Under “normal” circumstances, homelessness harms the health and development of young children, jeopardizing their learning and life outcomes. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers experiencing homelessness are even more vulnerable in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, as they struggle with disruptions in food, family, and housing, as well as the increased stress of caregivers. Yet young children often are overlooked in homelessness and housing systems, and families experiencing homelessness often are overlooked in early childhood programs. Without focused efforts to mitigate the effects of the present crisis on young children experiencing homelessness, they are at substantial risk of long-term harm—harm that could impact their lives long after the COVID-19 crisis has passed.

SchoolHouse Connection (SHC) offers five strategies for young children experiencing homelessness during (and after) the COVID-19 crisis. While this document emphasizes the unique roles played by early childhood programs, McKinney-Vento local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaisons, homeless and housing providers, and nutrition programs, we recognize that the best way to maximize and efficiently use resources is by working together across sectors.

Please share this information with your community partners as we collectively find new ways to provide quality support and learning opportunities to young children experiencing homelessness, and to their families.

**Reminder: Federal Early Care and Education Protections for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness Remain in Effect**

A number of federal laws—including the McKinney-Vento Act, the Head Start Act, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—include requirements for identification, outreach, enrollment, and coordinated support for children experiencing homelessness. These laws remain in full effect, although the way in which they are implemented may change as a result of COVID-19 closures and stay-at-home orders. See SHC’s Early Childhood Homelessness page for more information.
1 Maintain proactive identification efforts.

Many families with young children are likely to fall into homelessness as a result of job loss and economic struggles caused by the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, many families who are currently experiencing homelessness find themselves in urgent need of new living arrangements. Proactive identification efforts are necessary to find all families experiencing homelessness and ensure that they are connected to appropriate resources.

**LEA Homeless Liaisons and K-12 Educators:**
- Ask parents who are identified as homeless if there are younger children in the household; ask youth experiencing homelessness if they have younger siblings.
- Provide flyers, posters, or other McKinney-Vento awareness materials to programs serving families with young children; post them in areas where families may be living (motels, campgrounds, etc.).

**Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and home visiting programs:**
- Sensitively and discreetly ask about families’ current living situations, including past, present, and potential housing instability.
- Contact shelters and programs serving families experiencing homelessness to inform them about any services you continue to provide during the outbreak.

**Housing Programs/Homeless Providers:**
- Inform parents of their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act and the availability of services provided by any early childhood programs that remain open.
- Inform McKinney-Vento liaisons, Head Start, and other early childhood programs about the presence and needs of young children in your program.

2 Communicate frequently and creatively.

Social distancing and the closure of schools and early learning programs exponentially increase the isolation faced by families experiencing homelessness. For young children, voices and faces matter. The loss of healthy and consistent emotional connection can have negative developmental consequences.

- Help families stay connected to you and to their own support networks by helping them obtain free unlimited minutes and Wi-Fi, prepaid phones, tablets and other devices. Spectrum, Comcast, Xfinity Wifi, and Cox are offering free internet right now, with some restrictions.
- Encourage families to let you know if they must relocate unexpectedly, and where they go. Ask if they are willing to provide names and contact information for other people who will know how to reach them if they move suddenly.
- Adapt strategies and techniques from home visiting programs. Child Trends has compiled a document to support providers in their delivery of home visiting services to families during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring ways to adapt strategies from traditional home visiting to virtual home visits during the crisis.
3 Ensure that meals and food products are age appropriate.

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, it was not uncommon for homeless infants and young children—even those living in shelters—to suffer from poor nutrition. COVID-19, however, presents further threats to the ability of infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children to obtain adequate nutrition, as the pandemic has disrupted existing distribution systems, and any new distribution systems may not yet address the specific way that infants and toddlers eat.

- Evaluate the offerings of food distribution networks to assure that age-appropriate offerings, in adequate amounts, are available for infants, toddlers, preschool-age children, and their families experiencing homelessness, no matter where they are staying.
- Learn about the unique circumstances of each family prior to providing food. Most families experiencing homelessness are staying in unstable situations with other people, or in motels, and are not in shelters. They frequently must move from one temporary arrangement to another, and may not be staying in a place where they can store or refrigerate large amounts of food products, or prepare meals.
- Work with **Women, Infants, and Children** and **Child and Adult Care Food Program** partners to ensure public schools, shelters, and other community distribution sites are familiar with meal patterns appropriate for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and have age-appropriate meals available as part of their meal distribution plans.
- For McKinney-Vento liaisons: coordinate the provision of school meals for school-age children with programs serving young children to provide age-appropriate meals to younger siblings and/or younger relatives of students. Ensure that all community partners understand the **waivers granted for USDA programs**, including those that allow parents or guardians to pick up meals for their children.
- For Head Start and Early Head Start programs: review **guidance from the Office of Head Start** on potential strategies for providing food to children during center closures, including assembling bags of food for families and delivering them to homes in agency vehicles, having families pick up bags of food at a drive-through location, or partnering with other community organizations to distribute food.

4 Child-proof emergency shelters and temporary housing for young children.

Ensure that emergency shelters, motels, and other housing facilities have taken age-appropriate precautions in their facilities and are providing appropriate support for infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children of families in their programs. Relevant precautions include appropriate childproofing of electric sockets, removal of sharp objects and toxins, and provision for adequate security, among other things. **See SHC’s Childproofing Checklist and the Administration for Children and Families’ Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters.**
Help families experiencing homelessness obtain access to electronic devices and WiFi, to enable children and their families to remain in touch with teachers, caregivers, and peers. As noted above, Spectrum, Comcast, Xfinity Wifi, and Cox are offering free internet, with some restrictions.

Be mindful of approaching enrollment deadlines for Head Start and other public preschool programs for Fall 2020; inform families of deadlines and help them apply.

- More information about Head Start.
  - Contact your local Head Start program or state Head Start office for enrollment information.
- More information about preschool and homelessness.
  - Contact your local school district to ask about preschool enrollment.

Identify resources for subsidized child care for infants, toddlers, and other children who are experiencing homelessness, especially for essential workers who are homeless.

- More information
- Find your local Child Care Resource and Referral organization contact.
- Find your state child care contact.

Identify and support children with disabilities. Early Intervention programs are available for children birth to three with developmental delays.

- More information and find your state contact.
- For children four and older, school districts must identify and evaluate children with disabilities experiencing homelessness. Find more information and your state contact.

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