



TRANSITION CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAMILIES ON THE MOVE

The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers National Conference hosted a workshop entitled "Families on the Move—Serving Homeless Families" in January 2001 in Washington, D.C. The Alliance, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, provides technical assistance to over one hundred parent centers serving families of children and adolescents with disabilities. The purpose of the workshop was to describe the multifaceted needs of homeless families of disabled children and to provide approaches on how to reach out to homeless families in each state. The strategies included the knowledge and use of local, state, and national resources. The presentation was an outcome of the 1999 Policy Forum sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

The moderator of the workshop was Marie Mayor, Education Program Specialist, Office of Special Education Programs at the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in Washington, D.C. She also headed the Office of Homeless Services in Baltimore County, Maryland, before coming to Washington. Beatriz Mitchell, former Special Assistant to Assistant Secretary Judy Heumann at OSERS, began the presentation by reviewing the Office's efforts to highlight the unique problems that homeless families of children with disabilities face in obtaining housing and services in this country.

Connie Hawkins, Executive Director of the state parent training and information center in North Carolina, described her attempts to incorporate the homeless families of children with disabilities as part of her center's outreach activities. She talked about the many needs that the families presented to them. One obstacle included the lack of transportation to medical and social services, and



to employment resources. A second obstacle the families face is having to move from shelter to shelter or apartment to apartment, thus crossing school jurisdictions and making it difficult for the children to be served appropriately in their "home" schools. Connie recommended that parent center staff identify the state and local homeless education representatives and utilize them in both recruiting the homeless

families to their centers' training sessions and in advocating for services from state and local agencies. She also stressed the need to understand the laws that stipulate educational services for homeless children.

Ana Espada, the Director of Advocates for Children of New York, described the inherent difficulty that a transitory lifestyle presents to children with disabilities. Ana discussed the emotional disturbances that homeless children often develop because they frequently do not know where they will be sleeping the next night, and fear that they may not have food to eat when they return from school. That lack of security, as well as having to cope with stressors such as new school settings, peer relationships, poverty, and parental distress all contribute to disruptive behaviors and depression when the homeless child enters the classroom. Since assessments for these suspected problems are often thwarted when the child moves out of the school district that is assessing her, it is imperative that advocates convince the school districts to maintain the child in the same school and to transport her from the temporary housing as long as necessary.

Donald Lash, executive director of Sinergia in New York City, stressed the need for homeless advocates to formulate united, multifaceted approaches in convincing the responsible social services, including the schools, to comply with their mandate to serve homeless children and their families. Sinergia runs shelters for homeless families, many of whom have children with

disabilities. Their staff is diverse and speaks various languages, and their work is comprehensive and “flexible,” to accommodate the changing needs of the families whom they serve.

The workshop participants brought up vivid accounts of their encounters with the public institutions as they attempted to obtain assistance to home less families of children with disabilities. An advocate from Texas described her ongoing efforts to maintain a child in his same school even though the child and his family had moved out of the school district. The child was receiving appropriate educational services in his school, and equally important, he had established a circle of friends there. The workshop presenters offered several suggestions, including the name and telephone number of the homeless liaison for that state, and encouraged all advocates to form a working strategy with their state education liaisons for homeless services.

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