

State of Delaware

Early Learning Opportunities for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Delaware



This summary report, submitted to the Delaware Head Start State Collaboration Office, contains findings from a review of data and documents, discussions and meetings with state leaders and practitioners, and facilitation of early learning communities of practice. The resulting recommendations are intended to guide efforts to increase access to and participation of young children experiencing homelessness and in foster/kinship care in quality early learning.

June 2022

**Early Learning Opportunities for
Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Delaware:
A Summary Report Submitted to the Delaware Head Start State Collaboration Office
June 2022**

Grace Whitney, PhD, MPA, IMHE®

Young children experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of poor health and academic outcomes, and the experience of homelessness can disrupt a child's development, resulting in persistent developmental delays. They are more likely to lack access to and to participate regularly in early childhood and child care programs, especially high-quality programs, known to help alleviate the adverse effects of homelessness and any of a range of co-occurring trauma or toxic stress that often accompany unsafe, unstable, and inadequate housing.¹ Further, the challenges presented by homelessness during the early years are particularly urgent to address. "While becoming homeless is potentially traumatizing for people of any age, it is important to recognize that, when young

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation #1 – Training: Assure working knowledge of the *federal McKinney-Vento definition of homeless for children and youth*.

Recommendation #2 – Partnership and Collaboration: Establish infrastructures to sustain communication among providers and key leaders.

Recommendation #3 – Policy Implementation: Ensure implementation of early learning policies related to homelessness.

Recommendation #4 – Data: Maximize accurate data entry, reporting, and monitoring of trends.

Recommendation #5 – Research and Evaluation: Engage academic and research partners to aid in building capacity and measuring progress.

Each recommendation is discussed later in this report.

¹ Brown, S.R., Shinn, M., and Khadduri, J. (January 2017). *Well-being of Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness*. Homeless Families Research Brief. OPRE, Report No. 2017-06. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre_homefam_brief3_hhs_children_02_24_2017_b508.pdf

children experience trauma, there is a relatively short window in their developmental process to address the trauma before it becomes a serious problem that affects them as adults.”²

This summary report contains the findings of a brief examination of early learning opportunities and challenges for young children experiencing homelessness in Delaware identified through data review, individual meetings with state leaders, and virtual group events with Head Start, Early Head Start, Delaware Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP), other early learning providers and community partners. Activities were carried out under the direction of Delaware’s Head Start State Collaboration Office (DEHSSCO) from March to June of 2022 to meet three objectives:

- Objective #1 – Learning from Head Start/Early Head Start Homelessness Data
- Objective #2 – Engaging Head Start/Early Head Start Grantees/ Recipients
- Objective #3 – Supporting the Delaware Head Start State Collaboration Office

The scope was expanded to engage ECAP and others in the early learning and broader community.

Defining Homelessness: McKinney-Vento and HUD Definitions

Early childhood and education programs funded or regulated by the US Department of Education and the US Department of Health and Human Services must use the McKinney-Vento Act education subtitle’s definition of homeless for children and youth. This *definition focuses on the needs of the child* and includes children who are staying with others, including family and friends, due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason. [McKinney-Vento Definition – National Center for Homeless Education](#)

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homeless focuses *primarily on adults* but does include “*families with children*.” It is narrower and centers on those who are in shelters, unsheltered or who move frequently within a short period of time. [HUD’s Definition of Homelessness: Resources and Guidance - HUD Exchange](#)

Using the McKinney-Vento definition to identify and determine eligibility for children is necessary to ensure access to services and benefits and necessary accommodations designed to address their unique needs.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (July 31, 2019). Child Homelessness: A Growing Crisis. Rockville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/child-homelessness-growing-crisis>

Overall, there is strong interest in building additional capacity for identifying, engaging, and serving young children experiencing homelessness in early learning programs. Participants in discussions and meetings openly shared experiences and expressed interest in exploring how this population of young children and families can be better served. Data presented below indicate relatively low representation of young children experiencing homelessness among those attending early learning programs. Discussions with state leaders and providers revealed a need for increased training to both identify children and families experiencing homelessness currently participating in programs and targeting outreach to engage and enroll this population. Each of these points will be addressed in more detail.

Again, interest in enhancing enrollment and participation of young children experiencing homelessness in early learning programs is notable. Input regarding resources, challenges, opportunities, and next steps has been gathered. The summary report will share those thoughts and offer recommendations for consideration. It is likely this effort by the DEHSSCO, though quite brief, has facilitated connections among those interested in this work, validated their concern for needing to build capacity, and created provider partnerships that are already impacting practice. It is hoped that this summary report can serve as a guidepost for continued progress.

Several data sets were reviewed for the summary report, including data from the US Department of Education and US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Head Start, data from Delaware's State Department of Education and Office of Early Learning, findings from a national housing study and a recent report to Housing Alliance Delaware. Each source will be cited shortly.

Learning from the Data:

To begin, it is important to note that one is most likely to find oneself in a publicly funded

housing shelter during infancy.³ Although children under age 5 are recognized to be over represented in shelters and 30% of sheltered homeless family members were found to be younger than 6⁴, housing systems overall do not track the number of young children they serve and tend to be disconnected from Head Start and early learning. **Finally, a recent study of family homelessness in Delaware prior to and since the COVID-19 pandemic found just over half of children in families experiencing homelessness were under age 5.**⁵

1 in 20 Young Children in Delaware Experience Homelessness

In its annual reports using the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness for children and youth, the US Department of Education estimates that approximately 3,000 infants, toddlers and preschool-aged children experience homelessness in Delaware each year, or about 1 in 20 young children, and the vast majority of these children go unserved by any early learning program. [Early Childhood](#)

Below are data from the Office of Head Start annual Program Information Report (PIR) followed by data from recent ECAP Quarterly Reports and the Delaware Department of Education. Included with the data on children experiencing homelessness are data on children in foster care are. Trends are apparent.

Children Served by Head Start & Early Head Start ⁶

	Total number of children served	Number (percent) of children experiencing homelessness	Number (percent) of children in foster care
2017-2018	2,597	45 (1.7%)	41 (1.6%)
2018-2019	2,632	68 (2.6%)	44 (1.7%)
2020-2021	1,859	46 (2.5%)	32 (1.7%)

Data reported in the 2021 DEHSSCO Needs Assessment Report were reviewed and align with data and trends above. In comparison, PIR data from the same reports indicate the 2020-2021

³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development. (September 2020). Part 2: Estimates of Homelessness in the United States The 2018 Annual homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. [The 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report \(AHAR\) to Congress \(huduser.gov\)](#)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Metraux, S., Solge, J., Mwangi, O. and Culhane, D. (2022). An Overview of Family Homelessness in Delaware: A Report to Housing Alliance Delaware. University of Delaware. [DE UD.Study.FamilyHomelessness.pdf](#)

⁶ Source: Office of Head Start. (2018, 2019, 2021). Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Summary Reports for 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, respectively. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

national averages for children experiencing homelessness and in foster care to be 6.1% and 3.8%, respectively.⁷

Children Served by ECAP Programs ⁸

	Total number of children served	Number (percent) of children experiencing homelessness	Number of children in foster care
Quarter 2, Month 1	390	6 (1.5%)	0
Quarter 2, Month 2	391	6 (1.5%)	0
Quarter 2, Month 3	400	6 (1.5%)	0

Finally, Delaware Department of Education data were examined since there is both the requirement and designated capacity to collect and report this data annually to the US Department of Education.

Education Data of Children Served as of 2/1/2022 ⁹

Grade	# (%) children experiencing homelessness	# (%) children in foster care
PK	24 (1.0%)	2 (0.6%)
KN	148 (6.3%)	15 (4.5%)
1	176 (7.5%)	14 (4.2%)
2	164 (7.0%)	12 (3.6%)
3	188 (8.0%)	19 (5.6%)
4	174 (7.4%)	19 (5.6%)
5	196 (8.4%)	22 (6.5%)
6	186 (8.0%)	26 (7.7%)
7	185 (7.9%)	21 (6.2%)
8	172 (7.4%)	28 (8.3%)
9	268 (11.5%)	50 (14.5%)
10	143 (6.1%)	40 (11.9%)
11	147 (6.3%)	38 (11.3%)
12	152 (6.5%)	31 (9.2%)
TOTAL	2338	337

Immediately apparent is that the percent of young children experiencing homelessness and in foster care are slight in comparison to the percent of school-aged children and youth identified

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Source: ECAP Quarterly Reports 2021-2022 [DE ECAP Quarterly Data 2021.docx](#)

⁹ Source: Delaware Department of Education

by the public schools. The marked increase from preschool to kindergarten is especially notable. Yet unclear, however, is whether these differences in the early years are due to low enrollment generally, to a failure to identify those children enrolled who meet criteria for homeless or foster care status, thus a training issue, or a combination of both. Lack of recognition of a child's experience of homelessness or foster care itself is cause for concern since supports cannot be offered when needs remain unseen. It will be critical to further understand the stories behind these data so that appropriate action can be taken to assure identification and equitable access to quality early learning opportunities for these high-need populations and so that adequate supports are available to meet their unique needs in the future. Next steps and recommendations will be offered later.

Learning from Head Start, Early Head Start, ECAP and other Early Learning Providers

Three events were scheduled and facilitated – “Supporting Families Experiencing Homelessness” – on alternate Fridays from 11:30 to 12:30 for Head Start, Early Head Start, ECAP, other early learning providers, and community partners:

- May 6th Lunch & Learn – Explore together how young children and families are currently engaged in Head Start, Early Head Start and ECAP programs across Delaware and what we know about early learning and families of young children experiencing homelessness in the state.
- May 20th Community of Practice – Share what is working for your program and community related to key Head Start Program Performance Standards to successfully engage and support young children and families who are experiencing homelessness and what challenges you still encounter in reaching program goals.
- June 3rd Office Hour (optional) – Discuss with colleagues your individual needs regarding identification and enrollment of children and families, collaborating with community partners to access benefits, resources and supports, and any new approaches to consider.

Prior to the first event, participants were encouraged to review the national Early Learning and Knowledge Center training modules¹⁰ and to complete a survey of needs.¹¹ The survey helped to

¹⁰ National 9-module training series at [Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.eclkc.gov/supporting-children-and-families-experiencing-homelessness)

¹¹ Pre-event participant survey: [\[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE\] HS-EHS-ECAP-Redding ProgramsFamilies Experiencing HomelessnessCommunity of Practice Survey \(surveymonkey.com\)](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SURVEY_PREVIEW_MODE_HS-EHS-ECAP-Redding_ProgramsFamilies_Experiencing_HomelessnessCommunity_of_Practice_Survey)

better understand the needs and experiences of the audience and the results helped to shape discussions. At each session, a variety of resource materials were provided. Participants included Head Start and Early Head Start Family Service Workers, ECAP Directors, Resource and Referral staff, and Technical Assistance staff from DE Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC).

Participants identified the need for further training and collaboration aimed at identifying and providing support to children and families. The seemingly general lack of understanding of the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless for children and youth¹² is likely preventing the identification of young children experiencing homelessness both at enrollment and during the program year, and likely impacts data reported by programs regarding the number of children served. When the ECAP data above were shared during the first virtual provider event, an ECAP provider reported serving children in foster care which was not reflected in the data. It will be important to examine data entry and reporting protocol.

Several participants talked about the unique challenge of meeting needs in rural communities. Many housing supports are consolidated in urban areas, creating an obstacle for both families and early learning providers, creating service deserts and transportation nightmares. The discussions also revealed that due to COVID-19 the ability to focus specifically on this population was challenging for multiple reasons. Included, of course, were challenges related to pandemic health concerns, but also those related to staffing, inconsistent program operation and attendance, general family hesitance, difficulty connecting with community providers working remotely, and constantly changing practices across provider systems.

Another need identified was for strategies to strengthen partnerships with partner agencies. Specifically, providers would like to see closer working relationships with their McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaisons, the designation of primary points of contacts in partner agencies and streamlined referrals procedures to fast-track access, increased referrals from housing providers so that young children are being referred to early learning programs, and a

¹² Note that identification and eligibility determination using the federal McKinney-Vento definition of homeless for children and youth is a national training need throughout early learning and service systems supporting this population.

better working relationship with Purchase of Care (POC) for accessing child care subsidies which many of the families in early learning programs rely on to help pay for the cost of care. The current POC eligibility determination process for families experiencing homelessness was reported to be cumbersome despite federal and state policy accommodations to prevent barriers to access and immediate enrollment, e.g., waiving the need to produce certain documents prior to attending. Each of the issues will be addressed among next steps and recommendations.

These discussions also revealed interest among participants to strengthen capacity to both engage and support the target population. Participants shared activities that worked for them, such as working with a shelter to enroll families or providing play groups in housing settings to build relationships with families and partner agencies. In the second session one of the participants volunteered to continue to bring the group together periodically to sustain interest, mutual sharing, and support. One participant who had worked more closely with homeless families in another state expressed her appreciation for learning about opportunities to continue her efforts in Delaware.

Supporting the Delaware Head Start State Collaboration Office and Learning from Key Partners

Together with the DEHSSCO director, a number of contacts were made with state leaders and partner systems providing services to young children and families experiencing homelessness. Each contact resulted in engagement, rich discussion or series of discussions and contacts related to reflecting on current practice, identifying, and addressing a priority need(s), and potential steps going forward. Specific accomplishments with individual partners are described below, and next steps and recommendations will follow.

- ECAP (DE State PreK)
ECAP data were reviewed, and providers were invited to participate in group events
- DE McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, DE Department of Education
Resources on young children and Head Start were made available to share with school district liaisons and the directory of LEA Liaisons was made available to share with Head Start, Early Head Start, ECAP and other early learning providers

- DEPDNow (DIEEC-Professional Development)

The current training module was reviewed, and feedback provided, and connections were made with Office of Head Start Early Learning and Knowledge Center to install the national 9-module training series¹³ onto the DEPDNow platform. The 20-minute certificate granting modules with separate tracks for Head Start, Early Head Start and CCDF funded early learning programs and are relevant for the wider early learning and provider audience.

- MyChildDE (Consumer Education, Child Care Resource and Referral)

Two consumer education web pages were developed, one for parents and one for early learning providers, which inform the user on the children's definition of homelessness¹⁴ and provide guidance for implementing policy accommodations that streamline access and support continuity of participation for the children and families experiencing homelessness in quality early learning.

- Housing Alliance Delaware, Continuum of Care

Connection made with Continuum of Care to increase exchange of referrals and information between housing and early learning providers.

- DE Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) Administrator

Reviewed CCDF State Plan for 2022-2024 and discussed implementation of accommodations aimed at increasing POC access and continuity of care for children experiencing homelessness and children in foster care.

- DE Kinship Community Collaborative

Connected through the Collaborative meeting to learn about kinship foster care network

- UD Center for Community Research & Service

Reviewed recent study of family homelessness and discussed ways to enhance attention to young children in housing sector considering just over half of children in families experiencing homelessness are under age 5.

- DE Substance Abuse and Mental Health (Moms and Babies Recovery)

Met to discuss ways to provide parenting and early childhood supports within the context of recovery residential services. Shared resources and facilitated connection with Bright

¹³ National 9-module training series at [Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](https://www.eclkc.gov/supporting-children-and-families-experiencing-homelessness)

¹⁴ Parent page and provider page added to: [Home - My Child DE](#)

Spaces, a national organization that builds/furnishes child space in residential settings and provides parenting curriculum for shelters.

- Nemours Children's Hospital Research Center

Shared information on interest in Delaware to enhance activities on this topic which is an area of interest for Nemours and researchers at the University of Delaware (UD).

Next Steps

Following from work begun above, the next steps below are suggested to complete activities already in motion, support enthusiasm and interest in moving forward and continue progress:

- Head Start, Early Head Start and ECAP

Acknowledge and support the volunteer facilitator in convening regular provider meetings, designate the DE HSSCO director as the lead state contact to validate this valuable activity and to receive any input from the volunteer facilitator and the field regarding enrollment of and support for the target population. Resource information might be provided to the provider community through the volunteer facilitator, as needed. Consider supporting the volunteer facilitator to co-sponsor a joint meeting with McKinney-Vento LEA Liaisons in the new school year and to invite the POC eligibility lead staff person to meet together with the group so that their identified needs from the May sessions are responded to. Provide fiscal resources for these activities as available and appropriate.

- DE McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, DE Department of Education

Send an email to Head Start, Early Head Start and ECAP containing the directory of LEA Liaisons.¹⁵ Since the current State Coordinator is retiring shortly, it would be helpful to establish contact with the new State Coordinator once hired. This could be something for the new DE HSSCO director or anyone designated to continue connecting with the volunteer facilitator referenced above.

- DEPDNow (DIEEC- Professional Development)

Facilitate contact between Office of Head Start's National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) and those responsible at DEPDNow to make sure

¹⁵ Liaison directory can be found at: [Homeless Education / Homeless Liaisons \(doe.k12.de.us\)](https://doe.k12.de.us/homeless-education/homeless-liaisons)

the national 9-module training series is added to Delaware's professional development platform. Consider including a module containing Delaware-specific policy, practice and key contacts, and another module that embeds content on supporting children and families experiencing homelessness into DE trauma informed systems and practice.

- MyChildDE (Consumer Education, Child Care Resource and Referral)
Finalize release of the two consumer education web pages, develop the announcement of this new resource, and install the new pages. Review periodically to update content and contact information and monitor responsiveness to intended audience.
- DE Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) Administrator
Continue discussions regarding implementation of CCDF State Plan stated policies and provide direction on priorities to be clarified and installed, e.g., designating state primary point of contact, promote training of eligibility workers to ensure implementation of all accommodations included in federal policy and DE's CCDF State Plan for children experiencing homelessness and children in foster care.
- Housing Alliance Delaware, Continuum of Care, DE Kinship Community Collaborative, and DE Substance Abuse and Mental Health (Moms with Babies in Recovery)
Encourage continued communication between housing and early learning providers, foster and kinship care and early learning providers, and recovery and early learning providers, perhaps through a collaborative email providing the endorsement of strengthening partnership, and perhaps within the context of preparing for fall enrollment into early learning programs.
- UD Center for Community Research & Service and Nemours Children's Hospital Research Center
Remain receptive should research/evaluation opportunities arise. Explore opportunities to coordinate any related efforts of these entities with UD's institute. These researchers bring different perspectives, are already familiar with one another's work and are a valuable resource. Alignment of efforts can ensure an inclusive approach and strengthen overall impact in the field for children, families, staff, programs, and communities.

Selected Recommendations

Following from the accomplishments and next steps listed above, the recommendations below may be used to guide further efforts to increase access and participation of children experiencing homelessness and children in foster/kinship care in quality early learning:

- Recommendation #1 - Training

Assure staff in multiple roles and sectors have a working knowledge of the *federal McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness for children and youth* and all policies and eligibility criteria based on this definition. Add content to the national 9-module training on DEPDNow that summarizes DE policies for accommodations, for example, allowing attendance in early learning programs prior to producing required health documents. Consider adding a module that embeds child homelessness into DE's training related to trauma. Encourage use of training modules through periodic dissemination of its availability.

- Recommendation #2 - Partnerships and Collaboration

Establish infrastructures that can sustain communication among providers and key state leaders so that the early learning needs of young children experiencing homelessness and in foster/kinship care remain visible:

- Develop a directory of provider systems containing the names and contact information for designated contact persons at the state and community levels. At minimum, state systems contacts can include McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, Head Start State Collaboration Director, ECAP Coordinator, and CCDF State Administrator. Contacts at the community level can include McKinney-Vento Liaisons, Head Start/Early Head Start providers, ECAP providers, POC eligibility agencies.
- Promote the continued meeting of the provider Community of Practice begun by the DEHSSCO by supporting the volunteer facilitator. Designate or identify a body of state leaders to meet at least semi-annually and communicate regularly to address the development and learning needs of young children experiencing homelessness. These groups can align policies, streamline referrals, share resources for children, families, and staff, monitor progress, and strengthen cross-system connections.

- Find ways to connect early learning and housing sectors, e.g., attending one another's training events, including early learning providers in Housing Alliance Delaware/ Continuum of Care meetings, and including housing providers on early learning councils and other gatherings.
- Explore ways to increase connections between early learning and child welfare to specifically address issues related to foster/kinship care and access to quality early learning.
- Recommendation #3 - Policy Implementation
Examine current Education, Head Start/Early Head Start, POC/CCDF, and ECAP policies and practices to determine whether there is adequate support to ensure full implementation. Pay special attention to any barriers to enrollment and continuity of participation of children experiencing homelessness and children in foster care in quality early learning.
- Recommendation #4 - Data
Examine current Education, Head Start/Early Head Start, CCDF, and ECAP policies and practices to assure accurate data entry, reporting and monitoring of trends. Pay special attention to data suggesting inequitable representation of children experiencing homelessness and children in foster/kinship care in quality early learning.
- Recommendation #5 – Research and Evaluation
Engage the available excellent and interested resources (UD, Nemours) to assist state leaders and community providers in managing data, measuring progress, engaging students, and perhaps publishing accomplishments.

While the above recommendations were selected, setting priorities will involve considering imminent changes in state leadership due to retirements, challenges and opportunities created within early learning and the wider community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and current economic stresses on early learning programs, staff, families, and communities.

List of Sector Contacts

DE Leaders/Partners Contacted:

- Debra Taylor, Director, Delaware Head Start State Collaboration Office*
- Lynn Kelly and Beth Smith, MyChildDE (CCR&R, Consumer Education) Children & Families First
- Erin Gallaher, Housing Alliance Delaware
- John Hulse, McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, DE State Department of Education
- Rena Hallam and Veronica Commodore, DIEEC re: DEPDNow
- Belvie Herbert, DE CCDF Administrator
- Stephen Metraux, UD researcher
- Alexia Wolf and Mary Wise, DEDHSS, DSAMH, Moms with Babies in Recovery
 - (Input from Shelly Nolan, CT DMHAS Women's Recovery Program)
- JJ Cutuli, Nemours Children's Hospital Research Center

Statewide Meetings Attended:

- Housing Alliance Delaware, Continuum of Care
- DE Kinship Community Collaborative Meeting

* NOTE: This report was made possible through the resources of the Delaware Head Start State Collaboration Office, Delaware Department of Education, Office of Early Learning, and the direction and guidance provided by Debra Taylor, Director.