

Head Start Collaboration and Partnerships to Support Families Experiencing Homelessness

The federal Head Start program promotes school readiness for infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children and is widespread throughout Pennsylvania. Strengthening collaboration within communities to support children and families experiencing homelessness has long been a priority for Head Start grantees. In fact, Head Start Program Performance Standards include the requirement that grantees work with local organizations to identify and support families experiencing homelessness.¹

To address how homelessness among Head Start grantees may be addressed, the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office (HSSCO) analyzed multiple data sources to examine the incidence of homelessness and the nature of grantee collaboration with key partners. This research brief summarizes results from the analysis and offers recommendations to grow collaboration and partnerships among Head Start grantees in Pennsylvania.

Data

This report uses data from 2018-19 Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Summary Reports and Pennsylvania HSSCO needs assessments.²⁻³ Head Start grantees are mandated to complete a PIR annually. These data are available to the HSSCO for planning purposes. The PIR includes data on child eligibility, cumulative enrollment of children and families experiencing homelessness, housing statistics, and related topics.⁴

The Needs Assessment data are based on cross-sectional surveys administered by HSSCO in partnership with Center for Schools and Communities. Head Start grantees are located in all but one of Pennsylvania's 67 counties (Forest County being the exception) and serve thousands of

children five days a week. The survey data were collected in spring 2017 (n=227) and 2020 (n=266) and provide point-in-time summaries of Head Start in Pennsylvania using an anonymous, convenience sample of Head Start staff who volunteered to complete the survey. Each sample was representative of the different regions in Pennsylvania where Head Start is offered. The survey examined, in part, the frequency of collaboration with key partners, perceived partner helpfulness in working with families, and whether staff found providing services related to homelessness to be challenging.

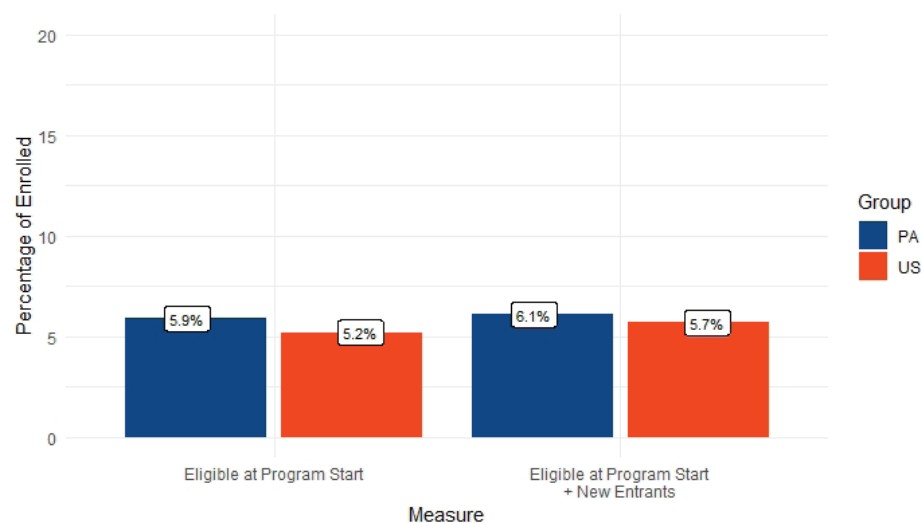
Enrollment of Families Experiencing Homelessness

A starting point to understand the landscape of homelessness in Head Start is to examine eligibility and enrollment data. Children whose housing situation meets the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness⁵ are categorically eligible for enrollment in

Head Start and amount to roughly 2,600 individuals. Additional children and families identified as experiencing homelessness during the program year are reported as *new entrants*. Figure 1 shows both of these groups, and that Head Start grantees enrolled a slightly greater proportion of children experiencing homelessness than the United States overall.⁴

Other PIR data indicate that emergency/crisis intervention (e.g., food, clothing, shelter) and housing assistance (e.g., subsidies, utilities, repairs) were the third and fourth most frequently requested/needed services of 16 family services reported on the PIR. One in eight Pennsylvania Head Start families have expressed an interest in, or were identified as needing, housing assistance.⁴ These circumstances are commonly addressed through collaborative efforts among Head Start stakeholders.

Figure 1. Percentage of Head Start Enrolled Children and Families in Pennsylvania and the United States Overall Who Were Experiencing Homelessness



Source: PIR 2019

Collaboration to Support Persons Experiencing Homelessness

Frequency of Collaboration

The needs assessments asked staff to indicate how often they collaborate with key partners in their community to identify children and families experiencing homelessness and who may wish to receive Head Start services. Local community partners included homeless and domestic violence shelters, substance abuse treatment facilities, and housing agencies. Figure 2 shows that collaboration is generally ongoing, perhaps every 2-4 months, or about quarterly. Working relationships between Head Start staff and partners appear to remain open and able to support exchange of referrals and collaboration throughout the program year versus limiting contact to annual recruitment efforts. The survey responses also show that collaboration increased from 2017 to 2020 and that collaboration is most frequent with housing agencies and least frequent with substance abuse facilities. Based on a chi-square test ($\chi^2 < 0.05$), differences across years are statistically significant for the highest and lowest frequency levels.

Organization Helpfulness

Head Start staff were asked to indicate the helpfulness of various organizations to reach

Head Start goals related to serving homeless families. Local community organizations included McKinney-Vento liaisons, agencies serving homeless families, homeless housing agencies, and domestic violence shelters. Staff indicated whether they perceived each organization as very helpful, moderately helpful, slightly helpful, or not helpful. In general, Figure 3 shows that survey respondents reported an increase in helpfulness from 2017 to 2020. Additionally, the proportion reporting organizations as “not helpful” decreased over time and the proportion reporting “very helpful” increased for all partner types. Based on a chi-square test ($\chi^2 < 0.05$), differences across years were statistically significant for all levels of helpfulness.

Difficulty addressing homelessness

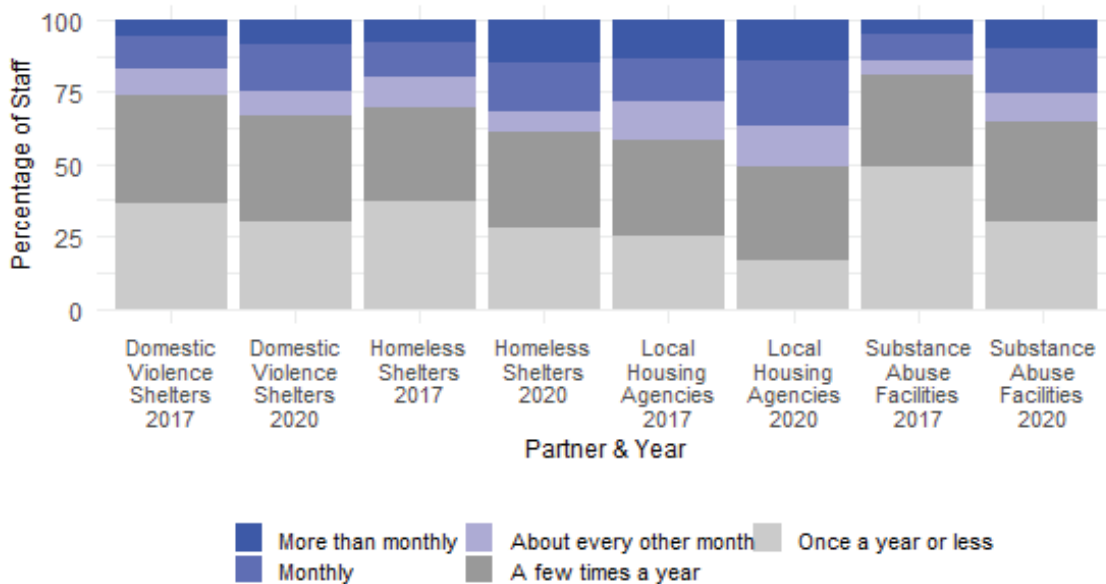
In 2017, staff were asked if they found tasks associated with identifying and serving homeless families to be difficult. They responded regarding four specific tasks related to using the definition of homelessness, identifying children and families experiencing homelessness, obtaining necessary documentation, and reporting of data. Staff rated difficulty on a Likert-type scale ranging from “not at all difficult” to “very difficult.” More than 80 percent of respondents indicated they did not find these tasks “more” or “very” difficult,

except for “reporting data” where about one-fifth of respondents did.

Summary

Survey responses suggest that working relationships with key partners have become stronger and more helpful for grantees between 2017 and 2020, while leaving room for continued improvement. When examined with PIR data for the same period, it appears these growing partnerships are resulting in increased identification and enrollment of families experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Such partnerships are especially important to address inadequate and unstable housing that a considerable number (1 in 8) of Head Start families are reporting and that interferes with healthy growth and learning for young children. Clearly, Pennsylvania Head Start grantees are already providing family services to meet both emergency and ongoing housing needs by families in their communities. Efforts of the Pennsylvania HSSCO and grantees to strengthen partnerships and collaboration will benefit children, families, and staff. Additionally, these efforts will develop further the capacity of Head Start to be fully recognized as a key resource and critical partner in the early childhood and housing communities.

Figure 2. Collaboration Frequency Between Head Start Staff and Their Key Partners to Identify Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness in 2017 Compared to 2020



Compare stacked bars across years.
Source: PA HSSCO Needs Assessment

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of PIR and survey data, it is clear that increased partnerships and collaboration to address housing is necessary. Additionally, more training is needed to ensure staff have sufficient understanding of Head Start goals and identification of families experiencing homelessness.⁶ The following recommendations provide actionable steps to continue building partnerships, enhance provider training, and expand outreach to families.

Continue to Strengthen Partnerships and Collaboration Related to Housing

Survey results indicate that the quality of these working relationships continues to improve. Efforts of the HSSCO to bring partners together regionally for collaborative dialogue have had a positive impact. Given current economic conditions, these partnerships will be crucial in the coming months and years as families and communities adjust to post-pandemic life and work to heal and restore. Intentional, facilitated opportunities to gather at local, regional, and state levels will be valuable in moving forward together. Specifically, increased efforts by the HSSCO to encourage partnerships among HS Grantees with the Department of Education, Education for Children and Youth Experiencing

Homelessness Program, Early Intervention, the Office of Children, Youth and Families, the Continuums of Care Organizations and the Early Learning Resource Centers is highly recommended.

Develop Guidance and Training

PIR data underscore a number of family service needs related to housing. To aid both staff and families, it may be helpful to establish policies and practices specifically addressing local housing needs in collaboration with families and community partners. A review of the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center ([ECLKC](#)) reveals 167 online resources related to housing. It is recommended that Head Start grantees work together with the HSSCO, partner agencies, Head Start technical assistance providers, and federal staff to develop guidance, tool kits, and test curricula that advance current resources and strengthen grantees’ capacity to meet the obvious demand for housing related family services.

Continue Outreach to Families Experiencing Homelessness

Head Start grantees must continue to build on existing partnerships to identify families who are experiencing homelessness. PIR data indicate (for Pennsylvania and nationally) that the proportion of children enrolled using the McKinney-Vento

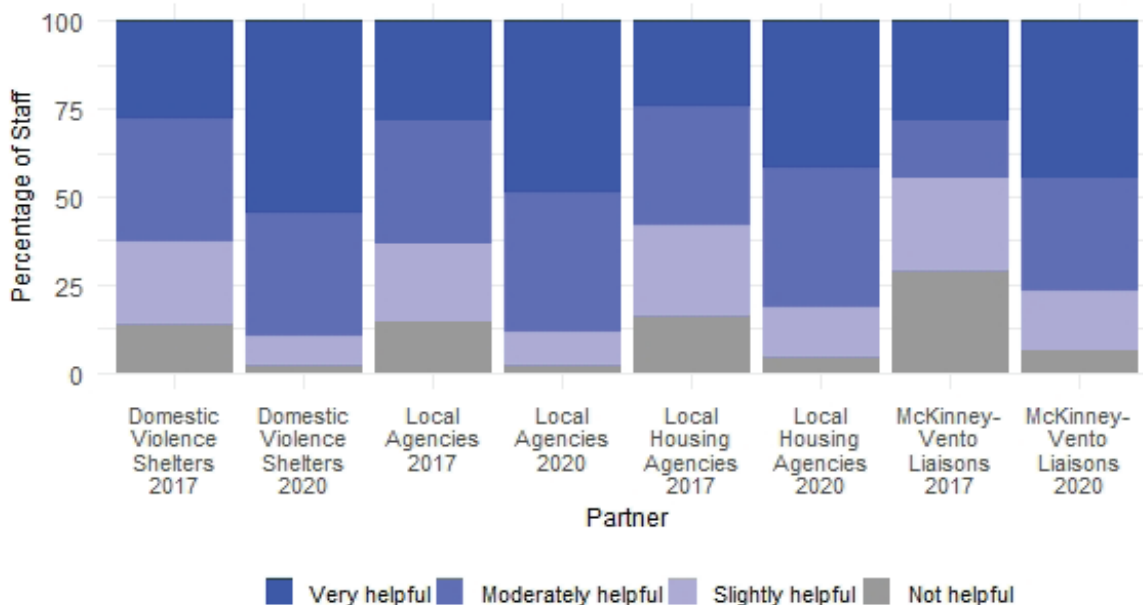
eligibility criteria is less than half of the families deemed eligible using “over income” or “exceed allowable income at enrollment” criteria.

Although stagnant wages complicate reliance on income alone, it is estimated that in 2016-2017 less than one third of young children experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania participated in quality early care and education (ECE).⁷ Grantees can take advantage of existing partnerships to inform referral processes and further increase outreach and identification. For example, Schoolhouse Connection (2020)⁸ provides templates aligned with McKinney-Vento legislation for building partnerships with local school districts. These model documents may strengthen dialogue and collaboration between Head Start and public schools. Additionally, the recent American Rescue Plan presents an opportunity to strengthen connections with the housing sector to enhance referrals and to ensure access to housing benefits for Head Start families.⁶

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Figure 3. Percentage of Staff Who Rated Organizations’ Helpfulness in Addressing Homelessness in 2017 Compared to 2020



Compare stacked bars across years.
Source: PA HSSCO Needs Assessment

References

- 1 Office of Head Start. (2000). Head Start Program Performance Standards and Other Regulations. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.
- 2 Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office. (2017). Annual Needs Assessment. (pp. 1–27) [Unpublished Report]. Pennsylvania Head Start Collaboration Office.
- 3 Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office. (2020). Annual Needs Assessment. [Unpublished Report]. Pennsylvania Head Start Collaboration Office.
- 4 Office of Head Start. (2019). Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Summary Report (2018-2019). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- 5 National Center for Homeless Education. (2020). McKinney-Vento Definition* – National Center for Homeless Education. <https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/>

*Homeless children and youth include, according to the McKinney-Vento legislation, individuals without a regular nighttime resident, and includes children sharing housing, living in hotels or similar arrangements, living in cars, parks or similar settings, and migratory children defined in section 1309 of ESEA.
- 6 National Head Start Association. (2021). The American Rescue Plan: Policy Change Affecting Head Start Families and Programs (pp. 1–27). <https://www.nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-American-Rescue-Plan-Head-Start.pdf>
- 7 Yamashiro, A., & McLaughlin, J. (2019). Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles 2019 (pp. 1–82). US Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/homeless/early-childhood-homelessness-state-profiles-2019.pdf>
- 8 Schoolhouse Connection. (2020, June 1). Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness: Coordination Guidance for Integrating Homelessness into Working Agreements and MOUs between Head Start Grantees and Local Educational Agencies. SchoolHouse Connection. <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/integrating-homelessness-into-mou-between-hs-and-leas/>