



Valley Youth House
1880 JFK Blvd, Ste 660,
Philadelphia, PA 19103
Phone: 215- 925 -3180

PA Children and Youth Committee

Submitted by: Alyssa Weinfurter, LSW

Hello everyone, thank you so much for being here today to discuss the critical issue of students experiencing homelessness. I am Alyssa Weinfurter, Director of Emergency Services Programs in Philadelphia for Valley Youth House and a leader in our Philadelphia Philly Homes 4 Youth Coalition.

I am here to urge you towards action to increase support statewide for students experiencing homelessness and the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Departments, as we have seen a harrowing increase in numbers over the years. New reports from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) show that in School Year (SY) 2022-23, 46,705 children and youth were identified as homeless throughout the Commonwealth, an all-time high. The number of children and youth experiencing homelessness has increased every year in Pennsylvania since 2015 – by a total of 78 percent. From 2022 - 2023 alone, the vulnerable children and youth identified have increased 17% with 90% of counties in PA identifying more homeless children and youth.

Chairperson McNeill, in your county of Lehigh county, the number of children and youth experiencing homelessness has increased to 1,082 in School Year 2023, up 3% from the previous year.

Mr. Jozwiak, in your county of Berks County, there were 2,961 homeless children and youth, a 60% increase since the previous year and a 19% increase since 2020. At this rate of increase, you will have more than 3,000 homeless children and youth in Berks county. Berks County is part of the Department of Education's homeless education regional structure, Region 2, which has historically identified more homeless children and youth than the urban community of Philadelphia.

The American Rescue Plan Dollars provided critical investment and innovative solutions to address this crisis over the past two years and those dollars are expiring or have been exhausted with no plan for replacement and as we are just getting started to truly address the scope of this issue.

At Valley Youth House, we have services for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in 15 counties across PA. I work in Philadelphia and oversee our housing programs for LGBTQ youth, our street outreach program and Youth Designated Access Point, and our newest program, funded by ARP dollars, Synergy in Schools. It is through this work that we clearly recognized



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and understood the concerning correlation between homelessness and educational attainment with 40% of youth we serve have dropped out of or disengaged from school. Often we met youth after their housing crisis resulted in disruption or separation from school. One youth in particular came to me at 18 years old recounting her years of sleeping in alley ways and behind dumpsters throughout her junior year while sneaking into her friend's house when her parents were asleep to clean up so she wouldn't look like what she was going through. This story and unfortunately many others reveal a system gap in the ability to reach these youth while they were still students and connect them to vital school district resources via the McKinney Vento Act for more upstream and preventive measures. With the ARP funds, we were able to do just that.

If these services go away, not only will we see a potentially inaccurate and misrepresentative decline in the numbers of students identified, more importantly we will leave vulnerable young children and youth without the services they need to address their crises and circumstances. When these issues go unaddressed, it only increases the risk of experiencing homelessness as an adult including chronic adult homelessness, struggles to gain employment, higher risks of violence, and mental health challenges.

Some may be wondering why these children, youth and families don't get the housing and services they need from the homeless services system. And it's an important question. Approximately 80% of these children and youth are living doubled up, couch surfing, or overcrowded making them ineligible for housing programs funded by Housing and Urban Development.

Others may wonder why the current system of the designated liaisons isn't enough. According to the PA Department of Education's ECYEH Evaluation Report from 2021-2022 school year, actually identifying if a student was eligible for homeless services was the most common barrier to school enrollment, academic success, and attendance¹. Many youth and families experiencing housing insecurity intentionally try to blend in, do not realize they are eligible for these additional resources nor self identify themselves as experiencing homelessness, and many are in fear of child welfare involvement if they disclose their situation. In Philadelphia, the homeless liaisons often hold dual roles making it unrealistic for them to identify and engage students proactively. With hundreds of students on your list as a school counselor, is it reasonable to expect them to get to know every student's housing situation?

There is evidence that many children and youth experiencing homelessness end up in the child welfare system, which costs tens of thousands of dollars. Additionally many of these students

¹ [Shapiro, J., Mumin, K. N., Fuller, J. A., Lena, A., & Medina, C. M. \(2023b\). Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program 2021-22 State Evaluation Report. In COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA. COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA.](#)



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will need housing assistance in the future if their situations go unaddressed in programs such as Rapid Rehousing or Permanent Supportive housing, costing tens of thousands of dollars per person per year. Supporting schools now means avoiding greater costs later.

If we fail to act and invest in the well being of these students, we are leaving our most vulnerable Pennsylvanians behind. The children, youth, and families we serve are extraordinary and move beyond life challenges that many Pennsylvanians cannot even imagine. All young people deserve the opportunity to have stability and be able to build up their futures. The needs of our children and youths cannot be delayed any longer.

Our goal is for all students to learn in both safe classrooms *and* stable homes.



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**# of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Berks
 County School Districts**

School District	2022	2023
Antietam SD	27	27
Berks County IU 14	140	147
Boyertown Area SD	45	45
Brandywine Heights Area SD	16	16
Conrad Weiser Area SD	28	29
Daniel Boone Area SD	62	68
Exeter Township SD	151	152
Fleetwood Area SD	42	45
Governor Mifflin SD	117	119
Hamburg Area SD	20	24
Kutztown Area SD	27	27
Muhlenberg SD	104	105
Oley Valley SD	26	26
Reading SD	1,028	1,052
Schuylkill Valley SD	16	16
Tulpehocken Area SD	16	18
Twin Valley SD	50	53
Wilson SD	113	115
Wyomissing Area SD	*	15
TOTAL =	4,050	4,122

* School District identifying less than 10 students



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**# of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Lehigh County
 School Districts**

School District	2022	2023
Allentown City SD	591	604
Arts Academy CS	*	*
Arts Academy Elementary CS	13	14
Carbon-Lehigh IU 21	*	*
Catasauqua Area SD	36	42
Circle of Seasons CS	*	*
East Penn SD	56	57
Executive Education Academy CS	*	*
Innovative Arts Academy CS	*	*
Lincoln Leadership Academy CS	*	*
Northern Lehigh SD	30	33
Northwestern Lehigh SD	17	17
Parkland SD	89	91
Roberto Clemente CS	*	*
Salisbury Township SD	22	23
Seven Generations CS	*	*
Southern Lehigh SD	11	12
Whitehall-Coplay SD	23	25
TOTAL =	888	918

* School District identifying less than 10 students