



Supporting Children and Families
Experiencing Homelessness:
CCDF State Guide
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Executive Summary

Homelessness has a devastating impact on children. Research has shown that homelessness puts children at increased risk of health problems, developmental delays, academic underachievement and mental health problems. Homelessness also has a disproportionate impact on the youngest children, who account for more than half of all children in federally-funded homeless shelters. At the same time, families experiencing homelessness often face numerous barriers to the programs and services that can support the healthy development of their children, including early care and education programs.

In recognition of the challenges faced by homeless families, the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (Pub. L. 113-186) (“CCDBG Act”) includes a number of new provisions designed to address barriers and improve access. States are now required to:

- Establish a grace period that allows children experiencing homelessness to receive child care while their families take action to comply with immunization and other health and safety requirementsⁱ
- Use funds for activities that improve access to child care services, including
 - Procedures to permit enrollment of homeless children (after an initial eligibility determination) while required documentation is obtained
 - Training and technical assistance on identifying and serving homeless children and their families
 - Specific outreach to homeless familiesⁱⁱ
- Coordinate services with early childhood programs serving children experiencing homelessnessⁱⁱⁱ
- Establish a sliding fee scale that is not a barrier to families receiving federal child care assistance^{iv}
- Collect and submit data on homeless children receiving federal child care assistance^v

Implementation of the CCDBG Act presents an important and unprecedented opportunity not only to improve the overall quality of early care and education but to also expand access to a critical support for homeless children and families. Although all states have experience serving homeless children and families in school-based programs, most have not intentionally targeted homeless families in their subsidized child care programs, leaving many policymakers to confront a steep learning curve in designing policies and procedures for this particular population.



By grounding efforts in the overarching principles described below, states can ensure that they fulfill the new mandates to serve homeless families and create a solid foundation for the future.

Align policies and practices with the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento

Homeless Assistance Act. In the 1980s, homelessness among families in the United States increased dramatically, presenting many new challenges. Requirements to produce birth certificates, immunization records and proof of residency prevented homeless children across the country from enrolling in and attending school. Legislation enacted in the late 1980s aimed to remove these barriers and ensure that homeless children had the same access to educational opportunities as their stably housed peers. Since then, the protections afforded homeless students through Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11431 et seq.) (“McKinney-Vento Act”) have proven successful in improving access to education for children who experience homelessness. Because of this success, many states and federal agencies, as well as Congress, have begun applying the lessons of the McKinney-Vento Act to early care and education programs, including Head Start, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and now the CCDBG Act. As states develop new child care policies and procedures related to homelessness, they should ensure alignment with the McKinney-Vento Act and build on best practices in homeless education.

Leverage existing infrastructure. Although many of the new requirements of the CCDBG Act will necessitate changes to state Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) policies, most of the requirements are not novel. Because these new requirements largely represent an alignment to the homeless education programs of the McKinney-Vento Act, states may be able to model or borrow policies, procedures and practices after those that are already in place for local education agencies (LEAs) and Head Start programs. Schools and Head Start programs have fairly extensive experience identifying, outreaching to, serving, and tracking homeless families, as well as training staff to fulfill these duties. States should start with a thorough review of existing policies and procedures related to identification and enrollment of homeless children in schools and model CCDF policy and procedure after what is already in place. Similarly, states may also be able to grow the capacity of existing training in identifying and serving homeless families that is available through schools instead of creating new structures. This approach will likely prove to be more cost-effective and efficient, and produce better results.



Invest in collaborations. McKinney-Vento liaisons^{vi} and homeless service providers (including family shelters, rapid rehousing providers and permanent supportive housing providers) can be valuable partners in helping states meet the requirements of the CCDBG Act. Because these professionals work on the front lines with homeless families every day, they can help identify homeless families they work with and refer them to child care services. They can also partner with child care providers to assist families in obtaining needed documentation, such as birth certificates and immunization records. States can utilize memorandums of understanding or grants and contracts to support this type of collaboration. In addition, homeless service providers should be invited to participate in any local early childhood systems that support community-wide referral networks for early care and education. Another strategy to support collaborations between early care and education and homeless services is interprofessional training, which can increase knowledge and awareness of the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness while simultaneously establishing professional relationships and building capacity for effective collaboration.

Using this guide

This guide is intended to assist states in utilizing their CCDF state plan (“CCDF Plan”) as a vehicle for improving access to high-quality early care and education for children who experience homelessness. The guide provides background information on child and family homelessness, including common barriers and challenges and best practices for serving homeless families; a summary of requirements of the CCDBG Act related to homelessness; and a summary of some of the opportunities available through the state CCDF Plan to improve access. The guide is organized according to the [CCDF draft preprint](#) that was released on September 14, 2015, and summarizes key policy and practice opportunities that can be addressed in each section to advance access and quality for homeless families. For convenience, the most pertinent points are featured at the beginning of each section, where appropriate. The guide also includes general information and strategies that are not specific to any one section of the CCDF Plan but are critical for states to consider in their planning. As a companion to the guide, a self-assessment tool is available that can assist states in assessing their current policies and practices and identifying options to better support vulnerable children is included. We recommend reviewing the self-assessment tool prior to reading the guide.

Using the self-assessment tool

The self-assessment tool identifies key policies and practices that may improve inclusivity of homeless children in early care and education programs and services. State advocates or administrators can use this tool to identify policies and practices that are already in place, as well as those they could consider implementing or enhancing. As mentioned above, readers may find it helpful to review the self-assessment tool prior to reading the guide.

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Introduction

Children who experience homelessness face a host of challenges that threaten their health, development and ability to succeed in school. Once children enter the public school system, the education subtitle of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11431 et seq.) (“McKinney-Vento Act”) facilitates their enrollment and attendance, mitigating barriers to academic achievement that homelessness poses. The McKinney-Vento Act was designed to address the myriad challenges of homelessness, and nearly three decades after its enactment, it has drastically improved homeless students’ access, participation and success in school.

Unfortunately, homeless children continue to struggle to access early care and education programs, most of which operate outside of public school systems. They face barriers to accessing high-quality child care and other early education programs that exceed those confronted by families in poverty with stable housing, even as the research tells us that such programs are particularly beneficial for homeless children.^{vii} Many of the lessons learned through implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act can be applied successfully to early care and education programs.

The McKinney-Vento Act defines “homeless youths” to mean those lacking “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”

This includes children who:

- *Share housing due to “loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason”*
- *“Live in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations”*
- *Are abandoned in hospitals, or are awaiting foster care placement*
- *Have a primary nighttime residence that is not designed or intended for human sleeping accommodations*
- *Are migratory children living in the above circumstances*

Homelessness and children

Homeless families are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population, with approximately 2.5 million children nationally estimated to experience homelessness over the course of a year.^{viii} Most children who experience homelessness are very young, with children under six accounting for 52.8% of all children in federally funded shelters.^{ix} Shockingly, the age at which a person is most likely to be found in a homeless shelter in the United States is infancy.^x

Research has shown that homelessness puts children at increased risk of health problems, developmental delays, academic underachievement and mental health problems.^{xi} In fact,

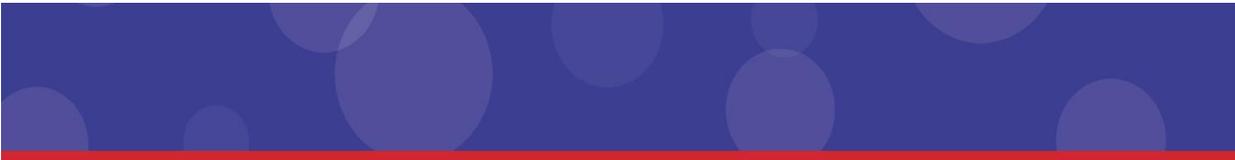


children who are homeless are sick four times as often as other children, experience four times the rate of developmental delays and have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems.^{xii} Sadly, most homeless children do not receive the services they need to address their high rates of medical problems, developmental difficulties and mental health needs.^{xiii} In addition, over half of all children who experienced homelessness at some point by age five moved more than three times during that period. Studies have found that frequent moves during early childhood negatively impact school achievement.^{xiv}

Early care and education services, including child care, can help mitigate the impacts of homelessness on these vulnerable children. Research overwhelmingly shows high-quality educational experiences in the preschool years can have a positive effect and long-term benefit throughout a child's education. Yet compared to poor housed parents, homeless parents are less likely to receive child care subsidies. At the same time, they are more likely to rely on informal child care arrangements and to report quitting jobs or school due to problems with child care.^{xv} Homelessness presents barriers over and above what other poor families face, which are exacerbated by other factors such as fragmentation of service systems, limited availability of services, lack of transportation, rigid program rules and the family's mobility.

The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014: Aligning early childhood programs and applying lessons of the McKinney-Vento Act

In November 2014, Congress passed and President Barack Obama signed the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (Pub. L. 113-186) ("CCDBG Act"), reauthorizing the federal child care program for the first time in 18 years. The CCDBG Act makes significant changes to the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) program, including strengthening health and safety standards, establishing more family-friendly policies, improving overall quality of child care, improving access and continuity of care, and promoting family choice while empowering parents to make informed decisions about child care through improved consumer education requirements. The CCDF program has two goals: supporting the ability of parents to work and supporting child development. The CCDBG Act underscores the equal importance of the latter goal by recognizing high-quality child care as a key component of the larger early care and education system. The CCDBG Act also includes new provisions meant to increase access to child care for homeless families, which follows a recent trend seen in many other early care and education programs.



In recognition of the many barriers homeless families face in accessing vital early childhood services, many states and federal agencies, as well as Congress, have begun applying the lessons of the McKinney-Vento Act to early care and education programs. McKinney-Vento concepts are now incorporated into the policies and practices of Head Start and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, both Part C and early childhood special education services. In 2013, the federal Office of Early Childhood Development of the Administration for Children and Families released a “Dear Colleague” letter, urging stakeholders to adopt policies and procedures to increase access to early childhood education programs for children and families experiencing homelessness.

The US Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education have continued efforts to align early childhood program policies with the McKinney-Vento Act. Congress continued its legislative action on the issue, enacting new provisions related to homelessness in the CCDBG Act.

Those provisions include requirements that states:

- Establish a grace period that allows children experiencing homelessness to receive child care while their families take action to comply with immunization and other health and safety requirements^{xvi}
- Use funds for activities that improve access to child care services, including:
 - Procedures to permit enrollment of homeless children (after an initial eligibility determination) while required documentation is obtained
 - Training and technical assistance on identifying and serving homeless children and their families
 - Specific outreach to homeless families^{xvii}
- Coordinate services with early childhood programs serving children experiencing homelessness^{xviii}
- Establish a sliding fee scale that is not a barrier to families receiving federal child care assistance^{xix}
- Collect and submit data on homeless children receiving federal child care assistance^{xx}

A handful of states already implement some of the new provisions in their existing child care subsidy programs. Many others, however, will need to develop new policies and procedures to implement the law. This guide is designed to support states in not only meeting the requirements of the CCDBG Act, but also to go beyond in implementing policies and procedures that will further align child care to other early childhood programs while increasing access to child care so homeless families can thrive.

Policy opportunities within the CCDF state plan

With the enactment of the CCDBG Act, several policy opportunities exist for states to utilize the CCDF state plan (“CCDF Plan”) to better provide homeless families with high-quality child care. The *Draft CCDF Preprint for Public Comment*, released on September 14, 2015 (“CCDF Preprint”), is a preview of how states will be asked to implement the new requirements of the CCDBG Act as it relates to homelessness. Ideas for using the CCDF Plan to advance access to high-quality child care for homeless families are included below.

Consultation in development of the CCDF Plan [Section 1.3 of CCDF Preprint]

State coordinators for homeless education, McKinney-Vento liaisons and homeless service providers understand the needs of homeless populations and should be consulted in the development of the CCDF Plan. In developing the CCDF Plan, Lead Agencies are required to consult with “appropriate representatives of units of general purpose local government.”^{xxi} McKinney-Vento State Coordinators, school district McKinney-Vento liaisons, and homeless service providers are knowledgeable resources in this effort.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, each state must appoint a coordinator who is responsible for ensuring appropriate policies and procedures are in place to enable enrollment and full participation in school for children who experience homelessness. Furthermore, each school district appoints local homeless education liaisons to identify children who experience homelessness and facilitate their enrollment and participation in school, and work with homeless families to help them access available services and resources in the community. State coordinators and local education liaisons have expertise in identification, outreach and provision of services to children and families who experience homelessness and

Key partners to consult with or directly involve in developing the CCDF Plan

- McKinney-Vento State Coordinator—every state is required by federal law to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education. This person is responsible for ensuring the understanding of and compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act in public schools throughout the state (per the National Center for Homeless Education). Contact information for State Coordinators can be found on the National Center for Homeless Education’s [website](#).
- Local McKinney-Vento Coordinators—every local educational agency is required by federal law to designate a staff person to identify homeless students, ensure their enrollment and participation in school, and connect them and their families to resources. Contact information is available from the State Coordinator.
- [Head Start State Collaboration Director](#). If applicable, state interagency council on homelessness.
- [Homeless service providers](#). Mental health providers.



can provide invaluable guidance to the lead agency in meeting the new requirements in the CCDBG Act related to homelessness.

Additionally, homeless service providers have valuable expertise on local family homelessness. States should invite homeless service providers representing various regions of the state to provide input and feedback on the CCDF Plan. Because of the variation in available resources and needs of homeless families across any state, input should be sought from providers in urban, suburban and rural communities.

At minimum, McKinney-Vento state coordinators, local homeless education liaisons, and homeless service providers should review drafts of the CCDF Plan and sign off on the final version; ideally, they should participate in a drafting committee.

Coordination with partners to expand accessibility and continuity of care [Section 1.4 of CCDF Preprint]

- States are now responsible for coordinating CCDF-funded child care services with other federal, state, and local programs that serve homeless children and families. Examples of programs that serve homeless families include family shelters, schools, food banks and Head Start programs.

States are required to coordinate with early childhood programs serving homeless children in order to expand accessibility and continuity of care and assist children enrolled in early childhood programs to receive full-day services. Some of the goals of this coordination could include extending the service day or year for families, smoothing transitions for children, enhancing and aligning quality of services, linking comprehensive services to children in child care settings or developing the supply of quality care for homeless children.

Examples of programs that serve homeless children include:

- Public schools, including public preschool programs
- Family shelter providers
- Rapid rehousing providers
- Local Continua of Care
- Food banks
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs
- Early childhood home visiting programs
- Public aid offices
- Community early childhood providers



Programs that serve homeless children and families, like the above examples, can assist with outreach and identification of homeless families and could also be engaged to assist homeless families in applying for child care subsidies and finding child care that meets their needs.

Eligible children and families [Section 3.1 of CCDF Preprint]

- Work-eligibility requirements should be expanded to include job seeking.
- Education-attainment requirements should include GED programs.
- Housing assistance should not be included in income-eligibility calculations.

The CCDBG Act has provisions that seek to make child care subsidies a more stable source of financial assistance to families in need, and this includes families who experience homelessness. States can remove barriers to child care, employment and education for homeless families by addressing some of their more common needs and challenges as they set definitions. This, in turn, allows states to leverage CCDF as a powerful tool in preventing and ending homelessness.

CCDF Plans should include a period of initial job search in the state’s definition of working. One of the most common barriers to employment for homeless parents is lack of child care. Many homeless families have weak social support systems and may struggle to identify a family member or friend they can trust to care for their children while they apply for jobs or attend job interviews. Providing a child care subsidy during an initial period of job search for homeless parents will help homeless families find work faster so they can resolve their homelessness.

Currently, parents who are attending job training or educational programs qualify for child care assistance. The definition of “educational programs” should include GED programs. Homeless parents have lower rates of high school diploma or GED attainment, and this represents a major barrier to obtaining employment. Providing child care for parents who are working toward increasing their education level supports better long-term outcomes for families in terms of income and housing stability.^{xxii} States can also choose to provide child care assistance to children receiving or in need of protective services and include homeless children in their definition of “protective services.” This would allow states to waive work and school requirements and provide eligibility for child care assistance to families experiencing homelessness. As mentioned above, homeless parents face many barriers to employment and securing housing. Safe, stable child care arrangements not only protect and support children but also allow homeless parents the time they need to



address the challenges that contribute to their continued homelessness, including children’s and parents’ health and mental health problems, searching for housing, obtaining public benefits and resolving legal issues. Once stable, most homeless families can meet regular eligibility requirements for child care assistance. Some states, such as Washington and Massachusetts, already implement this strategy and set aside a certain portion of their CCDF funds specifically for homeless families.

Finally, housing assistance is often temporary and should be excluded from the calculation of income-based eligibility requirements. This practice provides vulnerable families with the stability and support they need to ensure they can maintain employment and housing after temporary financial assistance falls away.

Prioritization [Section 3.2.1 of CCDF Preprint]

CCDF requires that Lead Agencies prioritize children with special needs or children in families with very low incomes for child care assistance. Because states define “children with special needs” and “families with very low incomes,” they have the option of including homeless children in these definitions.

Potential strategies for prioritizing homeless families under this section of the CCDF Preprint include:

- Ranking homeless families higher on a waiting list
- Expediting application processing for homeless families
- Providing higher reimbursement rates to providers caring for homeless children
- Waiving co-payments for homeless families

Improving access for homeless children and families [Section 3.2.2 of CCDF Preprint]

- Since homeless families may not always disclose their housing status, lead agencies should have specific identification procedures in place that make use of best practices, such as those developed by school districts.
- States must provide a grace period for homeless families to produce records and other required documentation; a minimum of 90 days is recommended.
- Some of the challenges of homelessness, such as irregular schedules, lack of documentation and unfamiliarity with available services, make it more difficult for families to fully engage in programs. Providers should be sensitive to these difficulties and tailor their programs accordingly.

The CCDBG Act requires procedures for enrollment of homeless children in the subsidy program pending completion



of required documentation, as well as outreach to homeless families. States must describe the current status of establishing such procedures. If states are fully implementing such procedures, they must describe them and list relevant policy citations. If they are not being implemented, states must include an implementation plan.

Identifying homeless families

Inherent in these new requirements is the need for states to have mechanisms to identify homeless children and families. Unfortunately, it is not always obvious when a family is experiencing homelessness, and families will not always self-identify, often due to fear of child welfare involvement, stigma and embarrassment or other reasons. Simply asking a family if they are homeless is not a good strategy for identifying homeless families. Various strategies are available to identify homeless families, and states should utilize as many as possible to ensure all families are being served appropriately. Providers should ask families to describe their living situation and whether that situation is permanent. Providers should also offer options to choose from, such as car, motel, shelter or living temporarily with family or friends. If a family indicates they are in a living situation considered homeless according to the definition in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act, they should be identified as homeless administratively and offered the corresponding supports.

Fortunately, schools can provide good models for identification procedures, as they have been required to identify homeless students for decades. The National Center for Homeless Education offers information on best practices, examples of policies and procedures, and sample forms on its website, <http://center.serve.org/nche/>.

Examples of identification strategies include:

- Partnering with homeless service providers, McKinney-Vento liaisons and others who work with homeless families to provide referrals to child care; a referral form could provide a mechanism to verify a family's homeless status.
- Developing a residency questionnaire or integrating questions about housing into existing forms or family interviews that prompt families to answer key questions about their living situation.
- Providing training in identifying homeless families to any staff person in a position to interact with families or process applications.
- Having entities that process subsidy applications monitor applications for addresses of known family shelters and low-cost motels in the community and reach out to families to confirm the details of their living situation.

Procedures to enroll homeless children without documentation

One of the key rights afforded homeless children in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act is the right to enroll in school immediately while required health records and identity documentation are being obtained. This practice has proven to be very effective in removing barriers to school enrollment for homeless children with extremely limited risks to the health of other children in school. In recognition of the success of this approach, a key provision of the CCDBG Act requires states to permit enrollment in child care while required documentation, including immunization and health records, is obtained. States should address this requirement at both the administrative and programmatic level, meaning families must be able to both access subsidies and enroll in a child care program while documentation is obtained. Many states may encounter barriers to implementing this new provision in their child care licensing requirements, meaning states must first take action to align licensing requirements with the McKinney-Vento Act. In order to do so, it is recommended that any licensing standards relevant to documentation be amended to include a minimum 90-day grace period for homeless families to produce records, including immunization records and birth certificates.

Obtaining documentation for the whole family can take significant time and resources, and in many cases will not be feasible in any time period shorter than 90 days; this also aligns with similar grace periods in other early childhood programs like Head Start. Additionally, if applicable, states should have an exception to the requirement to have a home address, telephone number or similar information that homeless families may not have throughout the duration of their homelessness. This will require training of state personnel and early childhood providers.

States should also consider modeling enrollment processes after policies and procedures in place at schools. Such procedures must have as their foundation mechanisms to effectively identify homeless families. Once identified, states may consider including the following recommended components in their procedures:

- Provide adequate training and support for all staff who enroll homeless families in a subsidy or child care program.
- Create a special form that collects only the essential information needed to enroll or apply, such as names and birthdates. The information should be self-reported by the family and could include a signed affidavit and clearly defined expectations of what documentation is still needed and when it must be submitted.

- Establish resources to assist families with obtaining records post-enrollment. This could include, for example, funds to pay for records or dedicated staff at the child care resource and referral agency to assist families.
- Contract or partner with child care programs that provide comprehensive services and can assist families in obtaining documentation, such as Head Start.

Outreach and engagement

Homeless families are typically transient, making outreach and engagement difficult for providers. Dedicating staff members specifically to homeless outreach will allow service providers to more effectively connect with homeless families. Creating strong relationships from the onset helps to preempt the loss of contact with families, who, because of the formidable challenges of their situation, are particularly prone to disengagement. Homeless families who trust staff or a staff member are more likely to attempt to stay in regular contact. Not surprisingly, a well-resourced and well-trained staff is crucial to building this rapport.

Some considerations include:

- Staff members must be able to ask sensitive questions without being overly invasive in order to obtain necessary information.
- Staff must be able to support homeless families in accessing and navigating other service systems that help them meet their needs; providing tangible help and establishing themselves as reliable resources allow staff to build stronger relationships with families.
- Service providers must ensure that opportunities to learn about services and resources are accessible to homeless families. Some families may be utilizing child care assistance programs for the first time and may not be aware of the full range of services available to them.
- Child care providers should proactively offer multiple options for parents to check in on their children throughout the day, particularly for families who are new to child care. Homeless families may find it especially difficult to entrust their children to child care providers because of previous negative experiences with other service providers or their trauma histories. Allowing parents to call in or to visit the classroom as desired, and to be offered these options from the moment of first engagement, may allay some of these fears.

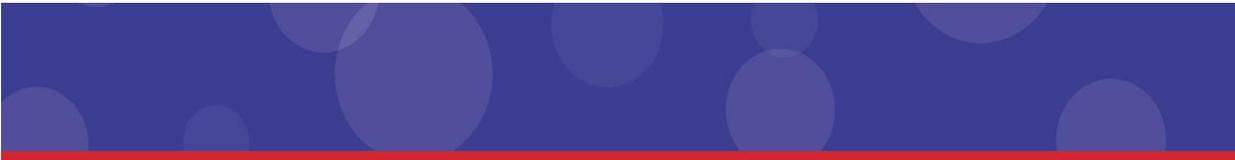
- Homeless families may experience physical barriers to engagement that providers are not aware of. Many schools post signs requiring identification for entry into school grounds. For homeless parents who may not have identification, such policies strongly discourage any attempts to connect with the school. Where identification for entry is required by law or ordinance, providers may want to hold outreach or engagement events outside of school grounds.
- McKinney-Vento liaisons, homeless service providers and other community resources may already have established relationships with homeless families; providers can leverage those relationships by engaging the providers to assist with outreach and engagement on behalf of child care.

Child care services available through grants or contracts [Section 4.1.3 of CCDF Preprint]

The CCDBG Act includes a provision requiring states to develop and implement strategies to increase the supply and improve the quality of child care services for children in underserved areas, infants and toddlers, children with disabilities and children who receive care during non-traditional hours. One strategy that may be used is the provision of direct contracts or grants to community-based organizations. The CCDF Preprint asks specifically about the use of grants and contracts to increase supply or improve quality for children experiencing homelessness.

Depending on your state context, there may be some advantages to utilizing grants and contracts to increase access to child care for homeless families. Because their transiency often creates barriers to consistent attendance, homeless families may struggle to find child care providers willing to serve them because programs are often under pressure to be fully enrolled every day. Grants and contracts can be used to build the supply of child care for this particular population by allowing programs to be paid based on enrollment rather than attendance. The practice would also reserve slots specifically for homeless families, which may make it easier for families to find an opening quickly. One other potential benefit of using contracts is the ability to ensure that homeless families are served by child care providers with specialized training, support and resources to meet their unique needs.

Some of the potential downsides of utilizing grants and contracts for homeless families include limiting family choice, limiting options for care that match irregular work hours, not having enough dedicated slots to meet the demand and not having dedicated slots in the right



locations. If states utilize grants and contracts to serve homeless families, it is strongly recommended that states allow homeless families to choose vouchers if that is preferred or needed by the family, and that investments be made to increase access to vouchers as well.

Considerations and ideas for using grants and contracts to serve homeless families include:

- Reserve slots in child care programs for homeless families specifically; this could work particularly well in programs that blend a child care subsidy with Head Start, or in a state-funded preschool, for example.
- Contract with homeless service agencies, or other community-based organizations that already work with homeless families, to administer child care subsidies.
- Contract with other community-based agencies that are more connected to homeless families and attuned to their needs; such agencies should operate through a trauma-informed lens.
- Contract with organizations with expertise in identifying and serving homeless families to provide training and technical assistance to child care providers.

Supply building strategies to meet the needs of certain populations [Section 4.6 of CCDF Preprint]

In addition to using grants and contracts as described above, other strategies to build supply and improve quality that could be utilized include:

- Offering tiered payment rates—a rate add-on can provide an incentive for child care providers to accept and/or outreach to homeless families and can also provide resources to support the unique needs of homeless families while they are enrolled in the program, such as transportation, help obtaining required documents, and comprehensive services/case management.
- Offering training and technical assistance to providers on outreaching to, identifying and serving homeless families.
- Creating designated competencies within the Quality Rating and Improvement System that indicate that programs are structured and staff are trained to serve children experiencing homelessness and their families.

Training and professional development requirements [Section 6.1.10 of CCDF Preprint]

- Training for child care providers working with homeless families should, at minimum, include: basic information on child and family homelessness, such as how homelessness is defined, prevalence rates, causes, and impacts; strategies for identifying families experiencing homelessness; recognizing and responding to trauma; understanding trauma-informed practice; and interprofessional training to ensure staff are equipped to collaborate with other service providers who work with homeless families.
- In addition to training, staff who work with families who experience homelessness should have access to professional supports that assist them in serving homeless families effectively. Recommended supports include reflective practice, peer support community, technical assistance focused on homelessness, and mental health consultation.

Serving homeless families and children effectively requires a keen understanding of the commonly experienced challenges and circumstances associated with homelessness, knowledge of best practices for identifying and serving homeless families and the ability to effectively collaborate with other service systems that serve homeless families. To that end, new mandates in the CCDBG Act require that states use CCDF for activities to improve the quality or availability of child care, including training and technical assistance to providers on identifying and serving homeless children and families. The CCDF Preprint asks states to describe the status of the state's training and technical assistance to providers on identifying and serving homeless children and their families. States must comply with this requirement by September 30, 2016.^{xxiii} In addition to training on identifying and serving homeless families, ideas for other critical training and professional supports that can support high-quality child care for homeless families are described below.

Training

All providers should receive training that builds their knowledge and understanding of child and family homelessness, including how homelessness is defined; the prevalence of homelessness among families; causes of homelessness; providing trauma-informed care; using an appropriate, individualized curriculum; and the impacts of homelessness on children, parents and the community. Providers should also receive specialized training in how to identify homeless families and talk to them about their housing situation without stigmatizing them or losing engagement.

Because homeless families often have complex needs that cannot be met by one service system alone, providers should have opportunities for interprofessional training. Such training can build knowledge among child care providers about other services and resources that homeless families need or often interact with, such as housing or child protective services, while providing a venue for establishing professional relationships with collaboration partners. In turn, collaboration partners can learn about how to help families navigate child care, thus enlisting other providers in outreach and engagement efforts. This type of cross-sector training approach can prove critical to ensuring that homeless families have the support they need to seamlessly access resources in their community through building the capacity of the providers who work with them to collaborate and help families navigate unfamiliar systems.

Experiences of trauma are very common among families who experience homelessness. Trauma symptoms can present in a number of ways and can often be difficult to recognize or easily misinterpreted without the proper training; many organizations and providers will not be equipped to meet this need. All staff who work with homeless families should be trained to recognize trauma symptoms in both adults and children and respond appropriately. Training should be provided not only to direct service providers but to all staff who may interact with families, such as security guards or receptionists. Child care providers and child care resource and referral agencies that serve homeless families should also take steps to incorporate a trauma-informed approach into every aspect of their work—from policies on suspension and expulsion to enrollment procedures to the physical environment.

Professional supports

Another key resource that can support high-quality services to homeless families is mental health consultation. Mental health consultants can provide more specialized expertise in connecting families to the mental health services they need and help child care providers and teachers make appropriate adjustments to curriculum, interactions, routines or physical space so children can be comfortable and successful in a program. States could also provide access to general technical assistance on serving homeless families, giving child care providers a resource to call on an ad hoc basis. The small but growing network of organizations with expertise in the intersection of homelessness and early care and education could be tapped to provide such technical assistance.

Because homeless families can have intense needs, another critical support for staff who work with homeless families is reflective practice. Reflective practice allows providers the opportunity to process the troubling situations experienced by the families they work with and how it impacts their work. Providers must also be knowledgeable about strategies to address self-care and have the time to dedicate to its practice. Another strategy for supporting staff is to actively cultivate avenues for peer support. The exchange of strategies and advice among colleagues who share experiences working with families with intense needs can promote better collaboration among staff and create a supportive work environment.

Lastly, like other low-income families, many homeless families need child care during evening, night and weekend hours due to their work schedules. As a result, homeless families often rely on informal child care arrangements and family child care to meet this need, as most center-based care is not available during those hours. States should consider extending the training and supports described above to those child care providers who work during nontraditional hours as part of a strategy to improve quality of care for homeless families.

Other important considerations

- Rather than creating new systems, coordination among already existing service providers will satisfy many of the requirements of the CCDBG Act.
- In aligning state and local services to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education program, service providers may use policies and procedures already in place for local education agencies and Head Start programs.

Collaborations

As mentioned earlier, homeless children and families often have complex needs that won't be met entirely by any one service system. Unfortunately, our service systems often operate in silos, resulting in duplicated services, conflicting messages, gaps in services and an otherwise confusing mess that homeless families struggle to navigate through. This fragmentation often impedes the ability to leverage valuable resources and expertise across systems to effectively support families. Building systems that work for homeless families will require establishing intentional, meaningful and strong cross-sector collaborations that allow us to share our disparate resources in a way that has a positive impact on families.

Leveraging existing infrastructure

Although many of the requirements of the CCDBG Act will require changes to state CCDF policies, most of the new requirements are not novel. Because these new requirements largely represent an alignment to the homeless education program of the McKinney-Vento Act, states may be able to model new policies and procedures after those that are already in place for local education agencies and Head Start programs. Schools and Head Start programs have fairly extensive experience identifying, outreaching to, serving and tracking homeless families and may have policy language and ideas that could be incorporated into the CCDF Plan.

As mentioned earlier, the CCDBG Act now requires training in identifying and serving homeless families for child care programs, which is another area where states may be able to leverage existing infrastructure for easier implementation. States could consider connecting child care programs to existing training provided through schools, Head Start, or other service systems in order to support alignment and collaboration and to more efficiently use resources.



For example, in Illinois, McKinney-Vento liaisons regularly hold regional trainings on identifying and serving homeless families that are open to and appropriate for early care and education providers, including child care providers. Head Start also offers online training on homelessness that could be utilized by child care programs. Finally, at the community level, local homeless service providers may also have existing training available that could be modified or expanded to include child care providers, or at the very least, homeless service providers may be valuable partners in developing and delivering new training, given their expertise working with homeless families.

Working with homeless service providers and McKinney-Vento liaisons

McKinney-Vento liaisons and homeless service providers (including family shelters, rapid rehousing providers, and permanent supportive housing providers) can be valuable partners in helping states to meet the requirements of the CCDBG Act. Because they work on the front lines with homeless families every day, they can help to identify and refer homeless families they work with to child care services. They can also partner with child care providers to assist families in obtaining needed documentation, such as birth certificates and immunization records. States can utilize memorandums of understanding or grants/contracts to support this type of collaboration.

In addition, homeless service providers should be invited to participate in any local early childhood systems that support community-wide referral networks for child care. Another strategy to support collaborations between child care and homeless services is interprofessional training, which can increase knowledge and awareness of the needs of children and families experiencing homelessness while simultaneously establishing professional relationships and building capacity for effective collaboration. Finally, states could consider partnering with homeless service providers to administer child care subsidies, a strategy used in Virginia.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Many states have established a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) or other quality rating system. QRIS can be a powerful tool for driving quality and access for children who experience homelessness in child care settings. States can create designated competencies that indicate that programs are structured and staff are trained to serve children experiencing homelessness and their families.

Data on homeless families

- The CCDBG Act now requires the collection and reporting of data on homeless families receiving child care subsidies.
- While the details of each data system will vary from state to state, the infrastructure should be based on a consideration of the purpose and users of the data.
- Complete and accurate data on homeless children and families currently do not exist. Furthermore, since existing systems of data collection are not aligned, policymakers should be wary of relying broadly on data collected about specific populations.

The new data collection and reporting requirements in the CCDBG Act reflect a growing awareness that sound policy must be evidence-based. Homeless families have historically not been well-served in this respect, and the new rules provide an important opportunity to improve our understanding of the range and extent of need in this vulnerable population. Currently, the available data on rates of homelessness among children and families are extremely limited and fragmented; although many sources of data exist, they often capture different facets of homelessness, and even where metrics are being sought for the same issue, they may be defined differently. This poses major challenges for program planning and policy development addressing child homelessness.

In recognition of these challenges, the following subsection enumerates some guidelines states should consider in creating or improving data collection for homeless families with young children. A discussion of the utility and limitations of the major sources of data on homeless children and their families is also included to help in the creation of data systems.

Creating data-driven policies under the CCDBG Act's mandate

The CCDBG Act requires the monthly collection of a number of data points, and it presents an opportunity to unify and streamline disparate systems of information to better serve homeless families.

Under the CCDBG Act, states must submit quarterly and annual reports to the secretary of health and human services on the following information for each family receiving CCDF assistance:

- Family income
- County of residence

- Gender, race and age of children receiving assistance
- Whether head of household is a single parent
- Sources of family income, including sources of public assistance
- Number of months family has received benefits
- Type of child care in which child is enrolled
- Whether child care provider is a relative
- Cost of child care
- Average hours per month of child care received during the month of reporting
- Whether child is homeless

The breadth and frequency of information gathered has the potential to transform the currently barren landscape of data on vulnerable families. Child care data from CCDF programs will be fundamental to the overall understanding of child homelessness, particularly in the areas of service usage, funding allocation and unmet needs.

To do so, however, it is critical to clearly articulate the purpose of the data collection effort: what policy and practice outcomes will the data be informing? While the answer to this question will vary from state to state, the following points are broadly applicable:

- Identify partners at the local, state and federal level that are already collecting data. Bring these stakeholders together to align data systems and establish common metrics to the extent possible. As discussed in previous sections, potential resources include Head Start agencies, McKinney-Vento liaisons, Continua of Care and administrators of the Homeless Management Information System.
- Ensure that the agents of data collection are properly trained and have the support they need to carry out data collection and compilation.
- Institute statewide standards to gather data on homelessness that are in line with the McKinney-Vento education definition of homelessness.^{xxiv}
- Create data infrastructures that are integrated horizontally across services and vertically from age group to age group, if not already established.^{xxv}
- Integrate data from the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, which collects information on temporary and living arrangements where families share the housing of others due to lack of alternatives, sometimes referred to as living “doubled-up.”

Existing data systems

Currently, data on homeless families come from three main sources: the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR), and enrollment information on homeless students collected by the Department of Education. Although the first two sources use a large data set, their utility is limited by the fact that they only capture information on people who receive services from HUD-funded programs. Crucially, neither source counts all individuals or families who are defined as homeless under early childhood and education laws, including those who are doubled-up or all those who are unsheltered. Furthermore, neither source includes families who are in specialized domestic violence shelters that do not share client information because of safety concerns. The problem of underreporting is exacerbated by the fact that not every community has a shelter.

The largest source of data on homeless children is the Department of Education, which requires school districts to identify and report on the number of students who are living unsheltered, in shelters, in temporary or transitory housing or are doubled-up in already occupied housing. While department data is likely to be more accurate because of the expanded definition, it counts only children enrolled in school. Therefore, these data drastically underrepresent children younger than school age.

Given the widely-recognized limitations of these three data sources, direct reporting from CCDF programs on child and family homelessness will provide significant and much-needed clarification. Because of the inherent challenges to capturing information on such a transient population, it is crucial to use a wide variety of data sources to ensure that programs are effectively serving this vulnerable population.

Conclusion

The enactment of the CCDBG Act poses significant challenges to states; however, the new law also presents significant opportunities to advance access to high-quality child care for children and families who need it most. Through careful alignment with the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act, leveraging existing infrastructure and investing in new, strategic collaborations, states can serve more homeless families through child care programs. The potential impact of realizing these opportunities transcends the dual goals of CCDF to support both employment and positive child development—for homeless families, access to child care is critical to resolving and preventing homelessness. As states move to seize these opportunities, we can move closer to ending and preventing family homelessness for good.

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- ⁱ CCDBG Act, section 658E(c)(2)(I)(i)(I).
- ⁱⁱ CCDBG Act, section 658E(c)(3)(B)(i).
- ⁱⁱⁱ CCDBG Act, section 658E(c)(2)(O)(i).
- ^{iv} CCDBG Act, section 658E(c)(5).
- ^v CCDBG Act, section 658K(a)(1)(B)(xi).
- ^{vi} The McKinney-Vento Act requires all LEAs, which include all school districts and charter schools, to designate an appropriate staff person to serve as the LEA liaison. The LEA liaison is sometimes referred to as the McKinney-Vento or homeless liaison. The McKinney-Vento liaison is the primary contact between homeless families, school and LEA staff, shelter workers, and other service providers. (From <http://nysteachs.org/info-topic/mvliasons.html>) (accessed September 3, 2015).
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