



Strengthening Coordinated Entry to End Family Homelessness: Partnering with Continuums of Care

In *Home, Together*, the federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness, we focus on strategies to ensure that homelessness is a rare, brief, and one-time experience. In order to achieve that goal, national, state, and local partners must work across sectors to build a coordinated community response that addresses the strengths and needs of individuals and families.

This fact sheet, part of a series that focuses on recommendations from the [Policy Statement on Meeting the Needs of Families with Young Children Experiencing and At Risk of Homelessness](#), is designed to strengthen collaboration between early care and education (ECE) providers and housing and homelessness services providers. It provides strategies to enhance ECE program and system integration with local Continuum of Care (CoC) coordinated entry processes to ensure immediate needs, such as housing, are assessed and addressed quickly, and families continue to be regularly assessed for ongoing service needs, including resources for young children.

How can ECE providers connect clients to housing and homelessness services resources available in the community?

HUD's [CoC program](#) is designed to promote a community-wide approach to ending homelessness. It provides funding to non-profit providers and state and local governments to quickly rehouse individuals and families experiencing homelessness while minimizing the trauma and dislocation caused by homelessness. The CoC program also promotes access to resources and programs that impact housing stability and overall wellbeing among those experiencing homelessness.

Each CoC covers a geographic boundary determined by the community. Within that boundary, CoCs must develop and implement [coordinated entry processes](#), designed to connect individuals and families experiencing a housing crisis with housing and housing-related resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. Coordinated entry standardizes the assessment process across local providers and coordinates resource referrals in a way that incorporates participant choice and allows communities to prioritize the most intensive interventions for community members with the highest or most complex needs.

Coordinated entry processes in communities can take different forms including, but not limited to:

- Virtual access points, such as a [2-1-1 service](#), connecting people in the community to specialists who help them find local health and human services or their closest coordinated entry access point
- Single locations within the community for in-person assessment
- Multiple points of access via community-based housing and homelessness services providers

By connecting with their local CoC to understand the local coordinated entry processes and service options for families with young children, ECE providers can help to ensure that families have access to crucial crisis response and housing resources. Further, ECE providers can also work with CoCs to develop a streamlined referral process to connect eligible families with children to ECE programs for assistance, including opportunities for priority access to services.

How can ECE providers get involved in their local coordinated entry process?

ECE providers can help ensure a community's coordinated entry process is informed by the expertise of those familiar with the needs of infants, young children, and their caregivers:

- Become part of or advise [your local CoC](#). Regularly participate in its meetings and relevant subcommittees, especially those focused on coordinated entry planning and implementation.
- Become familiar with the coordinated entry processes in your community. Understand what is working well and where there are opportunities to strengthen processes for families, especially those with infants and young children.
- Help the CoC determine the most appropriate coordinated entry access point(s) for pregnant women and families in your community, such as single, multiple, or virtual locations.
- Educate CoC partners in your community about the developmental needs of young children and the effects of inadequate family supports on children's health and learning. CoC partners may not have your expertise about the immediate effects of trauma or lack of resources on children's development and long-term outcomes.
- Provide CoC partners with knowledge and tools to refer families experiencing homelessness to ECE services, for example, onsite screening services for young children.
- Inform the CoC's prioritization and decision-making processes. Use your expertise to help the community identify what factors are most important in prioritizing limited housing and service resources for families.
- Help develop the criteria used to prioritize assistance for households, including families with young children, based on assessments of strengths and needs. Work with the CoC to design a coordinated entry screening tool tailored to identify and assess the unique vulnerabilities of pregnant women and families with infants, toddlers, and young children.

A Note About Language

Housing and homelessness services providers use the term **"screening"** when referring to the process for determining whether a family is eligible for different housing and related resources and services. A referral for intake or assessment usually follows the determination of program or resource eligibility.

"Assessment" refers to processes that gather information about a household's needs, preferences, and vulnerabilities. Assessments help inform a determination of what housing assistance and services a family might need and their prioritization for those resources and services.

Housing and homelessness providers will also appreciate your understanding of supports available in the community for pregnant women and families with young children, and your involvement in coordinated entry can support the community to consistently consider the needs of families with young children in resources and

protocols. This includes collaboration with human services systems to integrate screening for homelessness and housing instability for pregnant women and families with young children.

How can ECE providers better serve families with young children experiencing homelessness?

Your programs have an important role to play in meeting the specific early care, education, health, and developmental needs of young children and their families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

- Prioritize enrollment for children experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Regulations for both Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) identify these children as priority populations. Local Head Start programs and CCDF Lead Agencies are responsible for implementing these requirements. For more information, watch [this module](#) for ECE providers on understanding family homelessness, and select “Menu” and then “Federal Laws and Regulations.”
- Identify and help track the housing status of families with young children you interact with. During intake, and on an ongoing basis if possible, collect information about families’ housing status and living circumstances, including questions concerning housing stability. The July 2016 publication from the Administration for Children and Families Office of Family Assistance, [Enhancing Family Stability: A Guide for Assessing Housing Status and Coordinating with Local Homelessness Programs for TANF Agencies](#), includes examples of screening questions for consideration. Gather this information in ways that ensure families’ privacy and demonstrate sensitivity about ways that families describe their living situation.
- Work with the CoC to develop and implement tools for use in early childhood settings to screen families for basic eligibility for housing and homelessness programs in the community.
- Become familiar with basic eligibility requirements for the major [housing programs](#) in your community, including public housing, voucher programs, CoC programs, and Emergency Solutions Grant programs. Also learn the types of local housing and shelter models available in your community, such as prevention, emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, maternity group homes, and permanent supportive housing.

How can ECE providers better integrate and coordinate services between ECE and housing and homelessness organizations?

Your expertise in the array of local early childhood supports and strategies for best connecting families with young children to these resources will be an asset to your community’s efforts to end homelessness among families. You have a critical role to play in helping partners integrate these connections into their programs.

- Develop joint protocols and processes for making referrals that include “warm handoffs” or other direct provider-to-provider communications to help families navigate both the ECE and homelessness services systems.
- Ensure ECE staff understand the purpose of the coordinated entry process and its access points, how best to refer families to coordinated entry, and what types of housing and related supports families with young children may be eligible for in your community.

- Work with the CoC to integrate screening questions into the coordinated entry process to evaluate the extent to which pregnant women and families with infants or young children are already connected with appropriate supports, including early learning, developmental, physical health, mental health, substance use, IDEA early intervention and special education supports.
- Work with the CoC to identify particularly vulnerable expectant and young parents and help coordinate services that address their distinct parenting needs.
- Educate housing and homelessness organizations in your CoC on how to act upon the results of coordinated entry screening questions, by:
 - Helping them identify available resources, including connections with health and behavioral health providers, in the community to assist families who have unmet needs.
 - Ensuring there is a consistent process for referring families to needed ECE services.
 - Assisting them in learning how to refer families to trained professionals who can conduct deeper, [standardized developmental](#) and behavioral screenings using valid and reliable screening tools for young children. This could include onsite screening services.