has to come in and go through their determination or redetermination for subsidy in that building and we’ve moved to a system where we’re co-locating or we’re actually moving to where families are... We’re moving past this idea that a family has to come into a specific site to be determined eligible for childcare subsidy.”
Next Steps

Kathy Desmond, PEC President: “As next steps, we will be organizing a leadership team to consider the future of efforts to connecting young children experiencing homelessness to high quality early learning. We hope to strengthen in this region Tracy Duarte’s PA Stakeholders group to help articulate needs and solutions.”

Kristen Hoffa: “ECYEH Region 2 has taken some steps to address these challenges. First, we have established MOUs with all early childhood providers throughout the region. These MOUs create a shared responsibility in addressing these challenges. ECYEH provides staff training, resources, and connections with local shelter programs, and early childhood providers refer homeless students and provide data to ECYEH. ECYEH is available to serve as a liaison between schools, early childhood providers, and homeless service agencies. Learn more about the Region 2 ECYEH program at www.berksiu.org/ECYEH.”

Kayleigh Silver: “A stronger database that would allow for data-mining, in order to better understand this trend, would be extremely beneficial. •Villanova evaluation final report to be released September 2019. We hope to secure additional, ongoing financial support to bring the pilot up to scale. We hope to launch Sprout 2.0, with an equity lens as factors that lead to homelessness push harder on people of color, women, and families with children.”

Jennifer Lopez: “To further our efforts in becoming a fully trauma-informed agency, we are hoping to be awarded a grant to bring in Dr. Sandra Bloom’s new Presence Model (a trauma-informed model). This will enhance our ability to promote true healing and recovery in the lives of the families we serve. We are working towards implementing a Two Generation approach - to break cycle of poverty by addressing the needs of both children and parents. Our goal is to align and coordinate service delivery for the whole family so both can have improved physical and mental health, safety, stability and education. As we look toward coordinating the shelter system with the educational system, we will be adding information about the Education Assurances in the Hearth Act to our intake process; we will complete the Early Childhood Self-Assessment for Family Shelters; we will begin using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire.”

JJ Cutuli: “We still have more questions than solutions. We know early childhood programs are important, based largely on findings from other places and children in other circumstances. With the will, we can build the partnerships necessary to share information from early childhood programs across Philadelphia. This will allow us to know with more certainty which children and families do better in which programs and which barriers during a stay in shelter are the hardest to overcome.”

Dr. Bergeron: “Home at Head Start” will help families experiencing homelessness access Head Start services. See http://bit.ly/35frPeA.
BELL

The BELL project is administered by the People’s Emergency Center in Philadelphia. BELL connects the early childhood education and family emergency / transitional housing systems to better respond to the needs of young children experiencing homelessness. The BELL model is derived from the developmental science of resilience which emphasizes the importance of high-quality early childhood programs and other responsive contexts that support early development. Families often become disconnected from these contexts when they move to family shelter.

People’s Emergency Center (PEC)

Our mission is to nurture families, strengthen neighborhoods and drive change. For families, children, and youth experiencing homelessness, PEC offers more than 235 affordable housing units, job training, parenting and early childhood education, financial education and planning, life skills and technology classes.

Contact Us

Give us a call for more information about our services and products

BELL/PEC
325 N. 39th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104

(267) 777-5800

bell@pec-cares.org

Visit us on the web at https://www.pec-cares.org/bellsummit.html

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