

Homeless Children in Care



WHO?

Homeless children are individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. This includes children:

- Sharing housing due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason.
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations.
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters.
- Awaiting foster care placement.
- Residing in a location that is not designed or intended for human sleeping accommodations (e.g. park benches, etc.)
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing or bus or train stations.

HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Sometimes it is hard to know if a child in your care is homeless. Families will not always self-identify, often due to fear, shame and embarrassment. Simply asking a family if they are homeless is not a good strategy. Providers should ask families to describe their living situation and whether that situation is permanent. If a family seems unsure when asked, a provider could offer options to choose from, such as car, motel, shelter or living temporarily with family or friends.

Potential signs that a child may be homeless include poor health and nutrition, unmet medical and dental needs, chronic hunger (may hoard food), fatigue, poor hygiene, lack of showers or baths, wearing the same clothes for several days, poor self-esteem, extreme shyness, difficulty socializing and trusting people, aggression, protective of parents and anxiety late in the day. Parents or children can make statements like, "We've been moving around a lot;" "Our address is new — I don't remember it;" "We are staying with relatives until we get settled;" or "We are going through a bad time right now."

15,808

children under the age of six were identified as homeless in Utah in 2013.

More than half were under the age of



WHAT IS REQUIRED?

All Child Care Providers are required to be in compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act when enrolling homeless children who meet the definition provided.

One requirement is that the facility enrolls homeless children without documentation required of other children, including immunization records. The family has 90 days after enrollment to provide the records needed.

The provider could create a special form that collects only the essential information needed to enroll or apply, such as names and birthdates. The information should be self-reported by the family, and could include a signed affidavit. The form shall clearly define expectations of what documentation is still needed and when it must be submitted.



HOW CAN YOU HELP?

The impacts of homelessness on children, especially young children, may lead to changes in brain architecture that can interfere with learning, emotional self-regulation, cognitive skills and social relationships. Children experiencing homelessness are sick four times as often as other children, experience four times the rate of developmental delays and have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems. They wonder if they will have roofs over their heads at night and what will happen to their families. Some techniques to help stabilize a child include the following.

Active Listening. Active listening is perhaps the most important technique that you can use:

- Encouraging the expression of feelings.
- Acknowledging the real loss or tragedy experienced by a family.
- Reflecting feelings expressed by the child.
- Normalizing the child's reactions.
- Conveying acceptance of the child, but not of destructive behaviors.
- Reframing the child's statements or behaviors to emphasize the positives.
- Focusing on the "here and now".
- Confronting inconsistencies in child statements or behaviors in tactful ways.
- Summarizing and bringing closure to emotional topics.

Providing Information. Information about community resources and assistance in accessing those resources, such as access to a computer, can help families.

Modeling a Sense of Humor and Fun. Some children need to be able to relax and take themselves and their situations less seriously. Showing a sense of humor about one's own mistakes lets children know that no one is perfect and that laughter is sometimes the best medicine.

Showing Enthusiasm. Your enthusiasm promotes feelings of enthusiasm in a child. The child can begin to gain confidence in their own abilities to resolve a crisis when they see the caregiver as someone who believes they can do so, too.

Instilling Realistic Hope. Your ability to instill hope in a child is critical in motivating children to try new coping strategies. Help the child to see his or her strengths. Encouraging the child to try new approaches imparts hope.

Questioning. In periods of crisis, it is important for children to be able to organize their thoughts. Asking questions is

one way to help children start thinking clearly again. For example, "What have you already tried?" and "What do you want to try next?" are questions that can lead children toward a better alternative.

Child care providers should also proactively offer multiple options for parents to check in on their children particularly for families new to child care. Homeless families may find it especially difficult to entrust their children to child care providers because of previous negative experiences or their trauma histories. Allowing parents to call or visit as desired, and to be offered these options from the moment of first engagement, may allay some of these fears.

RESOURCES FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES

If you suspect a family is homeless, you can refer the parents to the following for assistance:

- Help hotlines: Dial 211 for up-to-date services
- Homeless Shelter Directory: homelesshelterdirectory.org/utah.html — Provides search tools and links for:
 - ♦ Department of Housing and Urban Development offices
 - ♦ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
 - ♦ Food banks
 - ♦ Legal assistance
 - ♦ Local tenant rights, laws and protections
 - ♦ Social Security offices
 - ♦ Homeless veterans resources
 - ♦ United Way
 - ♦ Jobs and job training
 - ♦ Skills training and counseling

SPECIAL THANKS:

- HomelessChildrenAmerica.org
- *Supporting Children and Families Experience Homelessness: CCDF State Guide*, naehcy.org
- National Center for Homeless Education
- National Alliance to End Homelessness
- Utah Comprehensive Report on Homelessness

