



## **Supporting Infants, Toddlers, and Families Experiencing Homelessness:** Strategies for Early Childhood Development Providers

The early years of life, from prenatal to age three, are a critical stage of development for all children. Outside stressors like homelessness can threaten healthy child and family development, and it is important that children and families experiencing homelessness have access to high-quality early learning development opportunities which can mitigate the harmful effects of homelessness. SchoolHouse Connection, in partnership with Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, analyzed [data on infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness](#), including their enrollment in early childhood development programs. Providers play an important role in ensuring families experiencing homelessness are identified and supported through programs like home visiting, child care, Early Head Start, and Early Intervention.

### 1. Ensure all staff know the early childhood definition of homelessness and signs that a family may be experiencing it.

- ☐ Provide training for every staff member throughout the program - enrollment personnel, front office staff, classroom teachers, transportation staff, etc. - about the impacts of homelessness on infants and toddlers, and what to do if they [suspect a family is experiencing homelessness](#).
- ☐ Partner with other programs and systems, like K12 school districts, to offer joint training and share resources that can help staff understand the impacts of homelessness on young children, particularly infants and toddlers.

The McKinney-Vento Act defines homelessness as children who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence”. This definition applies not only to preK-12 schools, but also Head Start, Early Head Start, licensed child care providers, and Early Intervention services (for more on the definition of homelessness and requirements across sectors, see [SHC's Cross-Sector Framework](#)). Under McKinney-Vento, homelessness includes:

- I. Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons (also known as “doubled-up” or “couch surfing”).
- II. Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations.
- III. Living in emergency or transitional shelters.
- IV. Living in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.

## 2. Remove barriers so that families experiencing homelessness can access early childhood development programs.

- ☐ Partner with other agencies, programs, and settings where families experiencing homelessness are most likely to frequent, such as shelters, motels, public libraries, etc. Post information about your program that families will see, and create formal referral partnerships when possible to ensure families will be routed to an appropriate early learning development program.

[Horizons for Homeless Children](#) in Roxbury, Massachusetts has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the local homeless shelter provider. When a family with young children enters shelter care, they are automatically referred to Horizons to ensure each child experiencing homelessness is immediately enrolled in the early learning program.

- ☐ Review enrollment forms, housing questionnaires, and other paperwork to ensure questions about living situations are aligned with the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, and are appropriately worded so as not to stigmatize or create fear among families. The [Decision-Making Tool to Determine a Family's Homeless Situation](#) from Head Start provides a useful template for housing questionnaires.
- ☐ Provide enrollment forms and housing questionnaires in multiple languages, and remove words like “homeless” and “residency”, which prevent many families from self-identifying.
- ☐ Provide families experiencing homelessness with information about extensions and waivers to submit required documentation, such as immunization records, birth certificates, and parent work requirements. Learn more about state provisions [here](#).
- ☐ Collect and report data on the number of infants, toddlers, and families experiencing homelessness served across the program. Many programs, like Early Head Start, have required data reporting forms. Other programs might collect information about a family's living situation, but not mark it as homeless. For example, providers might track families who are staying with a parent, relative, or someone else. In many cases, this likely qualifies as doubled-up homelessness and should be reported as such.

### 3. Connect infants, toddlers, and families experiencing homelessness to other services.

- ☐ Connect families with access to housing, when possible. This could include helping families fill out housing assistance applications or access shelter services, where available. Some programs are able to cover a few nights in a motel.

The [Connecticut Head Start on Housing](#) Voucher pilot program, enacted by Governor Ned Lamont, puts public housing vouchers directly in the hands of Early Head Start and Head Start programs, enabling families experiencing homelessness with infants and toddlers to receive direct access to housing.

- ☐ Ensure families have access to hygiene products, diapers, and formula, and offer connections and referrals to community service agencies who can provide food, clothing, and other basic needs.
- ☐ Consider ways to help families experiencing homelessness with access to transportation, which is often a barrier that prevents participation in programs.
- ☐ Offer access to facilities so that families experiencing homelessness can use on-site washers and dryers, showers, etc.
- ☐ Complete the [Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Programs Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness](#) to evaluate how your program can be more responsive to the needs of families experiencing homelessness.