



Addressing Child, Youth, and Family Homelessness: Priorities for the Biden-Harris Administration

November 2020

There is nothing ordinary about this Presidential transition. The seismic events of the coronavirus pandemic, the economic crisis, the toxic political divisions, and the long overdue awakening to systemic racism call for new thinking, and bold and decisive action to reflect current realities. This is especially true for our most vulnerable children, youth, and families, who must be a priority if our nation is to have hope for a stronger future.

Addressing homelessness in the same ways that it has been addressed in the past is a recipe for failure we can ill afford. Specifically, we must prioritize young children, youth, and families, and we must center child and youth serving systems in our response to homelessness. If we do not, we are all but guaranteeing that homelessness will continue for future generations.

Consider the evidence:

- **Family and youth homelessness is at record levels, and likely growing.** Prior to the pandemic, public schools identified and enrolled [1.5 million children and youth experiencing homelessness in 2017-2018](#) – the highest number on record. Another [1.4 million children under age six](#) are estimated to experience homelessness. In addition to children and youth who experience homelessness with their families, [at least one in thirty adolescents ages 13-17](#), and nearly one in ten young adults 18-24, are estimated to experience homelessness on their own. These numbers are now likely much higher as a result of the economic downturn and family stress.
- **Most children and youth experiencing homelessness are not visible in shelters or on the streets, but rather moving from place to place: couches, basements, motels, cars, and wherever they can find temporary refuge.** Lack of shelters for youth and families,

and fear of shelters, mean that most families and youth who are homeless are outside of the formal shelter system; indeed, [only 12% of children and youth experiencing homelessness were staying in shelters](#) when they were first identified as homeless by public schools. Shelter space has been even further reduced during the pandemic due to social distancing protocols and shelter closures, and families and youth have even more fear of seeking shelter. Yet families and youth experiencing homelessness outside the shelter system are rarely able to socially distance, or limit their mobility; they are often at the mercy of others, and thus at high risk of transmission and infection of COVID-19.

- **Family and youth homelessness does not occur in isolation from other inequities in our society, and in particular, racial inequity.** Systemic racism is a driver of homelessness, as demonstrated by racial disparities in the likelihood of families and youth becoming homeless, in the prolonged harmful consequences of homelessness, and in barriers to accessing education and services. [In high school](#), Black students are 2.67 times more likely to experience homelessness, and Hispanic students are 1.68 times more likely to experience homelessness, than their white peers. A [February 2020 national survey](#) of two- and four-year college students found that among racial and ethnic groups, American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Black students have the highest rates of homelessness. Research from [CA](#), [IN](#), and [WA](#) demonstrate significantly lower graduation rates and achievement for students of color who are experiencing homelessness.
- **Family and youth homelessness is complex and cannot be solved by housing alone.** The University of Chicago's Chapin Hall found that [lack of a high school diploma or GED](#) is the single greatest risk factor associated with homelessness as a young adult; the second greatest risk factor was [having a child](#); and the third was having a low income (under \$24,000). Moreover, one-hundred percent of young adults who participated in [in-depth interviews](#) reported family-based instability and trauma prior to their homelessness. The devastating impact of homelessness on children begins prior to birth, with harm to health and development prenatally, [in infancy](#), [in early childhood](#), and in school-age years. The [national high school graduation rate for homeless students](#) is 67.5% -- 12 points below the graduation rate of economically disadvantaged students, and over 18 points below the graduation rate of all high school students. The health risks and vulnerabilities for children and youth experiencing homelessness are comparable, [no matter where children and youth are staying](#): with other people, in shelters, or in motels. Students experiencing homelessness are also [more likely to have disabilities](#); 18% of K-12 students experiencing homelessness were identified as having a

disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, compared to 14% of all K-12 students.

- **While single adults have been the focus of pre-pandemic federal policy and administrative action on homelessness, comprehensive solutions for families and youth are necessary to prevent and address homelessness.** Many homeless adults first experienced homelessness as children or youth, failed to graduate from high school, and/or suffered various adverse events that impacted them throughout life. Efforts to intervene *before* these children and youth reached adulthood could have prevented their later bouts of more entrenched homelessness. For instance, 20% of unsheltered homeless adults in [Los Angeles](#) indicated that they first experienced homelessness when they were under age 18, and an additional 25% when they were young adults between the ages of 18-24. Similarly, in [Seattle](#), 18% of homeless adults indicated that their first experience of homelessness occurred when they were under age 18, and an additional 27% when they were between the ages of 18-24. And in the state of [Minnesota](#), more than half (52%) of homeless adults surveyed first became homeless by the time they were age 24, with over one-third (36%) first experiencing homelessness at or before age 18.
- **Public schools, early childhood programs, and institutions of higher education are a de facto homelessness response system.** These agencies see more children and youth experiencing homelessness (including parenting youth) than the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) homeless assistance programs; as child and youth-focused institutions, they know more about their complex needs (beyond housing) and are better able to track and respond to youth mobility; their metrics and goals are more aligned to longer-term measures of health and well-being and future school success; and, if they were properly supported and resourced, they could do even more to assist youth holistically to resolve their homelessness permanently. In sum, early care and educational agencies are not ancillary to the federal response to homelessness – they are central to it. This is especially true in the wake of COVID-19, when schools and early care programs are often the only agencies actively looking for and serving children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness.

With this evidence in mind, we ask the Biden-Harris Administration to provide specific and detailed attention to the role of child and youth-focused systems -- especially early care and education -- in preventing and addressing family and youth homelessness, and to ensure that housing policies reflect how families and youth experience homelessness and what they need to overcome it permanently.

Priorities for the First 100 Days

The Biden-Harris Administration must respond to the immediate crisis of family and youth homelessness during the coronavirus pandemic, while laying the groundwork for longer-term recovery. To this end, there are three urgent items to address child and youth homelessness that should be executed within the first 100 days in order to limit harm and save lives.

- 1. Issue an Executive Order Directing Educational Agencies to Find, Enroll, and Support Missing PreK-12 Students and their Families.** Early in the pandemic, many children and youth experiencing homelessness lost one of the most stable, secure places in their lives: school. School provided safety, structure, normalcy, food, caring adults, and the education that is key to a life free of homelessness. Under federal law, local educational agency homeless liaisons are required to identify homeless students; however, the challenge of doing so without regular in-person contact is tremendous. At the same time, the high mobility of youth and disruptions of the pandemic made keeping in touch very difficult. [A national survey of liaisons by SchoolHouse Connection and Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan](#) very conservatively estimates that at least 420,000 homeless students, from preschool through high school, are not enrolled in school, and may be in harm's way. Taking into account other marginalized students, many of whom disproportionately experience homelessness, such as youth in foster care, those with disabilities, and English learners, Bellwether Education Partners estimates that [three million students are not attending school](#). Not only are these students, who are disproportionately students of color, facing tremendous and potentially lasting gaps in their education, their health and safety is also at risk. Working closely with the Office of First Lady Jill Biden, we urge the Biden-Harris Administration to issue an Executive Order on Missing Students, inclusive of and with specific attention to children and youth experiencing homelessness, that directs the U.S. Department of Education, in coordination with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to work with state and local educational agencies to locate, enroll, and assist students who are not attending or engaged in school, and also directly engages child welfare, housing, homeless, and other recipient agencies of federal dollars to assist schools in reconnecting children and youth experiencing homelessness to school.
- 2. Direct the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to waive any regulation or practice that restricts access to housing and homeless assistance for children, youth, and families who are experiencing homelessness under the education definition of homelessness.** Homeless families and youth who are staying in motels or temporarily with other people cannot access desperately needed housing assistance

because they do not meet HUD's narrow definition of homelessness, and other eligibility criteria. As a result, they are systematically excluded from available assistance and are trapped in prolonged homelessness, with especially severe consequences during the pandemic.

- 3. Direct the Internal Revenue Service to Remove Barriers to Stimulus Payments for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth.** Many unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness or from foster care cannot access stimulus payments because their parents have claimed them as dependents, they have no stable address or bank account, or they did not file tax returns in previous years, and so may be unknown to the IRS. As a result, they are unfairly blocked from desperately needed relief for their basic needs and survival. In the event that Congress provides additional direct payments, but not does not amend the definition of "eligible individual" to include unaccompanied youth and youth from foster care, the Administration should direct IRS to use its full administrative authority to create a dedicated initiative for unaccompanied homeless youth and foster youth, including a web hub, just as it does for taxpayers who want to file innocent spouse claims, claim disaster relief, or speak languages other than English. Targeted resources and assistance should be provided so that youth experiencing homelessness do not lose out on the stimulus payments they need so urgently.

Priorities for the First Year, and Beyond

In light of the evidence on the critical role of early care and education in preventing homelessness and creating lasting pathways out of it, we urge the Biden-Harris Administration to endorse the goals of the [Education Leads Home Campaign](#) (ELH). Those goals are:

- Young children experiencing homelessness will participate in quality early childhood programs at the same rate as their housed peers by 2026.
- Students experiencing homelessness will achieve a 90% graduation rate by 2030.
- Students experiencing homelessness will achieve a 60% postsecondary attainment rate by 2034

Below are policy priorities and key actions for the first year of the Biden-Harris Administration to advance these goals.

Policy Priority #1: Support New Flexible Funding Models and Policies to Prevent and Address Family, Child, and Youth Homelessness.

As first responders, schools and early childhood programs are often the first to notice youth experiencing or at risk-of homelessness. Even during the pandemic, when school building closures have made identification much more challenging, school district homeless liaisons are conducting outreach and training educators to respond to signs of potential homelessness. Other community-based organizations, including early childhood programs and child care resource and referral agencies, also offer organic entry points for families and youth - places where trusting relationships help pave the way for disclosure and assistance. Yet currently, schools and community organizations are restricted both in the amount and allowable uses of funding to meet the emergency needs of children and youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Flexible dollars targeted to children, families, and youth experiencing homelessness under the broader education definition would allow these agencies to meet a diverse range of emergency needs, including housing-related needs, and allow them to stabilize families and youth immediately and effectively. While flexible funding models have been determined to be effective for [survivors of domestic violence](#), they have not been widely promoted or implemented as a response to family and youth homelessness. The need for a flexible funding approach is particularly critical because of numerous barriers to accessing HUD homeless assistance.

Therefore, we urge the Biden-Harris Administration to pursue the following flexible funding and policies to respond to families, children and youth experiencing homelessness.

- Include in its first budget request, as well as supplementary spending negotiations with Congress, a request for a new emergency funding stream through the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, such as that described in the bipartisan Emergency Family Stabilization Act (H.R. 7950, S. 3923). In light of racial disparities among families and youth experiencing homelessness, organizations by and for communities of color should be prioritized for funding.
- Direct the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to waive any regulation or practice that restricts access to services for youth who are experiencing homelessness under the education definition of homelessness, and work with Congress to amend HUD's definition of homelessness for children, youth and families to align with the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education, such as the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R. 2001).

Policy Priority #2. Support a two-generational approach to solving homelessness by increasing access to quality early childhood programs and strengthening partnerships across programs and systems for both parents and children experiencing homelessness.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates that [over 1.4 million young children](#) - infants, toddlers, and preschoolers - experienced homelessness prior to the pandemic. The impact of homelessness on their health and development can inflict lasting harm, and set them up for hardships as adults, including continued homelessness. Congress has recognized the unique vulnerabilities of young children experiencing homelessness, as well as the barriers they face to accessing quality early childhood programs, by enacting strong protections and policies in Head Start and Early Head Start, federally-funded child care programs, and public preschool programs. However, lack of federal oversight has prevented these provisions from being fully implemented and reaching the children and families who need quality early care, now more than ever.

In addition, many families experiencing homelessness are headed by young parents who face unique challenges due to their age and their own traumatic childhoods. According to [Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago](#), approximately 1.1 million children have an 18- to 25-year-old parent who experienced homelessness during 2017-2018. Among young adults experiencing homelessness, 43% of women and 29% of men have at least one child (compared to 22% of young women and 14% of young men who have not experienced homelessness). Among teenagers experiencing homelessness (13- to 17- year-olds), 10% of girls and 3% of boys report having a partner who is pregnant or is a parent. These young parents and their children require comprehensive, developmentally-appropriate interventions to ensure that they thrive, and that they never experience homelessness again.

We urge the Biden-Harris Administration to prioritize two-generational efforts to support young children experiencing homelessness and their parents by:

- Creating an Office of Family and Youth Homelessness within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to coordinate intra-agency efforts between the Office of Head Start, the Office of Child Care, the Office of Family Assistance, the Family and Youth Services Bureau, the Children's Bureau, and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB). Each of these offices should designate a point of contact with specific responsibilities for homelessness outreach, oversight, and coordination. The new Office of Family and Youth Homelessness would coordinate efforts closely with appropriate offices at the U.S. Department of Education.
- The Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care should ensure appropriate oversight and implementation of existing statutory and regulatory requirements on homelessness by:

- Using grantees' data on homelessness to assess and improve outreach and enrollment policies and practices
- Providing targeted assistance to grantees who are under-enrolling children and families experiencing homelessness
- The Office of Head Start should continue and expand [the Head Start-Public Schools Collaboration Demonstration Project](#) to support the transition of young children into kindergarten and include an explicit focus on supporting the transition of young children experiencing homelessness.
- Developing a new demonstration program to increase and improve outreach to and services for young parents within ACF programs and the home-visiting programs at MCHB, with an explicit focus on youth experiencing homelessness.
- Requiring MOUs between Maternity Group Homes, Head Start/Early Head Start, and home-visiting programs.
- Elevating homelessness within ACF and MCHB program grant competitions by assigning points for specific activities to serve young parents experiencing homelessness and their children.

Policy Priority #3: Increase the high school graduation of homeless youth by equipping public schools to identify, enroll, and support children and youth experiencing homelessness.

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, public schools identified a record [1.5 million](#) children and youth experiencing homelessness. While these numbers likely have increased in the wake of the pandemic, the closure of public schools means that many children and youth experiencing homelessness are not being identified, and face even greater barriers to getting the high school diploma they will need to obtain and maintain housing.

The McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth program is much more than a categorical federal program -- it is a civil rights law that ensures that the most disadvantaged youth, who are disproportionately children and youth of color, have access to education. Yet despite this fact, the McKinney-Vento Act's EHCY program has been sidelined within the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and marginalized in interagency homelessness efforts.

We urge the Biden-Harris Administration to prioritize efforts to increase the high school graduation of children and youth experiencing homelessness by:

- Creating within ED an Office of the Education of Homeless Children and Youth that is appropriately staffed to ensure oversight of and compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act, as well as robust implementation of homelessness provisions within other elementary and secondary programs.
- Conditioning the receipt of Title I funding on compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act and on evidence of appropriate reservation of Title I funds for homeless students.

- Requiring all ED civil rights data, including school discipline data, to be disaggregated by homeless status, and disaggregate and publicly report McKinney-Vento data by race and ethnicity.
- Increasing monitoring, enforcement, and oversight of state educational agencies and local educational agencies under the McKinney-Vento Act and Title I Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- Including a \$500 million appropriation for the EHCY program in its first budget request.

Policy Priority #4: Increase Postsecondary Access and Completion for Youth Experiencing Homelessness.

Despite the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, some form of higher education remains the best long-term opportunity for young people to achieve economic independence, health, stability, and well-being. One of the most significant barriers to higher education for youth experiencing homelessness is accessing financial aid; without financial aid, they cannot transition to and complete their college education, and remain at higher risk of continued homelessness as adults. Homeless youth also need specific, intentional support on campus - both for basic needs and academics - in order to successfully obtain postsecondary credentials.

We urge the Biden-Harris Administration to take specific action to remove barriers to financial aid for youth experiencing homelessness and increase basic needs and academic support to help ensure completion. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education should:

- Update and reissue the [U.S. Department of Education's 2015 Dear Colleague Letter](#) to financial aid administrators reminding them of their responsibilities to make FAFSA determinations for unaccompanied homeless youth.
- Monitor institutions of higher education to ensure that their financial aid procedures do not create barriers for unaccompanied homeless youth, and that unaccompanied homeless youth are not wrongfully denied financial aid.
- Work with Congress to improve postsecondary access and support for homeless and foster youth, including streamlining the financial aid process, designating higher education liaisons, and supporting housing during breaks, as described in the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act ((S.789/H.R.1724).
- Develop and disseminate sample training for SEAs to provide to LEAs about unaccompanied homeless youth's rights to federal financial aid and procedures to ensure high school counselors accurately advise and prepare youth for college.

- Include in its first budget request funding for activities to support college access, retention, and completion for homeless and foster youth, as described in the Fostering Success in Higher Education (HR 2966 /S 1650).

Policy Priority #5. Remove Barriers to Federal Programs Caused by Parental Consent Requirements.

Requirements for parental consent for minors to participate in many important federal programs, like Job Corps, present a barrier for homeless youth because many of these youth have been abandoned by or become separated from their parents/guardians. Often youth do not know how to reach parents, or do not have the resources to reach them. Others face a serious physical or emotional threat if they contact their parents.

When youth are unable to access important services, they are prevented from developing the skills and the necessary income to enable them to achieve housing stability, and are at higher risk for trafficking, predation, and harm.

We urge the Biden-Harris Administration to:

- Issue an Executive Order to require all federal agencies to review and revise administrative program participation requirements that require parental signature, or parental information, to allow for participation of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

In Conclusion: A Plea for Courage

In urging the Biden-Harris Administration to adopt the priorities described in this document, we are urging a new approach both to solving homelessness and to improving educational and life outcomes for some of our nation's most vulnerable children. Rejecting the status quo and embracing this new direction will require tremendous courage: the courage to examine new evidence, the courage to listen to new voices, and the courage to endorse new goals. Millions of children, youth, and families whose promise is periled by homelessness need and deserve your bravery.