

## **Home at Head Start: Helping Families Experiencing Homeless Access Head Start Services**

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Happy New Year! Happy 2019. I hope you had a great holiday. And you're back. The New Year's started. We're well into January. I actually apologize for being a little bit late--had a little vlog challenge this year. So, I'm just getting to my January Vlog. But nevertheless, we have a lot of good stuff to cover today.

So, let's jump in and start with our love notes. I've got two this month--really exciting. There's an organization called Sanford Harmony and every year they do Teacher of the Year Award and they're looking for inspirational teaching. And they give an award for a single teacher--one from each state. So, there are fifty teachers who get recognized. And this year, two of them were Head Start teachers--and I just think that's fantastic! So, I want to recognize from Maine, Sarah Page. She's a teacher at the SKCDC Head Start. And then, we have Janelle Williams from Atlanta, Georgia who is a teacher at Dean Rusk Head Start Academy. So, congratulations to the two of you. You have the honor of being recognized, but they also won a \$10,000 prize. So, next year when this award comes around--I did announce it last fall--I want to see more applicants from Head Start. This is so exciting to see our folks being recognized on the national level--so way to go!

And my second love note goes to E-Center in California. I got a great note about E-Center. If you recall, there were those horrific fires in California--the Campfires--and the E-Center actually opened their doors to the victims of the campfires for child care while this was going on, and people were struggling with figuring out how to cope. So, you know, Head Start is all about being a hub in the community. And I think this was a great example of how Head Start can serve as a real hub for the community, a real center for the community, beyond the child services we provide--just to be a community leader. So, way to go E-Center!

Alright, let's jump into our topic this month. I want to talk about homelessness this month. And part of the reason my vlog is a little late is because I--this is a little tougher, so it took a little work to put this together. And it's actually going to span beyond January. Back in the fall, I was having some meetings here at ACF and working with some other organizations on homelessness. And you know the statistics around homelessness for children are pretty staggering. I knew that. But when you hear things, sometimes they just strike you. And it you're not aware, over two million children are classified as homeless. But what's most striking is over a million of them are under 6. And when I heard that, I thought every single one of those children is eligible for Head Start. Are we really reaching out to our homeless community as effectively as we can? I don't know. But I think I want to jump in and see.

So, I'm going to talk a little bit about homelessness today. And we're going to start a campaign called, "Home at Head Start" this winter, and see what we can do to really bring those children and their families into Head Start nationwide.

So, first of all, I just want to remind everyone what the definition of homelessness is for Head Start as it relates to children, of course, from the McKinney-Vento: Children who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence are classified as homeless. So, certainly, families without any place to live--people living in their cars, in a shelter, in a park--are certainly classified homeless. But, also families that are borrowing space, sleeping in a basement of a friend or family member--especially, those tend to be inconsistent.

So, they might be somewhere for the week and somewhere else for a week. Those children also meet the definition of homelessness. And we can bring them into the Head Start family and give them services and some stability where they have none. So, I think it's really important--you know, serving the most vulnerable children is Head Start's mission and I would argue that homeless children would certainly be classified as our most vulnerable. So, as we talk about this, I want you to keep that in mind.

I realize that the work, this--the work that is required among this particular population can be really challenging. Everything from finding homeless families, enrolling them, getting records for them, doing screenings--all of those things can be very challenging, because you are dealing with a family who generally doesn't have that level of stability. But I would also argue that it's extremely important. I think one of the great things Head Start can do is offer stability and predictability for a child where they really have none. Even if their housing situation doesn't get remedied, they can come to Head Start and know things are going to be a certain way every day, regardless.

So, I want to start a campaign. It's called "Home at Head Start." We're gonna--my goal is to fill as many of our empty slots with homeless children and serve their families if we possibly can, this winter-- so, we'll say through the end of March, we're going to do some tracking. And we're going to do this in two phases: Rather than just jump into enrollment--you can certainly start that-- but what I want to do from my level is really look at this from a professional development standpoint.

We have a wonderful eight-module training on the ECLKC related to homelessness. It is very comprehensive and very valuable. So, I'm going to challenge you and your entire staff to complete this eight-module training. I'll provide the link for you here in the vlog. It doesn't take very long. You can do it as a whole staff together or you could charge everybody with doing it on their own. Certainly, they could do it on their own time, whenever, wherever. I personally think there would be great value to getting your staff together and completing it as a group, being able to discuss some of the challenges and maybe some solutions to some of those challenges together--a real collaborative effort.

But regardless of how you do it--get everybody trained, have them print their certificates, get a nice group photo of everyone holding up their certificate and email it to me. That--email that picture to me. My email is: [OHSdirector@ACF.hhs.gov](mailto:OHSdirector@ACF.hhs.gov). Again, I'll provide that for you here in the vlog.

And I want to track how many trainings can we get done by February and when I do my February Vlog, I'll shout out those of you who have done an incredible job here. I think doing the training first is the way to go, so that you can start to, sort of, materialize some solutions to some of the things that really will be challenging in undertaking something like a real effort to enroll homeless children. The second phase is going to be enrolling.

So, the center, the campaign centers around filling empty slots that you currently have with homeless children and certainly you will be serving their families. And we're starting that with you today. But throughout the winter--all the way through the end of March, we'll be tracking the children we enroll-- and I'll get to that in just a minute. And one of the ways that we're going to tackle this is not just through you, the grantee, the head start director, the teachers.

But in February, I'm going to do a special webcast just with Policy Council. I'm going to reach out to our parents. I think it's really important to recognize that our parents might be real advocates in this space. They know the community. They know of families who are struggling. They might not know that a family living in a basement in a temporary status is considered homeless, and actually has automatic eligibility for Head Start. So, those are things I'm going to share with Policy Council and how they can be a real advocate for this campaign, and really support the Head Start, their Head Start center in this way. And I think getting Policy Council involved will be a way to empower them and to also really bring this to the next level. So, you might be thinking, one of the things I hear a lot--and I understand this coming from the public schools because this is exactly the same thing we experienced.

You know, enrolling a family, screening, getting the child sort of acclimated to the classroom--all of that takes time. It's about a forty-five day process, really from start to finish of really getting centered in a program or in classroom. And then a lot of times the families leave, because their lives are unstable. And sometimes that can be very deflating. But you know, we were talking as a team here and the point was made that even if the only thing you do is bring a child in, do the screenings, try to get them educationally centered and they move on, you've given them a great gift. They get to take that with them. There's a relationship they established and although it might be frustrating to then have them leave, you've taken a really important first step. So, don't feel like this is an effort that's futile. It really is important.

And my goal for this campaign is to enroll 10,000 homeless children by the end of March. Now, I had someone say, "Mmm, you might want to lower that goal--that's a little lofty." But I really like to do things big--that's how I like to do things. And I think, it's, you know, we have a million children under 6 who are homeless. I don't think 10,000 is too lofty a goal.

And I want to show you a picture--you know filming this on Tuesday morning after Martin Luther King Day. So I had some technical difficulties, so I had to come back in and film it again and that's why it's late. And I was thinking, hmm, and I put up this picture and you'll recognize this picture, it's pretty well-known. And I was thinking, when he was up there speaking were there people who said to him: "You know, your goals are too lofty. You really can't accomplish this. It's too big of a shift." I'm sure there were. And I think Martin Luther King is known for ignoring that and really putting his efforts where his heart was. And I think that's what we all need to do. But we can only do this collectively. Just like this picture. This couldn't be done alone. It took this whole collection of people working together. And I would argue that that's what we need right now.

So, it's going to be one student at a time, two students at a time--that centers reach out to their communities. They find those homeless families. They bring those children in. And it's going to be that kind of effort that can result in success here of reaching that 10,000-child goal. I also want to encourage you to reach out to your public schools. I know I talk about this a lot, but all public schools have a homeless liaison, at least the system will. And if you can connect with your homeless liaison in your public school, maybe they just enrolled a second grader who had a 3-year-old sibling. And sometimes they don't think to connect that child to Head Start.

So there are a lot of creative things you can do to sort of contribute to this effort. And I encourage you to do them. Certainly, completing that ECLKC training is going to give you all of these ideas and real resources that you can dig into. So, I'm going to leave it with you. You'll have my email here. You're going to have a link to the ECLKC, some other resources I'm going to give you as well. Some homeless

services that might be in your community and maybe they would be good links to potential families to enroll.

And we're going to end with my "If You Didn't Already Know This..." If you didn't already know, back in the fall, Sesame Street launched "Lily." Lily is a muppet and she is homeless. And they have a whole series of resources, vignettes with Lily. And the idea behind Lily is to sort of destigmatize the classification of homelessness for children. And some of those vignettes are beautiful. You might want to share them with your families, with your teachers, in some of your process here. See if there are some resources on Sesame Street--I'll give you that link too--that would help you.

And so, go for it. Let's see how we get, how this works. I'm going to send you some reminder emails, to just send me your numbers on a monthly basis. I don't have an automatic way to track this, so this is going to be a really manual tracking. But I'm willing to do it, if you are. So, let's jump in together and collaborate like a real team. And make something really significant happen this winter for our children.

Remember: Head Start is access to the American Dream. Go make dreams happen.