



# People's Emergency Center

Nurturing Families, Strengthening Neighborhoods, Driving Change.  
325 N. 39<sup>th</sup> Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104  
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## Roundtable Discussion

### Testimony of Kathy Desmond

#### President and CEO of the People's Emergency Center

September 18, 2020

Good morning. My name is Kathy Desmond, president and CEO of the People's Emergency Center, which is located in your district in West Philadelphia.

Since 1972, PEC has served our community and families who experience homelessness.

Thank you for your interest in young children experiencing homelessness. Your district has most of the emergency housing programs for families and schools with the largest number of students who experience homelessness. So, the children you represent are *our* children. Working together, we can get them services they need.

As far back as 2007, Congress put in motion policies which would increase the enrollment of young children experiencing homelessness in Head Start, Early Head Start, childcare, and home visiting programs. In 2015 the new guidelines issued by United States Administration for Children and Families furthered these efforts by directing states to increase opportunities for young children experiencing homelessness to access these programs.

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In 2016, the U.S. Departments of Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services released a publication entitled, ***“Policy Statement on Meeting the Needs of Families with Young Children Experiencing and At Risk of Homelessness.”*** This document encouraged system integration as a strategy for ensuring that families entering emergency and transitional housing have equal access to participate in early learning programs.

So, equipped with sound federal policies and strong local leadership, community-based organizations stepped up to create change.

In 2016, with generous support from the William Penn Foundation, PEC surveyed staff and parents from emergency housing programs across Philadelphia about their experiences trying to enroll their children into high quality early learning programs.

We learned parents **understood** the value of high-quality early learning, but their housing assistance programs did not know where the high-quality programs were, or how to enroll. Conversely, the early learning system did not understand the needs of young children and families experiencing homelessness.

**Now we had evidence** and a set of recommendations on *how* to move forward. Working with our partners at the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, and more than a dozen emergency and transitional housing programs, and with funding from:

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- the Vanguard Strong Start for Kids program and
- the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey,

PEC created the Building Early Links for Learning project, known as BELL.

BELL is now a nationally known innovation in the homeless family services field of which Philadelphia can be proud.

We connect two disparate systems, the homeless housing and the early learning systems, creating change within and between systems.

We provide trainings, workshops, and connections.

We've helped 15 emergency housing partners improve their physical environments so that they are conducive to child development using the United States Administration for Children's Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters.

We are making a positive impact. Our emergency housing partners had conversations with the caregivers of 70% of the children staying in shelter over the 2018-19 school year. This hadn't happened previously.

Despite this success, there remain challenges.

We know that 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.

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**Fewer** young children, ages birth-to-3 years old attended **any** program and if they did attend they were less likely to attend a high-quality program. For example:

- 49% of birth-to-3 year olds attended any early child program compared to 63% of 3-to-5 year olds
- Conservatively, 15% of young children, ages birth-to-3 year olds attended a high-quality program compared to 28% of 3-to-5 year olds

We all need to do better.

Our recommendations for the next three years include:

- Family shelters and early childhood programs need continued support to serve young children experiencing homelessness. Most programs are not staffed adequately enough, and their buildings need improvements.
- Policy decision makers need to encourage more high-quality early childhood programs to create pathways for families in shelter to participate. Before COVID, they needed the funding to improve and to keep their heads above water. During and after this pandemic, they need funding to survive.
- Shelter and early childhood systems need to **increase focus** on opportunities for younger children as they are less likely to participate in high-quality early childhood programs. There is not enough high-quality infant and toddler care available to meet the need.

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- 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.
- Congressman Evans, we ask:
  - Can you convince Senator Toomey to call for a vote for H. R. 7027, the Child Care is Essential Act? This proposal creates a \$50 billion Child Care Stabilization Fund to stabilize the childcare sector and support providers to safely reopen and operate.
  - We request that HUD and the Administration for Children and Families change their policies. Specifically:
    - HUD policy needs to add to its criteria for funding a requirement to demonstrate evidence that the 'Continuum of Care' system is increasing access to high quality ECE for its young children;
    - The U.S. Administration for Children and Youth need to have their own line-item for housing support so that families in Head Start, childcare, and home visiting programs can receive housing support in a streamlined, cost efficient way.
  - In addition, more funding is needed for home visiting, Head Start, and the Child Care Development Fund.
- PEC is ready and willing to have this discussion again next year. We invite you work with us again for next year's Roundtable Discussion.

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