Educating Homeless Children in Allegheny County:
An Evaluation of Families, Agencies, and Services

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Executive Summary

We collected survey and focus group data from 139 parents of school-age children who reside in Allegheny County homeless agencies and 51 agency staff members who work with these parents on a regular basis. Additionally, we gathered extensive data from records and databases that were made available by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. The major areas of findings that surfaced included:

1. There is great diversity among homeless families with school-age children in Allegheny County. Many of these families are new to homelessness and do not fit stereotypes that are commonly attributed to the homeless.
2. Homeless students and parents experience widespread problems with school. Problems were seen most clearly in areas of health and attendance, mobility, misdiagnosis, harassment/stigmatization, and student behavior.
3. Most parents want to be active advocates in their children's educational pursuits, but many of them face significant barriers in their attempts to do so. The most commonly noted barriers were shortages of information and shortages of resources.
4. Agency-based after-school learning centers appear to be highly effective at providing academic and social support for homeless students. Although their capacities to reach all student populations were seen as limited, the learning centers thrived at providing caring/supportive relationships, access to computers, books, and other school supplies, and access to advanced on-line learning software.
5. The nature and frequency of communication between schools, community programs, residential agency staffs, and parents is crucial. Most parents noted how breakdowns in communication with schools limited their children's possibilities of succeeding.
6. Relationships (and the lack thereof) play important roles in parents' and children's development. Agencies' capacities to provide caring, bridging relationships to families appeared especially helpful in families' educational pursuits.

Based on these numbers, we offered several recommendations for practice in the area of homeless education. The most fundamental of these recommendations is the development of a "Homeless Education Expert Network" that will help facilitate more collaborative, efficient, and effective practice among key actors in homeless education.

Introduction

Research indicates that the number of school-age children who are homeless in the United States at any given time is between 900,000 and 1.4 million (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004). These children live in urban, suburban, and rural areas and they represent the spectrum of racial and ethnic diversity. Many of these children are parts of families who live in homeless agencies, doubled up with friends/family, or on the streets. Allegheny County is no exception to this trend, for recent data suggest that, in 2009, families constitute a higher percentage of the overall homeless population than they have in recent years. It is, therefore, important that we learn more about homeless children's educational experiences – not just their school-based experiences, but also those in community-based after-school programs and those within the homeless agencies themselves. This evaluation sought deeper understandings in these areas and was loosely guided by the following questions: What are the characteristics of homeless families with school-age children in Allegheny County? What are homeless families' experiences with schools and community-based education programs? What factors are most important in developing effective systems of homeless education?

Methods

The evaluation focused on 20 Allegheny County agencies that serve homeless populations. Beginning in April 2009, data were collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and document analyses (for copies of survey and focus group protocol, contact Peter Miller at: pmmiller2@wisc.edu). Surveys were completed by 139 parents of school age children (over 70% of the total population of population of sheltered parents in these agencies on a given night) and over 40 staff members from the agencies, most of whom work directly with parents and children on issues related to schooling. The survey data were coded and analyzed using SPSS software. Qualitative data were collected through interviews and focus groups with 53 homeless parents, agency staff members, and school personnel. Finally, extensive demographic and service information was drawn from the County Department of Human Services database.

Limitations

While our sample of parents and staff was large and representative of the overall County population of agency-housed parents and we were able to collect large amounts of data in multiple forms, there are several limitations to this evaluation that should be noted.

- First, as noted in the methods section, we focused on *sheltered* homeless families and did not gain insights from those who are currently experiencing other conditions of homelessness (doubling up with other families, living on the streets, etc.). In that such conditions affect individuals' encounters with and perceptions of school and after-school programs, our findings may not reflect the experiences of homeless families who do not reside in County agencies.

- Second, the agencies that we sampled are located in an urban area and most of the parents and staff who participated are "urban people." Accordingly, we did not gain insights into homeless education in more rural contexts.

- Third, our focus on parents of *school-age* children limited the extent to which we were able to learn about families' educational experiences with pre-school (ages 0-5) and older (ages 18-21) children.

- Finally, our sample included only a small number of school-based participants (i.e., school employees), which inhibited our capacity to cross-check some of the statements made by parents and staff. This evaluation, then, can be seen as a valuable launching-off point in learning about homeless education in the region. Each of the aforementioned limitations merits addressing in future work.

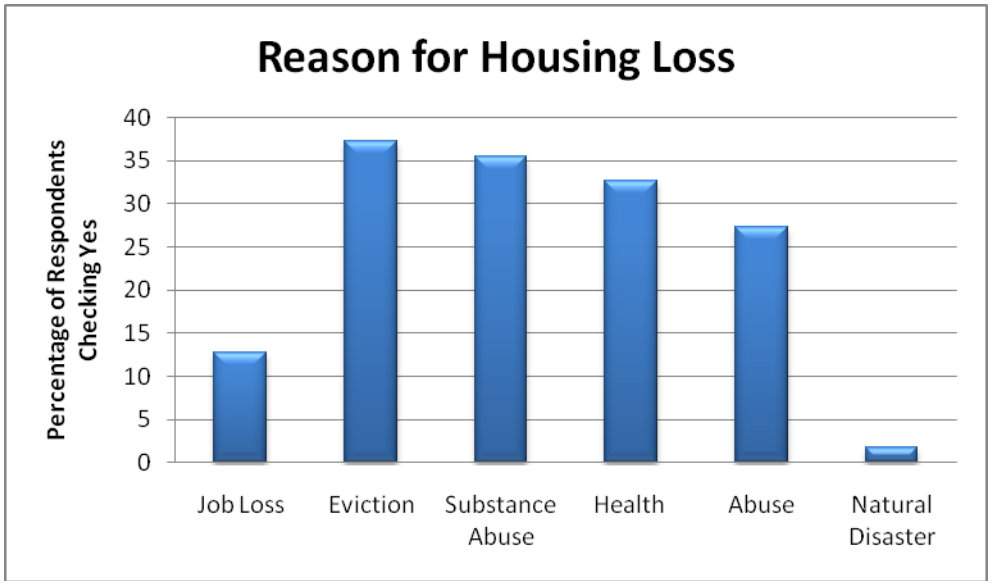
Finding 1:

There is great diversity among homeless families with school-age children in Allegheny County. Many of these families do not fit stereotypes that are commonly attributed to the homeless.

Common societal perceptions of homeless individuals as being chronically dysfunctional and having overwhelming individual deficiencies (addiction, mental/physical illness, indifference, etc.) appear to be largely inaccurate in this research context. While all of the parents and staff members from whom we collected data experienced significant individual and family struggles, data suggested that the homeless parents and students from these 20 agencies possessed both wide-ranging capacities and active interests in supporting/attaining successful educational experiences.

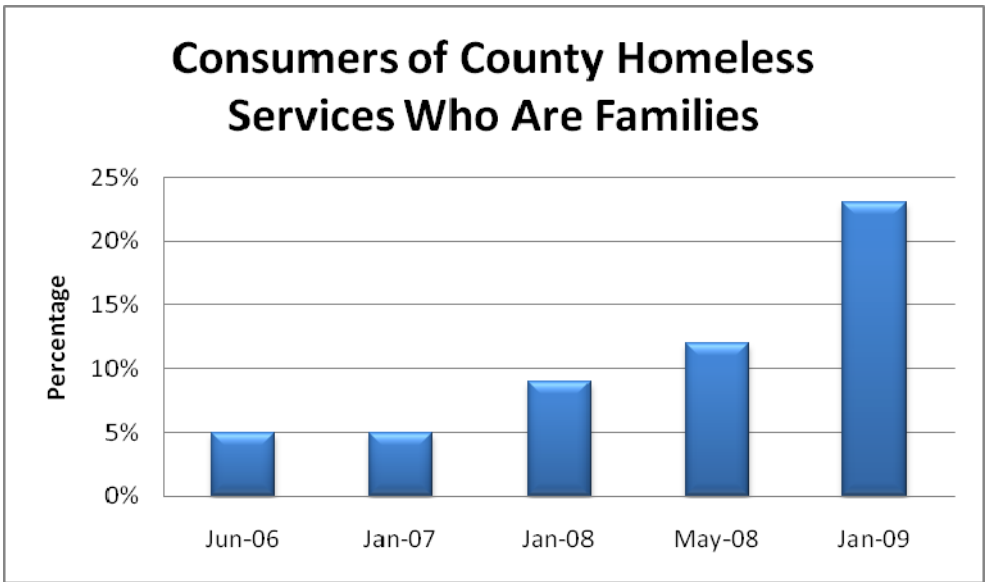
Data collected by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services indicates that the percentage of homeless individuals who suffer from substance abuse and mental illness has decreased over the past three years. Concurrently, data suggest that the percentages of those who suffer from domestic violence has slowly increased (refer to figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentages of homeless individuals in Allegheny County who suffer from substance abuse, serious mental illness, and domestic violence (source: Allegheny County Department of Human Services Point in Time Survey).



The same point in time survey indicates an increased percentage of *families* who are seeking County services (from street outreach to permanent housing). Whereas only five percent of these consumers were families (vs. individuals) in June 2006 and January 2007, 23% were families in January of 2009.

Figure 2: Percentages of consumers of County homeless services who are families

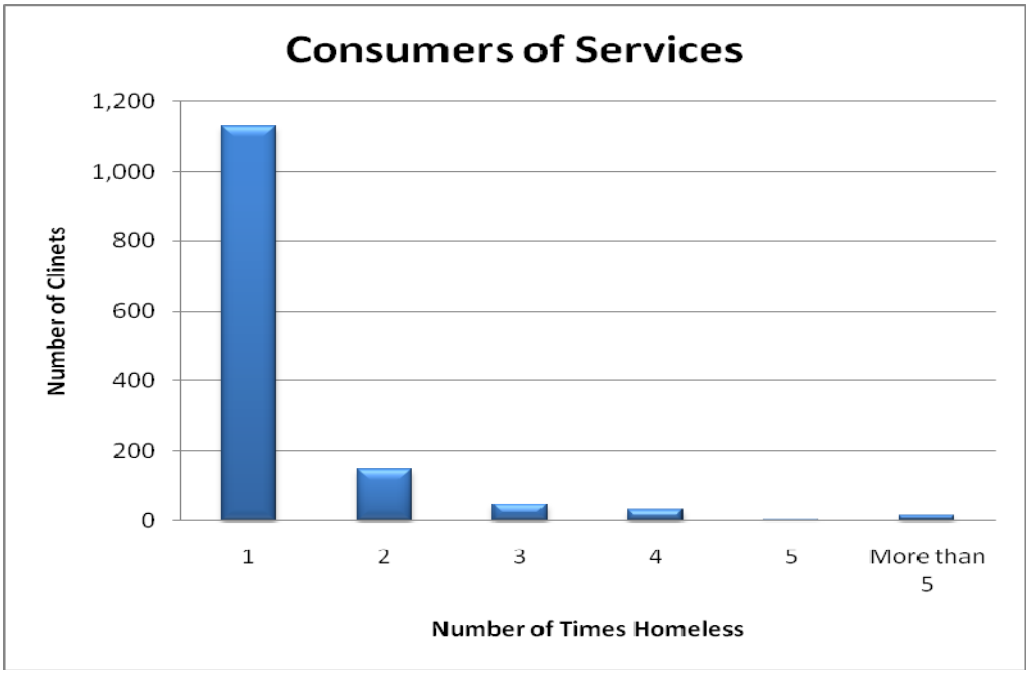


While the numbers listed above are drawn from the larger population of individuals who received County homeless services, data collected solely from the 20 agencies we surveyed – those that are mostly composed of families with school-age children – tells a similar story. Specifically, survey responses indicated that most families are not chronically homeless and many families are new to homelessness. For example, from our survey:

- 70% of clients at family residential agencies were experiencing their first episode of homelessness;
- 76% of clients at family residential agencies had experienced homelessness only once in the past three years;
- 65% of clients had been homeless for six months or fewer;
- Only seven percent of parents had experienced four or more incidents of homelessness;
- Parents averaged only 1.78 total separate incidents of homelessness; and

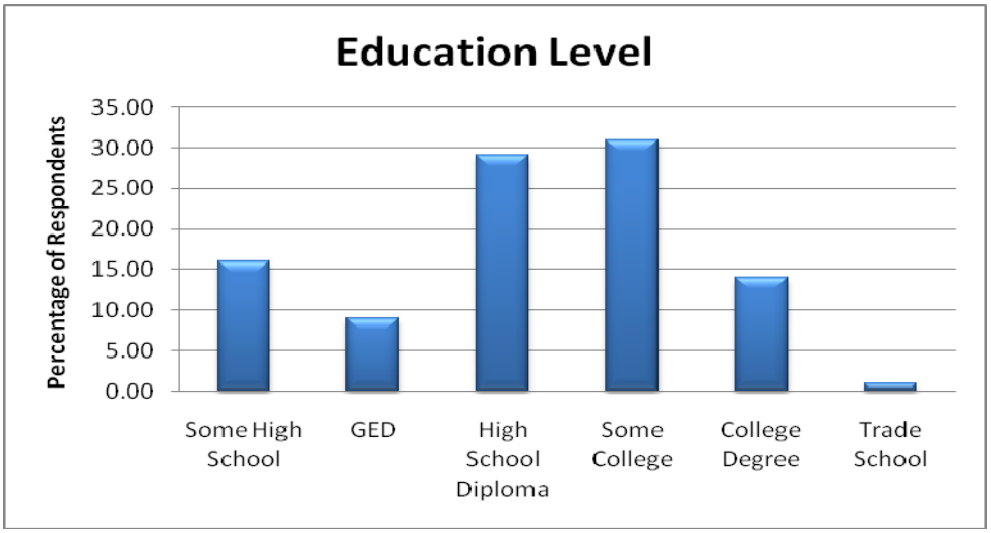
- 55% of respondents indicated that job loss/eviction led to their condition of homelessness (as opposed to other conditions/characteristics that are commonly used stereotype individuals who are homeless).

Figure 3: Individuals by numbers of times homeless



One of our most interesting findings from the study further highlighted the parent population as one that is different from popular perceptions of the homeless: 44% of homeless parents in our sample attended and/or graduated from college. This, coupled with interview and focus group data that reveals parents' commitments to helping their kids in school, suggests that homeless parents in the region value education and have experience making it through the education system.

Figure 4: Education levels of homeless adults



44% of homeless parents in the study attended and/or graduated from college

Summary of finding 1

Our findings describing selected characteristics of homeless parents of school-age children in Allegheny County counter some long-held public conceptualizations of who is homeless in the U.S. However, the findings are seemingly in concert with recent trends throughout the country suggesting that the wider homeless population is growing, changing, and disproportionately affecting children and the institutions that serve them. Indicators of these trends include:

- A recent (2008) National Coalition for the Homeless survey indicating that 72% of state and local homeless coalitions noted significant increases in homeless populations in their areas since 2007;
- Data collected in 2008 from over 1,000 school districts by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, indicated that, with two months

remaining in the school year, most districts had already identified and served more homeless students than ever before in a full year; and

- Washington, D.C.-based family advocacy group *First Focus* projects 2.2 million new home foreclosures are likely to affect more than two million children within the next two years – many of whom will experience homelessness.

The homeless situation in Allegheny County, then, contextualized within the evolving homeless epidemic nationwide, might be seen as a problem that is both unpredictable and gaining momentum. Homelessness affects not just the poorest, most addicted, dysfunctional, or uneducated of individuals – it touches (and will continue to touch at increasing rates) people from diverse educational, geographic, and family backgrounds. Although those who work closely with the homeless on a daily basis (such as the many agency staff members who were surveyed and interviewed for this study) seem to have a tacit understanding of and respect for the particularities of their clients' "paths to homelessness," there appears to be a need to develop other key professionals' awareness and understanding of the current state of homelessness (at local, state, and national levels). Such awareness and understanding can critically undergird schools' and community agencies' capacities to appropriately engage specific challenges of homelessness that unfold in their settings.

There is a need to develop *awareness* and *understanding* of the current state of homelessness.

Finding 2:

Homeless students and parents experience widespread problems with school.

During our interview and focus group sessions with 51 parents and staff members, we asked purposefully broad questions about education. In response, we heard rich descriptions of students' and parents' experiences in school, after-school, community agency, and home environments. Although parents at one long-term shelter spoke very positively of their neighborhood school, most of the other parents were particularly adamant in describing how difficult school has been during their times of homelessness. For example, one exasperated mother at a long-term residential facility stated:

> "We moved here and my children were 'A' students even though they were coming from shelters and had been through so much. They were still capable of doing well and getting good grades. Through the years as I've watched my kids go through this school system, they have actually burned them out...Now the children don't like school…I've fought for my boys, but three of my five children have fallen straight through the cracks."

An array of similar stories were noted – and the specific issues that were most commonly (and fervently) cited as underlying families' education struggles included student mobility, student health and attendance, student and parent harassment/stigmatization, and misdiagnosis of students. These issues are highlighted here with representative quotes directly from the parent participants.

→ Problems with student health and attendance

We consistently heard homeless mothers mention problems with their children's health and, in turn, school attendance. Such findings are not surprising, for, according to Health Care for the Homeless (2008), homeless people experience illnesses at three to six times the rates experienced by housed people. These mental and physical health struggles, in conjunction with the broader trials and inconveniences of homelessness, usually have deleterious impacts upon student attendance. Stronge (2000), for example, estimated that on any given day 45% of homeless

students are not in attendance at school. The mothers from our study described this as being especially concerning because schools were oblivious and/or non-responsive to their conditions of homelessness and the resulting challenges that were brought about. The following quote from a mother is representative of others:

> "If they miss school a certain number of days, they get docked on their grades. And I don't think that's fair. My daughter was on the honor roll and after being out several days due to severe asthma, went down to 'Bs' and 'Cs' and they kept sending me these little tardy letters...I don't think it's fair that they're docking these children's grades especially when they're working so hard…My daughter has chronic asthma…I am really disturbed and upset about this. And being that we're in the shelter, they should try to be understanding…They don't seem to give a damn at all."

The homeless experience illness at three to six times the rates experienced by housed people.

→ Problems with mobility

Research suggests that children who are homeless tend to be highly "school-mobile." That is, as their families move from one temporary location to the next, the kids change schools (Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Situated within the daunting social struggles that contribute to and sustain homelessness, there are serious implications for such mobility, as, "with each change in schools, a student is set back academically by an average of four to six months" (Moore, 2005, p. 2). Our findings were consistent with this research, as, many families in our sample noted their struggles with changing school during periods of homelessness. One mother at a shorter-term (60 day) shelter claimed, "Every teaching style is different and my child has to constantly adjust and it's very difficult and frustrating for him and for me. It's been terrible." This statement is representative of numerous others that were made – all of which indicated that students have a hard time adjusting to new teachers, new rules, and new classmates when they transfer schools during difficult times of homelessness. While some mothers indicated that they just wanted their kids to fit in with the other children at school, it was interesting to note that others did not want

their children ingratiated into what they perceived to be negative climates at their new schools. For instance, a mother explained:

> "It's tough because I don't want my child to fit in there. Not to fit in with the riff raff. I want him to have a happy and healthy educational experience. .. He's been trained well and to bring him into this altogether different atmosphere, it's difficult and it shouldn't happen…And when I go into the school with a question or a statement about my child, they look at me like I'm an alien…It's not the norm for parents to be involved there. I've never ever seen another parent at the school…Where I come from, that's how moms are supposed to behave."

Such perspectives – mothers not wanting their children to pick up bad habits in their new schools – appeared to be more common at shorter-term residential agencies where new schools were seen as only temporary sites. In fact, school mobility in general appeared to be less of a concern at the longer-term agencies because many of those families stayed put for years at a time in transitional or permanent housing programs. (These families voiced many concerns about the school process, but mobility was not mentioned nearly as often.)

→ Problems with misdiagnosis

Another school problem that was commonly voiced by parents was that their children were misdiagnosed upon entry into new schools. These included both academic and behavioral misdiagnoses and were seen by parents as major inhibitors to their children's overall development. For instance, a mother told the story of her high school-age son:

> "I had a son who was misdiagnosed when we came here. They immediately tagged him as a bad kid who didn't want to listen. They sent him to another school that was supposed to help him with his supposed learning disabilities, but this was a school where they basically sent children who are criminals. Kids who break the teachers' noses and do those kinds of things. So now he's exposed to that and learning those things. And now I have to deal with this. My seventeen year old thinks it's ok to knock adults upside the head. I can't get him into the school that fits his needs. And there is a school that would really help him. But no one will listen to me."

Like attendance and mobility-related problems, issues of misdiagnosis are common among homeless children nationwide. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides children the right to immediate enrollment in school, but their records often lag far behind, leaving schools in the difficult position of essentially guessing about students' appropriate class placements.

→ Problems with student behavior

In addition to (and, undeniably, in relation to) the previous problems, research indicates that students who experience homelessness are, in comparison with other students, affected to a much greater extent by social/behavioral dilemmas that can contribute to academic failure (Gibel, 1996; Gross & Capuzzi, 2004; Vissing, 2000). The mothers in our evaluation claimed that their children were no exception to this trend but, interestingly, they suggested that these behavioral challenges were linked to punitive and/or inept systems. Consider, for example, the perspectives of the following two homeless mothers:

> "The system just doesn't want to deal with them (homeless kids). It can be something as simple as throwing a piece of paper across the room and you get suspended for three days and you can't come back unless your mother comes in – even though she's working full time or in school herself. If you communicate in any way that you can't come, they automatically want to 'child-line' the parent. It's just really bad."

> "It's just all 'bad mom, bad mom, bad parenting.' They want to put it all on me. And I've been through all the systems too. The judicial system. All the systems. Begging for help. Crying to lawyers, crying to judges, crying to the DA. Nothing is being done and so these children are carrying this anger and snapping out and doing things. And yes, I'm responsible for their actions, but they need some help. A child needs help. I have children who need help. I've been begging for it for five years and have gotten none. But this school system isn't equipped to help us. They aren't even capable of helping an animal."

While some parents accepted a degree of responsibility for their kids' school conflicts, others were more adamant that the school system itself was largely to blame. Their exasperation with what they perceived to be inequitable systems actually appeared to be a bit of a galvanizing force in the relationships between mothers and children. A number of mothers, including the one quoted below, described this sentiment with great passion:

> "Kids were messing with my daughter and they (teachers) just didn't care until my daughter flipped the desk… They pushed her around and beat her up. I told my daughter next time someone messes with you or put their hands on you, you go off on them. Beat the s*** out of them, I don't care! Whatever it takes to protect yourself. Don't f*** with my daughter!"

I'm responsible for their actions, but they need some help. I have children who need help.

→ Problems with stigmatization and harassment

Related to the behavioral dilemmas that appear to face homeless children in school is the stigmatization and harassment that mothers claim their families face on a regular basis. They said that such treatment emanates from both other students and school staff members and that it is directed at homeless parents and children alike. This was cited commonly (at both long and short term residential facilities) as a factor that made it difficult for students to adjust to and ultimately succeed in school. Some examples include:

> "For the first three weeks we were in that new school, kids were beating up my son and knocking him into the lockers. A boy came up to me the other day and said, "I saved your son's life." It's really hard for my son because he's the new kid and also because he's mixed (racially) and there's lots that goes along with that in school. It's been hell."
>
> "The schools, they know our situation. They know our kids. They know we're here and they hold it against us. They hold it over our heads like, "We know your secret!" It's like, "Oh, your child is slow because you were too busy doing drugs." Well, actually, my daughter was getting straight "As" before going to that school. So it's not her – she's very smart. It's the school."
>
> "They (members of the school staff) were trying to get to why I was here. Was it for drugs, for alcohol, for mental illness? It doesn't matter why I'm here! I'm here and I'm not ashamed! I'm not ashamed! I've been homeless and walked the streets with my children! I'm not ashamed to be here and be a part of such a beautiful program. I'm not ashamed! No one can ever make me feel ashamed! I'm not one who will ever be like, "No, not me…" Yeah, ME! I'm here and I'm ok! I've been to the bottom and I'm ok! Yeah! You can feel it though, you know what I mean? When someone asks you a question and you can see it in their face. "What are you *there* for?" It's discriminatory. You can see it and you can feel it. One of the school security guards outright asked me."
>
> "It's none of their business…I've heard people say negative things to me about being at (a homeless agency). About being homeless and poor. About being this and that. But I've had to let them know, I'm there but I'm not poor. I'm there but I'm not crazy. I'm there but I'm not a drug addict or alcoholic. But I'm there. You can make your own assumptions…"

In the face of such treatment, the almost uniform defiance of the mothers with whom we spoke stood out. The mothers showed great pride in themselves and their children. They were visibly strong-willed and determined to not allow others' actions or perceptions further derail their lives. As noted previously, the turmoil facing these homeless families, although a clear limiter to them in some ways, appeared to spur increased pride and loyalty within and among mothers and their families.

Summary of finding 2

As evident in the preceding pages, our open-ended interview and focus group sessions with homeless mothers resulted in a deluge of data describing significant school struggles. These findings themselves were not surprising (as noted in the references to the wider literature on homeless education that are infused throughout the section), but the sheer amount of data in the area suggests that action is needed on multiple fronts to improve families' experiences in school.

The turmoil facing these homeless families appeared to spur increased pride and loyalty within and among mothers and their families.

Finding 3:

Most parents want to be active advocates in their children's educational pursuits, but many of them face significant barriers in their attempts to do so.

In one of our conversations with parents about the education of homeless children, a mother exclaimed, "I'm not like these other mothers who don't show up!" Her claim that she was highly involved in her children's school activity was consistent with our third major finding – that most homeless mothers of school-age children in our sample appear to make considerable efforts to advocate for their children's educational pursuits. Some of the most noteworthy of our survey data that support this finding include:

- 79% of parents indicated that they help their children with schoolwork at least a few times a week;
- 51% of parents indicated that they help their children with schoolwork every day;
- 71% of parents indicated that they want more information about how they could assist their children with school work;
- 92% of parents claim that they speak with homeless agency staff at least once a week about their children's educational progress; and
- 68% of homeless agency staff members claimed that parents are either somewhat or very responsive to agency attempts to get parents more involved with their kids' schooling.

These findings were largely supported by interview and focus group sessions where mothers fleshed out the survey findings with specific, often heart-wrenching stories detailing the lengths they go to advocate for their children. For example, after having been fired from two previous jobs because she was repeatedly called away from work by her children's school to bail them out of trouble, one mother actually applied for and secured a job at the school just so she could be near them and watch out for them throughout each day. Numerous other mothers told similar stories of advocating for their children's educational development. The following quotes allude to such efforts:

> "I'm not just one of those parents who sends their kids to school and lets them go. I want to know why the buses are late, why the grades are what they are…I want to know this, I want to know that… I'm very involved…I let them (school professionals) know that my child's coming from a situation that is difficult enough as it is and she doesn't need to be pampered, but she better be treated with respect."

> "The school does not like to follow the IEP (individualized education plans), so I educated myself on IEP laws. When things had to be done, I had an education lawyer come in and sit in on the IEP meeting to make sure things got done. That lit a fire under their asses real quick."

We were, in fact, struck by the almost universal passion with which mothers spoke about their children's schooling. These parents' conditions of homelessness did not appear to detract from their commitment to helping their children.

One mother actually got a job at her children's school just so she could be near them and watch out for them throughout each day.

Not surprisingly, however, mothers were limited in a number of ways in their attempts to engage family education issues. Among the obvious obstacles to parents as they attempt to support their children are all the life events/situations that lead to and/or are caused by homelessness. Some staff members claimed that conditions of abuse, illness, addiction, financial duress and like were overwhelming for many mothers and left them with insufficient time or energy to devote to other areas of life. While most mothers appeared to forge ahead despite these daunting accompaniments to homelessness, two particular barriers to parent involvement in their children's school and after-school activities – shortages of information and shortages of resources – appeared to be extremely common.

➔ Information shortages as barriers

Mothers' lack of information stood out in three key areas: 1) school subject matter, 2) school and community program information, and 3) legal information. In terms of school subject matter, it appeared that even though mothers had higher levels of education that we expected (44% of

them attended college), many of them struggled to help their kids with school work because they often did not understand the content matter. Notably, *90% of staff members claimed that better parent understandings of school subjects would help parents be more effective educational advocates*. Additionally, in response to the question, "What would help you assist your children with school work more often and effectively?" the most common response from parents was "better understanding of students' course topics."

In terms of information shortages in the area of school and community program information, many mothers and staff members claimed that they simply did not know about community-based programs and services that would help their children. For example, when asked why her kids did not participate in after-school programs in the local area, one mother from a long-term shelter claimed, "I really don't know about anything in the community." Two other mothers described specific challenges of not knowing about programming for their older children:

> "I don't really think there are enough after-school programs. My 15 year old, she has nothing to do except get out of school and go walking around the city. And that's o.k. for them to build friendships, but really that's an adult environment and there's not a lot there for the teenagers. And few places let them hang out. So, I think if there were more after-school programs that they were interested in and would want to go to, it would be a lot better."

> "I wish there was an after school program for kids who are 13 and older. That's the problem in this community. They need something to do and there's nothing to do for the older children. When they transition out of the after-school program here at the shelter, that where I'm finding a lot of problems."

These were representative of many others' sentiments. Consistent with these quotes, from our survey data we learned that:

- 64% of parents claimed that lack of knowledge about community programming was the biggest barrier to the fuller involvement of their children in local programming and
- 57% of staff members said that lack of information was a barrier to families becoming more fully involved in community programming.

While this lack of knowledge about community programming appeared to limit many families, it was interesting to note that none of the eight mothers with whom we spoke at one particular

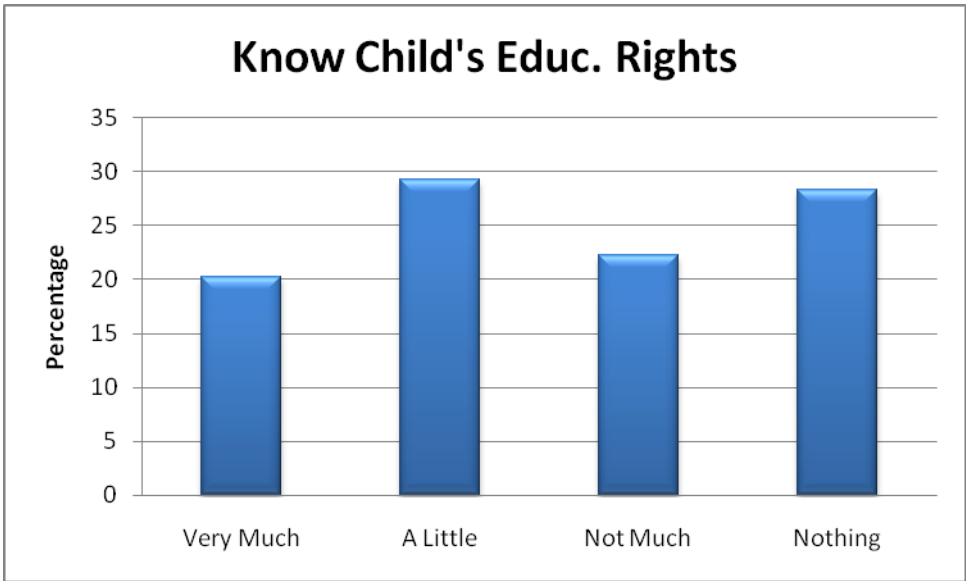
agency mentioned program awareness as a barrier to their children participating in community activities. We later learned that this agency made conscious and purposeful efforts to distribute such information to families on a regular basis.

Lack of awareness and knowledge of legal rights was the third major area where we found information shortage to be a barrier to families' full utilization of educational opportunities. Specifically:

- 20% of parents claimed that they knew very much about the children's educational rights and
- 50% of parents said they knew *not much or nothing* about these rights.

These numbers were supported by our focus group sessions, we asked parents what they knew about the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and only a single parent (out of the 51 we interviewed) had even heard of the policy. One mother's statement that, "As far as rights, I don't know nothing about her rights" characterized those of many others during these conversations about families' legal rights during periods of homelessness.

Figure 5: Parents' knowledge of the children's education rights



However, even though none of the mothers knew the specific language of McKinney-Vento, it did, upon further probing, appear that many of them were aware of the fact that they were indeed guaranteed certain schooling rights while they were homeless. For example, talking about her daughter's right to get transportation to her school of origin, one mother said, "All I know is that she gets bus passes." Such evidence suggests that mothers were not able to cite the specific "letter of the law" but through their exposure to the after-school learning centers, they gleaned some basic understandings of some of the rights provided by McKinney-Vento. Another mother, for example, stated, "I kind of know a little bit. What I know I've learned from the after-school program coordinator."

It was interesting to note in the focus groups that many mothers simply remained quiet when asked about their schooling rights. Even some of those who were quite outspoken in other areas of conversation (such as the extents to which they go to help with homework, meet with teachers, etc.) were noticeably reticent to admit that they really did not know much about the McKinney-Vento Act. It appeared to be frustrating to them that they were not taking advantage of other school possibilities that might be available for their children. For example, when we informed one mother at a short-term homeless agency that McKinney-Vento provides education rights during periods of homelessness so that she and her family should not be unduly punished during their difficult times of mobility, she adamantly exclaimed, Well, I am (punished)!" Not surprisingly, some of the mothers grew very curious about the policy (even asking us to spell it out for them) so they could look it up later.

> "What I know (about legal rights) I learned from the after-school coordinator."

There is one final point to make relating to the information barrier as it pertains to legal rights: it appears that the mothers are not the only key actors with inadequate legal awareness. Specifically, on the staff survey, *only 38% of agency staff members strongly agreed that they knew about the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* and its implications for students'

rights. Our focus groups discussions indicated that while the coordinators of after-school learning centers were moderately fluent in homeless education policy, other staff members – many of whom play important roles in families' early and ongoing agency experiences (in-take, case management, etc.) – know little about it and are therefore unable to support families in the area of education policy.

➔ Resource shortages as barriers

Resource shortages were, along with information shortages, the other major type of barrier we found that limited the extent to which families could have positive educational experiences. Broadly, we saw these resource barriers most clearly at both agency and family levels. At the agency level, we found that most staff members were enthusiastic about helping families with school-related issues, but many of them were very limited in time and budget and therefore could not devote as much time as they wanted to that area of service. Such findings were evident on the survey where *83% of agency staff members suggested that more agency staffing and/or resources were needed to allow them to get parents more actively engaged* with homework and schooling. It was interesting to note also that, in addition to money and staffing, many agency staff members identified *school support* as a resource that was in scarce supply. Specifically, *77% of homeless agency staff members said more support from school staffs was needed* in order to help parents get more actively engaged in the education process.

As stated, we gathered a wealth of qualitative data indicating that resource shortages at the family level also appear to pose major educational barriers for the homeless in Allegheny County. Families' lack of money was noted most commonly as a factor that prevented kids from participating in community-based after-school programs (including the numerous programs sponsored by the County). Multiple mothers at each agency described that they did not have enough money for program enrollment, items that were needed for program participation (supplies, uniforms, etc.), and/or transportation to programs. These issues were so commonly mentioned that we've included several representative quotes from four mothers below:

> "I have limited funds and resources right now, so I can't really afford most things. For some of these I can get my daughter a scholarship for the program itself, but not for the accessories that are required (camera for photography)…I can get one thing funded, but I can't get the stuff that's required to go along with it."

> "My son used to go to the Boys and Girls Club after school, but I had a car then and I don't now, so he can't go anymore."
>
> "My son has an after-school program at the school. But it is expensive and overcrowded. They don't have enough staff to be with the kids. They do a lot of things with math and science and reading. But that's only if you have the money."
>
> "Money seems to always be an issue. When I want my son to get involved in something, be it at the Boys and Girls Club or somewhere else, I have to bring in a fee. Sometimes I wish they had a scale that goes by my income. I understand that they don't, but it's hard for me to devote those extra dollars a month for him to learn about basketball, or crocheting, or cooking or whatever it is…That initial fee is really a problem. I understand that my son's education is something to invest in, but if certain things were on a sliding scale, they could benefit all kids, not just those who are privileged."

Summary of finding 3

The first part of finding 3 – that homeless mothers have active desires to be highly involved in their children's educational experiences – flies in the face of perceptions of homeless individuals as being dysfunctional people who incapable of being good parents. To the contrary, we found the mothers to have extremely tight bonds with their children and to have active interests in engaging school issues to the fullest extent possible. In the midst of their highly difficult situations of homelessness, however, family and agency information and resource shortages limited the extent to which mothers could advocate for their kids and get their kids involved in productive programming. Contextualized within the larger field of research on homeless education, this finding is consistent with past work (eg., Miller, 2008a; 2008b; 2009) that identifies information dissemination and program funding as major hurdles to overcome in homeless education. It should be noted, however, that inadequate information dissemination likely augments individuals' perceptions that they do not possess requisite resources to participate in the programs they desire. That is, the resources that many parents perceive to be non-existent (transportation to after-school programming, fees for supplies, etc.) may very well be available to them – they just have not learned *how to access such resources* (who to contact, where to go, etc.).

Homeless parents need to learn how to access education resources that they perceive to be unavailable.

Finding 4:

Agency-based after-school learning centers appear to be highly effective at providing academic and social support for homeless students.

Mothers and agency staff members alike resoundingly indicated that the after-school learning centers that are located within a number of residential homeless agencies in Allegheny County are highly effective resources for students. These centers provide structured learning services and support on a daily basis throughout the year. Without leaving the confines of their residential agencies, children can gain access to school supplies, computers, advanced on-line learning software, academic tutors, cultural enrichment activities, and adult supervision. The centers are operated in slightly different manners at each agency, but they seem to find common ground in their larger purposes of providing children with safe, stable, and productive learning environments. Parents and staff, in fact, almost universally lauded these in-house centers as some of the most fundamentally important factors in their school-age children's daily lives. Below, we present the key survey data that illuminates these perspectives in three areas.

→Agency-based learning centers are highly used:

- 60% of parents stated that they and/or their kids use the agency-based after-school programming two or more times per week.
- 48% of parents indicated they and/or their kids use these services at least three times per week

These numbers suggest that, despite the many challenges facing them, Allegheny County's sheltered homeless families utilize in-house after-school programming at very high rates. Children's very attendance at these programs is important, for there is overwhelming support in the education literature that quality after-school programming is a major asset for children and communities (Grossman et al., 2002; Marshall et al., 1997; Posner & Vandell, 1999; Riggs, 2006). Children derive benefit not only because the programs are of some particular level of quality, but because the after-school hours from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. are when youth most commonly encounter trouble in the form of accidents, deviant behavior, and the like (Zhang, et

al., 2002). After-school programs, then, at the very basic level, provide utility in serving as safe places for homeless kids – places that are removed from problems of the street.

→Agency-based learning centers are perceived to be effective academic supports

- 78% of parents whose children used agency-based after-school learning centers indicated that these services were "very helpful."
- 99% of parents whose children used agency-based after-school learning centers indicated that these services were either somewhat or very helpful.
- 91% of agency staff members claimed that agency-based after-school learning centers were somewhat or extremely helpful to students.

Considering that homeless children are, in comparison with other students, much more likely to be placed at risk of academic failure (Gibel, 1996; Gross & Capuzzi, 2004; Vissing, 2000), it is vital that they are afforded opportunities that their families perceive to be of educational value. The agency-based after-school learning centers appear to be providing such opportunities.

→Agency-based learning centers provide valuable services and supplies

- 86% of parents whose children use agency-based after-school learning centers indicated that online learning software and programs that were provided were somewhat or extremely helpful.
- 88% of parents indicated that access to computers was somewhat or very helpful for kids academically.
- 92% of parents indicated that access to books was somewhat or very helpful for kids academically.
- 92% of parents indicated that access to school supplies was somewhat or very helpful for kids academically.
- 77% of parents indicated that tutoring was very helpful for kids.
- 80% of parents indicated that help with school enrollment and transportation was very helpful for kids.

Access to computers, learning software, and books might not seem to be especially noteworthy for many who are housed, but for children who are homeless, these basic learning facilitators are often hard to come by. One of the staff members we interviewed explained, “Many of these families arrive with nothing but the clothes on their backs. They either don’t own anything much

or are on the run from a predator and had to leave their homes without any of their belongings." Accordingly, the backpacks, pens, pencils, notebooks, and computer time that are provided in the learning centers are really important. The assistance families receive with academic tutoring and school enrollment can be similarly viewed – they are services that many families take for granted but, if not provided within agency walls, would leave most homeless families at significant educational disadvantage.

We found the on-line learning software that is used in some of the agencies to be interesting and particularly promising elements their after-school learning centers. The STAR Reader program, for instance is a diagnostic tool that allows agency staff to quickly and accurately determine each child's reading level and best ways of learning. Equipped with such personalized information, agency staff members can immediately begin working with children *at their appropriate levels*. This process is especially vital in the context of highly mobile homeless students whose official school records often lag behind at them at their former schools for days or weeks. (Please refer to Appendix 1 for an example of a STAR Reader diagnostic report.)

Another of the centers' related on-line software programs that we found to be promising was Accelerated Reader, a program that allows teachers or tutors to assess students as they read level-appropriate books that are of interest to them. Accelerated Reader is widely used in both school and outside of school contexts throughout the country and, like STAR Reader, appears to be particularly appealing in the homeless education context because it can be so flexibly implemented and adapted. After reading level-appropriate books of their choosing, students take short computer-based Accelerated Reader "quizzes" and, as they pass the quizzes, they can be awarded special "prizes" from the after-school program staff (school supplies, toys, etc.). The program appears to be successful at encouraging students to read more. For example, during the 2008-2009 school year, the 62 students in County homeless agencies who took part in the Accelerated Reader program read 513 books (and passed 467 of the quizzes). These are impressive numbers – especially in the midst of difficult conditions of homelessness. (Please refer to Appendix 2 to see the Accelerated Reader report of a 12th grade student from one of the County homeless agencies.)

Remarkably, our qualitative findings were perhaps even more supportive of the after-school learning centers than the quantitative data presented above (refer to Table 1). We heard almost entirely positive remarks about the learning centers from the 51 mothers with whom we spoke. Other than mothers' frequently voiced desires that the centers remain open for longer hours (most of them close around dinner time), the only critique we heard was one mother's statement that the learning center at her residential agency was not equipped to meet her son's special learning needs:

> The program is very good with my daughter, but they have a hard time helping with my son because they don't have an autistic support background…They are limited on what they can do with him. I wish they had more training on stuff like special needs kids and autism. They do understand that kids who come here have baggage, though, and they are good working with them. I actually love the place. It has been a Godsend. But if they had a few workshops on special needs, and particularly autism, that would be great.

It is not surprising that this learning center is not equipped to meet the needs of students with special needs. The centers seemed to be staffed with exceptionally dedicated and hardworking individuals, but we did not note that any of them were specifically trained or certified to work with children who have significant learning difficulties. Upon closer analysis of Allegheny County data, this appears to be a significant limitation of the agency-based learning centers, because, in 2008, *12% of the children who were served in family residential agencies were identified with developmental disabilities, mental illness, and/or physical disabilities.*

Like the parents, the staff members described the learning centers as vital assets for the homeless families. Amidst their many positive remarks about the centers, however, they acknowledged two limitations of the centers: 1) insufficient resources (although they provide families with many services and supplies, staff members suggested that they could do much more for the families with more monetary support and 2) inability to overcome issues of family/student mobility. Explaining this second limitation – which was identified by staff members at multiple agencies – one after-school program coordinator explained, "Unfortunately, often, just as soon as a child gets comfortable here, she begins the school transition process again." This challenge of dealing with mobility was more of a problem at short-term agencies than the long-term ones. Even considering these limitations, the learning centers were highly valued by all parents and staff. Some staff members from agencies that did *not* have learning

centers even expressed desires that their agencies might one day have their own learning centers on site.

Summary of finding 4

Both qualitative and quantitative data strongly suggest that the agency-based after-school learning centers are frequently utilized and perceived by parents and staff to be highly effective. The centers expose children to caring adults who support them academically and socially in safe and stable environments. It is apparent that the major limitation of these after-school learning centers is that most of them are not efficiently equipped to meet the needs of students who have special learning needs.

Table 1: Selected mothers' descriptions of homeless agency-based after-school learning centers

Quotes from Mothers	Key Benefits
"The after-school program here is very, very helpful. It's tremendous. Because they're *here*. When we're getting off work or coming back late from school, they're *here*. It's wonderful. I hope it never changes – even for families who come here years from now. .. They have a reading program that is special. My daughter kind of liked reading in school, but she *loves* reading here – and it brought her grades up in school. It's great!"	• Consistent presence • Reading program • Improved grades
"The reading program, the best thing about it is that it helps the kids meet their quota at school. They have 25 books that they have to read (at school). In the after-school program, they have tutors that come and help them read during those times and then they test them on the computer and we send those papers to the school to show they read. And it's helped her learning so much."	• Facilitates school success • Tutors
"My kids love the program. The reading program in particular. It helps my kids to read better. And the computers too."	• Fun • Reading program • Computers
"They love it because it's not a school atmosphere. It's more fun for the kids and they learn."	• Fun
"This program here is great for me who don't have the money. It helps the kids to be computer literate. And the parents too. I know that as a parent I have to be computer literate too. My son is learning about it here and then he's teaching me how to use computers."	• Free • Computer skills (for parents too)
"My daughter, she couldn't wait to get to the after-school program. And now that she's in it, I can't get her out. She loves to read. She gets so excited by the reading program…We sit there and she reads her book and I read my book in the evening…She gets really excited. She loves it. They take a real interest in her."	• Fun • Reading program • Personalized attention
"They've been really, really great with my daughter. There was a time when the children were struggling with spelling words and the staff here designed a curriculum to help them with that – to incorporate their spelling words into the after-school program. I thought that was great and my daughter's grades improved because of the extra support she received here. And the reading program where the kids can check out books is great. My daughter comes home with all kinds of books and she loves it. We read them together, she comes back and gets new ones and we do it again.. It encourages children to read and go to the library…And the computer center is really great	• Facilitates school success • Reading program • Access to books • Computers

Finding 5:

The nature and frequency of communication between schools, community programs, residential agency staffs, and parents is crucial.

Our fifth major finding suggests that communication between key actors is crucial and that there is much room for improvement across all of the organizations and settings that are involved in homeless education in the region. Although this finding is relevant for more than just those who work/live in schools and homeless agencies, we speak here predominantly of communication between a) parents and schools and b) schools and homeless agencies. Some of our most noteworthy findings in these areas are highlighted below.

➔ Parent-school communication

On a positive note, one mother explained: "My son has ADHD and his teacher calls every week. She takes the time and it makes a difference. He's made great improvements because of her." This mother was joined in these positive sentiments by a couple other mothers from the same long-term residential agency. They noted how the school provided *regular* feedback – both positive words of support and challenges for improved behavior. The parents described a deep appreciation for these regular updates from teachers and administrators. Their children all attend the same neighborhood school – a school that is broadly well-regarded for its parent engagement efforts. Unfortunately, the communication between these mothers and that school appear to be the exception rather than the norm, for we heard far more stories of communication breakdowns between schools and parents than positive ones. The following quotes from mothers, for example, illuminate how issues of poor timing and non-responsiveness affect families' perceptions of schools:

> "I've talked with the principal, teachers, and secretary. But…it just doesn't work. And I can't keep leaving my job. I'm a single mother of three. I can't keep leaving my job. I need them to do their job because I'm doing my job at home with the kids… It's really sickening. I leave the center at 6:20 and a couple weeks ago I was leaving on Monday morning at 6:20 and they called and said, 'Your son did so and so on Friday and he's suspended for the next three days.' And I said, 'Why are you not calling until now as I'm

walking out the door to work?' And she said, 'I didn't want to spoil your weekend!' Well that really ruined my day!"

"The only way to get in touch with them (the school) is to go up there. They never call back and notes go unanswered. They're generally cooperative at the time (when you go there), but once you step outside the door, don't expect anything."

"My daughter couldn't go to school for the last two weeks because she had a serious bike accident. I called the school and faxed them doctors' notes and records. I haven't heard one thing from them. They didn't call, didn't send any work home. Nothing. They just don't care."

It is evident in these quotes that school-family communication is problematic in that there are few actual exchanges between schools and parents and, when these exchanges actually do occur, they are usually very negative in tone and content. Several mothers suggested that their conditions of homelessness make this communication with schools more difficult, not only because they, as parents, are busy and overwhelmed, but also because the schools are perceived as less apt to respect (and be responsive to) the mothers because they are homeless.

While it is quite apparent that there is indeed substantial room for area schools to improve their communication with parents, our conversations with a school counselor and a school social worker brought to light a couple of interesting items. First, the school workers, in these cases, suggested that homeless parents are communicated with and treated in the same manner as all parents. Second, the school workers perceived that many of the communication problems with homeless parents stemmed from the parents' lack of understanding of how to navigate the school system. The counselor explained:

"A lot of the parents at the agency (that is located near the school) go straight to the top (the superintendent) with any little issue that comes up. This creates a conflict when it's really not necessary. If they would just go to the teacher or counselor first, we could resolve most of these things a lot more easily."

School workers perceived that homeless parents lack understanding of how to navigate the school system.

➔ Homeless agency-school communication

While we did not gather a plethora of data specifically in this area, two items from our survey stood out as indicators that there is much room for improvement in the communication between agencies and their neighboring schools:

- Only 12% of agency staff members indicated that they speak with school staff members very often; and
- 44% of agency staff members speak with school staff members "rarely or never."

In that school personnel and their neighboring agency personnel are often working with the same clientele on an array of similar issues, it would seemingly behoove all parties to strengthen their relationships with one another. These stronger relationships could help them to meet families' educational needs in more efficient and effective fashions.

Summary of finding 5

Our data suggests that there is a significant need for improvement in communication between key stakeholders in homeless education contexts in Allegheny County. Although communication breakdowns regularly occur within and between area schools and homeless agencies, there does appear to be a general interest and willingness among all parties in overcoming such obstacles. Specifically, 92% of homeless agency staff members who participated in our survey desired more information about community-based educational opportunities for students and 54% of homeless parents desired more frequent communication with staff members at their children's schools. Such interest, coupled with the implementation of sound strategies and processes, indicates that there is hope for communication improvements in the days ahead.

Finding 6:

Relationships (and the lack thereof) play important roles in parents' and children's development.

Research strongly suggests that students' capacities to learn and succeed in school are tied to the presence of supportive and enduring relationships in their lives (Coleman, 1988). No matter how good their teachers are, how much technology they are exposed to, and/or how new their school facilities are, students are unlikely to achieve sustainable cognitive and socio-emotional growth if they do not have well-intentioned, informed, and connected family members and friends to stand by their sides. This appears to be especially true in the context of homeless education, where the multiple accompaniments of homelessness make schooling all the more difficult. Not surprisingly, then, our sixth major finding is that relationships play major roles in parents' and families' personal, professional, and social growth.

We found there to be a bit of a mixed bag in terms of the relationships that affect homeless education in Allegheny County. Specifically, although most families in the County residential agencies have been debilitated by (and/or continue to be debilitated by) highly destructive personal relationships and many homeless agencies and their neighboring schools share virtually no relationships at all, there appeared to be numerous highly productive relationships between homeless agency staff members and families and also a number of productive relationships among the families themselves. Below, we highlight some of these major "relationship" themes.

→Destructive, negative and nonexistent relationships in the lives of the homeless

When we asked parents about the relationships that affected their kids' educational experiences, we anticipated that parents would reiterate some of the difficulties that they had with teachers and schools and, while we did hear a number of such stories, we also heard about some of the deeply troubling circumstances that contributed to their families becoming homeless. Many of these stories centered on how abusive relationships violated their kids and exposed them to violence and lives of fear:

> "I was living in fear of him (her husband). We were running from him and to hear that he had died, it was just a relief."
>
> "My daughter was molested by her dad. And my son witnessed him with a gun to my head. He actually pulled the trigger but the bullet got stuck in the chamber. He (her son) saw it all."
>
> "When it comes to domestic violence, so much of the attention is devoted to the women and mothers and not really toward the children. But the children suffer just like the adult does – especially if they're witnesses to it. I left my husband when my daughter was 2 – she's seven now and still remembers some of the things she saw."

Considering the prevalence of such stories, it was not surprising, then, that when we asked mothers with whom they had productive personal relationships (in contexts of schooling), most of them struggled to come up with answers. One mother, for example, said, "I don't really have anybody like that. I don't have much family and the ones I have aren't worth much. I guess I'd like to get them (her kids) into the big brother program or something like that…" and another offered, "I don't really have family around here so I have to reach out."

→Non-existent relationships between parents/agencies and schools

Closely related to finding five, we found there to be, with some exceptions, very weak and/or non-existent relational ties between parents and schools and also between homeless agencies and schools. Several parents mentioned that schools' front office staff members were important and that isolated guidance counselors and teachers had taken specific interests in their children, such statements were not the norm. Our survey data jived with these qualitative findings. When asked which school-based relationships were helpful, some of the most interesting findings included:

- 20% of homeless parents indicated that teachers were very helpful during times of homelessness;
- 21% of homeless parents indicated that school administrators were helpful;
- 36% of homeless parents indicated that school counselors were helpful.

These are very low numbers considering that teachers, administrators, and counselors are commonly the most influential school-based actors on students' lives. It was also troubling to

note in the surveys that, even though the homeless agency staff members were very committed to and supportive of the homeless families, they too tended to lack strategic relationships with neighboring educators. Specifically, only 15% of agency staff members strongly agreed that they had "meaningful relationships with members of the local education community."

"Only 15% of homeless agency staff members strongly claimed to have meaningful relationships with members of the local education community."

→Supportive relationships between families and agency staff members

We were struck by the overwhelmingly positive remarks that were made by mothers in describing their relationships with homeless agency staff members. In fact, 87% of parent respondents indicated that supportive relationships with agency staff were somewhat or very helpful for kids academically. Even more striking to us, however, were numerous parents' suggestions that these relationships are *life-saving* ones. One mother, for example, exclaimed that, "If it wasn't for this place (the long-term County residential agency where she lives) as a cushion to fall back on, I don't know where I'd be…It saves us." Such remarks were plentiful and diversely framed, including the following:

> "She (her agency-based family specialist) is just, there's no words for her. She's just astounding. A beautiful person. Outstanding. She helps be become a beautiful person. I see the staff here glow and I glow. I see them walk proudly and I walk proudly. Their hope gives me hope… This is what I need. I need a strong foundation. If it wasn't for this place, I don't know where I'd be. They've done wonders for me and my daughter."

> "I've been here for a long while and she has been my case manager since I've been here. We have a very good relationship. I can call her at any time. I've had different things that have happened to me like a death in the family or really anything, and she's there. If I need help getting to appointments, she's there. If I need help with my children, they're there…If you want it, they're here. It definitely helps lead you to self-sufficiency."

> "I have positive relationships and I have negative relationships…Through this program I've been able to re-connect with my family. By providing me a clean, safe environment, my mom knows I'm somewhere safe with people who care about me. My case manager has had numerous talks with my mom about my well-being and, as a result, my mom is ok with me being here. My relationship with my case manager is one of complete honesty. I can really tell her things that are going on with me. Good things, bad things, whatever they are. It's not even just my case manager either. Some of the other staff allow me to come to them and say, 'Hey, this is going on in my life.'"

> "My case manager understands me. She will not put up with my bull****. Which is great because I need someone to give me a kick in the ass sometimes."

Many of the parents' descriptions of productive relationships with staff members focused generally on "getting by in life," but, in the schooling realm, these relationships appeared to serve as important foundations upon which new educational possibilities could be built.

87% of parent respondents indicated that supportive relationships with agency staff members were helpful for their kids' academic achievement.

→Supportive relationships among homeless mothers

The relationships between homeless mothers who lived at the same agencies varied greatly, but it was somewhat surprising to us to note the extent to which many mothers at the longer-term agencies (over one year) appear to rely upon each other for friendship and day-to-day support. As with their relationships with agency staff members, these inter-family bonds appeared to vital in helping them get through the daily struggles of homelessness – including education struggles. One mother described:

> "We are like a family. There are 27 families here and we are a family. There are of course problems with people not getting along from time to time, but it's just like that. Everybody seems to have that one person or two people that they just grow on…We need someone to fall back on. For me that's been Ramona (pseudonym for her friend). Her family and my family have become one. Her kids play with my kids and mine with hers.

> We have dinner together, cook together, and take care of each other. Where she's lacking I am, and where I'm lacking she is. We pick each other up. And that happens with other relationships throughout this program…I am estranged from my biological family, so I've adopted this one.

We noticed a marked difference in the relationships between mothers in these settings and those that were present at the shorter-term agencies, where we neither witnessed nor heard of meaningful relationships between families.

> *"I am estranged from my biological family, so I've adopted this one."*

Summary of finding 6

It was clear to us that homeless families' educational pursuits can be significantly supported by the presence of meaningful relationships in their lives. Where present, these connections with agency staff members, school actors, and other homeless families appeared to provide them with a degree of what Coleman (1988) and others (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 1995) refer to as social capital: the benefits and/or potential benefits derived from relationships with others. While we found that many families gained educationally-relevant social capital from their relationships with homeless agency staff members and some families (at long-term agencies) gained it from their associations with fellow homeless families, there are significant relational gaps between parents and schools and between agencies and schools.

Implications and Recommendations

These wide-ranging findings have implications for homeless families with school-age children, for homeless agencies that serve families, for schools, and for other community-based programs that serve homeless students (refer to Appendix 3 for review of key findings). Each of the major findings merits field-based responses, but rather than delineating numerous action recommendations for each of these six findings, we offer several ideas that, collectively engaged, would help make across-the-board improvements to the education of homeless students in Allegheny County. All recommendations are rooted in the data derived from this broad evaluation.

1. Professional development

While there are a number of well-informed and highly effective advocates for homeless students at work throughout the region (state and district level homeless liaisons, Intermediate Unit personnel, homeless agency personnel, etc.), there is need for a significant expansion of homeless education-focused professional development in Allegheny County. Below, we overview what this professional development might entail, where and when it might occur, and who might deliver it.

a. Professional development in residential homeless agencies

i. *Topical foci:* Trainings at residential homeless agencies should seek to increase staff members' understandings of school culture, school policy, and school actors' roles and responsibilities at both general levels (how do schools *writ large* operate) and specific, local levels (how does the school in *this neighborhood* operate). Professional development in homeless agencies should also address strategic issues of inter-organizational and intra-community relationship development, comprehensive information dissemination, and other issues that are most relevant at each site.

ii. *Where/when it could occur*: We suggest that this agency-based professional development should supplement (*not* replicate or replace) existing training that occurs within each organization and, on a larger scale, through the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. The trainings could take

place at regular staff meetings, during new employee induction phases, and at specially scheduled group and/or individual consultation sessions. Importantly, the professional development would be *ongoing* and *tailored to agency-specific needs*.

iii. *Who could deliver it:* Specific trainings should be developed and (when possible) delivered by content-specific experts from area organizations and institutions. Key facilitators in the process might be the Homeless Children's Education Fund, the Duquesne University School of Education, local schools, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, and the Educational Law Center.

b. Professional development in the schools

i. *Topical foci:* School-based professional development should attempt to increase key school actors' awareness of the current status of homelessness in the region (including its recently escalating rates and shifting demographics), identify impacts of homelessness upon students and families, highlight the importance of communication, accessibility, and relationship development, and clarify issues pertaining to legal rights and responsibilities. Like the trainings at agencies, school-based trainings should consider both broad issues/trends in homeless education and, more specifically, those that are most pertinent in their specific communities.

ii. *Where/when it could occur:* We suggest that school-based professional development be infused into existing schedules and infrastructures such as school and/or district in-service sessions, school faculty meetings, and individual department meetings. These, as well as additional individual and small group consultations, should be implemented on a regular basis within each district/school.

iii. *Who could deliver it:* Similar to agency-based professional development, specific trainings should be developed and delivered by content-specific experts from area organizations and institutions. Key facilitators in the process might be the Homeless Children's Education Fund, the Duquesne University School of Education, local homeless agencies, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, and the Educational Law Center.

2. After-school learning centers

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from parents and staff members, along with impressive evidence of student growth and learning, indicate that inter-agency after-school learning centers are worthy of further attention and investment. We next describe several specific recommendations relating to these centers.

a. *Increased human and financial capital should be directed toward existing after-school learning centers*. We noted that despite the apparent effectiveness of the programs, most of them had few (if any) staff devoted specifically to after-school learning and those who were assigned to these areas were limited in their capacities to meet diverse learning needs. Additionally, it was apparent that the learning centers would benefit significantly from more "learning tools." Accordingly, dependable line-item funding is needed from a variety of government of government sources to support increased expertise (social workers, school psychologists, literacy experts, etc.) and to provide additional supplies (computers, books, etc.) for established after-school learning centers.

b. *After-school learning centers should develop identity-specific foci*. While it appears that all of the centers have great academic and social utility, it is clear that the roles and intents of each learning center should be related to the amount of time that families spend in the residential agencies. Centers that work with students for only short periods of time (less than 60 days) should focus predominantly upon helping students/families make enduring *external* educational connections (in community programs, for example) and introducing them to global "school skills" (how and when to contact teachers, do homework, get accurate diagnoses of learning needs, etc.). Centers that get to work with students for longer periods of time (six months or more) should focus on similar school skills, but might direct more time and resources to traditional tutoring and *in-house* relationship development between students and staff members. For example, from July 2008 until July 2009, 57% of the families in Allegheny County's residential homeless programs had stays of less than six months and were, in turn, more appropriate candidates for the shorter-term foci. However, at one particular agency, 90% of the families stayed for at least six months – making them prime candidates for the longer-term foci.

c. *Development of new centers where space is available in other long-term agencies.* Considering the effectiveness of existing in-house after-school learning centers, dependable funding is needed for the development of similar centers in agencies

that do not currently have them. We suggest that long-term agencies are the most attractive venues for new learning centers.

3. School-based connections and programming

There needs to be significant improvement in school-agency relationships, for although agency-based learning centers are effective and their bolstering and expansion is important, it is of fundamental importance that agency and school partners work in concert with one another. Specifically, it is essential that current school-shelter divides are overcome so that homeless children's schools become more viable options for their after-school learning. While the agency-based learning centers are invaluable sources of academic and social support for homeless families, *school-based programming is an essential element of students' academic progress and it must be prioritized in all homeless education initiatives*. Some specific considerations here include:

- School-based pull-out programs and after-school programs would enable after-school learning experiences to be aligned with students' regular curricula;
- School-based after-school programs would allow effective coordination among after-school personnel and regular classroom teachers and other professionals; and
- School-based after-school programming would be supported by Title I and IDEA funding. This is an especially important point, considering that many of the current agency-based learning centers are supported by local foundations and corporations – many of whom have indicated that their funding will soon be discontinued if schools do not take on more of the homeless education burden

Our overall point in recommendations 3 (above) and 4 (below) is that there need to be effective after-school learning options in *both homeless agencies and schools*. This should be approached at both district and state levels.

4. Community programming

Purposeful efforts should be made to increase homeless families' utilization of educationally-focused community programs because, although there is a broad array of programs in Allegheny County that could be helpful to homeless families in their

educational pursuits, many parents do not know about these opportunities and/or perceive them to be unaffordable/inaccessible. Accordingly community-based programs should be made more accessible to homeless families through systematic information dissemination (at homeless agencies, schools, etc.), cost reductions/waivers, and transportation assistance. Community programs should work in tandem with homeless agencies and boundary spanning entities such as the Homeless Children's Education Fund and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit to improve accessibility. Our data suggests that special attention should be devoted to early childhood programs (for example, in 2008, 143 children ages 1-5 stayed at one of the agencies we visited), special needs learning programs (12% of children ages 6-17 in the agencies had significant special needs), and adult learning programs (countless mothers with whom we spoke either attended school or described interests in further schooling).

5. **Research and evaluation**

Ongoing documentation of and research into trends of family homelessness is needed. The Pennsylvania state taskforce on homeless education should both be informed by this research and take an active role in determining how and where future research will occur throughout the state. While broader quantitative data on homelessness in the region is helpful in getting a general sense of who is homeless, strategic quantitative and qualitative inquiry into families' formal and informal education experiences during periods of homelessness would provide valuable insights to school and community organizations that work with homeless students and families on a regular basis. Such research would further Allegheny County's already progressive homeless information management system, help improve education services to homeless families, and establish the County evaluation/documentation system as a model for others to replicate.

6. **Wider replication/consultation**

If the preceding recommendations are implemented, key Allegheny County actors will be positioned to take on leadership roles in homeless education at regional and national levels. We recommend that these organizations should work in concert with

others throughout the state to replicate the groundbreaking Allegheny County model. Strategic partners here would include the Homeless Children's Education Fund, the National Association for Education of Homeless Children and Youth, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Education Law Center (which recently released a research report that posited some similar findings as ours), regional education organizations, Duquesne University, and other colleges/universities throughout the state. At the national level, the well-established relationships between the Homeless Children's Education Fund and researchers from Duquesne University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison provide natural entrée into homeless education contexts throughout the country. Funding should support such initiatives, which could ultimately help countless homeless families and position Pennsylvania and it's homeless education advocates as national leaders.

7. **Homeless Education Network**

To facilitate several of the action recommendations that have been tied to the findings, we recommend the development of a "Homeless Education Network" (HEN). This network would draw from the skill and expertise of local university, non-profit, government, and educational institutions to support the educational pursuits of homeless families. Building upon valuable boundary-spanning work that has been done to date by several individuals and organizations, the network would catalyze the vast reserves of human capital in the region in response to the specific educational needs of families in local agencies. We suggest that the network might initially consist of two overlapping, mutually-informing foci, both which are briefly described below.

a. *Daily issues foci*. HEN would recruit a cadre of local experts to engage the daily education challenges that face area homeless families and their service providers. Network members would develop and deliver school and agency-based professional development, facilitate agency-school-community connections, assist with after-school-learning center programming, and be on call to provide agencies and schools with expertise about specific education dilemmas that arise (for example, insights about legal issues and educating students with special learning needs).

b. *Big issues foci.* Concurrent to its local daily issues work, HEN would rally resourceful partners throughout the region and state to engage "big issues" of homeless education. These would include issues of policy, law, research, evaluation, and resource acquisition. The big issues work would fundamentally undergird attempts at national and state levels to replicate the Allegheny County model of homeless service suggested in recommendations 1-6.

HEN partners would include the Homeless Children's Education Fund, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (and its regional homeless coordinator) and Duquesne University's School of Education, who have, with significant support from the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and others, cultivated a collaborative and creative approach to engaging homeless education in Allegheny County. Their work to date includes: a) the development of a "systems advocate" position (supported by the Pittsburgh Foundation, this systems advocate has re-designed agency in-take documents, consulted agency staff and parents, connected university and agency resources, conducted ongoing research and evaluation, etc.); and b) a tentative agreement to institutionalize homeless education advocacy and research into Duquesne's redesigned undergraduate and graduate level curricula (where agency-based learning centers are to be used as laboratories of practice for students and faculty). While the work of these partners is highly promising, HEN would require numerous other partners at local and state levels, including (but not limited to): the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Education Law Center, area law enforcement personnel, the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, other intermediate units, and agencies that are committed to serving homeless children and their families. This work could inform (and be informed by) work that is currently being done by the statewide taskforce on homeless education. For example, the HEN model might provide meaningful insights into the revision of the state's existing regional homeless education structure.

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Appendix 1: STAR Reader report for first grade student at a short-term homeless agency in Allegheny County:

This report presents diagnostic information about the student's general reading skills, based on the student's performance on a STAR Reading test.

Time for First Part: 13 minutes 5 seconds
Time for Second Part: 0 seconds

SS	GE	PR	PR Range	IRL	Est. ORF[a]	ZPD
332	2.7	90	84-94	2.8	88	2.4-3.4

This student's Grade Equivalent (GE) score is 2.7. Her test performance is therefore comparable to that of an average second grader after the seventh month of the school year. Gianna also achieved a national Percentile Rank (PR) of 90. This score is in the above-average range and means that Gianna scored greater than 90% of students nationally in the same grade. The PR range indicates that, if this student had taken the STAR Reading test numerous times, most of her scores would likely have fallen between 84 and 94. It reflects the amount of statistical variability in a student's PR score.

These scores indicate that Gianna has probably had successful reading experiences with longer blocks of text. She has mastered most of the basic sounds related to word recognition. Gianna is blending sounds and word parts to read words more quickly and smoothly.

More spoken words are becoming part of this student's reading vocabulary, enabling her to spend less time focusing on word recognition and more time thinking about meaning. Students at this level begin to spend more time reading silently and can read unfamiliar easy-reader materials.

Students at this level still need models of fluent reading. Reading orally with Gianna is a powerful way of demonstrating the skills needed to become a fluent reader.

For optimal reading growth, Gianna needs to:

- Continue to develop oral reading fluency and rate
- Listen to books read aloud at school and at home daily
- Increase time spent on silent reading
- Learn how to select books for guided independent reading practice
- Increase oral reading practice time

This student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for independent reading is book level 2.4-3.4. If Accelerated Reader™ reading management software is being used in your classroom or school, Gianna should be encouraged to select books with book levels in the ZPD. These books will provide optimal reading challenge without frustration. The ZPD, however, is approximate. Success at any book level also depends on the student's interest and prior knowledge of a book's content.

The following techniques will also help ensure the student's continued growth in reading:

- Guide reading practice so that Gianna averages at least 85 percent on Accelerated Reader Reading Practice Quizzes.
- Once Gianna is able to maintain an 85% average, encourage her to raise her average to 90% or higher. High averages are associated with the greatest reading gain.
- Teach Gianna how to select books throughout her ZPD.
- Use the Accelerated Reader Diagnostic Report and Student Record Report for more detailed information about the student's reading practice.

Appendix 2: Books read and quiz scores from Accelerated Reader program for 12th grade student living in long-term homeless agency.

Date	Title	Correct	Possible	Percent
6/2009	Just Kidding	10	10	100.0
6/2009	Sacajawea	8	10	80.0
5/2009	Barack	5	5	100.0
5/2009	Lock and Key	9	10	90.0
5/2009	Dancer	10	10	100.0
5/2009	Just Listen	10	10	100.0
1/2009	The Year We Missed	9	10	90.0
12/2008	Breaking Dawn	19	20	95.0
12/2008	Eclipse	20	20	100.0
12/2008	New Moon	20	20	100.0
12/2008	Twilight	19	20	95.0
11/2008	Until We Meet Again	8	10	80.0
10/2008	Love, Stargirl	8	10	80.0
9/2008	Truth About Forever	8	10	80.0
8/2008	Mates, Dates and…	10	10	100.0
7/2008	Other Side of Dark	9	10	90.0
7/2008	All-American Girl	10	10	100.0
7/2008	Ready or Not	10	10	100.0
7/2008	Mad Mistakes	10	10	100.0
7/2008	Tempting Trouble	7	10	70.0
7/2008	Great Escapes	10	10	100.0
7/2008	Sole Survivors	9	10	90.0
7/2008	Sizzling Summers	8	10	80.0
7/2008	Inflatable	4	10	40.0
Overall Quizzes Passed/Taken:		26/27		
Cumulative Percent Correct:		91.1		

Appendix 3: Noteworthy Findings

- 70% of clients at family residential agencies were experiencing their first episode of homelessness.
- 76% of clients at family residential agencies had experienced homelessness only once in the past three years.
- 65% of clients had been homeless for six months or fewer.
- Only seven percent of parents had experienced four or more incidents of homelessness.
- Parents averaged only 1.78 total separate incidents of homelessness.
- 44% of homeless parents in our sample attended and/or graduated from college.
- 79% of parents indicated that they help their children with schoolwork at least a few times a week.
- 71% of parents indicated that they want more information about how they could assist their children with school work.
- 92% of parents claim that they speak with homeless agency staff at least once a week about their children's educational progress.
- 90% of staff members claimed that better parent understandings of school subjects would help parents be more effective educational advocates.
- 64% of parents claimed that lack of knowledge about community programming was the biggest barrier to the fuller involvement of their children in local programming.
- 20% of parents claimed that they knew very much about the children's educational rights.
- 50% of parents said they knew not much or nothing about these rights.
- Only 38% of agency staff members strongly agreed that they knew about the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and its implications for students' rights.
- 78% of parents whose children used agency-based after-school learning centers indicated that these services were "very helpful."
- 99% of parents whose children used agency-based after-school learning centers indicated that these services were either somewhat or very helpful.
- 91% of agency staff members claimed that agency-based after-school learning centers were somewhat or extremely helpful to students.

- 12% of the children who were served in family residential agencies were identified with developmental disabilities, mental illness, and/or physical disabilities.
- Only 12% of agency staff members indicated that they speak with school staff members very often.
- 44% of agency staff members speak with school staff members “rarely or never.”
- 20% of homeless parents indicated that teachers were very helpful during times of homelessness.
- 21% of homeless families indicated that school administrators were helpful.
- 36% of homeless families indicated that school counselors were helpful.
- Only 15% of agency staff members strongly agreed that they had “meaningful relationships with members of the local education community.
- Parents want to be involved with education: One mother actually got a job at her children’s school just so she could be near them and watch out for them throughout each day.

Appendix 4: Examples of Allegheny County homeless service providers with education services

1. Women's Center and Shelter, Pittsburgh, Shadyside
2. Salvation Army Family Crisis Center, Pittsburgh, East Liberty
3. Womanspace East, Inc., Pittsburgh, Uptown
4. Open Arms (Primary Care Health Services), Pittsburgh, Homewood
5. Sankofa House (Primary Care Health Services), Pittsburgh, Homewood
6. New Beginnings (Primary Care Health Services), Pittsburgh, Homewood
7. Three Rivers Youth, The Hub, Pittsburgh, Strip District
8. HEARTH Benedictine Place, North Hills
9. Sisters Place, Clairton
10. Womansplace, McKeesport
11. Bridge to Independence, Braddock
12. Healthy Start House, Duquesne
13. Crisis Center North, Pittsburgh
14. Alle-Kiski Hope Center, Tarentum
15. Allegheny Valley Association of Churches (AVAC), Natrona Heights
16. Sojourner House, Pittsburgh, Garfield
17. Sojourner House MOMS, Pittsburgh, East Liberty

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