



# Improving Federal Collaboration for Homeless Children and Youth

A joint brief by the Campaign to End Child Homelessness at The National Center on Family Homelessness, National Collaboration for Youth, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, and National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

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Over 1.5 million children and youth in America experience homelessness annually – one in 50 children each year.<sup>1</sup> Across the country, families are feeling the strain of the economic downturn as they try to stretch limited resources to cover basic necessities. This pervasive financial hardship, coupled with federal divestment in social safety net programs, has created a perfect storm for our most vulnerable citizens. Without access to supports, people experiencing homelessness struggle to find and maintain employment and housing. The costs of homelessness are high, and include emergency health care, incarceration, rehabilitation, and other costly interventions. Child and family homelessness represents a broken commitment to upholding the dignity of every American, and a violation of basic human rights. Our nation cannot afford to pay these social and economic costs, and the federal government must act accordingly.

Progress to combat child and youth homelessness in the U.S. can be made if federal agencies align their efforts, coordinating both program and funding streams. A high quality, fully-funded, and efficient support system of housing and services is necessary to make this happen. The federal government has created a number of coordinating bodies to collaborate on policy related to specific issues including the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).

In addition to federal level collaboration, the federal government must also increase coordination among state and local stakeholders. Earlier this year, President Obama released a Presidential Memorandum on “Administrative Flexibility, Lower Costs, and Better Results for State, Local, and Tribal Governments.” The document instructed all federal agencies to “identify areas where cross-agency collaboration would further reduce administrative and regulatory barriers” and to “work closely with State, local, and tribal governments to identify administrative, regulatory, and legislative barriers in federally funded programs.”

## **A NEW OPPORTUNITY, A CALL TO ACTION**

The needs of homeless children and youth do not exist in silos, and the support they receive should be designed accordingly, including programs and services that take a comprehensive look at the whole child. The federal government appropriately leads efforts to collaborate and coordinate resources, programs, and services to better serve at-risk and homeless children and youth, including hundreds of programs that serve children and youth ages 0-24, spread across 12 departments and agencies. The vast majority of these efforts are essential and effective; however, they are not part of an integrated, strategic plan to help at-risk and homeless children and youth achieve success in school and productive adulthood.

In June 2010, the USICH released *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, with a goal of ending child and family homelessness nationwide in 10 years. This Plan represents an unprecedented opportunity for the federal government to address homelessness in a coordinated and strategic way. Acknowledging the need for adequate funding, political will, and private sector support, the Plan calls for the federal government to:

- Increase Leadership, Collaboration, and Civic Engagement;
- Increase Access to Stable and Affordable Housing;
- Increase Economic Security;
- Improve Health and Stability; and
- Retool the Homeless Crisis Response System.

<sup>1</sup>The National Center on Family Homelessness. (2009). *America’s Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness*. Newton, MA.

It has been over a year since the Plan has been released; thus far, its potential has not been realized. To take full advantage of this opportunity, agencies, with leadership from the USICH, must coordinate resources and strategies to streamline existing programs and build capacity across sectors. This paper suggests specific approaches to meet the aforementioned goals, each of which would promote stability and opportunity for homeless children and youth. If the recommendations in this Plan are fully implemented by the USICH with adequate funding, political cooperation, and private sector commitment, they can help secure the future of countless vulnerable Americans.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Building on successful examples of federal government coordination and collaboration, the strategies outlined in this brief would improve services, programs, and policies for at-risk and homeless children and youth. The USICH framework provides an operationalized approach for addressing the many challenges facing this population. In many instances, these changes would not be costly, yet the benefits would be immeasurable. The investments and policy changes called for in this document should also be implemented in concert with investments in families and communities.

### **Increase Leadership, Collaboration, and Civic Engagement through Wraparound Support Services in Communities and Schools**

Homelessness presents overwhelming educational barriers for children and youth, and many in this population confront these challenges without the support and guidance of a caring adult. When these barriers are not addressed, homeless children and youth often are unable to attend or even enroll in school, effectively preventing them from escaping poverty as adults. To meet the comprehensive needs of homeless students, it is critical that federal policies encourage the development of school-community partnerships that help address multiple barriers to education.

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, school districts are required to collaborate with community agencies, such as housing authorities, to help ensure that homeless children and youth receive the services they need. Recent federal legislation (the HEARTH Act of 2009) imposes reciprocal collaboration mandates on homeless programs funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Yet, in order for either of these mandates to be implemented successfully on the local level and benefit homeless children and youth, improved federal collaboration is necessary between HUD and the U.S. Department of Education (ED).

#### *Recommendations:*

- Review policies, procedures, and regulations that contribute to the school mobility and the housing mobility of homeless children and youth.
- Conduct local needs assessments focused on the academic, health, social, and emotional needs of homeless students.
- Support comprehensive efforts to expedite services through streamlined referrals and information sharing.
- Encourage school-community partnership models that create greater access to integrated services that address obstacles to academic achievement. These include: academic interventions, dropout prevention programs, counseling, health services, and specialized instructional support. These partnerships would engage the public in strengthening homeless student achievement by coordinating existing services. An example of this is the Promise Neighborhoods program, the Department of Education's comprehensive school and community-based initiative designed to help at-risk children reach college and transform the communities they live in.
- Support the Developing Innovative Partnerships and Learning Opportunities that Motivate Achievement (DIPLOMA) Act. The DIPLOMA Act will provide funds that encourage the formation of locally-directed partnerships aimed at assessing the challenges standing between the community's children and academic success; improve the coordination of existing assets to better meet those challenges, and make additional investments to fill gaps in academic and non-academic services.

## Increase Access to Stable and Affordable Housing through Comprehensive Housing Support

A comprehensive strategy to end child and youth homelessness must address the full range of needs of all family members, including the children, by providing access to essential services and supports. As children, youth, and families move from homelessness into housing, specific services and supports are necessary to achieve the initial transition and to maintain long-term housing and independence. While HUD's Homeless Assistance Grant programs fund a variety of supportive services, cutbacks have occurred in recent years with HUD citing the need to have more of the dollars going to housing.

### *Recommendations:*

- Preserve current relevant spending at HUD for supportive services, including important programs serving children and youth.
- Support the Housing and Services for Homeless Persons Demonstration project that connects housing vouchers with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mainstream programs (e.g., TANF, Medicaid) for low-income people and with U.S. Department of Education programs for homeless children.
- A federal program should be established or HUD should create an allowable use within current Service Coordinator programs to provide child services in shelters and transitional housing facilities. This program would assist homeless children by providing shelter and a variety of supportive services that these children often need, such as educational supports, mental health treatment, and health care services.

## Increase Economic Security through Partnerships for Workforce Development

More than 5 million American youth ages 16 to 24 are not connected to education or the labor market. The employment prospects for youth are becoming even bleaker – since May 2007, the teen unemployment rate has grown from 15.9 percent to 24.2 percent – a 52 percent increase.<sup>2</sup> If these figures worsen, they will have a devastating impact on the future of at-risk and homeless youth.

### *Recommendations:*

- Promote coordination among Workforce Investment Act (WIA) program guidance and the Department of Education's after-school and summer learning program funds through the 21st Century Community Learning Center program to maximize academic and workforce skill development year-round.
- Support the RAISE UP Act (S. 1608/H.R. 3982) and/or other comprehensive measures to create a dropout recovery system designed to help communities build a cross-systems approach to re-engage and support millions of youth who are being left behind. The RAISE UP Act would support local systems to identify young people who have dropped out of high school and help them secure a secondary credential, a postsecondary credential, and a family-sustaining career. Youth would receive education services, workforce preparation, and wraparound supports.
- Review efforts to address the needs of the homeless service delivery workforce to ensure that professional development and job training strategies focus on how best to provide services to children and youth that meet their unique needs.
- Support the Educational Success for Children and Youth Without Homes Act (H.R. 1253/S. 571) to strengthen educational protections and services for homeless children and youth. H.R. 1253/S. 571 improves school stability, access, and full participation, thus helping to ensure that homeless students graduate from high school and are ready to go to college or enter the workforce.

## Improve Health and Stability by Supporting Early Childhood Education, Child Welfare, and Mental Health

More than half of all children served by HUD funded homeless shelters are under the age of six.<sup>3</sup> Other research has shown infants under the age of one have the highest rate of homelessness of any age group. Younger homeless children face numerous barriers to accessing needed services, including high

<sup>2</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). (June 2011). *Congress Shines a Light on Reconnecting Disconnected Youth*. Washington, DC.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2010). *Annual Homeless Assessment Report*. Washington, DC.

mobility, severe poverty, and invisibility within communities. The fragmented nature of the funding, administration, and regulations for federal early care and education programs creates another barrier, and is an area of much needed collaboration among federal agencies and programs.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Conduct a thorough review of policies, procedures, and regulations that create barriers to homeless children's access and retention in early care and learning programs, and develop strategies to remove these barriers.
- Foster collaboration among Child Care, Head Start/Early Head Start, and early learning programs funded by ED and HUD's homeless assistance programs.
- Increase awareness of child development, and strategies to support healthy child development, within housing and shelter programs.
- The USICH should aid the coordination of data and resources to span the boundary between HUD and HHS Children's Bureau.
- Allow short-term foster care/emergency shelter as an eligible use of funds in Title IV-E. Title IV-E funds can pay for room and board (but not services), and Medicaid can pay for services (but not room and board). Now, young people have to qualify for both Title IV-E and Medicaid to get Therapeutic Foster Care, which creates confusion and increases the likelihood that the young person in need will fall through the cracks between these two systems.

Homelessness is a devastating experience that significantly impacts the health and well-being of adults, youth, and children.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of traumatic stress in the lives of families who are homeless is extraordinarily high.<sup>5</sup> Young people who need recovery supports often require help from multiple systems at once. However, high-risk youth often find that youth serving agencies are becoming more restrictive on which youth they serve, thereby creating "gaps" for youth with needs that do not fit neatly into one category or another. Too often, it is difficult to help youth with relatively minor mental health needs to access services and stay in school and the community.

#### *Recommendations:*

Young people that are at-risk yet do not fit into existing eligibility definitions often fall through the cracks, either receiving no services at all, or receiving only limited services. To prevent this, policymakers should:

- Expand Medicaid outreach to homeless youth; explore best practices and model programs to enroll homeless youth.
- Encourage the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to work with agencies that administer funds to provide mental health services (e.g., ED/IDEA, Medicaid, Mental Health Block Grant) to facilitate the coordination of substance abuse and mental health funds.

### **Retool the Homeless Crisis Response System through Coordination for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth**

Unaccompanied homeless youth face instability and trauma, and struggle to survive without a parent or guardian—all too often, without protection or services from any program. These young people are homeless most frequently due to abuse or neglect, yet they are not in the custody of the child welfare system. Therefore, they lack the resources and supports of foster care. Their age and unaccompanied status create barriers to obtaining housing, health care, food, employment, and other federal benefits. Although the Higher Education Act and the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act include provisions for educational access and services for unaccompanied homeless youth, the implementation of these statutes is inconsistent from state to state and community to community.

<sup>4</sup> Rog, D.J., & Buckner, J.C. (2007). *Homeless families and children*. Paper presented at the 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research, Washington, DC. Retrieved May 12, 2010 from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/rog/index.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Guarino, K., & Bassuk, E.L. (2010). Working with families experiencing homelessness. *Journal of ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*, 30(3), 11-20.

### *Recommendations:*

- The Children's Bureau, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Education (both Secondary and Post-Secondary Education, as well as Federal Student Aid), the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other appropriate agencies must collaborate to address the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless youth.
- Conduct a thorough review of policies, procedures, and regulations that create barriers to accessing needed services, and develop strategies to remove these barriers.
- Promote awareness of the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless youth within each collaborating program and agency, and develop protocols to streamline and expedite referrals between them.

### **AMENDING THE DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS**

In addition to the five broad goals of the USICH, it is critically important to take into account the federal definition of homelessness. For nearly a decade, advocates for homeless families have raised concerns that limiting HUD's definition of homelessness to people living on the street or in emergency/transitional shelter unfairly penalized many homeless children, youth, and families. Many in this population have doubled up or lived in motels, often due to the lack of shelter access or unreasonable shelter policies requiring families to break up in order to receive assistance. In 2008 and 2009, 72 percent of all homeless children and youth enrolled in public schools lived in the situations described above, and therefore were not eligible for HUD homeless services. Even as ED, HHS, and other agencies officially recognized these vulnerable children and youth as homeless, HUD continued to assert that they were simply at-risk of becoming homeless in the future. In 2009, Congress passed the HEARTH Act, to expand the HUD definition of homelessness. However, those changes, while significant, are not sufficient: many homeless children and youth will remain ineligible if the complex new rules are implemented as proposed.

### *Recommendations:*

- HUD, HHS, and ED should ensure that any child, youth, or family served by HHS or ED is connected with housing resources through HUD.
- The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness should amend *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to End Homelessness* to include strategies for connecting children, youth, and families to the resources they need to remain housed, stay in school, obtain mental health/drug and alcohol treatment, and secure employment.
- Support the Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2011 (H.R. 32) which would amend the U.S. Housing and Urban Development definition of homelessness to include children, youth, and their families who are verified as homeless by school district liaisons, Head Start programs, Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs (RHYA), and early intervention programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Administration has acknowledged that the issues raised in this brief represent a domestic failing and are related to basic notions of human rights. Earlier this year, HUD, HHS, and ED, along with the State Department, committed at the United Nations Human Rights Council to implement recommendations to reduce the number of homeless people and ensure a broad range of safeguards for homeless people to allow them the full range of their rights and dignity. The policy recommendations in this brief would go far in putting the federal government on track to accomplish these commitments and its goal of ending child and family homelessness in 10 years. They would continue to build upon existing collaborations at the federal, state, and local levels to support homeless children and youth. As a country, we can no longer ignore the fact that 1.5 million children go without homes, food, health care access, and educational opportunities each year. The cost is too great to our children and families, our communities, and the country as a whole.

### *Campaign to End Child Homelessness*

The Campaign to End Child Homelessness is an initiative of The National Center on Family Homelessness that leads the effort to raise national awareness and galvanize action to ensure stable housing and well-being for families and children. The National Center learns what works and brings solutions to caregivers and policymakers that strengthen their capacity to help families in need. With the power of knowledge and the will to act, we will end family homelessness across America and give every child a chance. Together we can end child homelessness in America! Now is the time. The solutions are clear. All we need is the will to make this happen. For more information about us or to join the Campaign to End Child Homelessness, visit [www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org](http://www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org) and [www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org).



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
Family Homelessness



### *National Collaboration for Youth*

The National Collaboration for Youth (NCY), a coalition of the National Human Services Assembly, brings together over 50 national non-profit organizations that provide programs, services, technical assistance, training, and evaluation to youth in America. Primarily community-based, the members of NCY have a significant interest in youth development. NCY members collectively serve more than 40 million young people; employ over 100,000 paid staff; utilize more than six million volunteers; and have a physical presence in virtually every community in America. For more information on the NCY, see [www.collab4youth.org](http://www.collab4youth.org).

### *National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty*

The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty serves as the legal arm of the national movement to prevent and end homelessness. To achieve its goals, it employs three main strategies: policy advocacy, public education, and impact litigation. The Law Center speaks effectively to federal, state, and local policymakers to address both the short-term needs of homeless people and the root causes of their homelessness. It also produces investigative reports and provides training and technical assistance to local organizations. For more information, please visit: [www.nlchp.org](http://www.nlchp.org).

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### *National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth*

NAEHCY is a national grassroots membership association serving as the voice and the social conscience for the education of children and youth in homeless situations. NAEHCY connects educators, parents, advocates, researchers, and service providers to ensure school enrollment and attendance, and overall success for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the lack of safe, permanent, and adequate housing.

NAEHCY accomplishes its goals through advocacy, partnerships, and education. For more information about our organization, visit our website at [www.naechy.org](http://www.naechy.org).

