



Purpose

Numerous early childhood leaders and providers in Allegheny County created the Bridges group because of their concern that infants, toddlers, and preschoolers experiencing homelessness should be better served. Bridges members strive to work collectively and collaboratively with all programs within Allegheny County that provide services and support to young children. In those efforts, the Bridges group works to enhance parent and family involvement through cross-system collaboration; to facilitate cross-system local and state service delivery systems to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of children and families; and to enhance state and local policies that impact this population.

The Bridges group includes many active representatives from a wide variety of County service providers, service networks, and advocates. This includes the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's (AIU) liaison for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness; representatives of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services; Early Intervention Birth to Five; Early Intervention and Technical Assistance (EITA); providers and leaders of early care and education services (e.g. YWCA and PAEYC); providers of maternal and child health home visiting services and their network leaders; the network of providers of parenting services; homeless housing providers; Early Head Start and Head Start; the Homeless Education Network (HEN); and the Homeless Children's Education Fund (HCEF). Bridges is supported and staffed by the Education Law Center and the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development.

Recent Accomplishments

The Bridges group has:

- Developed collaborative strategies for change through regular meetings while sharing research, local data, and resources.
- Increased awareness of the scope of services provided to young children throughout the county.

- Identified priority issues and concerns among shelter providers. These issues include: access to quality child care, strengthening parenting skills, early childhood mental health, and the consequences of trauma.
- Provided recommendations for Early Intervention protocols for screening, tracking, and evaluation of infants and young children birth to 5 to the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. This was accomplished through a collaboration between the Alliance for Infants and Toddlers, Pittsburgh Public Schools, AIU, KidStart, and the Office of Child Development.
- Increased awareness of the federal mandates of the McKinney-Vento Act pertaining to young children birth to 5 through a collaboration between the AIU's liaison for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness and the Education Law Center.
- Focused cross-system attention on issues of family engagement, parent independence, system navigation, issues of stigma and trauma, and promoting healthy parent-child interactions.
- Raised awareness of the needs of young children under 5 and their families through collaborative work with HCEF, the HEN and the Department of Human Services.
- Increased the resources available to Allegheny County homeless housing programs for early childhood mental health and access to early childhood services.
- Raised awareness at the state level, through the State Interagency Coordinating Council and with key policy makers, regarding the need for collaboration among early childhood programs.

Presentations

Bridges members have also given presentations on topics that include:

- The impacts of homelessness on children birth to 5.
- The consequences of trauma on early childhood development.
- The importance for high quality early care and education opportunities for vulnerable children.

The forums for these presentations by Bridges members include:

- The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Conference (November, 2011)
- Pennsylvania Bar Association

- The Brighter Tomorrow Conference (July, 2011)
- Homeless Education Network meetings and presentations to housing providers at HCEF meetings