McKinney-Vento Collaborations:

Learning from the Experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons, Head Start Providers, and Community-Based Organizations

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Introduction

The first five years of a child's life are crucial for their development. During this period, millions of neural connections form, laying the foundation for future learning, health, and social-emotional well-being. Healthy development can be interrupted by chronic or unmitigated stress, known as "toxic stress", contributing to a host of negative outcomes through childhood and into adulthood.[1] One such stressor is housing instability, and, in Georgia, an estimated 11,415 children under the age of three are homeless, according to a 2022 School House Connection report. Of those 11,415 children, only 462, or 4%, were enrolled in some early childhood program like Head Start or home visiting program.[2] Additionally, a 2023 study found that children under five are disproportionately affected by eviction,[3] further emphasizing the urgent need to address the risk housing instability poses to Georgia's youngest children.

Georgia has taken a proactive approach to address early childhood housing instability through a "Memorandum of Agreement" (MOU) between the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Georgia Head Start Association (GHSA).[4] This MOU describes how these two agencies address different age ranges, with Early Head Start and Head Start (HS) serving children birth-3 and 3-5, respectively, and school districts typically serving children 5 and older with some districts serving a portion of 4-year-olds in Georgia Pre-K Programs. Both agencies have different abilities and parameters that, when working together, better cover the needs of children and families in Georgia.

[1] Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2007). InBrief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Retrieved from https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/
[2] Schoolhouse Connections. (2022). Infant & Toddler Homelessness Across 50 states: 2021-2022.
[3] Graetz, N. (ngraetz@princeton.edu), Gershenson, C., Hepburn, P., +2, & Desmond, M. (2023, October 2). A comprehensive demographic profile of the US evicted population. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 120(41), e2305860120. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2305860120
[4] Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) between Georgia Department of Education (Ga DOE) And The Georgia Head Start Association (GHSA), https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/mou-ga-ed-hs.docx

For school-aged children, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act guarantees children experiencing homelessness the right to public education and requires districts to provide these children with support to enroll and retain them. This includes but is not limited to services such as transportation, referrals to medical or mental health services, specialized professional development for educators working with this population, and more.[5] To enact this directive, each local education agency (LEA), typically referred to as a school district, will designate a McKinney Vento "Liaison" to work with the state education agency – GaDOE – to implement these activities. Liaisons work to identify children experiencing homelessness and connect services and resources from the district or community partners. The work of a liaison is usually in addition to the responsibilities of another district position's role, which can challenge the workload for those designated as liaisons, especially in smaller districts where liaisons often wear multiple professional hats. While comprehensive, the McKinney-Vento Act does not address some key things, like directly providing housing assistance, nor do its protections extend to non-school age children, leaving out the youngest and most vulnerable population: children birth to age 5.

The MOU between GaDOE and Georgia Head Start Association (GHSA) helps to address the youngest population through its enumerated collaborative activities between the agencies as well as those between the local liaisons and Head Start or Early Head Start providers. Head Start providers can be any kind of licensed child care or school district space that meets certain standards, applies to be a Head Start grantee, and is awarded a Head Start grant through the federal government. Head Start classrooms therefore n be in the community at child care centers or they can be

housed at the district if it is a Head Start grantee - or communities can have a combination of both. Head Start providers can only accept children who meet certain federally set eligibility criteria, but children experiencing housing insecurity (as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act) are categorically eligible for Head Start, and Head Start grantees have additional flexibility to enroll them.[6]

[5] .S. Department of Education. (n.d.). McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Retrieved from
https://nche.ed.gov/legislation/mckinney-vento/
[6] SchoolHouse Connection. (2024). The Head Start Program Performance Standards and Homelessness. SchoolHouse Connection.
https www schoolhouseconnection org early childhood head start program performance standards and homelessness

Not every community has Head Start or Early Head Start, and communities that do are not exclusively served by these programs. In fact, statewide, just under 19,000 children are served in Head Start, and under 5,000 in Early Head Start, representing a small fraction of children at this age,[7] out of a total of approximately 768,000 children birth to age 5.[8]

Recognizing that there is an opportunity to connect more young children to needed services, GaDOE and the GA Head Start Collaboration Office commissioned this report to hear from the experiences of local liaisons and HS providers. By conducting listening sessions with these stakeholders in various Georgia regions, liaisons, HS providers, and community organizations identified successful strategies, challenges to their work, and opportunities for improving support systems for young children experiencing homelessness. The goal of this report is to highlight effective practices, share common challenges, and provide recommendations based on the insights gathered from these listening sessions. By understanding the experiences of those working directly with housing-insecure children and families, we can work towards improving outcomes for this vulnerable population.

A note about terminology: While "homeless" is a common term, we will also use "homelessness," "unhoused," and "housing instability" interchangeably. These terms encompass a range of situations, from living in substandard housing to staying with relatives or in temporary shelters. They also reflect the definitional scope of homelessness that the McKinney-Vento Act describes.[9]

[7] Georgia Head Start Association. (n.d.). Facts and Figures. Retrieved from https://georgiaheadstart.org/about/facts-and-figures/
[8] First Five Years Fund. (2024). Child Care and Early Learning in Georgia. https://www.ffyf.org/states/georgia/
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Methodology

In May of 2024, GEEARS began a three-phase process to gather the information in this report. The first phase included research and interviews with national and state experts. From these interviews on McKinney-Vento coordination, Head Start, and the roles of other leading support organizations like Schoolhouse Connection, we formed a foundational understanding of how McKinney-Vento liaisons collaborate with those working within early childhood systems, especially with Head Start programs. Working with the Head Start Collaboration Office and Ga. Department of Education (GaDOE), we identified seven counties where the school district was also a Head Start or Early Head Start grantee or was closely located with a grantee program. Because of their proximity, we estimated that these communities would have an advantage in partnership and practice that others could learn from. Burke, Clarke, Emanuel, Hancock, Jasper, Putnam, and Randolph were the selected counties.

Next, we conducted stakeholder interview calls with district liaisons and Head Start grantees from these selected communities. These interviews offered a more in-depth perspective of each community, which shaped the three themes of inquiry for our coming in-person sessions. These themes are Identification, Access to Resources, and Coordination & Partnerships. From these stakeholder interviews we designed the questions and activities for the final phase of information gathering: the listening sessions.

In the Fall of 2024, GEEARS facilitated four listening sessions across Georgia, from the southwest corner to the northeast, in urban and rural settings. Cuthbert, Athens, Eatonton, and Swainsboro were the hosting locations for all seven invited counties. Across these four convenings roughly 50 professionals

came to share their experiences as McKinney-Vento liaisons, Head Start or Early Head Start professionals, and community partners working in some capacity with families experiencing housing insecurity. Food and stipends were offered to attendees to offset barriers to participation. While GEEARS captured contemporaneous notes of their responses, we made clear these would be anonymized so that participants could feel free to share their thoughts and experiences.

Mirroring the themes of inquiry, listening sessions consisted of whole-group guided discussions and activities with 10 – 20 participants at each session. The following sections reflect the responses gathered across the state from these participants on collaborating to address homelessness for very young to school-age children.

Identification

Defining Eligibility:

Eligibility for McKinney-Vento services is broader than common perceptions of homelessness and broader than definitions of some other agencies. By McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act standards, "homelessness" is not only defined by having no shelter to sleep in, but also includes circumstances like living in vehicles, living in substandard housing (i.e. lacking hot water or power), or "doubling-up" in the housing of family or friends. According to the Head Start Program Performance Standards, children who meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness who are 0 – 5 and under school age, are categorically eligible for Head Start or Early Head Start services which include comprehensive resources for the child and family.[10]

Respondents across Head Start and school-age settings were consistent and accurate in their understanding of the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness and could explain the nuances of eligibility. Liaisons reported being similarly knowledgeable about the state's MOU charging them to connect very young children to Head Start when they were too young for McKinney-Vento protection from the district. There was some uncertainty around whether children were eligible for Head Start services when HS spots were full. All communities reported waitlists for Head Start services. However, some respondents knew that Head Start programs can reserve up to 3% of spaces for unhoused children when vacancies open. While knowledge of and understanding of the state-level MOU seemed consistent, familiarity with written

[10] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Head Start. (n.d.). Head Start Program Performance Standards. Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii

local policies or written procedures decreased for local HS providers and district liaisons. Instead, liaisons and grantees reported feeling very comfortable speaking with one another directly about how best to approach a family's specific situation.

Qualifying circumstances were largely consistent across communities and aligned with the GHSA-GaDOE MOU. These included substandard housing, doubling up, living in vehicles or temporary shelters, and other situations that meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness. Professionals were also aware of the distinctions between their program's definition and that of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Housing Status Checks - Frequency & Methods:

Housing insecurity can occur due to many unforeseen or uncontrollable reasons including job loss, medical emergencies, or environmental crises. In the week leading up to these listening sessions, Hurricane Helene ripped through the state, hitting the rural east especially hard. In fact, some of these listening sessions had to be postponed because of the storm. When we were able to hold convenings in these eastern communities, the damage to homes and buildings was still clearly visible. Participants said they knew of families whose homes were damaged or uninhabitable. Events like these also can disrupt local economies and job security, putting more families into financial and housing insecurity. Whatever the reason, crises like this can change housing status quickly, so it was important to review methods and frequency of the housing status of children.

Intake forms are used by all respondents to check for housing insecurity. Respondents report that they do see some families disclose homelessness in these intake forms, especially if the form asks in multiple ways. For example, Head Start programs asked for the child's caregiver to list goals for the year, and this question sometimes yielded responses that show McKinney-Vento eligibility.

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The example given was an adult saying a goal was to move into housing of their own, which indicated that they were doubled-up and met the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness. While all respondents said intake forms asked about housing status, there was a mixed response on whether these forms asked if a school-aged child had siblings. This means that if a school-age child is McKinney-Vento eligible, then their younger sibling who is eligible for Head Start may be overlooked. Additionally, school-district staff indicated that even when they ask about younger siblings, caregivers do not always list them on forms, so additional probing may be needed to ensure younger siblings in the home are identified.

Besides forms, liaisons and HS providers report the value of strong interpersonal relationships with families and the community at large to keep up with changes in living situations. One respondent says that after building trusted relationships with families they bring up needs to them without prompting.

> "They'll stop by. They'll come to us, and they know that we're the resource people… We develop a relationship, and if they need something they'll just come and say 'Hey, can I talk to you?'"
> - Head Start provider describing family relationships

Relationships with other professionals that work with families was also an important window into the welfare of families. All communities shared that their bus drivers, cafeteria workers, administrative staff, and other non-educational staff also get information from relationships they have and work they do with families. These other staff are clearly an important piece of identification, and one that is passively and consistently happening.

Strong personal relationships within the community are a key method for identifying children experiencing housing insecurity. Such connections exist between the school district, Head Start providers, some other early learning providers and especially some community-based organizations like food banks, shelters, and the child welfare agency. Additionally, staff across the programs noted that relationships with families were crucial to families feeling safe enough to share their housing status. Many respondents reported relying on these relationships to receive information about potential qualifying

circumstances that families are experiencing. These word-of-mouth, or interpersonal relationships are credited for doing much of the work of identifying a family's circumstances.

Public Misconceptions, Cultural Preferences, and Stigma:

Public perceptions of homelessness often differ from the McKinney-Vento definition, which participants say can lead to delays or failures in identification. For example, some professionals report that families often think of homelessness as living outside without shelter. Families are surprised to learn that some conditions qualify them under the McKinney-Vento definition, like lacking power or hot water, or living at the house of family or friends. Other professionals responded that an educational campaign could be useful to help families understand that they indeed qualify for these beneficial resources and services.

Cultural preference may also influence families' willingness to self-identify as homeless. Even when families lived together on a non-temporary basis, professionals reported that some communities are more accepting and interested in a multi-family or multi-generational living situation. In these situations, professionals reported that these attitudes mean families would not identify themselves as housing insecure. One community liaison said that a helpful question to ask is "are you trying to leave this housing situation?" to delineate between housing insecurity and a chosen multi-family housing.

Stigma associated with homelessness can lead to reluctance to accept resources or fear of state involvement. One professional told us of an adult who, upon learning that they did in fact qualify, said that these resources should be saved "for someone who really needs it."

Both early learning and elementary-based professionals shared that framing the conversation was key to getting some families to participate. By focusing on the aspirations of the families and access to resources needed to accomplish those goals instead of focusing on the circumstances that qualify the families, some professionals said they can get more acceptance from the families and uptake of services. Multiple professionals reported that families expressed fear of child welfare involvement and family separation, which led to a reluctance to share all the details about their living situation. This fear stems from the systematic conflation of poverty and neglect. In fact, one study estimates that of children nationwide with child protective services investigation, 83% had incomes below the federal poverty line.[11] Additionally, nearly 20% of Georgia's children removed from the home in 2023 had "inadequate housing" as a listed reason.[12]

These were the most commonly referenced hurdles across the listening sessions, but they were also coupled with the confidence that they could be overcome when Head Start staff and McKinney Vento liaisons had time to connect with and reassure families.

[11] Casanueva, 2024 - (National Survey of Child & Adolescent Well-Being III Baseline Report, HHS Poverty Guidelines, 2024)
[12] Voices for Georgia's Children, Whole Child Primer, 2023

Access to Resources

Both Head Start and School System staff reported that identifying children of any age experiencing homelessness was just the first step. The real challenge came in connecting their families to essential resources, as their communities often lacked adequate support, including affordable housing, healthcare providers, nutrition assistance, and transportation.

Housing

Across all the communities we visited, money to help pay the rent or mortgage and eviction prevention services rose to the top of the list of resources needed. A lack of affordable housing broadly contributed to families experiencing housing insecurity. For example, one liaison said "the [housing] market is very upside down", describing how affordability of homes for sale or rent in the area has dropped as prices have soared to new heights. Several participants said families sometimes end up staying in hotels when available, however short-stay rentals are limited, if available at all in some smaller communities. While there were some differences in housing stock between smaller and larger communities, the need for affordable housing was a consistent refrain.

> "The market is very upside down"
> - Head Start provider on the challenge of rising housing costs

In addition to a lack of affordable housing, participants reported a lack of emergency housing, such as domestic violence shelters or emergency shelter after a natural disaster. This led to families leaving their home county to find emergency shelter, disrupting a child's educational experience and access to McKinney Vento or Head Start services. Except for one larger community, all of the professionals in our sessions reported some families leaving their communities for larger communities that were perceived to have more housing resources.

Some communities did have access to limited housing supports. More urban areas had non-profits dedicated to working with families experiencing homelessness, including rental support. One community reported working with a substance use treatment facility for mothers and their children that provided housing and child care. The school system and Head Start program worked closely with that facility to transition families into the community at the end of their stay.

One program mentioned that their local Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) had flexible funding to prevent a child being removed from the home when housing insecurity created an unsafe environment. This flex funding was not mentioned by other communities.

Healthcare

Chronic health challenges can affect caregivers' ability to work and afford housing. Acute health crises can result in economic hardship, such as medical debt or loss of employment. Caregiver mental health and substance use challenges also contribute to struggles with consistent housing. Yet, all the communities who participated in listening sessions mentioned challenges with finding local physical and behavioral health care providers. One community reported a lack of pediatric dentistry. Another community reported that expectant mothers had to drive over 40 miles to the closest birthing hospital. This community, however, was excited about a school-based health clinic being built in the next year that would serve not only students, but members of the community, including parents and children under five. School-based liaisons reported easier access to referrals through in-school nurses or clinics, but, with some small exceptions, these were not open to family members of these children.

Transportation

Lack of transportation can have a pernicious knock-on effect for families trying to access other resources, especially when other agencies require documentation from, say, city clerks, or a doctor's office, and transportation issues prevent fulfilling those needs. Unreliable or intermittent access to transportation makes obtaining necessary components for other resources much harder, and many of the participants of these sessions reported limited access to transportation. Public transportation was unavailable in many rural communities. Even in the larger community we visited, participants thought it was unreliable or inefficient. Other options were also limited, such as taxi services or rideshares. One community said they had no ridesharing availability, and just one community member who would provide taxi rides.

McKinney-Vento liaisons uniformly spoke about their access to district transportation solutions to keep district-enrolled children in school. Some solutions were robust, like one plan to keep a student at their school by coordinating two counties' transportation buses to meet at the county boarder to transfer the student and get them from one county to the next. However, these services were almost exclusively limited to district-enrolled children, not siblings and not family.

In one community, where the district was also a Head Start grantee, the HS director described how through blended funds and community fundraising they purchased a vehicle for their early learning transportation needs. They described how this was a game-changer for them as they increased attendance and could get children and families to related appointments at city clerks or health care providers. It is worth pointing out how rare this solution is, not just because of the cost but also for the red tape that goes with it.

Transportation needs can be so lacking that educators sometimes feel the need to step in and personally offer assistance. Illustrating this one HS provider described noticing a child was absent. When the family said they no longer had access to transportation, the educator drove to the family's home and offered rides.

Partnerships & Collaboration

Data Systems

Across all counties, both the school districts and Head Start organizations maintained separate data systems tailored to their respective needs for tracking student information, including homelessness status. Head Start universally utilized the ChildPlus system to manage and monitor data, ensuring consistency across their programs. Data systems employed by school districts varied depending on the local district, with commonly used platforms including Infinite Campus and PowerSchool.

One district elaborated on their process for transferring students from ChildPlus to their data management system and described that while they strive to maintain consistency from one platform to the other through communication, reporting requirements look different for both platforms. In one county, collaboration between the school district and Head Start has enabled designated staff members to access each other's data systems, fostering a more integrated approach to supporting students. However, generally, the data systems of school districts and Head Start operate independently, with limited direct access or integration between the two entities.

More broadly, one community implemented a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to streamline the tracking of individuals experiencing homelessness across various systems and organizations. The system was designed with the intention of fostering collaboration, improving data consistency, and ensuring that no individual falls through the cracks when seeking support. While the concept is promising and aligns with best practices for coordinated care, its practical application has been hindered by significant challenges. A key issue is that approximately 80% of organizations serving people experiencing homelessness do not use the HMIS, citing its complexity and cumbersome nature.

Similarly, another online tool called FindHelpGA.org can connect people to services and resources in their community. To be on FindHelpGA.org the resources need to be readily available and at low or no cost to those who are eligible. One hurdle it faces however is that not all agencies and organizations know about the site, leaving searches paltry for some parts of the state. Another issue is the accuracy of entries. For example, McKinney-Vento Liaisons are listed in every location we searched, but the contact information was for the central state office in Atlanta, and not the local contact information. These two examples of information systems show how liaisons, HS providers, and other community members can support their work through online tools, but there needs to be increased consistency and coordination for it.

Resources for Professional Learning

Communities highlighted various national, state, and local collaboratives and organizations as valuable resources for connection and professional development. Most professionals from both school districts and local Head Start programs reported receiving professional development and training through their respective agencies.

School district staff specifically mentioned accessing professional development from the Georgia Department of Education. They also frequently utilized resources from their Regional Education Service Agency (RESA), particularly for training related to social-emotional health and mental well-being. Georgia has 16 RESAs, strategically established to enhance educational services within each region's school districts and support statewide educational initiatives.

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Recommendations

For State and Local Policymakers:

Invest in the Economic Wellbeing of Families
- Increase access to affordable housing and housing assistance, especially for populations most at risk like families with very young children.
- Invest in cash assistance, child care scholarships and Head Start programs, nutrition support, rural health care providers, and public transportation.
- Provide families at risk of child welfare involvement with additional resources, such as housing, nutrition assistance, and health care for children and adults when poverty is the root cause of the report.

For School District and Head Start Staff:

Build Connections
- Host frequent trainings for all staff on the McKinney Vento definition of homelessness, including bus drivers and nutrition staff. Consider hosting these training collaboratively across Head Start, local school districts, Family Connections, and other partners.
- Prioritize regular meetings between Head Start family support managers and School District McKinney-Vento liaisons to share resources and support families.
- Invest in regularly updated searchable databases. For example, FindHelpGA.org can help others search for and connect to resources they might not have previously known about.
- Invite early learning partners into this work by finding them through DECAL's child care finder tool, families.decal.ga.gov, and asking them to join activities outlined in the HS & GaDOE MOU.
- Strengthen relationships with Regional Continuum of Care planning bodies. In Georgia there are nine such Continuum of Care regions where multisector agencies and organizations work together with the goal of ending homelessness. Liaisons and HS providers can connect with these to gain resources, learning, and funding opportunities for their communities.
- Connect reporting mechanisms so that when children transfer from Head Start to the school system, their status follows them, and administrative burden for families decreases.

For School District and Head Start Staff (Continued):

Build Rapport with Families
- Frame eligibility conversations with families as accessing helpful resources for their child, instead of focusing on traumatic or stigmatizing circumstances. By taking a solutions-based approach and sharing information about resources, families are empowered to ask for what they need instead of feeling as though systems view them as being deficient.
- Check housing status more frequently, especially after crisis events like a natural disaster.
- When working with families, frequently inquire and follow-up about younger children who may be housing insecure.
- Develop informational campaigns to increase awareness of available resources and the qualifying circumstances.
- Assure families' privacy when talking about their living situations to maintain trust with families.
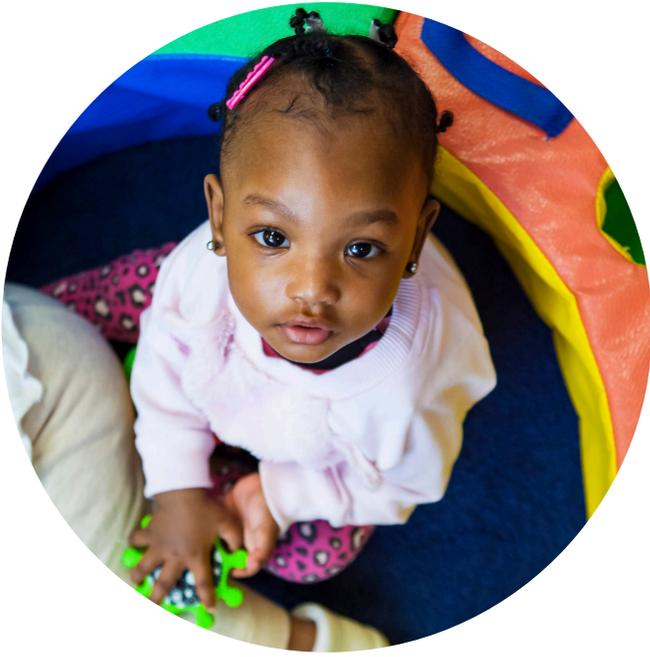
Conclusion

This report highlights the challenge of serving every child experiencing housing insecurity in Georgia, while also lifting up the incredible efforts made by McKinney-Vento liaisons, HS providers, and other community members. This is meaningful, impactful work that makes a difference in every life touched by these professionals.

Still, there are opportunities to improve the system, to give more capacity and tools to these professionals working so diligently on this issue, and to make it clear to families in need just what resources are available. By building additional supports around the system of collaboration already in place, Georgia can better serve one of its youngest and most vulnerable populations. Doing so would help ensure the future success of these children and the success of the State.

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