BUILDING EARLY LINKS FOR LEARNING
The BELL Report to Stakeholders

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SHELTER AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

**CHILDREN IN SHELTER**

- 70% of parents in shelters with children ages 0-5 discussed early childhood programs with shelter staff

**ENROLLED IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM**

- 52% of children in shelter
- 49% ages 0-3
- 63% ages 3-5

**IN A HIGH QUALITY PROGRAM**

- 15% ages 0-3
- 28% ages 3-5

**8 KEY ACTIVITIES**

- Child Care & Pre-K Discussions
- Staff Meet and Greets
- Child Care Enrollment Drives
- Shelter Self Assessments
- Stakeholder Convenings
- Staff Trainings
- Family Advocacy
- Annual Summit

**PRIMARY GOALS SUPPORTING EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTING RESILIENCE**

- **IMPROVE**
  - How shelters support early development
- **BUILD CONNECTIONS**
  - Between shelters and early childhood programs
- **HELP**
  - Families in shelter to participate in early childhood programs

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **SHELTERS and Early Childhood Programs**
  - Need continued support to serve young children who are homeless
- **DATA SYSTEMS**
  - Should include enrollment information for all children attending early childhood programs
- **Focus on infants and toddlers**
  - Younger children are less likely to participate in a child care program and, when they do, it is less likely to be high quality
- **Policy decision makers need to encourage**
  - More high-quality early childhood programs and pathways for families in shelter to participate

**AREAS TO EXPLORE**

1. **Families entering Philadelphia shelters today may be MORE vulnerable than families in the past**
2. **Shelter staff work in contexts of high employee turnover, dwindling resources, leadership changes, and shifts in the population**
3. **Nobody knows how many families with young children live doubled-up without stable housing of their own in Philadelphia**
4. **620 preschoolers (6%) are homeless and attending Head Start at the School District of Philadelphia, a higher rate than the national average**
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) aims to make family homeless shelters and early childhood education programs more sensitive to the needs of young children who experience homelessness in Philadelphia. The initiative works to improve how shelters and early childhood programs respond to young children experiencing homelessness. It does this through varied activities that build connections between shelters and early childhood programs while helping families in shelter participate in high quality childcare and preschool. During 2018-19, BELL worked closely with 18 emergency and transitional housing sites along with their local early childhood programs.

BELL activities supported providers and families through:

- Encouraging conversations and assistance to families about early childhood programs
- Enrollment drives to directly connect families to early childhood programs
- Trainings on supporting early childhood development
- Meet-and-Greet events to connect the shelter and early childhood education systems
- Self-assessments focusing shelters on early development
- Advocacy, meetings, dissemination and a national summit

This report describes BELL activities from August, 2018 to September, 2019. During that time, 1,020 families with young children stayed in one of 15 shelters working with BELL:

- 70% of them had at least one conversation with a housing provider about early childhood programs
- 53% of children known to BELL were participating in some sort of early childhood program
- Conservatively, 19% of all children were participating in a high-quality early childhood program

Fewer young children (birth-to-3 years) attended any program or attended a high-quality program:

- 49% of birth-to-3 year olds attended any early child program vs. 63% of 3-to-5 year olds
- Conservatively, 15% of birth-to-3 year olds attended a high-quality program vs. 28% of 3-to-5 year olds
Recommendations:

1) Family shelters and early childhood programs need continued support to serve young children experiencing homelessness.

2) Policy decision makers need to encourage more high-quality early childhood programs and pathways for families in shelter to participate.

3) Shelter and early childhood systems need to especially increase focus on opportunities for younger children as they are less likely to participate in high-quality early childhood programs.

4) Data systems should include enrollment information for all children attending early childhood programs to better understand the barriers to participation for all families in shelter.
BACKGROUND, GOALS, & PERSPECTIVE

Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) is an initiative that aims to promote resilience for young children staying in Philadelphia emergency and transitional shelter with their families. BELL is informed by developmental science which states that resilience is more likely to occur when a child’s and family’s contexts are focused on responding to their needs.

Young children in homeless families are more likely to succeed in life when families, shelters, and early childhood programs are focused on early development. Meanwhile, broader early education, health, and human service policies relevant to housing and early childhood programs also should emphasize the needs of young children in homeless families to promote resilience.

BELL looks to improve how the contexts of homelessness respond to young children in three ways:

1) Improve the quality of emergency and transitional shelters for families by making them more aware and more responsive to the needs of young children experiencing homelessness.

2) Increase the level of collaboration between emergency shelter, early childhood education, and other education and social service systems so that they can share expertise and better coordinate to serve young children experiencing homelessness.

3) Increase early childhood program participation among children in shelter as a supportive context for early development.

BELL works toward these goals through training housing and early childhood program providers, hosting collaboration-building events, advocating for the needs of young children in shelter, and providing direct assistance to the emergency and transitional housing system in Philadelphia. This report summarizes key activities across the 2018-19 school year, spanning August 2018 to September 2019.

It also documents key statistics that reflect the state of early childhood program participation among young children in shelter, noting progress as well as ongoing challenges. A more detailed description of the BELL model and the origins of the BELL initiative are detailed elsewhere.¹

BELL is possible because of ongoing collaborations with the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, the School District of Philadelphia, the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia Homeless Health Initiative, the Philadelphia Data Management Office, 15 family-serving emergency and transitional housing providers, countless early childhood program providers across the City, and many others who support young children experiencing homelessness.

BELL is administered by People’s Emergency Center and is currently funded by a grant from the Vanguard Strong Start for Kids™ program and the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey.

BELL supports families through working with them directly as well as supporting providers in both early childhood programs and emergency / transitional housing programs. BELL helps families and providers focus on the needs of young children experiencing family homelessness through education, information sharing, and building relationships between early education and housing providers.

BELL also represents families with young children to other partners including philanthropy, research and innovation, and other stakeholders across the region, state, and nation.

**Powerful Conversations**

BELL works closely with family emergency shelter providers who serve young children across Philadelphia. Staff at each shelter engage parents in conversations about the early childhood programs available nearby.

Parents share their questions, concerns, and perspectives, while providers listen for and respond to the family’s preferences.

BELL staff support the providers with information, tools, and direct assistance as they help carry out each family’s wishes. BELL also looks for patterns across different parts of the city for ways to help to better support families, emergency housing providers, early childhood programs, and the connections between them.
Trainings

BELL delivered or coordinated eleven training workshops across the year for families, housing providers, early childhood program staff, and other key stakeholders in the lives of families with young children experiencing homelessness. These trainings shared information about young children in general, and about the needs of young children and families experiencing homelessness, in particular. The topics spanned areas relevant to early development, parenting, literacy, accessing key supports, and early childhood in contexts of homelessness, poverty, and trauma.

2019 BELL Training Titles:

- How They Learn and Grow: Early Developmental Milestones (two trainings)
- Effects of Homelessness on Child Development
- Creating a Literacy Rich Environment in Shelter
- Recognizing and Responding to Drug/Food Allergic Reactions, led by Sally Poliwoda of the CHOP Homeless Health Initiative
- Accessing Subsidies for Child Care for Emergency Housing Staff, led by The Early Learning Resource Center (formerly CCIS) (two trainings)
- Growing Readers Workshop led by the Children’s Literacy Initiative
- Positive Ways to Discipline Challenging Behaviors, led by Bethany Watson
- Trauma Informed Care Training, led by Shenise Henderson of LifeLine Trauma (two-part training)
Building Links Across Systems: Meet & Greet Events

BELL coordinated four “Meet and Greet” events during the year. Program staff and leadership from both the emergency housing and early childhood systems attended to network, learn, and share their expertise in family homelessness and early development in a fun, relaxed atmosphere. These events introduced staff to each other across systems and deepened existing relationships. These connections help providers connect children with early childhood programs that are responsive to the needs of families experiencing homelessness.
Sharing Expertise and Improving Contexts: Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters

BELL brought together staff from a local early childhood education provider with staff from 14 partnering housing programs to jointly complete the ACF Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters. These teams rated the shelter on five different domains important for protecting young children and promoting their wellbeing.

They also worked together on an action list of steps that the shelter can take to increase its ability to support the development of young children. The housing and early childhood staff members shared their respective expertise and learned from each other.

They deepened their relationship and shared commitment to better helping young children who experience family homelessness, all while producing actionable steps to improve how the shelter meets their needs.

Enrollment Drives: Directly Connecting Early Childhood Programs to Families in Shelter

BELL organized two enrollment drives where local early childhood programs sent representatives to partnering emergency and transitional housing sites to directly engage families and staff. These representatives spoke with families about the programs, answered any questions that they might have, and provided assistance completing enrollment materials onsite for any family who was interested in enrolling. These were opportunities for families to learn more about what programs were available in the neighborhoods where they were staying and for early childhood programs to engage more deeply with the shelter programs.
The Children’s Work Group Early Childhood Committee: Community, Communication, & Recognition

BELL organized eight convenings of the Children’s Work Group Early Childhood Committee. This group brings together diverse stakeholders in the wellbeing of young children experiencing homelessness, including shelter providers, early childhood program providers, municipal agencies, philanthropy, and varied others at the local, regional, and state levels.

These meetings were an opportunity to share perspectives, network, and deepen relationships. They were also a context to share information and resources while eliciting provider input and reactions. Regular presentation topics included legal rights and resources, evolving childcare subsidy programs, engaging Early Intervention services and other supports, latest research findings, and many others.

BELL also established the Yay! Babies! Award in collaboration with the Early Childhood Committee to recognize exemplary work in supporting young children experiencing homelessness.

Winning Yay Babies awards this year were Latisha Brown-Swans of the Jane Addams Family Residence, Tambra Hall of Stenton Family Manor, Grace Whitney of SchoolHouse Connection, and Roslyn Robinson of Woodstock Family Residence.
Bell Summit 2019

In September 2019, BELL hosted a regional summit that gathered 300 stakeholders spanning the Delaware Valley, multiple states, and federal agencies. These stakeholders were providers, decisionmakers, and philanthropic partners representing housing, early childhood, higher education, and local, regional, and national advocates.

The summit featured keynote presentations by Dr. Deborah Bergeron, Director of the Office of Head Start, and Matthew Doherty, then-Executive Director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).

The keynote speakers and panel participants engaged the audience in conversations focused on how Congressional changes to Head Start and other childcare programs were affecting how these programs engage young children who experience homelessness.  

A summary of the 2019 BELL Summit is available at: https://bit.ly/BELL091619

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Spreading the Word: Advocacy, Presentations, & Publications

BELL communicates to policymakers, providers, researchers, and other stakeholders nationwide. This included leading or joining multiple coalitions advocating for state policies that better-support early childhood programs. BELL representatives had a leadership role in the “Strong Start PA” campaign, joining alongside groups such as First Up, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), the Maternity Care Coalition, and KenCrest to advocate for increased state investment into early learning and home visiting programs.

BELL has worked with state and national representatives to advocate on behalf of young children experiencing homelessness, including meetings with the offices of United States Senators Robert Casey and Patrick Toomey, U.S. Representative Dwight Evans, and Pennsylvanian state legislators Senators Vincent Hughes, Katie Muth, Tim Kearney, Art Haywood, Maria Collet, and Representatives Donna Bullock, Mary Isaacson, Ed Neilson, Joe Hohenstein, Brian Sims, James Roebuck, Pam DeLissio, Jared Solomon, Morgan Cephas, and Chris Rabb.

This year the BELL model was featured in a special issue of the journal *Zero to Three*. BELL also participated in three webinars hosted by Zero to Three and SchoolHouse Connection. In addition, BELL partners presented on the initiative at regional, national, and international research and public policy conferences, including the National Association for the Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness.

Finally, PEC publishes the monthly newsletters BELL and PEC Perspective, reaching more than 1,000 stakeholders regionwide.

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Information for Action

BELL uses information shared by families, providers, and the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services to guide its activities and look for patterns in ways to better support young children. This report details several of those patterns in how families, emergency housing providers, and early childhood programs interact.

In sum, 70% of parents had at least one conversation with emergency housing staff about early childhood programs. Over half of these children were attending some sort of early childhood program, considering just those 70% of families who shared information with emergency housing staff. Slightly less than half of younger children (age birth to three years) attended a program, while almost two-thirds of children age 3 to 5 years attended. Relatively few children attended a high-quality program, though 3 to 5 year olds were more likely to attend a high quality program than younger children.

These patterns reflect the degree to which BELL has been successful in focusing providers on the needs of young children, in building links between the emergency housing and early childhood systems, and in removing barriers to high-quality early childhood program participation for young children staying in shelter.

Data sources.
The information in this report is from August 21, 2018, through September 4, 2019. The information comes from several sources. First, the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services (OHS) shares information with BELL about every two weeks on where each child under six years old is staying in 15 emergency and transitional shelters. There was no information for children at 3 shelters that exclusively serve

![Bars representing percentages of children attending early childhood programs by age and program quality](image-url)
families who experienced domestic violence. The information was part of the Philadelphia Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and is used under a data sharing agreement.

Second, BELL encourages each emergency and transitional housing provider to have at least one conversation every month with each parent of a child who is too young to be enrolled in kindergarten (under age 5 on September 1st of the current school year). Housing providers share this information with BELL which includes the (a) date of the conversation with the parent, (b) whether each child is participating in an early childhood program, and (c) which program. Early childhood programs could be center-based or home-based.

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<td>Parent Conversation</td>
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<td>Attend High-Quality ECE</td>
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Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Observed rates are based on the number of parent conversations
<sup>b</sup> Lower bound rates assume children without parent conversations were not attending ECE
<sup>c</sup> Upper bound rates assume children without parent conversations were attending high quality ECE
Findings.
During the 2018-19 school year, 1,020 unique young children stayed in one of the 15 Philadelphia emergency or transitional housing programs. Seventy percent of all children’s parents had at least one conversation about early childhood programs with a provider or BELL staff. We included children who were born during the 2018-19 school year. Parents of younger and older children were just as likely to have a discussion about early childhood programs. Seventy percent of birth-to-3 year olds’ caregivers had such a conversation compared to 68% of 3-to-5 year olds’ caregivers.

We cannot report the overall population rates with certainty because we do not have information from 30% of young children’s parents regarding their participation in early childhood programs. We cannot know if this information is missing completely at random, or if the parents among this 30% were more or less likely to participate in early childhood programs. Therefore, we will report three rates: (1) the observed rate based on the 70% of children’s parents that provided information to BELL, (2) the most conservative lower-bound rate that assumes young children were not participating in early childhood programs if they did not provide data to BELL, and (3) the most liberal upper-bound rate that assumes young children were participating in high-quality early childhood programs if they did not provide data to BELL.

We provide raw information and all rates in the table, though we highlight different rates to serve different purposes in this report: we emphasize the observed rates when reporting the percentage of children who attended any sort of early childhood program as that rate is our best estimate of the true rate given the available information. We emphasize the lower-bound rates when reporting the number of children attending high-quality early childhood programs because this metric is a core indicator of the success of BELL activities. As such, we report the most conservative rates.

More than half (53%) of children with BELL data were participating in some sort of structured early childhood program (Lower-bound: 37%; Upper-bound: 68%). Nearly half (49%) of children age birth-to-3 years were attending a program (Lower-bound: 34%; Upper-bound: 64%), compared to 63% of 3-to-5 year olds (Lower-bound: 43%; Upper-bound: 75%).

198 children were attending a high-quality program (Lower-bound: 19%; Upper-bound: 50%; Observed rate: 28%). Older children were more likely to be in a high-quality program than younger children (3-to-5 year olds: Lower-bound: 28%; Upper-bound: 60%; Observed rate: 41%) compared to birth-to-3 year olds (Lower-bound: 15%; Upper-bound: 45%; Observed rate: 21%).

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5 More information on Keystone STARS is available at https://www.pakeys.org/keystone-stars/
SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) initiative is an innovation in the homeless family system and across systems focused on early child development. It has created change within and between systems, garnering local and national attention in the process. We have learned the following:

• BELL activities are generally well-received and consistently have participants from both the emergency housing and early childhood program systems.

• Shelter programs also work closely with BELL to engage families staying in shelter and support parents’ wishes when it comes to enrolling and participating in early childhood programs. These providers had conversations with the caregivers of seven out of every ten children staying in shelter over the 2018-19 school year.

• BELL engaged nearby high-quality early childhood programs, building relationships with staff through meet- and-greet gatherings and team self-assessments of the shelter. These relationships allow providers from each system share their expertise with the other.

• BELL has been resource for diverse stakeholders across the region, state, and beyond through its dissemination and advocacy efforts:
  • BELL was featured in multiple webinars with the national groups Zero to Three and SchoolHouse Connection.
  • The BELL model was highlighted in a special issue of the journal Zero to Three focused on young children experiencing homelessness.
  • BELL staff have engaged policymakers in Pennsylvania and in the federal government to represent the needs of young children experiencing homelessness and presented to diverse stakeholders at various professional meetings throughout the year.
  • BELL convened a national summit in September 2019 that brought together local providers, regional agencies, and national leadership to further the conversation around increasing resilience among young children who stay in family shelter.
  • Information from families, shelter providers, and the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services help guide BELL’s efforts while also providing an opportunity to discern both successes and ongoing challenges.
  • Shelter providers are engaging BELL and the families they serve with the shared goals of removing barriers to early childhood programs. This can help families who want to participate in childcare and preschool to promote resilience.
  • Most young children staying in shelter are participating in early childhood programs, though relatively few of the programs are high-quality.
Challenges remain:

• Three out of ten young children did not have a documented conversation about early childhood programs. The status of these children is unknown to BELL and represent an opportunity for a higher level of engagement between shelter providers and the families they serve.

• Nearly half of all children known to BELL are not attending any early childhood program to support early development. We speculate that families choose not to participate in early childhood programs for reasons spanning personal preferences and cultural values, potential trauma reactions related to trust, and persistent challenges of low availability and systemic barriers related to subsidy and funding programs.

• It is troubling that so few children attend high quality programs. Programs that are not high quality are more likely to miss opportunities for positive experiences and may present negative experiences that can put children at even higher levels of risk for poor outcomes.

• Younger children have the greatest barriers to high-quality early childhood programs. Development occurs rapidly for infants and toddlers and different factors, good or bad, tend to have a greater influence across the first three years of life. Even when infants and toddlers were involved with early childhood programs, most of those programs were not high quality. It is unclear what sort of impact these not-high quality programs have. This is a missed opportunity to promote resilience during the ages when positive contexts can have their greatest effects for children who are already threatened by family homelessness.

Considering our activities and findings across the 2018-19 school year, BELL makes the following recommendations:

- Activities should continue that support both shelter providers and early childhood programs in focusing on the needs of young children experiencing family homelessness. Providers from both systems appear committed to this goal and join together to share their expertise.

- The City of Philadelphia continues to develop its understanding of and response to young children experiencing homelessness regarding access to early childhood programs. A comprehensive early childhood information system would be an important tool in this effort. While the city’s Homeless Management Information System is a vital resource for serving young children experiencing homelessness and understanding their needs, there is no comprehensive information
system for early childhood programs. Such a system would include enrollment information for each program supported by public funds, including Early Head Start/Head Start, Early Learning Resource Centers, Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education, PHL PreK, and others. Such a system would allow providers to better understand and respond to the challenges that all families in shelter face with respect to early childhood program participation.

- Public service agencies and municipal services need to invest time and resources in making family shelters more appropriate for young children. Many aspects of emergency and transitional housing are not optimal for supporting early childhood development, including practices that disempower adults in their roles as parent and family decisionmaker, physical spaces that do not provide opportunities to safely play, explore, and learn, and messaging that does not prioritize the needs of young children. Housing providers involved with BELL are committed to making improvements, but they are sometimes limited by funding realities and the associated high rates of personnel turnover. Ongoing BELL-facilitated self-assessment can be helpful alongside professional development opportunities like BELL trainings for staff. However, these activities do not address capital needs nor demands from funding agencies that fail to prioritize family functioning and the needs of young children.

- Public policy decisionmakers need to support more high-quality early childhood programs and pathways for families in shelter to participate. Few children staying in shelter attend a high-quality early childhood program. Existing high-quality programs that are geographically near family shelters need to continue being supported and capacity expanded. These programs need to be explicit and intentional in how they facilitate enrollment for families staying in shelter (e.g., waiving application fees, adhering to federal mandates that waive or delay certain enrollment documentation) and actively work to maintain positive relationships with these families once enrolled. Programs need to maintain professional development that comprehensively empowers staff to understand, prepare for, and respond to common presentations of children and families who experience homelessness and other trauma. BELL can be a resource in this way.

- The areas around family shelters need more high-quality programs for infants and toddlers, and more effective ways to engage families with the youngest children. Children from birth to 3 years old staying in shelter were less likely to attend any early childhood program, and most that attended some program attended one that was not high quality. While opportunities for high-quality early childhood programs may be fewer than programs for older children, existing programs may struggle to connect with families in crisis who may be particularly wary of trusting center-based providers with their infant or toddler. Proactive steps to build and maintain trust may be fruitful, such as partnering with shelters for regular activities with parents and babies, inviting families to visit high-quality centers, and maintaining relationships with past families-served who can help programs understand how to engage new families going forward.

- BELL and its partners should continue to advocate for the needs of young children experiencing homelessness and disseminate learnings to key decisionmakers and broadly. While activities that focus on the shelter and early childhood systems in Philadelphia appear to be well warranted, many aspects of these systems are governed by decisions made at other levels of local, state, and federal policymaking. Furthermore, the BELL model may be adapted by other locales interested in similar goals and similar approaches.
WHO WE ARE:

JJ Cutuli is a senior research scientist at Nemours Children’s Health System. His research considers the varied processes of resilience in development, with an emphasis on how to promote good outcomes for children and families who experience very high levels of adversity.

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People’s Emergency Center (PEC) has served Philadelphia’s vulnerable citizens since 1972. PEC nurtures families, strengthens communities, and advocates for change. We provide more than 260 units of housing for families who experience homelessness. Our community development department leads efforts to improve the livability of West Powelton, Belmont, Mantua, and Millcreek neighborhoods. Our policy department advocates for local, state, and federal changes that improves public policies. Contact us at 267-77-5880, or on the web at https://www.pec-cares.org/about.html and

We are grateful to our funders:
• Vanguard Strong Start for Kids Program is dedicated to helping provide young children the opportunity grow, thrive and learn in communities near each of Vanguard’s major sites. The initiative is funded through a combination of Vanguard corporate gifts and Vanguard employee gifts from the company’s annual giving campaign.
• United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey.
• Individual donors.