



A CONVERSATION: SERVICES TO FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

JUNE 2019



Elevating the Head Start Community™

Developed from Presentations and Round Table Discussions at the
Head Start WEST Meeting June 5, 2019 in San Francisco

PRESENTATIONS

Office of Head Start

Jan Len, Regional Program Manager

“The round table event is a exchange of ideas, experience, wisdom—and aspiration for families. We know homeless families have always been with us. Today, services for homelessness are receiving substantial more attention than before. What we find in the shadows are moms, dads, families encountering high-income housing with low-paying jobs. There is urgency to the situation so young lives are not overwhelmed.

We’re here to recommit ourselves to doing something for those families—to being more impactful in their lives.”

—Edward Condon
Executive Director
Head Start WEST

Head Start is working on a better understanding of how to serve families experiencing homelessness. Nationally, more than 50,000 are reported in Head Start—Region 9 has 10 percent of that.

We know we are serving many more families than is being reported. As the advocate for families, Head Start agencies need to better understand the family living situation. We want to go deeper understanding all of the needs of this population, and this will help us develop strategy, solutions and new practices. We would like grantees to share the practices they are engaged in.

In serving the homeless, there’s a problem with creating stable relationships. Children have more missed school days and lower graduation rates. Eligibility needs to be prioritized.

We think that Head Start agencies have anecdotal data in other records, other files that is of value. That’s my plea. It would help everyone across the region and country—the researchers, the national Head Start office.

Of special note: Head Start has special “one-time” need funding that can be used to set up classrooms to serve children experiencing homelessness, one-time funding for health and safety needs. We encourage organizations to talk to Head Start program specialists and make an application for these one-time funds, especially if there’s been a local disaster or emergency and clients are affected.



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Community Action Partnership San Luis Obispo: Implementing EHS Services in a Shelter-Based Setting

CAPSLO created a new homeless shelter called 40 Prado that was 10 years in the making, built from the ground up. CAPSLO owns the building and it's funded both publically and privately. The funding comes from a variety of sources—the county, state, Head Start, private funds and donors.

It serves a high proportion of homeless families. Many homeless are younger, and teens have access to the shelter. Anyone who needs help, get it. There are 180 beds total with cots and sleeping bags. When it's too cold or too hot, the shelter opens up for anyone. It's open in the evenings.

People can even have their mail sent to 40 Prado, even though they don't sleep there. The facility provides day bathroom and showers for families sleeping in cars, etc. 40 Prado provides a safe parking place for cars—if clients don't want to come into the shelters, they can come into the shelter to take showers, use laundry facilities. There is a socialization room for children, a playground outside—and very importantly—kennels for clients' pets. The kennels are a big deal since for many clients their pet is a support system. The facility offers dorm rooms for single men and single women and rooms for families. It's kept in mind that families have very different needs.



There is also a community health center and exam rooms on site and staff for women's health. 40 Prado is a very comprehensive location—partnering with dental health providers, for instance. All services come together.

Of special note: The facility has an industrial kitchen for Head Start and Early Head Start programs and recently founded a culinary institute to provide culinary classes. Clients can take a class and receive credit and certification. A recuperative care program is also in development with an additional building planned for clients who are detoxing—so they can be in a safe place and transition then to the shelter. 40 Prado has become a hub for families experiencing homelessness. It is the first place they come to where they know they have a bed, will be safe and have shelter. There are a lot of volunteers helping out, too.

There are rules to keep clients safe and moving in a positive direction. The focus is on working with clients and the individual needs they have. Most important is the case management system, with all

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programs working together to help clients move forward. 40 Prado also links with the school districts.

The case management system includes monthly case review sessions, where providers meet and discuss individuals and families. Coordination is provided because it can be overwhelming for families to have to deal with seven to nine people (representing different agencies). The services work together and are able to refer out clients as needed. It's been very productive for staff relationships. If EHS or HS can't provide a service, there is someone else who can. There is a definite continuity of care. Families who see a teacher in the shelter can see the same teacher when they get to their new home.

The length of stay depends is taken case-by-case. It can be extended as long as clients are following through and meeting their goals.

E Center, Yuba, Sutter and Butte Counties: Building a Culture of Collaboration

The private, nonprofit Yuba City-based E Center administers federally funded programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and Migrant Early Head Start Programs and Woman's Infant and Children (WIC) in Northern California.

E Center is working on getting known among the community and organizations—that Head Start is there to serve families experiencing homelessness.

Two factors that are key to E Center's service to families are its memorandums of understandings developed with other agencies and a focused effort that uses staff specializing in outreach to recruit new clients.

The E Center is seeing an increase in homelessness. It has, for instance, MOUs with four different homeless shelters, so when families receiving Head Start help move from shelter to shelter, they can be more easily tracked and provided continuous case-work service. The E Center also has an MOU with a house that serves women and children.



Although E Center has always had relationships with other agencies, the MOUs establish a system of communication, i.e. contacts at the ground level in each agency. The MOUs previously were written for longer periods of time, but now they have been reduced to six months or a year—as personnel sometime change too quickly. The MOUs are non-fiscal, develop a common goal and are revisited to make sure they are working. E Center provides Head Start for nine counties, so its MOUs are many and include food banks, wellness programs, the Salvation Army, health departments, homeless shel-

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ters, clinics and more.

To improve recruitment of client families, E Center has also restructured outreach efforts—including creating three staff positions specifically for recruitment. The recruiters are supervised by one manager and all applications are filtered through the three individuals so it can be better determined if the target population is being reached.

E Center has experts going from agency to agency, to apartment complexes seeking families, working on getting referrals, because the categorically eligible clients are hard to find.

Volunteers of America-Los Angeles: Assessing Your Community's Needs—Dig for Data

One of the oft-expressed challenges for Head Start agencies in serving families experiencing homelessness is finding out who they are and where they might be sheltered.

The stigma of homelessness makes families hard to find. You don't find homeless children in parks. You may see them in the garages of a neighborhood family or relative or in recreational vehicles. It is a very difficult population to find, which is why you have to locate community connections that know about homeless populations.

Volunteers of America, founded in 1896 as an offshoot of the Salvation Army, serves children, struggling individuals, and anyone in any kind of circumstance. There are 50 facilities for children's services. It is the largest homeless service provider in Los Angeles, and it has advice and tips to offer on finding data for locating client families.

Data on the homeless can be found on the internet, but keep in mind three principles for gathering this: The data has to be current; it has to be drilled down to the lowest level by navigating through websites. Census tract data is preferred; and it has to be as accurate as it can be.

Methods of gathering data are sampling of community members, canvas the community with questionnaires or mailers and look to other agencies that already have gathered the information you seek.

Make sure you quote your sources for data and hold onto those data links. Know that there may be some data that is not specific. Be aware of possible trends in the larger community and compare that to your own program. Funds are limited, impacting outreach efforts to find families needing services, which is why putting extra effort into finding data already collected by other agencies and available on the internet can be productive.



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Los Angeles County Office of Education: Mobile Preschool Bus to Serve Families in Transition

Bringing Head Start classrooms out to families via mobile services is a concept now gaining traction as homeless populations burgeon. In Los Angeles, there was a 12 percent annual increase alone recorded in the latest survey—Head Start’s program strategy needs to shift and also consider more child care partners.



In striving to address the unique circumstances facing that prevents families from accessing existing programs and services, the Los Angeles County Office of Education has secured funding to develop a mobile pre-school, using a retrofitted school bus or RV. The pre-school classroom will travel to where homeless families are. It will have seats for 10 to 12 children, and be like a regular classroom, with soft surfaces, nooks for reading, and separate restrooms for children and adults.

The bus is expected be a highly visible recruitment tool for LACOE, serving the homeless population and recruiting through class demos and parent education. It is anticipated that the bus will have scheduled routes throughout the week and not be stationary in one location. A similar model is Las Vegas’ Classroom on Wheels—COW. It roams on a schedule.

LACOE is also reaching out and has used new state of California bridge funding for Head Start children in foster care and developed a multi-disciplinary team in-house to address needs of families in transition. Key issues include transportation and child care problems for parents in shelters and elsewhere. Transportation doesn’t exist in rural areas, and hours of child care availability are too limiting.

Of note: Part of the effort for LACOE is to address challenges of language. They are referring to people first, not a situation, so families experiencing homelessness instead of the homeless and “families in transition.” Surveys are no longer referred to as a residency questionnaire but housing questionnaire. And it is making a priority to serve children in foster care—up to 10 percent of Head Start enrollment.



TABLE TOP DISCUSSIONS

Being Intentional: Innovation, Challenges and Scaling Up

After listening to presentations, participants divided into eight teams to review what they had learned and combine that with their own in-house experiences.

Below, the compiled and combined list of challenges and innovation is intended to continue the discussion at local agencies and at other Region 9 conferences that will address servicing families in transition.

INNOVATIONS

- **Flexible enrollment policies** should be explored, including reserving slots for homeless children and also allowing portability of enrollment across Head Start facilities in different areas.
- **Classroom and socialization spaces** should be opened at homeless shelters and indoor playgrounds created.
- **Mobile buses** for preschoolers, office space and socialization can be developed to serve wait-list families and also bring services to where homeless families are living and where they might be gathering.
- **Bureaucratic barriers** to enrollment need to be removed—such as paperwork for health documents, missing documents and anything that might disqualify families that is situational or related to their lack of housing or current housing.
- **Create a questionnaire** with very specific questions that families can fill out—their own paperwork.
- **Create memorandums of understanding (MOUs)** with all partner agencies so families can be tracked from facility to facility and their needs be followed by the various agencies caseworkers. This can include partnering school districts' homeless liaisons.
- **Train Head Start staff** on the needs and challenges for families experiencing homelessness. Staff from homeless shelters and other agencies can be a resource for the training.
- **Conduct outreach and recruiting efforts** in the evenings and at places where families might be: shelters, community centers and other gathering places.
- **Provide one-stop service** for homeless with different sources of funding, such as CAPSLO's 40 Prado facility.
- **Retool screening and intake procedures** and paperwork so that all staff are using the same methods; encourage partners to do so as well.



TABLE TOP DISCUSSIONS

CHALLENGES

- **Families who are living** with friends or other family members may not consider themselves homeless and may not communicate this when asked.
- **Undocumented families** are fearful, too, of answering questions or divulging other sensitive information and building trust is essential
- **Asking a parent** if their family is homeless can bring up cultural and other sensitivities can cause a lack of openness in their response.
- **Recruiting families** into Head Start is problematic and keeping in contact with them difficult.
- **Once enrolled** in a program, families may need to move onto another program or move out of the area—so transitioning from program to program presents paperwork and eligibility issues.
- **Services can overlap:** Families can be part of a CPS or domestic violence case, and attendance can become an issue for children when they have to go to court or hearings, etc.
- **Mental health training needs:** Homeless families can have mental health issues that are outside of Head Start training. Because of Head Start staff turnover, ongoing staff skill-building is needed and skills on how to set boundaries are necessary.

WHAT'S NEXT

The issue of families facing homelessness will need ongoing discussion throughout Region 9. More round table discussions should be held. Challenges facing grantees need to be broadcast throughout the region. Successes need to be communicated and, more importantly, explained: How was success achieved.

Coalition of Experts: The Region 9 Head Start Association is compiling a list of volunteers who are willing to speak to other peers across the region about the challenges they have faced and the measures to meet them—achievements.

Regular Communications: R9HSA will also be establishing a system of communication—emails and webinars—that create an ongoing dialogue and community of Head Start staff who are engaged in helping their agency meet the challenges of families facing homelessness. More details will follow.

HEAD START'S IMPACT ON ONE FAMILY WHO EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS

How does Head Start have an impact on families experiencing homelessness? Through the eyes of the one mom, here's a story of one family's experience and how by their resolve and supportive programs, they succeeded in transitioning out of homelessness. Their story indicates why continued improvement of Head Start services aligned with other community programs is vital and life-changing—one family at a time.

After a run of trouble, a Sacramento family of four that includes two little boys—found itself homeless. They took numerous bus and light rail rides searching for help.

“We ended up at Loaves & Fishes (a regional homeless shelter),” said the mom, Lucia Vega, “and we were sent to Maryhouse, a center for woman and kids in need of a safe place during the day.”

That wise choice led to a cascade of other good things happening. From Maryhouse, they learned about a shelter called Family Promise, which is on the grounds of Loaves & Fishes.

“We were accepted into the shelter—and that was the moment we knew our life was going to change for the better,” Lucia said.

While there, the parents got their driver's license, saved money and paid off debt. They enrolled their four-year-old son at the Mustard Seed School, a school for families who are currently experiencing homelessness. But having an 18-month-old son to care for still made it difficult for both parents to go to work, so they looked at for daycare options. And that's when they found Sacramento Employment and Training Agency's Head Start program.

“The Head Start staff was so welcoming and friendly,” Lucia added, “and that made us very comfortable with the program. Getting my son into Early Head Start was another one of those wise decisions we made.”

With the toddler in preschool, the mom was able to go back to school and get her GED and then attend a nine-week program called Women's Empowerment. After finishing the classes, she found a job. “To be able to work and know I don't have to worry about child care is truly a blessing,” she said.

And then came along another moment of serendipity, created by opportunity and being in the right place. “While my son was attending Head Start, the program had a 30th anniversary celebration, and we were asked to speak about how the SETA Head Start helped us while we were homeless. After giving our talk a gentleman walked up and offered my husband a position in IT.”

Once again, their life changed again for the better. “If it wasn't for Head Start giving the family a slot for the toddler to attend, we wouldn't be where we are today,” Lucia said. That little boy who was 18 months old is now in fourth grade.

And here's the rest of the story. Father has been working at SETA for six years, and mom is the Outreach Coordinator at the Mustard Seed School.

“To give back and let other families know that there is a way out of homelessness is the best job ever,” Lucia said.

As a postscript to this story, the family recently purchased their first home.



Lucia Vega—Outreach Worker, at the Mustard Seed School, Loaves and Fishes, in Sacramento (center) is a former Head Start client whose family experienced homelessness. She poses with (left) Casey Knittel—Director of Mustard Seed School, Loaves and Fishes, Sacramento; and Denise Lee, Director of Head Start— Sacramento Employment and Training Agency.

PARTICIPANTS

“Head Start staffers are the luckiest, happiest people. Humans are wired to do good, and we do a lot of good.”

We see ourselves as agents of change. We are looking ahead at what’s coming and we want to continue this discussion and develop a system to access organizations who work with people who are experiencing homelessness.”

**—Wassy Tesfa
Region 9 HSA Chair**



Currently serving more than 130,000 children and their families and encompassing the largest geographical area of any regional association, Head Start WEST provides assistance to Head Start programs in 13 western states to ensure their ongoing viability and vitality.

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