**Early Learning for Children Experiencing Homelessness**

Research shows that brain development in early childhood lays the foundation for all future learning, behavior and health. This is when children develop the cognitive and social-emotional skills needed to successfully navigate challenges they will encounter the rest of their lives.

For some children, the earliest years are also marked by an increased risk for adverse childhood experiences,1 including homelessness, which can negatively impact brain development and result in poorer educational outcomes. Homelessness during

infancy and toddlerhood has been linked to social emotional delays, poor academic achievement and engagement, and underdeveloped social skills in elementary school. With approximately half of all children who stay in federally-funded emergency and transitional housing programs being age five or younger, it is imperative to address the challenges of young children experiencing homelessness.

Quality early childhood education programs can mediate the adverse influence of homelessness, reducing the achievement gap, and positioning children to be ready to enter school, learn, and succeed. Recognizing the benefits of positive experiences for young children, many early childhood programs prioritize the enrollment of young children experiencing homelessness, but homeless children’s participation in such programs remains disproportionately low with only 8% of young homeless children being served by Head Start/Early Head Start or McKinney-Vento programs.

According to the McKinney-Vento Act, each state must designate a State Coordinator for Homeless Education to oversee the implementation of the Act within the state (42 U.S.C. § 11432(d)(3)). The specific duties of the State Coordinator include (42

U.S.C. § 11432(f)):

• collecting data regarding the education of homeless children and youth within the state, as required by ED;

• developing and carrying out a state McKinney-Vento plan; and

• facilitating coordination between the SEA and various educational and service provider agencies, including child development and preschool program personnel, to improve the provision of education and related services to homeless children, youth, and families.

ED’s Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program: Non-regulatory Guidance (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) includes a wealth of information on State Coordinator and local liaison collaborations between LEAs and service providers such as Head Start and IDEA. Ensuring that young children experiencing homelessness have access to quality early care and education is most likely to happen when undertaken by a group of committed partner agencies. NCHE recommends the following steps to begin laying the foundation for collaboration:

**1. Find out what’s out there.**

Use the Early Care and Education Landscape chart on page 13 to become familiar with your state or local landscape. Chart the programs that exist, program eligibility criteria, administering agencies, and services offered in your area.

**2. Identify who’s out there.**

Venture out into the landscape. Gather contact information for the directors of all early care and education programs in your community and send an email to introduce yourself. You may wish to share data about the number of homeless preschool-and school-aged children in your community or state and information about local shelters.7 Request a meeting to become acquainted with one another and each other’s programs. Many early care and education programs convene advisory councils in which State Coordinators and local liaisons participate and share information. For example:

**• Early intervention (IDEA Part C)**

Part C of IDEA authorizes early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities (birth through two years old). As part of the IDEA component known as Child Find, states are required to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities, including children with disabilities who are homeless and in need of early intervention or special education services.