

# Family Homelessness Providers and Head Start—Natural Partners: Taking the Model Statewide

By Tracy Duarte, Grace Whitney, Joe Willard, Omari Baye, and Roslyn Edwards

A young mother and her children moved into a Philadelphia-based homeless emergency housing facility. She experienced trouble balancing caring for her three-year-old son and her seven-month-old daughter while looking for work and housing. She wanted to keep her baby close for multiple reasons, but also knew that her infant would benefit from developmentally appropriate services. Unfortunately, this household was one of dozens of families with young children in this particular shelter, and the homeless agency lacked staff knowledgeable in child development and the city's landscape of high-quality childcare options. This mother's case manager was overwhelmed and unaware of any community-based childcare programs. One day, an Early Childhood Education (ECE) Specialist from the People's Emergency Center (PEC) contacted the case manager and informed her that she could help any parent access early learning programs anywhere in the city. After speaking with the young mother, the ECE Specialist introduced the family to the Family Community Involvement Specialist at an Early Head Start. Within days following the intake process, the family began receiving Early Head Start services. With childcare support, the parent was able to spend more time seeking employment and finding housing and, ultimately, bring newfound stability to her family.

Children experiencing homelessness—like those described in the introductory scenario—are more likely to lack access to early childhood programs of any caliber, let alone those of high quality such as Early Head Start. This presents a missed opportunity because these programs can provide a positive buffer to the adverse effects of homelessness and the range of co-occurring trauma or toxic stress that often accompany unsafe, unstable, and inadequate housing.<sup>1</sup> It is particularly urgent to address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the accompanying toxic stress experienced at a very young age as they can follow children into adulthood, causing serious problems.<sup>2</sup> The experience of homelessness—one such ACE—can disrupt a young child's development, resulting in persistent delays and increased risk for poor health and academic outcomes. Infants and children experiencing such developmental delays can benefit not only from high-quality childcare but from early intervention services—supports such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-2010s, the People's Emergency Center (PEC), a West Philadelphia-based nonprofit that provides affordable housing units,

job training, parenting and early childhood education, financial education and planning, life skills, and technology classes to families, children, and youth experiencing homelessness, turned its attention to the pressing need for high-quality childcare and early intervention services for children experiencing homelessness, culminating in the creation of “Building Early Links for Learning,” or BELL. The BELL model is a multipronged approach that combines elements of advocacy, research, program design/implementation, and network-building to transform access to high-quality early education for homeless families with young children. This article discusses the path that led PEC to BELL and outlines how other localities can build their own community's capacity to respond to the needs of children and parents.

## One City's Story of What Works: Ringing the BELL for Early Education in Philadelphia

Prior to 2010, Philadelphia's homeless housing system had little focus on young children, reflecting the status quo in most regions

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](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre_homefam_brief3_hhs_children_02_24_2017_b508.pdf)

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>

3 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/parents/states.html>

throughout the United States. However, for many years PEC had been a leader among emergency and transitional housing providers in creating environments based on child and family needs. The organization's advocacy eventually led to multi-million-dollar private-sector investments to improve how young children are supported in Philadelphia and a statewide effort to align practices and improve coordination among state and private agencies, with a special emphasis on building partnerships between family homelessness providers and Head Start. Throughout this article and on the *Beyond Housing* magazine section of ICPH's website, links are included to provide readers with resources and inspiration to spark similar projects in other localities and states.

### **Precursors to BELL**

Roughly a decade ago, PEC led the Family Service Provider Network (FSPN). This coalition pushed the City to create the Children's Work Group (CWG)—solely focused on homeless children—in response to a then-mandate from the City's Deputy Manager for Human Services requiring City departments to cooperate with community partners to establish short-term goals toward ground-level change. Through its work groups, which involved more than 40 private- and public-sector leaders, CWG championed the needs of young children by better integrating the homeless housing and early education and intervention systems.

Within four years, the following outcomes were achieved:

- Homeless housing providers were contractually mandated to use the evidence-based Ages and Stages Questionnaire widely implemented in medical and educational settings nationwide to identify developmental delays so children experiencing homelessness could better access the City's early intervention system.<sup>4</sup>
- The first-ever citywide report<sup>5</sup> on the status of homeless children was commissioned and detailed families' experiences with such issues as lead poisoning, school truancy, immunizations, and health insurance enrollment. For the first time ever, Philadelphia had a data-informed view of the challenges faced by young children residing in emergency housing.
- A citywide trauma-focused curriculum<sup>6</sup> was developed and implemented that trained more than 350 homeless housing personnel. With expanded coordination capacity, this effort created the environment to support local development of a parenting curriculum called the Family Care Curriculum that remains available to the family homeless housing system.
- Strategies were coordinated to assist the public school district in identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness.

### **Building BELL**

The Children's Work Group Early Childhood Conference, co-led by PEC since 2016, emerged as the main body to sustain efforts to increase access to early childhood education for young children experiencing homelessness. PEC's deep commitment to this issue led it to become an early adopter of the Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters, published in 2015 by the Administration on Children and Families (ACF). PEC also sought ways to extend the tool, working with a graduate student to create a companion 14-item parent survey.<sup>7</sup> The parent survey, while focused on determining parents' own service needs, revealed that parents often feel unheard, resulting in suggestions that parents participate in policymaking.<sup>8</sup> It also surfaced that the children of parents who had more positive perceptions of support from family service providers for their unique needs in the shelter environment had better social-emotional competence than children of parents who did not.<sup>9</sup>

Partnering with the late Dr. Staci Perlman (who worked closely with the ACF team responsible for the early childhood self-assessment tool's development),<sup>10</sup> Dr. Janette Herbers, and Dr. J. J. Cutuli, PEC received a two-year planning grant from the William Penn Foundation to better understand utilization of early learning by parents experiencing homelessness and the challenges they face. This effort became known as "Building Early Links for Learning" or BELL. During this planning phase, consensus emerged around the importance of designating key contacts who could intentionally sustain working relationships with individual childcare programs and maintain regular communication between the homeless housing and early education sectors, as well as between programs and families.

Head Start is a Great Society program that was a key component of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. It provides preschoolers from low-income households with community-based, culturally competent full-day high-quality childcare programs aimed at "meet[ing] their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and educational needs" and home visiting and/or daycare programming to 0–3-year-olds through Early Head Start.<sup>11</sup>

In 2017 BELL released a report that offered a blueprint for increasing the enrollment of children experiencing homelessness into Head Start and other high-quality early learning programs. The same year the aforementioned report was released, PEC received an implementation grant from Vanguard Strong Start for Kids that allowed the organization to put the findings into action. PEC hired

4 This effort was superseded by a change in state law (after an advocacy campaign) that expanded the eligibility definition for Early Intervention to all homeless children ages zero to three. This resulted in the County assuming control, and the City removed the mandated participation from emergency housing contracts.

5 For a copy, email [policy@pec-cares.org](mailto:policy@pec-cares.org).

6 Ibid.

7 Vrabic, Sarah C. "Shelter Environment and Parent Functioning among Families Experiencing Homelessness. Master's thesis, Villanova University, 2018.

8 Vrabic, Sarah C. "Shelter Environment and Parent Functioning among Families Experiencing Homelessness. Master's thesis, Villanova University, 2018.

9 Vrabic, S. C., Herbers, J. E., Davis, M., & Thomas, C. (manuscript under review). Perceptions of Support in Shelter Environments for Caregivers and Young Children Experiencing Family Homelessness.

10 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/archive/blog/2015/08/remembering-staci-perlman-yay-babies>

11 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about/history-head-start>

designated key contacts—Early Childhood Education Specialists/Early Childhood Navigators<sup>12</sup>—who could assist parents throughout the homeless housing system in navigating the early childhood system and accessing those programs that best met their child’s and their family’s needs. The creation of this hub strengthened collaboration with Head Start and expanded efforts to connect families in the City’s homeless housing system with subsidized childcare.

### **Continuous Improvement**

In 2019 Dr. J. J. Cutuli evaluated the BELL Project’s impact. Among the key findings was that it is insufficient to track enrollment in early childhood programs. Agencies and policymakers must also track program *quality* since many children—notably infants and toddlers—living in emergency homeless housing were enrolled in programs that did not meet the quality standards outlined by the State of Pennsylvania’s early education Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Keystone STARS. Evidence gathered from these efforts is beneficial, as childcare policy is adapted to meet federal requirements to prioritize children and families experiencing homelessness for childcare subsidies. These changes will help connect homeless families with quality programs.

All young children, no matter where they live, eat, or sleep, greatly benefit from high-quality early learning programs. Quality is an essential but often overlooked consideration for children experiencing homelessness. States define standards for high-quality programs by using the national quality framework promoted by ACF—the QRIS—and evaluating early learning sites against those standards, building a culture of continuous program improvement.<sup>13</sup> The most common indicators for quality center around eight categories: staff qualifications, learning environment, program management, health and safety, curriculum, family partnerships, child assessment, and positive interactions.<sup>14</sup> Critical components for high-quality programs center on how children are nurtured inside the classroom and how enrolled families are continuously supported.

Research findings continue to indicate that housing and early childhood providers should designate staff contacts who can facilitate family access to needed services, and having an intermediary, like BELL, to establish and maintain this structure is helpful.

BELL has also influenced the broader PEC organization, drawing attention to the value of tracking the enrollment in early childhood programs of the young children in families residing in PEC’s shelter and transitional housing programs. PEC is currently building links with home visiting services as well.

### **Statewide Expansion**

What started as city-level advocacy morphed into statewide advocacy as PEC leadership realized that a full rollout that anchored Head Start

as the best possible intervention for homeless children would require state support. In 2018, PEC partnered with the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office (PAHSSCO) to draft recommendations to address state-level regulations and funding gaps and to create the PA Homelessness Stakeholders Group. PAHSSCO brought together state entities, including the PA Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) Program, PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning, PA Bureau of Managed Care Operations, and Center for Schools and Communities; nonprofit leaders like the PA Head Start Association and PA Partnerships for Children; and others to jointly prioritize the educational needs of young children experiencing homelessness.

Recently, PAHSSCO, PEC, and Dr. Grace Whitney began analyzing Head Start data related to children and families experiencing homelessness or with housing-related needs, such as assistance with utility bills. Data is being analyzed and broken out according to the Commonwealth’s 16 Continuums of Care (CoC) to help CoCs better understand the experiences of and resources available from Head Start providers. Data will be shared with communities with the goal of helping CoCs find families they may not have already connected with needing housing supports, increasing enrollment in Head Start, and strengthening working relationships between housing providers and Head Start. Notably, this analysis project is also helping Head Start better understand the housing needs of Head Start families and the high demand for housing-related services among enrolled families. One in three PA Head Start families requesting some type of family services from their programs has needs related to housing, and the following graphs of Head Start data<sup>15</sup> grouped by CoC illustrate that fewer than one in three PA Head Start families experiencing homelessness find housing during the program year.

The Continuum of Care (CoC) program promotes community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness. The program provides funding for efforts by nonprofit providers and state and local governments to rehouse homeless individuals and families while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused to homeless individuals, families, and communities by homelessness.

Continuum of Care Program | HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

## **Moving Forward for Families**

BELL’s activities continue to flourish in Philadelphia and across the state. In response to COVID-19 and the closures that followed, BELL adapted its outreach, training, and enrollment efforts to a virtual format. Although meeting and training methods were less than ideal, BELL was able to keep its finger on the pulse of emergency housing providers and the experiences of families residing in shelter

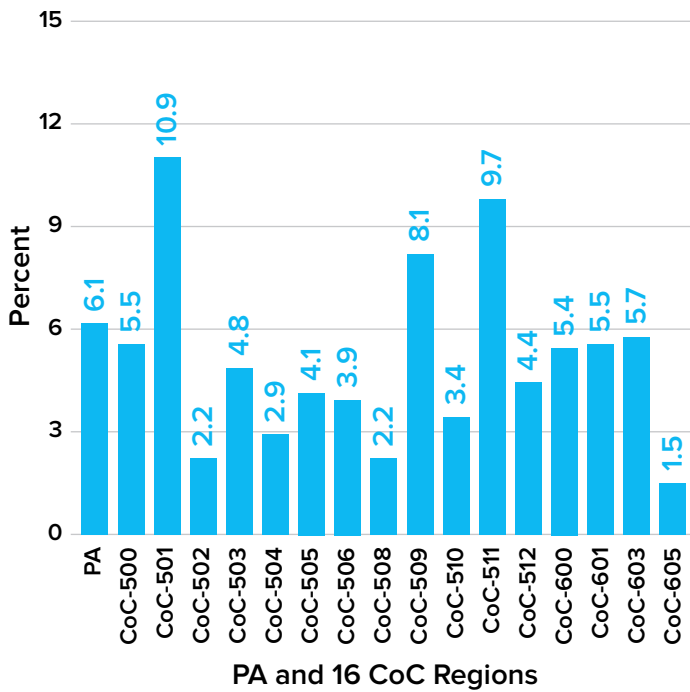
12 For copy of a job description, email [policy@pec-cares.org](mailto:policy@pec-cares.org).

13 <https://equality.acf.hhs.gov/>

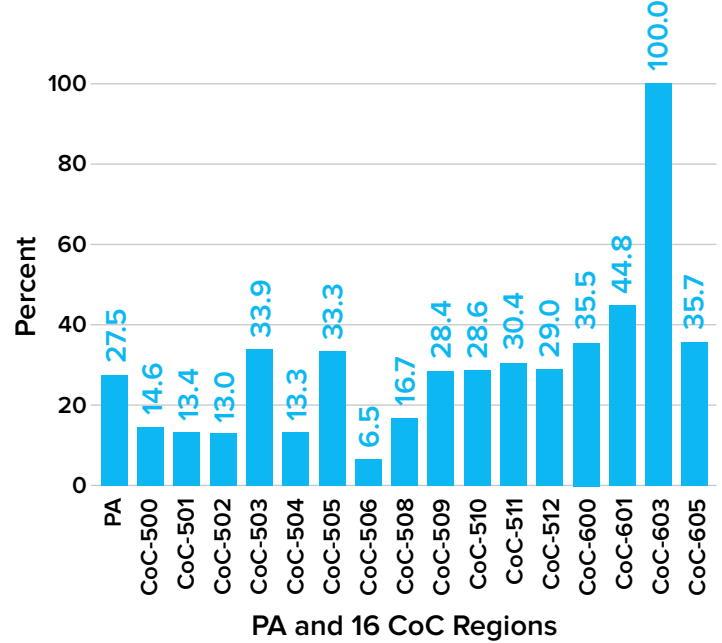
14 [https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/qrisc\\_indicators\\_quality\\_2016.pdf](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/qrisc_indicators_quality_2016.pdf)

15 Office of Head Start. (2019). Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Summary Report 2018-2019). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Prevalence of Children Enrolled in Head Start and Experiencing Homelessness by CoC Region



Housing Vulnerability by CoC Region: Percent of Head Start Enrolled Families Experiencing Homelessness who Acquire Housing During the Program Year



Source: 2019 PIR Summary Report

throughout the crisis. BELL, in partnership with the PAHSSCO and PA ECYEH, assisted emergency housing program leadership with accessing grant funding to purchase computers, signal extenders, hotspots, and learning software to ensure that school-aged children ages three to 18 had adequate WiFi access for remote learning. In addition, with support from Vanguard, the William Penn Foundation, and the Reinvestment Fund, BELL delivered Lakeshore socio-emotional activity kits to families in shelter with children ages birth to five to support parents with engaging and maintaining healthy attachments with their children through play, understanding that seclusion and isolation challenged the emotional regulation of those forced to parent round the clock in limited spaces. The Early Childhood Education Specialists also created a “Sit Calm” story time series to engage children and provide parents with a moment of respite.

The most recent BELL Summit for policy leaders took place on September 29, 2021. The state-level PA Homelessness Stakeholders group is growing in influence, and PEC continues to lead the monthly Philadelphia-based CWGEC, enhancing collaboration between housing and early childhood providers as they learn together and from one another through presentations and joint training. The need for trauma-informed training is notable and has generated new partnerships with the mental health provider community, including the PA Association for Infant Mental Health. Current challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic have added urgency to the mission of working more effectively together to address deep needs and to maximize use of new—and perhaps time-limited—resources.

The BELL model did not emerge overnight, and any community that sets out on this work should be aware that it will take time and

fortitude to build a strong network. However, PEC stands ready to discuss the process with any community or CoC looking to replicate its efforts. The key is to locate natural partners, build relationships, and together champion high-quality early education for young children residing in shelter and other homeless housing.

**Tracy Duarte** is the Director of the Pennsylvania Head Start State Collaboration Office. **Grace Whitney** is a consultant who previously worked as the National Director for Early Childhood Initiatives for SchoolHouse Connection and for many years served as Director of Connecticut’s Head Start State Collaboration Office. **Joe Willard** has been the Vice President for Policy at the People’s Emergency Center (PEC) since 2007. **Omari Baye** is the Manager of PEC’s Building Early Links for Learning project, and formerly managed one of Philadelphia’s largest family emergency housing programs. **Roslyn Edwards** has been PEC’s Director for Early Childhood Education programs since 2018.

 **How to Connect:**

- Tracey Duarte** / Tradua@pakeys.org
- Grace Whitney** / grace.whitney.124@gmail.com
- Joe Willard** / Jwillard@pec-cares.org
- Omari Baye** / OBaye@pec-cares.org
- Roslyn Edwards** / Redwards@pec-cares.org