



# What Pennsylvania's Next Governor Should Do to Support Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

## Children Cannot Wait

In November 2022, Pennsylvania voters will elect a new Governor. How will the next Governor support Pennsylvania's 40,000 children and youth experiencing homelessness?

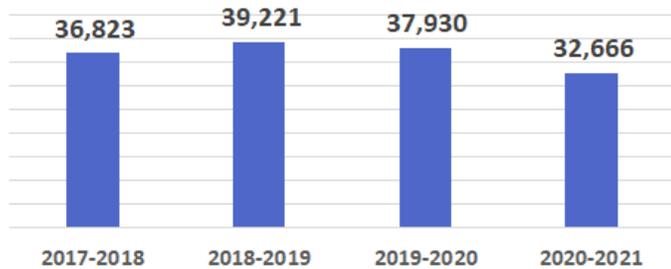
People's Emergency Center (PEC) and its **partners** have organized a campaign called **Children Cannot Wait** to seek responses to that question from candidates for office. In the last two years, PEC's leadership forums featured national, state, and local leadership who offered

**recommendations** on how best to support children and youth experiencing homelessness. (learn more at <https://www.pec-cares.org/bellsummit.html>.)

After consideration by the **PEC Policy Advisory Council** (see p. 4), and through stakeholder feedback, PEC summarized those recommendations and now encourages the Gubernatorial candidates **to learn** how to best support these children.

# Why focus on children and youth experiencing homelessness?

# of Children and Youth Who Experienced Homelessness in Pennsylvania, SY 2018 to 2021



At the rate of growth since 2017, Pennsylvania could identify nearly 50,000 homeless children and youth by 2025, up from nearly 40,000 in 2019.

By any analysis, that could be a catastrophe. Let us examine different age groups.

## Young Children Prenatal to Age 5

A large body of evidence suggests that the best opportunity to support children, bolster their academic careers, and strengthen their healthy development is in the first five years of their lives.<sup>i</sup>

The United States Department of Education estimated 29,000 children ages birth to five experienced homelessness in Pennsylvania in 2019. Homeless children are found in **every county** in the Commonwealth, residing in all communities. While many children experiencing homelessness are resilient despite adversity, many are not.

This is important because young children experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk of poor health and academic outcomes, and the experience of homelessness can slow a child's development, resulting in persistent delays. Young children experiencing homelessness are more likely to lack access to, and to participate regularly in, early childhood programs and services known to help mitigate the negative impact of homelessness and any of the range of co-occurring trauma or toxic stress known to accompany unsafe, unstable, and inadequate housing.<sup>ii</sup> Not enough homeless young children are in

high quality early learning programs that would improve their chances of performing well in future academics. An estimated 27 percent of young children in shelter in Philadelphia attend a high-quality program.<sup>iii</sup> Children experiencing homelessness had lower pre-reading skills,<sup>iv</sup> higher rates of behavior problems and early developmental delays compared to national norms for children their age. Pennsylvania's homeless children who take the standardized reading and math tests in the third grade score significantly lower than their housed peers.<sup>v</sup> Falling behind early in their academic careers lowers high school graduation rates, increases usage of remedial studies, and more.<sup>vi</sup>

Resources and data to understand the full impact of primary and secondary challenges facing Infants and toddlers are inadequate. There is no comprehensive data system for early childhood programs in Pennsylvania to inform who is enrolled in a quality program. There are no requirements for high-quality programs to contribute individual enrollment data to such a system, partly because there is no common mandate that spans federal, state, and local funding mechanisms. **Ultimately, decision makers are unable to tell who gets into these programs, who stays in, who benefits, and who is left behind.**

## The challenge for the Next Governor

Participating in high quality early learning programs can build resiliency in young children experiencing homelessness. Over the past five years, policymakers have enacted good policies in childcare, Head Start/Early Head Start, Early Intervention, and home visiting, which are key supports for young children. And in many counties, leadership in the homeless housing and the early learning systems have developed relationships aimed at increasing enrollment of homeless children into these programs.

**This is progress that should continue.**

Since 2016, community leaders have identified a set of recommendations that policymakers need to support for this progress to continue. The PEC Policy Advisory Council and leadership at PEC's annual 'Building Early Links for

Learning' summit offered a subset of those recommendations below:

## 1. Remove barriers to participation

- Appoint a senior leader within the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning to improve services for all children ages birth through 17 years and coordinate with other state departments.
- Fund designated Enrollment Specialists positions in the Head Start, Child Care, Home Visiting, and Early Intervention systems.
- Remove enrollment paperwork barriers.
- Train homeless service staff about the value of high-quality early childhood education.

## 2. Data

- Prioritize the improvement of state data collections systems by including enrollment information for all children attending early childhood programs and requiring that all high-quality programs contribute individual enrollment data to a single data collection at the state level.

## 3. Funding

- Continue to increase funding for Head Start/ Early Head Start and the childcare system.
- Increase capacity and support employees by raising wages and increase training.
- Enable the early learning system to provide housing assistance.
- Expand revenue for the state Housing Trust Fund.

## Youth

Fortunately, the critical importance of education for children in Kindergarten through high school is supported by the US Department of Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness. This program requires the designation of a

Homeless Education Coordinator in every state education agency and a Homeless Education Liaison in every school district nationwide who work to remove barriers to school attendance and who support the basic needs of children, youth and their families. This infrastructure is essential but is not sufficient to support the early learning needs of young children nor the educational needs of youth who have dropped out of school or who are homeless due to aging out of foster care or other situations.

Increasing numbers of youth experiencing homelessness is a tragedy similar to what young children experience. Much of what is known about youth homelessness is reported in a three age ranges: K-12, 13-18, and 18- to 26-year-olds.

### Youth ages 13- 18

Youth homelessness in Pennsylvania is estimated to number more than 31,800 teenagers, according to a study by researchers from Nemours Children's Services.<sup>vii</sup> The report says that "Student homelessness goes unrecognized most of the time" as 7 out of 9 homeless students are not identified by Pennsylvania's school districts, missing more than 23,000 students. Without being supported, these students will lack supports to attend school and to fully participate. The report goes on to show that these youth are 170% greater odds of sexual victimization, 466% greater odds of physical victimization, and that these students have higher rates of alcohol abuse, suicidality, poor grades, risky sexual behavior, and substance abuse than their peers.

### Youth Ages 18-26

The data on this group of homeless youth in the Commonwealth does not exist as a whole. To provide some insight, the Philadelphia Youth Homelessness Needs Assessment<sup>viii</sup> offers some insight into key issues that will be common throughout Pennsylvania:

1. There is an overall lack of youth-dedicated supportive housing programs.
2. The existing housing inventory for unaccompanied youth is not available to all.
3. Young people experiencing homelessness need an array of supportive services to transition successfully to permanent housing outcomes.

# The challenge for the Next Governor

A 2016 report<sup>ix</sup> by the Joint State Government Commission of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provided many recommendations supported by agencies throughout the state that are specific to youth, including:

- Continue and improve the Educating Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) program, with specific attention to identification and outreach as well as to academic achievement.
- Educate teachers about the signs of homelessness and homeless students' rights and instruct them to refer homeless students to the ECYEH office for services.
- Initiate a pilot project with CoCs collaborating with federal, state and local governments, private agencies, and with homeless and formerly homeless youth. The lead agency could be the Department of Human Services Office of Children, Youth and Families, with project activities consisting of identification and engagement of homeless youth.
- Homeless prevention, including: transition and life skills, discharge planning from child welfare and juvenile justice institutions, and counseling for family and "kin" reunification.

The recommendations from the **Philadelphia Youth Needs Assessment** in 2018 are still relevant. Some of the key recommendations are:

- Expand and diversify youth-dedicated housing inventory, including innovative housing models.
- Extend age eligibility for all youth-dedicated housing programs up to age 24.
- Shape prevention and diversion options specifically designed for youth.

## Conclusion

Pennsylvania is at a crossroads with the advent of new policy makers in 2023. A new Governor will affect how young children experiencing homelessness.

What will he support?

## About People's Emergency Center

People's Emergency Center (PEC) uplifts our community by providing housing, social services, and quality of life supports that empower people and encourage more prosperous and safer neighborhoods for all residents of West Philadelphia. Learn more at [www.pec-cares.org](http://www.pec-cares.org).

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(affiliations listed here are for identification purposes only and do not imply those organizations endorse this paper)

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i The Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) is the education system's response to supporting students who are homeless. Learn more at <https://bit.ly/3HPhAAK>.

ii Brown, S.R., Shinn, M., and Khadduri, J. (January 2017). Well-being of Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness. Homeless Families Research Brief. OPRE, Report No. 2017-06. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre\\_homefam\\_brief3\\_hhs\\_children\\_02\\_24\\_2017\\_b508.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre_homefam_brief3_hhs_children_02_24_2017_b508.pdf).

iii People's Emergency Center: Final Report to Vanguard Strong Start for Kids®, 2020.

iv Pre-reading skills are skills that help a child learn to read, such as phonological awareness, listening skills, learning new words, and print recognition.

v Office of Research and Evaluation, School District of Philadelphia: Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (Analysis of 2018-19 Data)

vi Council for a Strong America: <https://www.strongnation.org/readynation>

vii Cutuli, JJ, et al: High School Students Experiencing Homelessness: Findings from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), 2020

viii Philadelphia Youth Homelessness Needs Assessment, Sones, J., April, 2018

ix Joint State Government Commission: Homelessness In Pennsylvania: Causes, Impacts, And Solutions- A Task Force And Advisory Committee Report, 2016. See <https://bit.ly/3azMaTv>

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