

Testimony of Michelle Linder-Coates, Executive Director of PreK Partnerships, School District of Philadelphia
Before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
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Greetings Chair Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and other honorable Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Michelle Linder-Coates and I am the Executive Director of Pre-K Partnerships for the School District of Philadelphia, which provides Head Start programming to over 6,500 three and four-year olds each year across the city of Philadelphia. Our office is committed to ensuring each and every one of our children receive the best possible education and opportunity for life success. Unfortunately, many of our students and their caregivers face great adversity, feeling the effects of poverty and inequities in their daily lives. Our office works to combat the adverse impacts of poverty through a comprehensive support model that addresses the various conditions students and their families face outside of the security of the Head Start classroom. I am honored to speak with you today about the work we have done these past 18 months to reach Philadelphia's families in need, particularly those experiencing housing challenges and those who receive foster care.

I have a deep and extensive history with the Head Start program, as I started my Head Start journey as a young child. Later, I was a Head Start parent who served on Head Start's Policy Council and soon after became a Head Start classroom teacher. My many years of experience within the Head Start program means that I have a great deal of expertise in regards to early childhood education. As you can imagine, it also means that I have a deep passion and dedication to making sure the Head Start program is strong and impactful for our children and their caregivers.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act guarantees a free and appropriate public education for all children and youth experiencing homelessness and outlines procedures for deciding school placement, enrolling students, and determining responsibility. In our program, servicing families protected under this act starts with identification and recruitment. Because our families are often unaware of the services our office offers, our recruitment and identification efforts have been successful through the establishment of strong partnerships with many of Philadelphia's social service agencies. Our office has forged partnerships with refugee organizations, including the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Nationalities Services Center. Because of these relationships, we are able to reach immigrant populations eligible for services under the McKinney-Vento Act. Our office also provides translation and interpretation services to ensure that the family's primary language is never a barrier to enrolling in our program.

We have also had the privilege of forming relationships directly with city shelters through the facilitation of People Emergency Center and The Bell Project's monthly Early Childhood Workshops that focus on fostering relationships between city shelter staff and early childhood staff, enhancing our collective ability to service our families. We also

attend Shelter PreK Enrollment Fairs (virtually during COVID-19 pandemic) hosted by the BELL project that allows our staff to inform parents about Head Start and enroll their children.

Through this close relationship with shelter staff, we have been able to co-complete the *Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Programs Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness*, created by the Department of Health and Human Services, ensuring continual quality improvement and service to our neediest families. For the past three years, we have completed this tool with the support of shelter staff, and we, in turn, have helped them complete the *Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters*. Through the use of this assessment tool, we have refined our practices to better serve our families.

Based on the results of the assessment, we changed our Head Start application and all marketing material to be more inclusive, eliminating the word 'homeless' as most McKinney-Vento eligible families do not identify as such. The stereotype of 'homeless' is pervasive not only in agencies that service our families, but also amongst our families as well. There is often shame and embarrassment around identifying as 'homeless,' and many of our families do not want to be labeled, and they should be granted this dignity. We now utilize more common phrases used by the majority of McKinney-Vento families, such as, "Temporarily living in the house of a relative or friend" or "New to the country and looking for housing." These general statements are soft indicators that the family may be McKinney-Vento eligible. During the intake interview, we follow up with additional questions to determine actual status. Many of our families do not know that the Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of 'homeless,' and McKinney-Vento Law definition of 'homeless' are different. A family may not be eligible for emergency housing, but yet are still McKinney-Vento eligible.

We know that a majority of Philadelphia's children and youth identified under the McKinney-Vento Act are not in shelters. In fact, a review of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's report entitled "Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program 2018-19 Counts by Entity" shows that of the 39,221 children and youth experiencing homelessness and served by Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program for Fiscal Year 2019, only 8,069 children and youth identified as being in shelter, or 20.6% of all homeless children and youth. Most students experiencing homelessness – or 79.4% – are either living doubled up with friends or relatives, living in places not fit for human habitation, or living on the street.

Our close partnership with the School District of Philadelphia's McKinney-Vento Liaison within the District's Office of Homeless Services has also been extremely beneficial in identifying McKinney-Vento families and recruiting their age-eligible children to our Head Start program. This relationship is reciprocal as the Office of Homeless Services recommends eligible families to us when they identify children experiencing homelessness in the upper grades, and we recommend families to them who come

through the PreK application process. Thirty-five Head Start children have been identified and recommended to our program this year through the Office of Homeless Services that might have otherwise not known about our program.

Our office provides ongoing training to staff to support them in recognizing possible McKinney-Vento situations as the first step in the interview process. We emphasize the importance of using respectful language around the living situation of all families. As stated previously, this typically means that when discussing a family's living situation, we use the words the family uses. This gentle approach allows us to build trust with our families, giving them the dignity and respect they deserve, all the while ensuring they get the full spectrum of services available to them including immediate enrollment, help with any necessary enrollment documents, help with acquiring basic school supplies and basic clothing needs.

As was recommended through our partnerships with shelter staff, we eliminated listing 'required documentation' on advertisements as it may discourage McKinney-Vento applicants from applying. McKinney-Vento Families who have recently experienced fires, domestic abuse, or natural disasters often do not have access to our required documentation, like proof of birth or immunization records. This knowledge also prompted us to change our website to mention exceptions to required documentation for our Foster, Refugee, Asylum Seekers, and Families experiencing temporary living situations.

Once enrolled, our McKinney-Vento families are given top priority as we support families in the program. For example, partnerships were developed with Stenton Family Manor and ACTS Recovery House Shelters to provide onsite registrations by our Family Service Field Representative and to build relationships with the families.

According to an analysis of the *Household Pulse Survey* (HPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, we know that More than 1 in 6 (17%) adults in renter or homeowner households with children reported that they were not "caught up" on rent or mortgage and 1 in 4 (24%) U.S. adults in households with children reported limited confidence that their household would be able to make their next rent or mortgage payment on time (these numbers are significantly higher for African American families). This data indicates a rise in housing insecurity most likely due to the pandemic. Through research conducted by Mary Haskett, Kate Norwalk & Sarah Neal at North Carolina State University, we know that a strong teacher-student relationship is a key factor in promoting resilience in children experiencing homelessness. Certainly this positive student-teacher relationship promotes resilience in our foster children as well. According to a study released by the Harvard Medical School (HMS), the University of Michigan and Casey Family Programs, foster children are almost twice as likely to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as U.S. war veterans. Getting our children in a solid/stable caring relationship with their teachers and supporting foster parents in establishing caring relationships with their foster child can make all the difference. Supporting families through housing insecurity and through foster or kinship

arrangements is a unique and invaluable service of Head Start. However, despite the rise in housing insecurity and the benefits of Head Start, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted parents' willingness to participate in the program.

For the thousands of families experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia, the pressure to find a home, gain employment, feed their family, stay safe, maintain sound mental health, educate their child, access childcare and other community resources is overwhelming. Many families did not feel safe participating in face to face options and were unable to participate in the offered virtual options for a multitude of reasons. Our program used COVID-19 funds to support both virtual and in person programming during this pandemic. To support virtual learning, we ensured connectivity, purchased necessary technology and digital curriculum materials for children and teachers, consumable and non-consumable learning materials for use at home, and trained teachers on the use of technology and learning to support virtual learning, and purchased PPE to support face-to-face learning. We also allowed families to pick up meals to eat at home to ensure that children were not missing out on the non-educational supports that we provide.

We can see the impact of the pandemic represented in the differences between enrolled eligible McKinney-Vento children in school year 2019-20 versus program year 2020-21. For the school year 2019-2020, 6% of our total enrolled students were McKinney-Vento eligible. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, this school year has not only seen a drastic decrease in overall enrollment numbers, but also a drop in the percentage of children categorized as McKinney-Vento, as only 4% of our total enrollment are McKinney-Vento eligible. Similarly, total enrollment of children in foster care has decreased from 3% to 2%.

In an effort to address this decrease in numbers and to identify effective recruitment strategies for these vulnerable populations, we participated in the 'Roundtable Discussion' hosted by Congressperson Dwight Evans and People's Emergency Center (PEC). The panel offered recommendations that we have embraced:

1. Expand partnerships within the city of Philadelphia
2. The School District of Philadelphia Head Start, Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) project, and home visiting systems will strategize to increase and maintain enrollment of children experiencing homelessness
3. Support the transition to virtual learning for children experiencing homelessness, i.e., expand distribution of Chromebooks, increase internet connectivity, and more.
4. Continued education to parents on the value of Head Start and quality PreK. It is customary for elderly and extended family members to provide childcare for some families, so to maintain the connection and support, parents may elect not to disrupt the arrangements.

Additionally, we provide expedited services to our foster care families. Once a foster care family has been identified, our social service team establishes a working

relationship and provides contact information to the family's assigned case manager. The social service team works with the family to assist with family service plans and establishes a team to ensure that the family adheres to set goals, makes progress with goals and or complete goals that are mandated by foster care agencies. Our social service team acts as a mediator and provides advocacy for the families especially when they have issues or concerns with the agency contracted to provide care. During the pandemic the team made "safety and wellness" checks on a bi-weekly basis to ensure that our families were maintaining all agency and CDC guidelines and to monitor mental health.

We partner with community agencies to provide resources to our children in foster care and families experiencing homelessness to assist with healthcare, food, and clothing. We engage our families in formulating personal goals such as post secondary education, financial literacy, credit repair, improving parenting skills, learning new skills, job attainment, and resume building to name a few. We remain committed to serving as advocates for our families as they navigate the systems necessary to attain individual goals for success.

For many families in Philadelphia, the impacts of poverty and inequity are stifling. We will continue to work diligently each day to make a positive impact and to ensure our neediest families have the opportunity for long-term life success. Our program is now providing in-person services for any family that wishes to be in-person. Moreover, our program will use federal COVID-19 funds to provide summer programming to our students to ensure that children have the chance to catch-up for lost instruction time, especially those children entering kindergarten in the next school year and those children who were completely virtual during this past school year. I thank you for allowing me to testify and welcome the opportunity to work with any or all of you in seeking effective approaches to support our most vulnerable children and families.