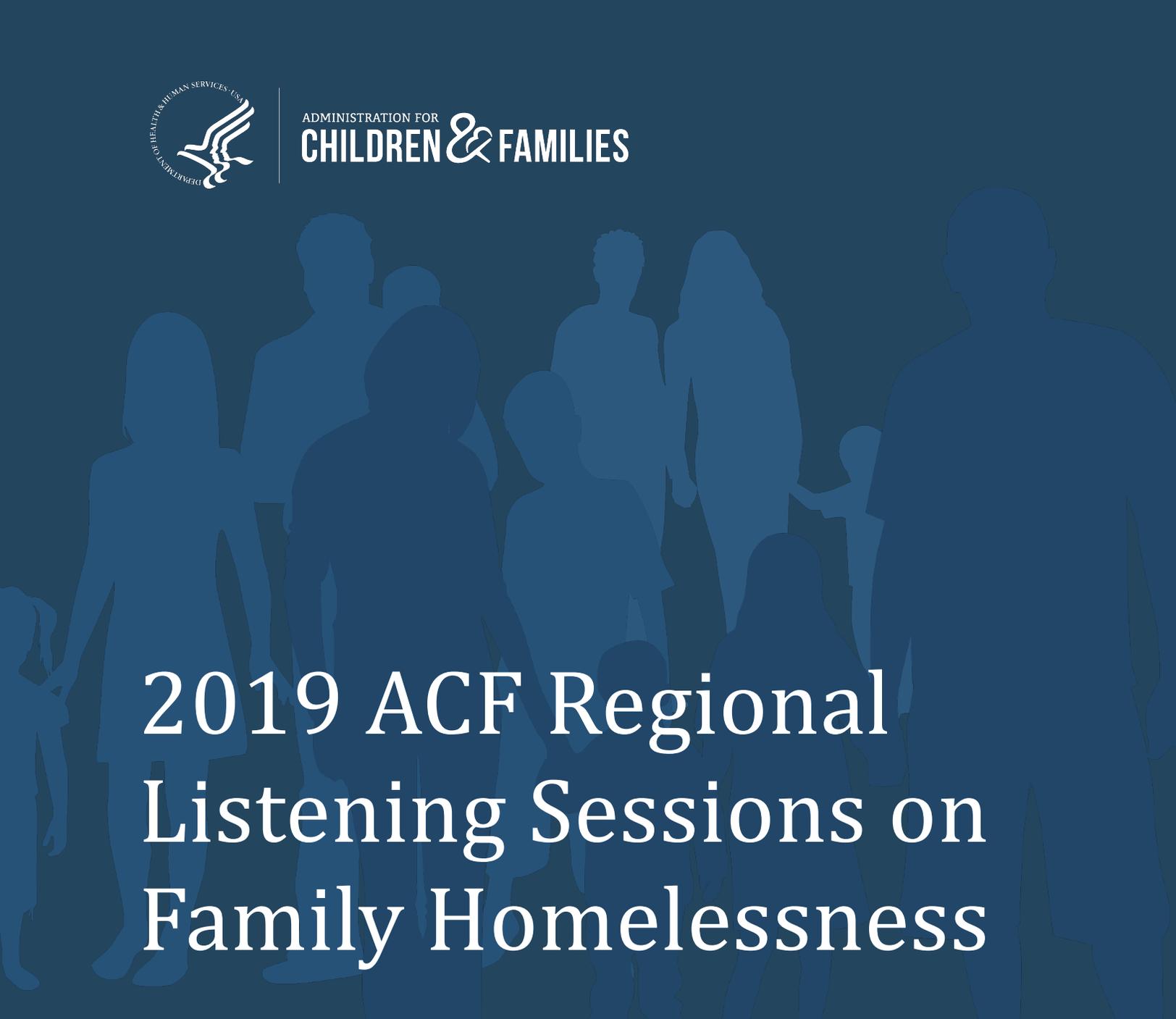




ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



2019 ACF Regional Listening Sessions on Family Homelessness

Report Summary: What We Learned

February 2020



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Administration on Children, Youth & Families | 330 C Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20201
www.acf.hhs.gov/acyf

February 2020

Dear Friends,

On behalf of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), I am pleased to present the executive summary of the 2019 ACF Listening Sessions on Family Homelessness.

The executive summary and report are based on feedback from all ten regional listening sessions, using participants' comments/notes, forum transcripts, and audio recordings, all of which will help form our internal and external recommendations and next steps.

ACYF programs seek to positively impact economic mobility and promote the critical need for primary prevention to help families achieve and maintain self-sufficiency and prevent generational poverty. We will continue to work across ACF programs and with other federal agencies and faith-based and community partners to strengthen our efforts to address family and youth homelessness.

Thank you to ACF Assistant Secretary Lynn Johnson for her leadership, and to the ACF Office of Regional Operations for their participation and help organizing the regional forums. Finally, thank you to all the leaders and organizations who participated in these forums and to all who are working daily on innovative solutions informed by those with lived experience.

Elizabeth Darling
Commissioner

2019 ACF Listening Sessions on Family Homelessness: What We Learned

Executive Summary

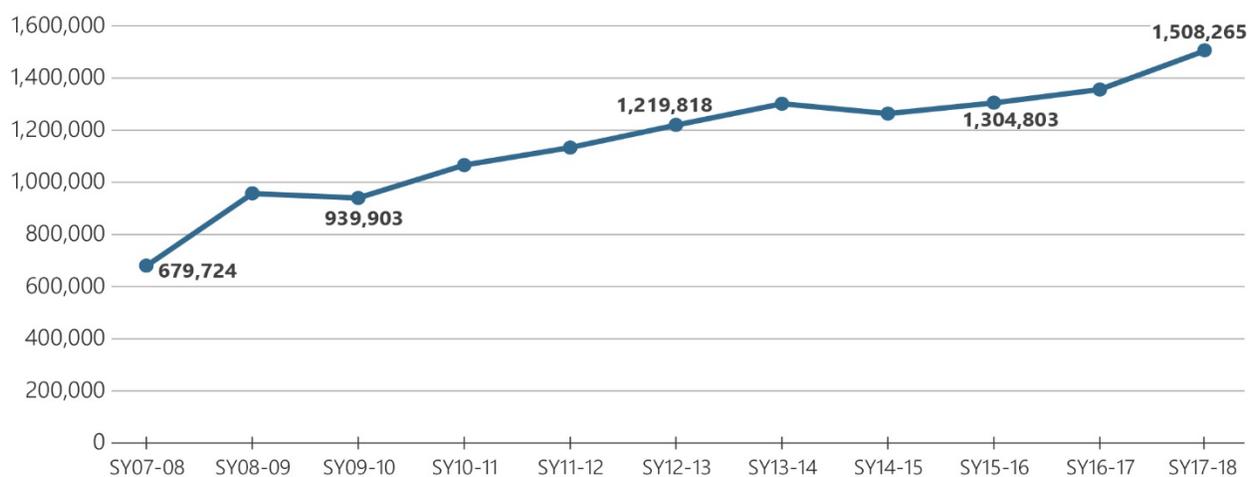
The mission of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is to enhance and protect the health and well-being of all Americans. Within HHS, the Administration for Children & Families (ACF) promotes the economic and social well-being of children, families, youth, individuals, and communities through a range of educational and supportive programs in partnership with states, tribes, and both faith-based and community organizations.

Homelessness threatens the health and well-being of an increasing number of Americans. For ACF, homelessness is of particular concern, as it predisposes children and youth to lifelong health, socio-emotional, and economic challenges, including future homelessness as adults.

Unfortunately, the problem of family and youth homelessness is growing in urban, suburban, and rural areas, as evidenced by data from public schools and early childhood programs. In 2017-2018, public schools reported that 1,508,265 children and youth experienced homelessness at some point during the school year (National Center for Homeless Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2020). *This number has increased by 122% since 2007-2008 and by 15% since 2015-2016.* (See chart below). The U.S. Department of Education also estimates that 1.3 million young children from birth to age five experienced homelessness in 2016-2017, a 4% increase over the previous year (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Head Start programs also have enrolled increasing numbers of homeless children: in 2018-19, 58,771 homeless children were enrolled in Head Start programs, up from 26,200 children in 2007-08.

**Homeless Students Enrolled in Public School
School Years 2007–08 to 2017–18**



Note: Students identified as homeless represent approximately 2.5% of all public school students

Source: National Center for Homeless Education, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nche.ed.gov/data-and-stats/>

For these reasons, ACF held ten listening sessions on family homelessness, one in each of the ten federal regions, from February through May 2019. Organized by the Office of Regional Operations (ORO) and the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), the listening sessions allowed ACF leaders to learn about trends, barriers, and local innovative responses from a diverse group of more than 600 stakeholders including parents with lived experience, grantee and non-grantee service providers, educators, faith-based and community providers, and state and local government leaders. The listening sessions provided an opportunity to share information about ACF's resources to attendees, and to ask attendees for ways in which ACF programs might be improved to better serve families and youth who are experiencing homelessness.

Some of **ACF's programs** have specific requirements to serve children, youth, and families who are homeless, and provide services to empower families out of homelessness and into self-sufficiency. Still other ACF programs engage in primary prevention strategies to reduce the risk of becoming homeless. Five ACF program offices are particularly well suited to address issues related to youth and family homelessness. Representatives from each central and regional office participated in the planning and implementation of the family homelessness listening sessions:

The **Office of Head Start (OHS)** provides traditional educational services for youth 3-5, as well as parental engagement to assist with the challenges experienced by homeless families. Head Start promotes school readiness of children under five from low-income families through education, health, social, and other services. The Head Start Act and the Head Start Program Performance Standards include requirements for serving children and families experiencing homelessness, including enrollment, outreach, and collaboration. Head Start programs also are authorized to reserve slots for children experiencing homelessness, including pregnant and parenting youth.

The **Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB)** supports the organizations and communities that work every day to reduce the risk of youth homelessness, adolescent pregnancy, and domestic violence. FYSB programs include the *Runaway and Homeless Youth Program*, which supports short-term shelter needs, maternity group homes, transitional living shelters, street outreach to homeless youth, and the National Runaway Safeline. The *Family Violence Prevention and Services Program* supports emergency shelters and supportive services for victims of domestic violence and their children, and funds the National Domestic Violence Hotline. The *Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention* program has a focus on primary prevention, empowering youth to make healthy decisions, optimizing opportunities for a successful transition to adulthood.

The **Office of Child Care (OCC)** supports eligible low-income working families through child care financial assistance and promotes children's learning by improving the quality of early care and education and afterschool programs. OCC administers the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), which is the primary federal funding source for child care subsidies. CCDF is a block grant to states, territories, and tribes, but includes very specific requirements for children experiencing homelessness, including enrollment, outreach, and training.

The **Office of Family Assistance (OFA)** administers several key federal grant programs, including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, tribal programs, the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) program, and the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program. States administer the TANF program and have flexibility in the use of funds, including the coordinated provision of employment services and benefits with local homeless service providers to minimize the incidence and duration of family homelessness. ACF has encouraged TANF jurisdictions to consider the implementation of interventions that connect families to permanent housing with coordinated supportive services, including child care subsidies for TANF eligible families, to help families improve their lives and avoid future homelessness [\[TANF-ACF-IM-2013-01\]](#).

The **Children's Bureau (CB)** provides support and guidance to prevent child abuse and neglect, protect children when abuse or neglect has occurred, and ensure that every child and youth has a permanent family or family connection. CB supports state efforts to reduce the risk of homelessness for youth aging out of the foster care system through adoption or kinship care.

Broad Themes and Challenges

Themes and trends described by participants in the listening sessions across regions included:

- **Family homelessness is an increasing or steady problem.** In all regions, participants described family homelessness as a problem that is increasing or holding steady. In no listening session did participants cite reductions in family homelessness.
- **Homelessness is accompanied by significant trauma for parents and children.** Participants raised the pervasive and damaging impact of trauma at every regional listening session.
- **Particular populations are at greater risk for experiencing family homelessness.** In nearly every regional session, participants discussed the over-representation of young mothers, families of color, single-parent mothers with young children, parents with foster care histories, survivors of domestic violence, and/or parents who had experienced homelessness themselves as children (inter-generational homelessness).
- **Families with lived experience of homelessness have critical insights on barriers and supports.** Families who have experienced homelessness participated in eight out of ten regional sessions. For many of these parents, homelessness occurred for the first time at a young age, more than once during their lifetime, and for significant lengths of time.
- **ACF programs have an important, yet overlooked and under-appreciated role to play.** While much work is needed to bring greater awareness and coordination of ACF resources to bear on family homelessness, participants were overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to learn more about ACF programs.

Broad challenges cited by participants across regions included:

- **Lack of alignment among federal programs and systems.** In every region, lack of alignment between programs and systems was cited as a major challenge, leading to siloed efforts, and ultimately, creating barriers to permanently exiting homelessness into self-sufficiency.

- **Lack of awareness of ACF programs among homeless service providers.** Many participants expressed lack of familiarity with ACF programs, including the ACF program services available to families experiencing homelessness; eligibility and other programmatic rules; and how to connect with ACF partners or staff at the local, regional, or state levels.
- **Lack of transportation.** While transportation was cited more often as a challenge in rural and suburban areas, transportation issues were raised in more than half of the listening sessions as a significant factor affecting families' ability to access services and to maintain employment.

Specific challenges related to individual ACF programs – in particular, Child Care, TANF, and Head Start – are discussed further in the full report.

Although the focus of the listening sessions on family homelessness was on ACF programs, participants raised concerns about housing and homeless assistance at every session. Specific concerns included:

- **HUD's definition of homelessness.** Participants noted that HUD's definition creates barriers to accessing needed services, as well as public understanding of the scale of family and youth homelessness.
- **Lack of affordable housing.** In all but one listening session, participants expressed strong concerns about the lack of affordable housing as a contributing cause to family homelessness, and the context in which family and youth homelessness occur. This is a much broader issue but is important to note.
- **Poor/unsafe housing conditions.** In addition to the high cost of and lack of availability of rental housing, parents and providers raised concerns with the safety of housing that is available, such as mold and infestations, and the dangers those pose for children and families. This also is a much broader issue, but is important to note.
- **Lack of shelter for families with children.** In eight out of ten listening sessions, participants discussed the lack of emergency and/or transitional shelter as a growing challenge for families with children.
- **Priorities and policies of the HUD homeless assistance system in general.** Challenges ranged from broad concerns about the failure of HUD homeless assistance to prioritize or respond to the unique needs of families with children, to concerns related to specific elements of HUD homeless assistance such as coordinated entry, diversion, performance measures, Rapid Rehousing, and the defunding of transitional housing.

Finally, participants provided many recommendations for how ACF, as an agency, can support community efforts on family homelessness, including:

- Championing the cause of child, youth, and family homelessness.
- Leading efforts to align programs and systems, and to dissolve silos.
- Providing more flexible funding opportunities.
- Using the power of convening to facilitate networking and education at the local/state/federal levels.

- Increasing awareness, education, and training on family homelessness.
- Providing outreach and technical assistance on ACF resources to homeless service providers.
- Actively soliciting feedback, direction, and insight from parents and youth with lived experience.

ACF is grateful for the participation of those who attended the regional listening sessions and for the generously offered comments, observations, and potential solutions. Family homelessness is obviously a growing concern that affects far too many in our communities. The resulting displacement, trauma, and burden on individuals and families is incalculable, as evidenced by statistics which show that many homeless adults experienced homelessness as a child.

ACF is actively considering the recommendations brought forth from this process. Thoughtful and effective responses will require that ACF work across our own programs, collaborating with other federal agencies and community providers as well. We look forward to sharing our progress and highlighting innovative approaches we learned about in the listening sessions. In the meantime, ACF will share the message that homelessness is not just a concept, nor is it simply a housing problem; it is a plight and one that requires us to help remove barriers to generational poverty and promote systems that facilitate self-sufficiency.