



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on General Welfare

Re: Oversight: Interagency Coordination Between DHS and ACS to Protect Homeless Children

February 27, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Robyn Bitner, and I am a staff attorney and legal fellow at Advocates for Children of New York, where I focus on early childhood education for children in temporary housing. For more than 40 years, Advocates for Children has worked to promote access to the best education New York can provide for all students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Every year, we help thousands of New York City parents and students navigate the education system.

In discussions of ways to protect children experiencing homelessness, early childhood education is too often left out of the conversation. It shouldn't be. We know that early childhood education has a significant, positive impact on children's education and lives. But few children need these programs more than children in temporary housing, who are three times less likely to access early childhood education than their peers.

Preschool programs help mitigate the chronic stress and trauma that many children and families in temporary housing experience. These programs serve as a protective buffer by providing a safe, supportive environment where children can prepare for kindergarten and families can access needed support. In addition to providing an educational program, Head Start and EarlyLearn offer services such as health, mental health, and parent workshops to families. Moreover, preschool staff are trained to identify children who may be at risk, offering additional help and serving as a source of stability in their lives. As an important additional benefit, while children attend preschool, parents are free to pursue work, educational training, and housing opportunities. For all of these reasons, the preschool environment helps decrease the likelihood that children will experience abuse or neglect. In fact, one Chicago Child-Parent Center study found that children from low-income backgrounds who attended high-quality preschool programs were 50% less likely to experience child maltreatment than similar children who were not enrolled. Of course, preschool programs are critical for young children for numerous other reasons, most notably that these programs lay the foundation for long-term academic success.

Board of Directors

Eric F. Grossman, *President*
Jamie A. Levitt, *Vice President*
Harriet Chan King, *Secretary*
Paul D. Becker, *Treasurer*

Matt Berke
Kevin J. Curnin
Jessica A. Davis
Adrienne Filipov
Robin L. French
Brian Friedman
Kimberley D. Harris
Caroline J. Heller
Roderick Jenkins
Jeffrey E. LaGueux
Maura K. Monaghan
Jonathan D. Polkes
Raul F. Yanes

Executive Director

Kim Sweet

Deputy Director

Matthew Lenaghan



Currently, over 10,000 children under age five are living in the City's shelters. Thousands of these children are not enrolled in EarlyLearn programs.

Critical to ensuring that children in temporary housing are enrolled in early childhood education programs is interagency collaboration between ACS and DHS. To make a real impact, ACS and DHS need to create a long-term plan to enroll all eligible children in preschool programs. ACS and DHS have already taken positive steps, such as performing a data match to identify children under five who are not yet enrolled, conducting several joint trainings for shelter staff, and encouraging EarlyLearn providers to reach out to local shelters.

We recommend that the City identify a high-level leader to set targets for increased enrollment of children in temporary housing and measure the success of enrollment efforts. Additionally, we recommend that DHS ensure that all young children are screened for EarlyLearn child care eligibility at the time of intake into the shelter system and that DHS and shelter staff provide information about EarlyLearn programs to parents at every opportunity, including initial intake and case management meetings. This information should include clear explanations of the eligibility requirements, including how to obtain any necessary documentation. ACS and DHS should also partner with local EarlyLearn programs to make presentations at shelters and facilitate parent visits at EarlyLearn sites. Finally, ACS and DHS should make it easier for shelters to identify EarlyLearn programs with open seats in their neighborhoods. The current EarlyLearn directory, organized by zip code, provides no information on open seats.

We look forward to collaborating with ACS, DHS, and the City Council on this important work. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.