

# YOUNG CHILDREN & HOMELESSNESS IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

## Opportunities to Make a Difference

### Introduction

Research shows us that children experiencing homelessness are at risk for many different challenges that include developmental delays<sup>1</sup>, behavioral challenges<sup>2</sup>, school failure<sup>3, 4</sup>, and medical issues.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these diverse needs, children in housing crisis, like all children, can benefit from supports that promote nurturing relationships and healthy cognitive and social-emotional development.

How can we be catalysts for broad-level as well as practical change? The purpose of this brief is to stimulate thinking, discussion, and action around the unmet mental health needs of young homeless children and their families living in Allegheny County.



### First – Think Broadly About the Causes of Homelessness

The current paradigm views “homelessness as the diagnosis, housing as the cure,” and ignores other critical factors that contribute to housing crises. It is important to first think beyond housing and embrace a paradigm that addresses the root causes and their impact on young children. What do we know and what do we need to know to effectively address their needs? The diagram to the right offers a new way to think about the causes of homelessness and the range of supports and services needed.

#### Important questions include:

- What is the range of services needed to support children and families experiencing housing crisis?
- What system-level changes are needed for this range of supports to be provided?

### Next – Establish Standards of Excellence that Take Children’s Needs into Account

Next, establish standards of excellence for all housing programs that take children’s needs into account. These standards should address safety, housing, and employment, as well as support service options, family outreach and engagement policies, and professional development. Moreover, they should explicitly integrate child-focused strategies—not only adult-focused strategies—to address children’s needs; including developmental delays, challenging behaviors, and parent-child issues.

### Beyond Housing What Supports Are Needed and Why



#### CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

- Broken Relationships
- Domestic Violence
- Lack of a Family-Sustaining Wage
- Limited Affordable Housing
- Limited Support System
- Mental Illness
- Substance Abuse

Local experts tell us that critical services for children include developmental and behavioral screening, early childhood mental health services, parenting education, and child- and adult-focused intake procedures and goal and transition planning.

## Tailor Services Based on Family's Unique Situations

Local experts— particularly agencies that specialize in children's trauma, transportation, emergency bed slots, and funding policies and strategies that address these needs—also tell us that some of the most critical needs of families who are homeless are for mental health services. Invaluable partners in this arena are Early Intervention and Child Protective Services, as they provide funding options that allow providers to bill for specific developmental and mental health services.<sup>1a</sup>

“Clients have difficulty getting appointments due to availability issues, and waitlists do not work for highly mobile families. There is a gap between the need for high-quality mental health trauma supports for children and what is available. ... Transportation presents new challenges when a family transitions to permanent housing or a rapid rehousing model in the community because they still need to get their child to services (e.g., mental health [MH], occupational therapy [OT] and physical therapy [PT]) that now may be far from their home.”

Elizabeth Wasel, *Sojourner House*



Additionally, further inquiry is needed into other options and strategies that address how payment structures can be modified to cover currently unbillable services. Key services in this category include engaging families in supportive services, case management, and court appearances. We have local stakeholders who are knowledgeable and innovative in their approaches to providing and funding services for young children. They can be valuable assets in furthering this conversation.

## Provide Training for Staff

Staff are foundational to supporting children and families and are among the most important resources to consider. Key topics for professional development efforts include:

- Trauma-informed care;
- Developmental, behavioral, and mental health issues and their impacts on children and families;
- Engaging families in services;
- Developmental and mental health screening resources and services;
- Mental Health First Aid.

<sup>1a</sup> Early Intervention, prioritizes children experiencing homelessness and has the resources and a legal mandate to provide screenings to this group of children and Child Protective Services allocates funds for the prevention of homelessness.



## Leverage Regional Strengths

The region has a wealth of quality early childhood services, a commitment to integrated service delivery, and centralized data resources. We are well-positioned to enhance collaboration and information exchange across regional programs and service providers (e.g., MH, EI, ECMH, HV, CYF<sup>1b</sup>) in ways that can potentially simplify administrative processes and provide more integrated service delivery.

National models demonstrate the effectiveness of coordinated agency and community supports, integrated developmental screenings, case management and care coordination services, and staff that are informed of resources and able to effectively navigate systems.<sup>6,7,8,9,10</sup> Again, how can we enhance collaboration and information sharing between providers so engaging and connecting with these services is streamlined for families and agencies?

## Ensure Continuity

Once families leave housing programs, agencies are often unable to maintain contact and provide assistance unless permission has been given previously. It is essential to maintain contact with families through their various moves to ensure they stay engaged in needed services and supports.

Regional supports for the homeless housing community should include increased service coordination resources through case management and/or Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) consultation services. It also would be helpful if service delivery paired mental health and early intervention professionals or worked in continuous treatment teams to support families and agencies. These approaches will ensure that children and families have better continuity of services across systems.

## Resources: Parting Thoughts

1. Are agencies sufficiently resourced to support families—children and adults?
2. How do we best prepare staff to be knowledgeable, efficient and sensitive, yet respectful when working with families impacted by trauma?
3. How do we resource staff to be able to direct parents to appropriate services and support their navigation and engagement efforts?
4. Case management and care coordination; support service champions within agencies; updated informational sources/networks for quality resources are vitally important.

<sup>1b</sup> MH: Mental Health, EI: Early Intervention, ECMH: Early Childhood Mental Health [Consultation], HV: Home Visiting, CYF: Children, Youth, & Family [Services]

## OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT CHANGE

We have opportunities to change the scope and quality of developmental and mental health supports that children and families receive. The list below provides a snapshot of system- and agency-level strategies that can lead to important changes for children and families experiencing homelessness.

### System-Level Change

**Promote the development of PRACTICE STANDARDS for agency and case management providers that include:**

- Child- and adult-centered intake and client planning processes;
- Generous and flexible family-friendly engagement and outreach policies;
- Developmental and behavioral screenings integrated into agency services;
- Engagement and navigation of developmental and mental health support services.

**Promote efforts around DATA SHARING between housing and support service providers.**

**Evaluate the utility of MH SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS for families within and across homeless settings (emergency shelters, transitional and bridge housing, Rapid Rehousing programs). Delivery models include:**

- Mental health/early intervention teams to work with families;
- ECMH consultants for housing programs (case management, support MH providers for intensive cases, “warm hand-offs” professionals for less intensive MH cases);
- Homeless Services and Supports Program (HSSP) coordinators (case management services in emergency shelters and other program settings);
- Home visiting providers to support and maintain connections with families that have transitioned out of housing programs; and
- School district supports to facilitate open communication between programs that support children and access to resources within the community to support their families (homeless liaisons, counselors, school nurses).

**Promote awareness, decision-making, and actions around FUNDING OPTIONS AND POLICIES:**

- Stakeholder discussions and strategies to fund services and modify payment structures as appropriate for mobile services, family engagement time, court appearances, etc.;
- Stakeholder discussions and strategies to support funding-related policy changes.

### Agency/Case Management-Level Change

**Promote changes in ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES to address children’s needs and streamline information gathering by families and agencies. Recommendations include:**

- Intake processes that identify child risk factors and incorporate parental consent for child screenings and information sharing with support services;
- Child- and adult-focused goal and transition planning; and
- Data sharing with developmental and MH service providers.

**Promote LIAISON/COORDINATION MECHANISMS through**

- Case management services to help parents engage recommended supports, manage crises, and support child and adult planning efforts and
- Housing agency champions to support staff/family connections with support service providers.

**Facilitate EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES and resources to increase knowledge and skills in staff and families.**

**Increase agency resources through VOLUNTEER PARTNERSHIPS that promote parent-child and children’s activities, and help ensure the availability of up-to-date resources related to regional support services.**

