SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS WITH AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT FUNDS

JUNE 2021
The American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), Congress’ most recent package for COVID-19 relief, includes billions of dollars dedicated to infants, toddlers, and children under the age of six. In addition to the $800 million in education funding included for identifying and supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness, there are opportunities across other funding streams to target supports for young children and families experiencing homelessness:

- $150 million for home visiting programs (available through September 30, 2022)
- $1 billion for Head Start (available through September 30, 2022)
- $15 billion for the Child Care Development Block Grant (federal obligation through FY21; state obligation by September, 2023, and state liquidation by September, 2024)
- $24 billion to stabilize child care providers (obligated through 2022; liquidate 2023)

ARP also provides nearly $123 billion in aid for K-12 education through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), including several reservations to support students experiencing homelessness and other groups. Child care providers, Head Start programs, and SEAs and LEAs should strategically use and leverage all available funds to locate, engage, maintain connection, and support young children experiencing homelessness and their families.

States, districts, and programs can access and use a variety of federal funding streams to support children experiencing homelessness, including:

- Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV): prenatal through age 4 (Title I funds may be used to continue Home Visiting for kindergarten students and families)
- Early Head Start: prenatal through age three
- Head Start: ages three-five
- Child Care: through age 12, with services available longer in certain circumstances (i.e. if a child has been diagnosed with a disability)
- Pre-Kindergarten: ages three and four (depending on state eligibility)
- Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): children ages 3-5 with disabilities or developmental delays (Part B), and early intervention for infants and toddlers ages birth - three with developmental delays (Part C)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>The Needs of All Children Ages Birth-Six</th>
<th>The Realities of Children Experiencing Homelessness</th>
<th>Additional Impacts of COVID</th>
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<td>- Physically safe environments</td>
<td>- Often lack a permanent place to live</td>
<td>- Many support services and programs for infants/toddlers have been paused or shut down</td>
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<td>- Stimulation through play</td>
<td>- Sense and take on the stress of their parent(s)</td>
<td>- Families experiencing homelessness have been more transient, in search of safe places to stay</td>
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<td>- Emotionally supportive, trusting relationships with caring adults</td>
<td>- Might suffer from sleep deprivation or other physical symptoms without a consistent routine</td>
<td>- The shift to virtual learning has left children without access to programs</td>
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<td>- Established routines</td>
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<td>- Continuity of care</td>
<td>- Are less likely to be able to access high-quality child care programs</td>
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<td>- High-quality early care and learning opportunities</td>
<td>- Face transportation barriers</td>
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<td>- Support to develop language, motor skills and social emotional development skills</td>
<td>- Are unsure if they qualify for child care assistance</td>
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<td>- Are afraid to answer child care eligibility questions about housing for fear of retribution</td>
<td>- Lack of in-person learning has contributed to severe under-identification</td>
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<td>- Are severely under-identified for Head Start/Early Head Start services</td>
<td>- Children who were previously identified under McKinney-Vento have gone missing in the system</td>
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<td>- May experience developmental delays that go undiagnosed and supported</td>
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<td>- Might experience more frequent absences due to changing living situations</td>
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ALL CHILDREN NEED HIGH-QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT STARTING AT BIRTH

The early years of a person’s life set the stage for lifelong development and success - 90% of brain growth and development will happen by age five. Key developmental milestones that occur within the first few years of life provide the foundations of physical and social-emotional health. During these early years, children should have the opportunity to learn:

- how to hold up their heads, how to smile, how to self-soothe, and how to communicate using sounds and coos;
- how to use items like a toothbrush, how to say sentences with 2-4 words, begin playing interactively with other children, how to follow simple instructions, and be able to kick a ball;
- how to show a wide range of emotions, carry on a conversation with 2-3 sentences, know how to open a jar or door handle, and pedal a tricycle;
- how to tell stories and use different tenses, develop friendships, print some letters and numbers, use the toilet on their own, and how to recite their address

It is imperative that all children and families have the support and opportunities they need in order to activate healthy development. For babies, play is learning, and a parent can be their child’s best play partner. Providing infants with physically safe environments, as well as dedicated emotional attention, is critical in order to ensure they are on a path of healthy development. Parents should also establish a routine for their child early, and make time to engage in play with them. Home visiting programs, a research-based strategy for supporting pregnant moms and new parents, are proven ways to support both children and families (see Parents as Teachers as an example of an evidence-based model).
Access to full-day or partial-day high-quality child care programs that provide educational and social-emotional learning opportunities is also important as children grow. Working parents need access to an affordable, trusted program that allows them to continue working without worrying about the safety of their children. High quality child care programs, in centers and family child care homes, can help provide stability for young children, build relationships with caregivers, and provide resources and supports for healthy development.

Research has also shown that Head Start and Early Head Start programs are well-designed to meet children’s developmental needs and have been proven effective, particularly for low-income children and families. In addition to learning, Head Start also provides opportunities for families to receive holistic support. Programs employ Family Engagement Coordinators who can help families access additional services like job coaching, housing, health screenings for children, etc.

**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS FACE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

For families experiencing homelessness, physical environments can be unstable and unsafe. Infants and toddlers need space to crawl, explore, and test out their fine motor skills. Families experiencing homelessness might be staying at a shelter without a play area, a cramped motel room, or in someone else’s apartment with limited space and many people. Parents who experience homelessness are often unable to establish routines due to the fluidity of their living situations and inability to maintain regular schedules. Without space to move, or consistency in their schedules, the foundations of development are jeopardized for babies experiencing homelessness. Babies can also sense the stress that their parents are feeling and take on those emotions. In addition, families experiencing homelessness may not be aware of home visiting programs, or become disconnected with a program if they are forced to move locations.
Families experiencing homelessness with young children may not have the means, including both resources and time, to support their child’s development, so high quality child care is even more critical as it can provide a safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate place for children experiencing homelessness. Yet families experiencing homelessness face many barriers to accessing these programs. They may often lack high-quality child care options nearby, or they may not be aware of how to access a quality child care program because programs are not actively reaching out to them. Families may also believe that they cannot participate because they don’t have a permanent address to provide on enrollment forms. For families who are able to locate a program and begin the application and enrollment process, accessing a subsidy is a time-consuming process, requiring documentation that families experiencing homelessness might not have readily available (the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) program includes requirements for states to address this barrier). When child care options are available, families experiencing homelessness often face additional barriers including lack of transportation options, difficulty meeting attendance requirements, barriers, or the cost of attendance is too high, even with subsidy assistance.

For example, a single mother experiencing homelessness in New Hampshire can receive the maximum state subsidy for child care, but still have to pay $350 per week out-of-pocket. This puts child care out of reach for so many low-income families and those experiencing homelessness, particularly young, single parents. If a family experiencing homelessness is able to access and participate in child care assistance programs, their enrollment might be short-lived because of requirements to show proof of employment and/or education within a certain time frame (i.e. within 30 days of enrollment). When parents experiencing homelessness are unable to provide such proof in a very short timeframe, this causes additional interruptions in their child’s education because they are forced to withdraw.

WITH AN ESTIMATED 1.1 MILLION CHILDREN BORN TO PARENTS UNDER THE AGE OF 25 WHO ARE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS, IT IS IMPERATIVE TO PROVIDE HIGH-QUALITY OPTIONS THAT ALSO SUPPORT A PARENT’S ABILITY TO WORK AND/OR CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION.

A number of factors might also prevent families experiencing homelessness from being identified for services. For example, families might not be aware of Head Start/Early Head Start services, or that they should be prioritized for enrollment. Others are fearful of being identified because they think they will get in trouble - immigrant families, for example, are hesitant to disclose to programs that they are experiencing homelessness.
Families experiencing homelessness also are often unable to transport their child to a Head Start program for a number of reasons - lack of access to a car or public transit, lack of school- or program-provided transportation, or difficulty balancing working schedules with Head Start hours all contribute to the transportation hurdles experienced by families.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles revealed that, on average, only 10% of young children experiencing homelessness are enrolled in Head Start, Early Head Start, or a McKinney-Vento funded Early Childhood Program. Increasing activities to identify and enroll families experiencing homelessness with young children is critical to ensure they are served.

For families experiencing homelessness, the stress and trauma of not knowing where you will sleep from one night to the next can be overwhelming, and can be disruptive to children’s development, socialization, and ability to trust.

Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness Face Barriers to Accessing High-Quality Learning Opportunities

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs limited their capacity or shut down altogether. Home visiting, center-based child care, Head Start, and other pre-kindergarten programs have all been paused or modified to accommodate families virtually. Families experiencing homelessness have faced additional challenges during this time, including lack of access to the technology needed to participate in virtual learning and being cut off from additional services like meals and health screenings.

Notably, the shift to virtual learning has caused additional difficulty identifying children experiencing homelessness, who also are more likely to have inconsistent access to WiFi and the technology needed to engage in virtual learning (just 13% of low-income children participated in a center-based program as of December, 2020). In communities and programs where in-person learning centers are offered, transportation barriers may prevent children experiencing homelessness from participating.

This resource from Zero to Three outlines the critical needs of babies and young families during COVID-19, along with the opportunities to support them made available through multiple federal relief packages.
HOW ARP FUNDS CAN BE USED TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Recommendations for Home Visiting

Congress included in the ARP $150 million for Home Visiting Programs through September, 2022. These funds can be used to:

- Partner with shelters to bring programming to families who are staying there.
- Partner with local homeless education liaisons to ensure that families experiencing homelessness with young children, but who are not in a shelter system, are identified for services.
- Partner with hospitals and medical centers to ensure families experiencing homelessness are identified as early as possible, and provide materials and contact information that hospitals can use to refer families to services.
- Hire a Family Homelessness Home Visiting Coordinator at the state-level to coordinate and support local programs to ensure that families experiencing homelessness are prioritized for services.
- Collect more statewide data on the number of families with infants and young children experiencing homelessness under the definition of homelessness used by early care programs and public schools.
- Provide new parents with the technology that would enable interactions with specialists, even though their location may change.
- Provide families with flexible transportation options so they can access programs.
Recommendations for Child Care Providers

ARP provides two sources of funds explicitly for child care: $15 billion for CCDBG and an additional $24 billion for stabilization to child care providers, which can be used to:

- Supplement state child care subsidy rates to ensure that more families experiencing homelessness are able to participate, and that child care providers are still fairly compensated for serving children experiencing homelessness.
- Eliminate co-pays and additional fees for families experiencing homelessness.
- Pay providers based on enrollment rather than attendance, so that providers are not penalized for working with families experiencing homelessness, who may not be able to attend every day.
- Provide more transportation options for families by offering child care transportation hubs, purchasing vans or other vehicles, offering direct assistance to families for purchasing a car, etc. Consider creating partnership agreements between child care programs, shelters, and other community partners to offer services to families.
- Create a state-level child care homelessness position to ensure programs are informed of the needs of families, and to strengthen outreach and identification efforts.
- Elevate homelessness as a priority for enrollment and service in any applications for funding.
- Increase data collection across programs, including by hiring more professionals at the state level to coordinate efforts.
- Provide additional training and support to child care providers, subsidy providers and child health specialists about homelessness and family needs.
- Provide child care programs and assistance for parents who are experiencing homelessness on post-secondary campuses, including community colleges.
- Create initiatives to provide more high-quality child care options in areas/regions of the state where there are more families experiencing homelessness.
- Increase the salary of child care teachers and paraprofessionals, many of whom may also participate in public benefits programs due to inadequate pay.
Recommendations for Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

The ARP package includes $1 billion dedicated to Head Start programs, and the Program Instruction outlines four priority areas for funding, and there are opportunities in each to support children experiencing homelessness:

- Prioritizing additional weeks of instruction, including summer programming
  - Pay for transportation (buy vans, hire additional drivers, etc.) to ensure children can access programming
  - Offer additional instruction sites to make access easier for families experiencing homelessness
  - Provide onsite medical staff to ensure that children are able to receive necessary screenings, vaccinations, etc. in order to remove barriers to participation

- Reaching more families
  - Clarify your enrollment information and questions about housing, including paying to have materials translated into multiple languages
  - Hire a homeless outreach and identification specialist
  - Develop materials about programming to share in hotel/motel lobbies, physician offices, housing authorities, and other places where families experiencing homelessness are likely to visit
  - Create a Public Service Announcement/communications campaign to reach a wider audience in your community

- Getting facilities ready for in-person learning
  - Make sure you can provide masks and other required items to children and families free-of-charge
  - Install a washer/dryer (and/or other hygiene equipment) in program facilities so that families experiencing homelessness have a place to wash clothes if needed
  - Be mindful of the trauma children will carry into the classroom with them - offer family counseling referrals, hire a mental health specialist, etc.

- Supporting Head Start Employees
  - Offer training specifically about McKinney-Vento, identification of families, and the importance of developing positive relationships with families and children.
  - Raise wages and salaries to ensure that employees who might be experiencing homelessness have more support
  - Hire a systems navigator/specialist who can help Head Start staff refer families to other services they might need, like housing, healthcare, SNAP, etc.
Recommendations for Local Education Agencies

States and LEAs may draw upon the $800 million for children experiencing homelessness and the $123 billion for K12 education to:

- Hire a designated early childhood homelessness coordinator, to ensure families with young children are identified and enrolled immediately, and to lead multiple identification opportunities throughout the year including mid-year and end-of-year surveys.
- Increase overall slots for state-funded pre-k, prioritizing children experiencing homelessness. Use data to identify districts with higher concentrations of families experiencing homelessness where more slots might be needed.
- As reopening plans are developed, be mindful that policies requiring COVID testing can cause additional barriers to highly mobile students. Grouping students returning to school in pods or cohorts can also be stigmatizing to children experiencing homelessness who might have to leave and re-enter pods more frequently.
- Increase outreach activities, including through translating materials into multiple languages, hosting resource fairs for families, partnering with shelters, motels, medical centers, and other community-based organizations.
- Fund a district-level position to track data on the enrollment and academic outcomes of students experiencing homelessness, starting in pre-k.
- Use funds to supplement the cost of transportation to ensure children experiencing homelessness can get to school on-time and are able to fully participate.
- Create a committee of parents who have experienced homelessness to provide feedback on program improvement, and offer them stipends for their time and expertise.
- Partner with local medical clinics and doctors office to offer free or low-cost vaccination appointments, screenings, and check-ups for children experiencing homelessness, to remove barriers to full participation.
- Increase opportunities for staff to learn about the needs of families experiencing homelessness, including culturally competent practices for working with families of color and immigrant communities who might not trust the system.

There has been an 8% increase in the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness who have a disability over the past three years. Identifying them and connecting them early to IDEA Part B (Prek) and Part C (Early Intervention) and other services is critical to their learning and development. Make sure your district's McKinney-Vento liaison and disability services coordinator are communicating about the needs of young children experiencing homelessness, including by collecting data on identification, enrollment, and access to services.
RESOURCES

- Preschool to Prevent Homelessness: Research, Rights, and Resources (SchoolHouse Connection)
- Five Ways to Protect Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers Experiencing Homelessness during COVID-19 (SchoolHouse Connection)
- How to use American Rescue Plan Act K12 Funds to Identify and Support Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (SchoolHouse Connection)
- Six Findings from Pre-Pandemic School Homelessness Data that Should Inform Reopening and Recovery (SchoolHouse Connection)
- The American Rescue Plan: Policy Change Affecting Head Start Families and Programs (National Head Start Association)
- Developmental Milestones (Centers for Disease Control)