



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

SAFEGUARDING SUCCESS

The Need to Sustain Funding for Shelter-Based Community Coordinators

Students living in shelter face formidable obstacles to success in school—from mid-year school transfers to hours-long commutes to the trauma of housing loss—and their academic outcomes reflect how much more the City needs to do to adequately meet their needs. For example, in 2021–22 (the most recent school year for which data are available), students in shelter dropped out of high school at more than three times the rate of their permanently housed peers, and only 11% of those in grades 3–8 scored proficient on the State math exam.

During the 2022–23 school year, the City launched a much-needed initiative to bolster support for this population: New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) hired 100 new shelter-based community coordinators (SBCCs) to help resolve barriers to consistent school attendance and connect children living in shelter with the services and supports they need to learn. **SBCCs are problem-solvers who help students and families find appropriate school programs, address bureaucratic roadblocks, access resources like food and healthcare, and much more.**

Shelter-based community coordinators fill a critical service gap. While other shelter staff work with families to find permanent housing and receive public benefits, they have neither the time nor the expertise to help families navigate the City's sprawling school system and resolve school-related problems. SBCCs, in contrast, are *exclusively* focused on meeting the educational needs of children and youth in shelter. And unlike school-based staff, SBCCs are well-positioned to get to know entire families holistically; they can work with all the children in a family, who may attend multiple different schools, and understand how school-related issues fit into the broader context of a child's life. By building relationships and trust with parents, SBCCs are better able to assess student needs, problem-solve effectively, and provide families with support along the way.

Since the shelter-based community coordinator position was first envisioned, the level of need has only grown: more than 40,800 students spent time in shelter during the 2022–23 school year, up 39% from just the year prior, and more than one hundred new shelters have opened across the five boroughs. As thousands of immigrant children and youth have arrived in New York City and entered the shelter system needing school placements, bus service, and clothes and supplies for school, the SBCCs have played a critical role, helping newcomer families navigate an unfamiliar system and access resources. **Yet funding for all 100 of the recently-hired SBCCs will run out at the end of June—25 are funded with one-year city dollars and the other 75 with expiring federal stimulus funds—and there is currently *no plan* for ensuring they can remain on the job.**

The following stories illustrate the multifaceted nature of the shelter-based community coordinator role and provide a snapshot of the tangible difference these staffers are making in the lives of young people who might otherwise fall through the cracks. **With the shelter population at record highs, it is vital that the City sustain this work.**

SBCCs are helping students enroll in school and access the supports and services they need to be successful.

Shelter-based community coordinators help families find appropriate educational programs, secure busing, navigate the special education process, and much more. **Their work has helped keep students in shelter on the path to graduation and made it possible for parents to pursue and maintain employment.** Individual SBCCs have, for example:

- Helped a teenager who was considering dropping out of school after having a baby enroll in the LYFE program, which provides student parents with free on-site childcare, so she could continue attending high school.
- Requested and secured an exception to add a student in 3-K to her older sibling's bus route, allowing their mother to start a new job. Without busing—which NYCPS rarely provides to children in 3-K—it would have been impossible for the parent to both take the 3-year-old to school and get to work on time.
- Provided the encouragement a twelfth grader needed to get over the finish line and earn his diploma. After this student's family moved out of the shelter, he brought a box of donuts to personally thank the SBCC—who had provided help with basic needs like laundry and made herself available whenever he needed someone to talk to—for all she did to help him get through high school.
- Made sure families know about the Early Intervention program, which provides services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities, and guided parents through the referral and evaluation process, helping children to get needed services as early as possible.

After 13-year-old Victor, a student in shelter with a disability, had a growth spurt, his wheelchair no longer fit him. The discomfort and embarrassment of having to use a too-small chair began affecting his attendance and his attitude towards being in school. Victor's parent, whose primary language is not English, had tried contacting the school and the New York State Office of People with Developmental Disabilities for help, but felt overwhelmed and frustrated. Victor's parent confided in the SBCC at their shelter, whom she had grown to trust, about what was going on and the fact that she was having a lot of difficulty making calls about the wheelchair replacement because of the language barrier. The SBCC helped the parent connect with a local hospital and advocated on the family's behalf, eventually securing a new wheelchair for Victor.*

Families in shelter are often navigating a range of challenges and social service systems simultaneously, and shelter-based community coordinators provide overwhelmed parents with at-the-elbow support. This individualized assistance is especially critical for the families of students

* All student names are pseudonyms.

with disabilities, as even well-resourced New York City families routinely struggle to obtain the supports and services to which their children are entitled. SBCCs have, for instance:

- Secured a school transfer for twins with autism who were placed in a shelter in Brooklyn after their family was evicted from their Bronx home, and then arranged door-to-door car service so the students—whose behavior had regressed in the absence of their school routine—did not have to miss even more school while waiting for a bus paraprofessional to be assigned.
- Accompanied the parent of a child on the autism spectrum to meetings at the local school after the parent was turned away when trying to enroll, and then followed up repeatedly with school staff to secure new special education evaluations and a District 75 school placement that would better meet the student's needs.

SBCCs are addressing barriers to attendance and reducing absenteeism.

Students living in shelter are absent from school at alarmingly high rates. During the 2021–22 school year, for example, 72% of students in shelter were chronically absent, meaning they missed at least one out of every ten school days. By comparison, 39% of permanently housed students missed that many days of class.

When a student is not getting to school in the first place, it can be extremely challenging for a school-based staff member to build the personal relationship that is necessary to uncover and address the underlying issues preventing regular attendance. **Because shelter-based community coordinators are working in the locations where students and families live, they have a unique vantage point from which to spot and address problems.**

An SBCC noticed that Jake, a student in his shelter, was struggling with his attendance. When the SBCC would go to Jake's door in the morning, Jake would be up and dressed but would often have an angry outburst when it came time to leave for school; other days, he left the shelter but still skipped class. The SBCC brought the student to his office to talk, and during the course of the conversation, Jake expressed that the SBCC was lucky because his clothes were clean—which is how the SBCC discovered that Jake was embarrassed to go to school because he had no way to wash his clothes. The SBCC got the family laundry detergent and laundry cards and worked with Jake and his family to raise his attendance.

By building trusting relationships with families, regularly monitoring attendance data, and addressing logistical barriers to getting to school on time, SBCCs have ensured that students in shelter are spending more time in the classroom where they belong. For example, SBCCs have:

- Arranged for a bus driver to let a family with a very early-morning pick-up time know when he was close to arriving so the children could be in the lobby and ready to go, as missing the bus meant a long commute on public transit that left the students arriving after the school day had already started.
- Worked with all the students in a family to set a concrete goal—attending school every day for two weeks—and, when the goal was met, recognized their efforts with pizza and a certificate of improvement.

- Raised a kindergartener's attendance from just 50% in the fall to 83% in the spring by providing regular check-ins and developing a trusting relationship with the parent, who was struggling with significant mental health challenges.

SBCCs are supporting newcomer children and families.

As increased numbers of immigrant families and asylum-seekers have arrived in New York City and entered the shelter system over the past year, shelter-based community coordinators have stepped in to play a critical role in the City's response. Although the SBCC role was envisioned—and desperately-needed—before the increase in the shelter population, these staffers have been vital in helping the newest New Yorkers find school programs and access needed educational services. They have explained to families that children living in the U.S. have a right to a free public education; reassured anxious parents and children that the schools are safe; and helped families navigate the special education process. Had the SBCCs *not* been in place for the past year, newcomer students would doubtless have experienced even longer delays enrolling in school, even more educational disruption when moving from one shelter placement to another, and even more obstacles to arriving at school ready to learn.

An SBCC was working with newly arrived immigrant parents who were initially reluctant to send any of their three young children to City schools. Because the children did not speak any English, the parents were concerned that they would struggle both socially and academically. The SBCC helped them understand the public school system and enroll their oldest, Lucia, in first grade. Seeing the positive impact school had on Lucia led the parents to change their perspective, with positive ripple effects on the entire family: because Lucia loved school and was learning English, they enrolled her two younger siblings in 3-K and pre-K, and the mother began taking English classes herself.

In addition to enrolling newcomer children and youth in school and helping their parents navigate the bureaucracy of NYCPS, shelter-based community coordinators have connected students with resources that they would otherwise struggle to access. For example, individual SBCCs have:

- Established partnerships with community-based organizations to bring free food, clothing, and school supplies to families living at a newly opened shelter that had no permanent staff on site except for the shelter director.
- Arranged vaccination appointments and physicals for newcomer students and helped connect families to health and mental health care services critical to school attendance.
- Reached out to the school to help with enrollment when a family was moved from a Bronx shelter to Floyd Bennett Field and then to another shelter in Manhattan.
- Organized clothing drives and distributed coats, hats, and scarves to children and youth who had no winter clothes.
- Launched English classes for parents at the local elementary school and worked with the principal to provide childcare so they could attend.

* * *

As the examples above demonstrate, the support provided by SBCCs has indisputably been life-changing for individual students and families. They have made the difference in determining whether a student dropped out or earned a high school diploma; whether or not a toddler with a developmental delay received services at a time in their life when those services could have the biggest impact; whether or not a teenager skipped school because they had no clean clothes; whether a newly arrived immigrant enrolled in pre-K and started learning English, or missed out on the chance for early childhood education.

With student homelessness at a record level, the City should be *increasing* its efforts to ensure students in shelter can access a high-quality education. **Instead, the shelter-based community coordinator initiative is in serious jeopardy. Losing 100 SBCCs would result in a massive service gap for students who are homeless; at a minimum, the Administration must maintain the limited supports that currently exist and find a permanent funding stream to continue the work of these critical staffers.**