Parents Engaging Community

A Model for Early Childhood Systems Leaders to Generate Field-Initiated, Parent-Informed Approaches for Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness

November 2023
Acknowledgements

Leveraging 35 years of organizational experience working with homeless children and families in Albuquerque, Cuidando Los Niños and partners at The Grant Plant and Organizational Rebel crafted the insights in this document through two years of partnership with a group of parent leaders exiting homelessness.

Cuidando Los Niños also engaged the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Early Childhood Coalition, including:

★ Albuquerque Public Schools McKinney Vento
★ All Faith’s Children's Advocacy Center
★ Alta Mira Specialized Family Services
★ Bernalillo County Department of Behavioral Health Services
★ Juneteenth Revival Institute
★ New Mexico Department of Health
★ Native American Professional Parent Resources
★ United Way of North Central New Mexico
★ University of New Mexico Health Inclusion Vibrancy & Equity (UNM HIVE)

This work culminated in a conference titled “Building Futures: Strengthening Early Childhood Education for Families Experiencing Homelessness” in Albuquerque on August 11, 2023. Feedback was gathered from 99 attendees representing early childhood education, early intervention, home visiting, academia, government, and philanthropy.

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About Cuidando Los Niños

Cuidando Los Niños is a nationally accredited preschool and nonprofit with a mission to break the cycle of homelessness for children and families. Services include early childhood education, housing support, case management, career services, and therapeutic support for the whole family. As the only preschool dedicated to addressing homelessness in Albuquerque, Cuidando Los Niños meets a significant need for dual-generation homeless services in New Mexico’s largest city.
Introduction

The following document is intended for early childhood policymakers, funders, state and local government, coalitions, and program directors seeking to improve early childhood systems’ accessibility and responsiveness to children and families experiencing homelessness. Cuidando Los Niños makes the compelling case, describes impacts, and shares considerations for one model of parent and practitioner engagement utilized by this seasoned homeless-serving preschool to drive community-led systems change at the intersection of early childhood education and homelessness.

Cuidando Los Niños founded the “Parents Engaging Community” initiative to design and facilitate a peer group of preschool parents with a lived experience of homelessness in leading early childhood systems change. From January 2022 to August 2023, six parents of Cuidando Los Niños preschool students met frequently to receive peer support and leadership development, learn about early childhood development, and hear from local early childhood practitioners. Parents and practitioners participated in the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Early Childhood Coalition, collaborating with the New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department to lead systems change addressing homelessness.

The results of this collaboration have been a greater sense of empowerment by parents, improved community engagement and equity strategies by Cuidando Los Niños, and a unified vision for early childhood systems’ role in responding to homelessness.

In sharing design considerations, insights, and results from this pilot project, we seek to provide a model for early childhood systems leaders to incorporate robust parent and practitioner engagement into decision-making to address homelessness. To be sure, other national resources have sought to help early childhood systems better serve the homeless. For example, the Child Care Services Association’s primer on early childhood homelessness includes recommendations for building relationships and systems of care, data sharing, and research.¹ Yet these resources fail to incorporate feedback from parents and practitioners directly engaged in the system, and we have encountered few practical resources helping early childhood systems equitably garner feedback from families experiencing homelessness—a population with unique challenges to systems engagement.

In response, this document is designed to help develop equitable, place-based, culturally responsive solutions that ultimately help more children experiencing homelessness access early childhood services and improve their long-term health, education, and life outcomes. By focusing on families most in need, early childhood systems can grow their reach and effectiveness, overall.
Background

Every year in the United States, 1.3 million children under age six experience homelessness. For these children, the lifelong consequences of homelessness are dire. According to Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child, 90% of the human brain develops by age 5, meaning that early experiences leave a lasting impression on children’s psyche, with devastating consequences later in life. Children growing up or born into homelessness have, by definition, at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) such as physical and emotional abuse, neglect, household substance use, domestic violence, and poverty. Experiencing four or more ACEs significantly increases an individual’s risk of future violence victimization and perpetration, as well as deficits in lifelong health and opportunities—including repeat homelessness. For very young children, the risk of hospitalization, poor health, and developmental delays spikes after just six months of homelessness.

Sadly, most of these children will never access the early childhood systems designed to help them. The most recent national statistics show that only 10% of homeless children under age six—and a mere 7% of those under age three—are served by federally funded Head Start/Early Head Start and McKinney Vento programs. Barriers include poor transportation, lack of open slots, and lack of availability within early morning or evening working hours. Within homeless-serving systems, families have a unique need for child-friendly shelter, anonymity from unsafe partners, and legal representation, with domestic violence being one of the top causes of family homelessness.

Yet childcare is widely recognized as a critical step toward family stability. Research shows that access to affordable childcare enables parents to return to work or stay employed and work longer hours for longer periods, representing an additional $94,000 in lifetime earnings. Childcare is especially critical in promoting economic equity for women of color, who typically take the primary caregiver role while facing inequitable access to quality, culturally and linguistically responsive childcare. Expanding homeless children’s access to early childhood services is therefore an urgent priority for overall child and family wellbeing.
New Mexico: A State of Innovation

New Mexico is at a key inflection point for ending family homelessness. From 2016 to 2020, the state experienced the largest percentage increase in homelessness in the nation, at 47%. Meanwhile in 2020, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed House Bill 83 into law, founding an Early Childhood Education & Care Department that has made historic, nationally leading investments in early childhood. This move was critical, as New Mexico has the highest rate of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the United States, affecting 68% of New Mexicans, with 24% having experienced four or more ACEs.

There is enormous potential to utilize New Mexico’s investment in early childhood to address family homelessness. This, combined with New Mexico’s diverse population, makes it an ideal space to develop early childhood and homelessness solutions grounded in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Racial Equity & Racial Healing

Especially in the majority-minority state of New Mexico, homelessness and access to quality early childhood education are unfortunately racialized issues. As shown in Figure 1 below, individuals who identify as Hispanic or Native American are more likely to experience homelessness, and communities of color frequently face “childcare deserts” where quality, affordable, culturally and lingually responsive options are scarce. Racist policies, practices, and systems are deeply entrenched in early childhood education funding streams historically intended to assimilate immigrant and Indigenous children and rely on primarily Black women to bear the burden of childcare—“first as slaves, then as an undervalued labor force.”

In our diverse community, racial inequities play a role in accessing early childhood services: our families frequently face immigration, language, and social barriers to services and are unheard in shaping ECE policy.

Figure 1: Race & Ethnicity of NM K–12 Students Experiencing Homelessness

![Figure 1: Race & Ethnicity of NM K–12 Students Experiencing Homelessness](image-url)
Engaging Parents with a Lived Experience of Homelessness

Learning from lived experience is critical in creating early childhood systems that work for families furthest from opportunity. Such authentic engagement is especially crucial for combatting the stigma, stereotypes, and low self-esteem that often accompanies homelessness, while providing the best possible understanding of how systems are working (or not working) for those experiencing homelessness. Centering those with lived experience has therefore long been a core strategy of homeless-serving systems, for example, in the U.S. Housing & Urban Development Department’s Continuum of Care program. Yet leadership by families experiencing homelessness, specifically, has not been a major focus of early childhood systems. Indeed, many of the same unique factors that make it difficult for homeless families to access early childhood systems also complicate their engagement in meaningful design, feedback, leadership, and advocacy work. Cuidando Los Niños shares lessons learned from its “Parents Engaging Community” initiative as one potential model for parents with a lived experience of homelessness to mold early childhood systems to their needs.

The “Parents Engaging Community” Model

From January 2022 through August 2023, Cuidando Los Niños engaged six parents with young children and lived experience of homelessness in group sessions to develop parents’ leadership skills and understanding of early childhood systems, with the ultimate goal of parents becoming advocates in early childhood issues that affect their families. Initial objectives of the program can be summarized as follows (see Logic Model in Appendix A for more detail on initial program design and anticipated results):

1. Parents exiting homelessness are empowered with the resources to improve their community and children’s life chances.
2. Parents are embedded into organization and community decision-making processes.
3. Parents support the development of solutions to increase enrollment and positive outcomes of children experiencing homelessness within early childhood systems.

Cuidando Los Niños recruited participants directly from our regular early childhood education and housing programs, via case manager referral and flyers issued to families with children enrolled in our preschool. Case managers played a critical role in helping gauge parents’ level of stability and realistic ability to engage in frequent leadership and advocacy group sessions. All parents were actively working on exiting homelessness at the start of the Parents Engaging Community program. Throughout the program, they were receiving services from Cuidando Los Niños in accessing housing, childcare, employment, behavioral health counseling, or other needs.

Group sessions were held at participants’ convenience, at least twice a month, in person at the Albuquerque Public Schools McKinney Vento facility. Discussions were led by a
dedicated staff facilitator well-versed in social justice and advocacy. To ensure participants’ full engagement, a small stipend was offered as well as meals and childcare during meeting times.

The first six months of programming focused on creating a trauma-informed environment where parents felt supported and able to share freely. This included icebreaker and structured reflection exercises. Parents also agreed upon healthy norms for the group (e.g., “ask before giving advice” and privacy considerations) and developed a vision statement. During this time, participation in the group was still stabilizing, with the facilitator helping orient new participants and ensure a continued positive group dynamic.

After six months, sessions shifted focus to honing parents’ leadership skills and deepening their understanding of child development, early childhood systems, and advocacy. Partners at the workplace consulting firm Organizational Rebel supported parents in sharing their stories and understanding linkages between personal challenges and possible systemic issues using a social justice lens. All Faiths Children’s Advocacy Center presented to the group on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their developmental effects on children experiencing homelessness.

A year into the project, parents began looking more closely at issues that affect their families and engaging in activities to address those issues. During the New Mexico legislative session from January 17 to March 18, 2023, parents tracked policy developments such as New Mexico Constitutional Amendment 1, which was passed to enable land grant
funds to be distributed to early childhood education. From March 31–April 1, 2023, parents attended the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children (NMAEYC) conference titled “The Power of Play in Our Everyday.” There they gathered inspiration for the culminating Building Futures conference to be hosted by Cuidando Los Niños. Parents also participated with other cross-sector stakeholders in the Albuquerque/ Bernalillo County Early Childhood Coalition aiming to improve early childhood systems’ responsiveness to families experiencing homelessness. As part of this collaboration, parents provided input to an Early Childhood Community Assessment and Strategic Plan that continue to shape coalition priorities.

By August 2023, several children of the parent group graduated pre-K, all six families had become transitionally or permanently rehoused, and parents were likewise ready to “graduate” from the Parents Engaging Community program. Cuidando Los Niños plans to engage a new cohort of parents in 2024.

**Design Considerations for Engaging Parents with Lived Experience of Homelessness**

Based on successes and challenges from the Parents Engaging Community program, leaders should take several key considerations into account when designing programs to embed families experiencing homelessness in systems change. First, parents should be involved in the design process as much as possible to ensure that it reflects their voice, needs, and priorities. Likewise, the program budget should include compensation such as stipends or gift cards—as well as other necessary incentives and supports such as transportation, meals, and childcare during parent meetings—to honor parents’ substantial time commitment and contributions, and the budget should be flexible enough to accommodate new ideas and initiatives proposed by parents as the program develops. The program budget should also allow for adequate staff time (ideally, a full-time dedicated program director) and training in topics such as trauma-informed care to ensure staff are equipped to support parents with a lived experience of homelessness. Other potential costs to consider include:

- Accessibility supports, such as translators or interpreters
- Technology for participants who may not have access to a digital device or Wi-Fi
- Meeting space rental or facilities costs
- Program evaluation and management
- Conferences or professional development activities
- Honoraria for community partners providing training or information to parents

Program directors should also consider the best strategies for recruiting, retaining, and ensuring accessibility for families with a lived experience of homelessness. Cuidando Los Niños benefitted from being able to recruit parents directly from our existing early childhood education and housing programs, affording us with a large pool of potential participants while also providing built-in systems for extensive wraparound support.
Program directors could achieve a similar result by partnering with local homeless-serving nonprofits to recruit participants. However, upon reflection, one crucial lesson was the importance of not limiting participants to those who are actively experiencing or exiting homelessness or have children enrolled in early childhood education. In fact, preschool parent alumni and those who have successfully exited homelessness may likely be in a more stable place and be able to share perspective that comes from their child having transitioned to kindergarten. As described in the next section, balancing families’ immediate needs for support versus our larger advocacy goals created some dissonance during the project period that may have been avoided or reduced if Cuidando Los Niños engaged parents who had already achieved a more stable position in exiting homelessness.

Depending on where families are in their housing journey, potential barriers and challenges may become more relevant. Project directors should consider what kinds of wraparound supports they are able to offer participants during and outside of group meetings, while also creating protocols for responding if a participant shares information during the group that suggests they may be in crisis. Potential staff trainings may include content on trauma-informed care and suicide prevention.

Project directors should also consider a location that is familiar, accessible, and welcoming for families. Keep in mind that preschool facilities may have limitations on how and when they can be used, so a local library or children’s museum may be a more appropriate meeting space. Cuidando Los Niños was able to utilize a facility in-kind from our local McKinney Vento chapter. In some cases, a virtual option may prove most desirable and accessible to parents.

Finally, project directors should consider group size in their design, whether the group will be open or closed to new participants, and whether participants will “graduate” from the program. Cuidando Los Niños recommends engaging up to fifteen participants, which is big enough to account for potential attrition, yet small enough to develop peer relationships. If new participants are invited over the project year, consider what kinds of individual supports you can offer to help new participants fit into the group dynamic and gain an understanding of concepts previously presented. Consider whether the parent group will be ongoing or have a set term. Because Cuidando Los Niños engaged current preschool families, our group ended when the children graduated from Pre-K. However, if engaging preschool parent alumni, the group could potentially continue indefinitely, enabling parents to continually deepen their knowledge and advocacy work.
Ensuring Parent Ownership

Systems leaders should strive to authentically engage families with a lived experience of homelessness and ensure they have true ownership over the work being done, from more bite-sized projects, such as planning a conference, to influencing organizational and systemic decision-making. The U.S. Housing & Urban Development Department provides several essential considerations for meaningfully engaging individuals with a lived experience of homelessness, summarized and editorialized with our approaches below:

- **Lead with racial equity and social justice**, understanding that homelessness often results from multigenerational impacts of systemic and institutional oppression. Cuidando Los Niños was intentional about deconstructing our own biases and priming board and staff to meaningfully engage with families, before tackling larger systems change. The organization embarked on an ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion experience with Everette Hill consulting to audit all public-facing materials, train board and staff members, and rework internal policies and procedures to center DEI values.

- **Relinquish control and promote the power and expertise of people with lived experience.** Ensure that individuals with a lived experience of homelessness have the same level of input, decision-making, and access to organizational resources as other team members. As learned by Cuidando Los Niños, consider ways in which your physical space (e.g., lecture style vs. round table), parent interactions, and material may be reinforcing or breaking down power differentials.

- **Ensure that the demographics of people with lived experience of homelessness are reflected** in other aspects of the organization. At Cuidando Los Niños, most of the families we serve are Hispanic/Latina women; a majority of our staff share this identity.

Moving from Vulnerability to Advocacy

As noted, all families in the Parents Engaging Community program were actively exiting homelessness. While these families had overcome “crisis” mode, many were still facing or dealing with the immediate effects of trauma. For this reason, families’ basic needs, stability, and emotional safety was prioritized above advocacy. It also meant that what parents appeared to most value about the group was the peer support it provided, rather than its potential to change inequitable systems. We found it difficult to shift parent and staff thinking to advocacy and systems change. Cuidando Los Niños has since conceived several strategies to address the challenge of moving parents with a lived experience of homelessness into the advocacy space. First, as noted above, systems leaders should consider engaging parents who are further along in their journey to stability and more able to engage beyond their immediate need for safety. Second, systems leaders should set clear expectations for the purpose of the group when recruiting participants. This may include creating collateral materials or flyers that help parents understand what to expect. A shared schedule or curriculum would also help the group progress through the work. See the insert on Circles USA below for one example.
Lessons from the Field: Circles USA

Cuidando Los Niños is learning from a partner in the field of advocacy, Circles USA, a national nonprofit offering a proven model for moving families from poverty by changing the systems that affect them. Circles USA works, in part, because it offers a clear progression of events while continuing to help families achieve personal goals. The program begins with a 12-week leadership training to prepare participants’ (a.k.a. “Circle Leaders”) own economic stability plans, reconnect with dreams for their families’ futures, and create SMART goals designed to bring their dreams into reality. Once this training is complete, Circle Leaders meet weekly with middle- and upper-income volunteers (“Allies”) to share a meal while discussing progress steps to reach desired goals. Meanwhile, young children and older siblings will engage in trauma-informed programming and activities exploring ideas from friendships to money.

Once a month, Circle Leaders participate with local government, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and businesses in a “Big View” session to tackle challenges that affect their families. This structured advocacy time honors Circle Leaders’ expertise and enables them to lead initiatives to catalyze real systems change, while still working to improve their personal stability in other sessions.

Parallel Experiences for Children

Childcare is essential to enabling the participation of families with young children and a lived experience of homelessness in the program. Given that children are likely to be available during parent meetings, systems leaders should consider ways in which this time can be maximized to provide additional meaningful support and programming for children. At minimum, childcare providers should be trained in trauma-informed care and able to respond to the needs of children with lived experience of homelessness. Better yet, early childhood interventionists and other services could be contracted to engage children during this time. Also consider family activities such as meals or book handouts that could be completed at this time.

Results

Participant feedback from the Parents Engaging Community program shows that parents have found personal value in the experience:
“For me, the parent leadership group gives nonjudgmental support and safety along with resources... We are all different but able to come together and learn about the different situations we face and help each other.”

“It gives me peace of mind that I am not alone, and we will all overcome what we have been through.”

In addition, parents were effectively embedded into organization and community decision-making processes through the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Early Childhood Coalition. One parent also participated in a review committee for the local US Department of Housing & Urban Development Continuum of Care competition, lending valuable lived experience to help determine which local agencies are delivering the most helpful services.

Finally, parents contributed valuable input demonstrating that engagement of homeless families in early childhood systems needs to begin with a strong system of support, mental health support, and compassion and understanding. Parent themes from Cuidando Los Niños’s Community Assessment are highlighted below:

**Fair & Safe Emergency Housing**

There aren’t any emergency shelter housing options that feel safe to stay at with young children. Expectations and rules put additional stressors on families who are in ‘survival mode’.

**Ability to Work on Mental Health**

Without the ability to work on mental health, being stuck in ‘survival mode’ creates more trauma for parents. The system doesn’t prioritize mental and emotional health, only focused on workforce.

**Compassion & Understanding**

Instead of being treated like a situation (a homeless person), and judged for what caused it, more compassion and understanding is needed - especially from family support specialists, case managers and the general public/community.

Finally, participants shared ideas for the ongoing role for parents with lived experience of homelessness in systems change:

“Those of us who have lived experiences with homelessness want to be steppingstones for the parents experiencing homelessness — to represent hope for a better future — but need support to do that.”

“The system is not created to support us, it's a catch 22 and we are often treated like just another number or statistic. I'm learning to advocate in order to expose the roots of these issues and help build a better system.”
“It takes a village to raise a child.” It’s cliché, but the old wisdom holds true when addressing issues of early childhood education and homelessness. Systems leaders working at the intersection of these two spaces should strive to build a comprehensive system of care and consider engaging the following critical entities:

- Early Childhood Education Providers
- Early Intervention & Disability Services
- Home Visiting Programs
- Head Start/ Early Head Start
- McKinney Vento Programs
- K–12 Education Providers
- Informal Education, Museums, & Libraries
- Early Childhood Development Researchers and Higher Education
- Advocacy & Social Justice Organizations
- Philanthropy
- Homeless Shelters
- Public Housing Authorities
- Healthcare & Behavioral Health Providers
- Economic & Urban Development Departments
- Law Enforcement
- Domestic Violence Response
- Family & Community Government Agencies
- Crisis Response & Street Outreach Teams
- Affordable Housing Developers

Below is an example of an early childhood ecosystem based primarily in Albuquerque:

Figure 2: Anatomy of an Early Childhood Ecosystem
The Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Early Childhood Coalition was founded in July 2022 to strategically address community challenges at the intersection of early childhood education and homelessness. The Coalition’s mission is to partner with the community to elevate families’ lived experiences, inspire empathy, and nurture early childhood stability that supports family prosperity. Its vision is for every New Mexican family with children under the age of five to be safe, secure, engaged in reciprocal community relationships, and able to make time for joy, play, and self-care.

Cuidando Los Niños serves as the group’s fiscal agent and supports family involvement in the coalition through its Parents Engaging Community group. Coalition members include parents with lived experience of homelessness, early childhood education and intervention, K–12 education, public health agencies, and family support services focused on Albuquerque’s underserved Barelas/South Valley community, including:

- Six parents with lived experience of homelessness, facilitated through Cuidando Los Niños Parent Leadership Group
- Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) McKinney Vento Program
- All Faith’s Children’s Advocacy Center
- Alta Mira Specialized Family Services
- Bernalillo County Department of Behavioral Health Services
- Juneteenth Revival Institute
- New Mexico Department of Health
- Native American Professional Parent Resources (NAPPR)
- United Way of North Central New Mexico (UWNPNM)
- University of New Mexico Health Inclusion Vibrancy & Equity (UNM HIVE)

The coalition meets monthly in-person at the APS McKinney Vento facility during the school year and virtually during the summer. Coalition governance and decision-making is consistent with the New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department (ECECD) stabilization policies and procedures, including consistent membership, information sharing across the whole coalition, active participation by all coalition members, and decisions made by consensus rather than majority (meaning that all parties must reach some level of agreement before proceeding with an action).

Cuidando Los Niños partners with local evaluation firm Organizational Rebel to gather meaningful coalition feedback through a variety of means, including group discussions during coalition meetings, interviews of individual coalition members, surveys, and conferences. For example, Organizational Rebel’s evaluation survey of coalition partners found that partners reported positive engagement with the coalition, support for the developmental activities and policies implemented, increased awareness and knowledge of the needs of families experiencing homelessness, and identified actions that they would
take to improve the responsiveness of early childhood systems to the needs of families experiencing homelessness. Feedback was incorporated into coalition policies and procedures through the co-creation of documentation that guides the coalition’s work. For example, to date coalition members have informed a Community Assessment, Strategic Plan, Vision Statement, and Feasibility Study—all of which provide critical frameworks for the coalition’s shared work moving forward.

On August 11, 2023, Cuidando Los Niños and coalition members hosted 99 early childhood stakeholders from 44 organizations in a professional development and strategic visioning conference titled “Building Futures: Strengthening Early Childhood Education for Families Experiencing Homelessness.” The conference featured presentations by coalition members, including a keynote address by ECECD Assistant Secretary for Native American Early Education & Care Cotillion Sneddy, trauma-informed training from All Faiths Children’s Advocacy Center, an overview of early childhood intervention by Alta Mira Family Services, a presentation by University of New Mexico researchers on the physical effects of trauma, and a visioning process led by Albuquerque Public Schools McKinney Vento. Attendees had the opportunity to reflect and provide feedback via table exercises throughout the conference, resulting in a cohesive vision for early childhood systems to better meet the needs of homeless families.

▶ Design Considerations for Engaging Practitioners

One potential challenge for systems leaders is that of maintaining continuity, sustainability, and forward momentum in the midst of team member turnover. In the new, turbulent workforce landscape wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in member organizations’ staffing are a potential threat to the coalition. In response, coalition members should work to ensure that commitments to coalition work are held by entire organizations, rather than by individuals alone. We are also working to document work to date to maintain continuity as individual coalition members inevitably shift.
Systems builders can also work with leaders at the state level to enhance coordination and collaboration between public schools, private early care and education agencies, and Tribal and non-Tribal Head Start grantees by publishing contact lists to help stakeholders connect with the right people, and by holding convenings where these stakeholders can begin to talk and collaborate.

**Results**

Below are examples of how member and community feedback has informed coalition policies, practices, decisions, and priorities:

**Strategic Planning:** The coalition’s initial direction was determined through a series of four strategic planning sessions, where members discussed Communication, Connection, Community, and Conflict within early childhood systems (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Coalition-Identified Early Childhood Systems Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of funding, access to technology, language barriers and time limitations prevent adequate, intentional and equitable communication between service providers, community organizations and the families in need.</td>
<td>Without a cross organizational data system with up to date information on services available, many service providers aren’t able to connect families with the critical resources they are in need of.</td>
<td>Language barriers, mistrust from communities, ‘silo mentality’, turf wars among providers, and time restraints all contribute negatively towards outreach and educational efforts within communities.</td>
<td>State &amp; federal policies being too rigid (CYFD licensing rules, ISD work requirements, income limits, etc) limit the services families qualify for, especially if service providers base qualifications on those policies.</td>
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These discussions and subsequent interviews with parent participants resulted in an Early Childhood Community Assessment and Strategic Plan that are now shaping coalition priorities. Specifically, the coalition identified a local need for a family shelter that would fill a gap in services for families with young children experiencing homelessness, while also providing on-site access to trauma-informed early childhood education and services. The family shelter project will likely become a focus for the coalition in the coming years.

**Building Futures Conference:** In an evaluation of the 2023 Building Futures Conference by the Organizational Rebel evaluation team, almost all participants either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they learned something new and valuable at the event and that they met new contacts and learned of new resources at the event. Participants reported that registering for the event was simple, getting information about the event was readily available, and attending the event was easy. Participants were also in strong agreement that attending the event was a worthwhile experience and that organizers were well-prepared. When asked to elaborate about how they planned to work towards the common
vision developed during the event participants indicated that they would collaborate with other organizations, work to provide services to families experiencing homelessness, applying what they learned at the event to serve families experiencing homelessness, networking with other providers, and sharing information and resources that they learned at the event.

The Building Futures conference engaged community-based, early childhood, and government agencies in table exercises responding to questions around how early childhood providers can employ a trauma-sensitive lens, how medical and early childhood systems can work together to support children, and how classroom strategies can be employed to support young children at home or in shelters. Attendees’ responses were then compiled to create a shared vision that includes: (1) Early Childhood Education Environments built on trauma-informed and sensory-rich classrooms, culturally representative educators, relationship-based interactions, connection to community resources, engaging materials, books, and outdoor spaces, and continuous communication and collaboration; (2) Provider Systems that are supported by home visiting, nutrition, shared data across systems, diversity and inclusion, and multidisciplinary shared location for preventative care; and, as a result, the creation of (3) Communities of resilience, safe outdoor spaces, secure employment, transportation, affordable housing, accessible education for all ages, comprehensive healthcare, and family centered programs. This vision statement provides a North Star for the coalition moving forward.

Finally, Coalition activities instilled critical lessons about the key elements that make early childhood systems accessible to the homeless, including the importance of:

- Training early childhood environments and service providers to recognize and respond to trauma.
- Implementing innovative solutions that center the cultural and linguistic diversity of our community.
- Improving communications and information systems between service providers to build a system of wraparound support.

Feasibility Study: Cuidando Los Niños surveyed 22 families with lived experience of homelessness to learn more about what they would like to see in a family shelter. These survey results were wrapped into a larger Feasibility Study, which will determine a path forward in creating a new family shelter in Albuquerque.
Identified Opportunities in Early Childhood & Homelessness

Much work remains in making early childhood systems more accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of families experiencing homelessness. In Cuidando Los Niños’s work with parents and families, coalition partners, and agencies working at the intersection of these two issues, the following themes and priorities have emerged.

▶ Uplift Trauma-Informed Approaches

Children growing up in homelessness have often experienced significant traumatic events that affect their behavior and development. When not properly managed, trauma can affect a child’s ability to learn and form healthy relationships as they remain unable to move up the hierarchy of needs.

In response, trauma-informed care is an evidence-based approach for holistically understanding an individual’s experiences and the effects of those experiences, then creating supportive environments to help them cope. Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with you?,” trauma-informed care shifts this question to “What happened to you?” Trauma-informed providers are better equipped to deliver a holistic response to meet the full needs of children and families experiencing homelessness.

To support trauma-informed approaches, leaders should authorize supplemental funds for early childhood providers to train or hire staff with trauma-informed endorsements and help children and families access behavioral health care. Providers should also be supported in upgrading their physical spaces to create a more trauma-sensitive environment. This may include adding a foyer or calming area to help children transition to the learning space, incorporating soothing sounds and colors, or creating a “life pantry” of items to meet children’s basic needs.

Lessons from the Field

Cuidando Los Niños issues an Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) survey for every child to enter our program. A Trauma-Informed Teacher then “floats” between classrooms to provide individualized support for children with four or more ACEs. For example, the teacher might engage the child in a bubble blowing activity to practice soothing breath or drawing to cope with tough memories. This approach has resulted in a better understanding of the experiences of those we serve, ultimately improving our standard of care.
Continuity from Pre-K to Kindergarten

One critical issue in addressing the needs of the homeless is that, while early childhood education programs frequently have intervention mechanisms and developmental screenings built in, there is no way to share this information and data with public schools once a child progresses to Kindergarten. The result is that children experiencing homelessness are frequently siloed in special education programs that do not meet their full needs.

To alleviate this challenge, early childhood leaders should work together with K–12 public school systems to create bridge programs where vital information about students and families is shared to support the best possible student outcomes, and to make sure families continue receiving much needed services. For example, the EPICS Child Care provider dashboard is used to streamline childcare providers’ contracts with outside services and manage client and employee records. This dashboard could be modified to include notes and information on children and families that would then be made available to the public school system through appropriate Release of Information agreements.

Homeless Systems Equipped for Families

Homeless shelters are often ill-equipped for children experiencing homelessness. Early childhood providers can support in developing family-friendly shelters or helping these agencies understand what is needed to create environments that are supportive of children’s healthy development. For example, the Administration for Children & Families offers an early childhood assessment tool to help shelter staff members create shelter environments that are safe and developmentally appropriate for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The tool provides recommendations and information on how shelters, programming, policies, and staff can support early childhood safety and development.

Additional Challenges

Additional barriers to homeless children accessing early childhood services include:

★ Lack of childcare options during parents’ actual working hours.
★ Generic cost-per-child funding schemes for early childhood services, which do not include wraparound support needed to address the challenges of homelessness, such as transportation.
★ Low wages result in difficulty hiring, retaining, and training early childhood professionals with the necessary understanding of childhood trauma.
★ Poor connectivity between homeless-serving systems, early childhood education, K–12 education, healthcare, and other stakeholders.
★ Racial equity also plays a role: our families frequently face immigration, language, and social barriers to services and are unheard in discussions of ECE policy.
Conclusion

Cuidando Los Niños, parents, and partners were proud to develop significant, locally relevant systems recommendations to help more children experiencing homelessness access early childhood services. Among our learnings were important insights about the exact barriers faced by families experiencing homelessness in our community, the need for all stakeholders to be trauma- and child-development-informed, opportunities to share data and resources across sectors and systems, and the creation of communities free of stigma that are welcoming and supportive of children and families experiencing homelessness.

While the recommendations included here are meant for increasing stakeholder insight to improve system uptake by families experiencing homelessness, similar methods could be used to increase engagement and representation by other underserved groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and economically disadvantaged families. This document could also provide a useful guide for states, territories, and tribes working on Child Care Development Fund plans, helping economically disadvantaged families obtain childcare.

Ultimately, we hope that by engaging those who are closest to the systems, leaders can help to create communities where more children are helped to cope with the trauma of homelessness, experience the joy of therapeutic play, and take their first step toward brighter futures.
### Appendix A: Parents Engaging Community Logic Model

#### Summary:
As a preschool, housing, and social support agency serving Albuquerque’s (ABQ’s) diverse South Valley, Cuidando Los Niños will provide strengths-based leadership development, networking, and wraparound support to help parents exiting homelessness address early childhood inequities that affect their families.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Short-Term Outcomes</th>
<th>Long-Term Outcomes</th>
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<td>• Homelessness in NM nearly doubled over the last 5 years—the largest increase of any state. In ABQ, at least 153 families are homeless. Children's health and developmental risk spikes after 6 months of homelessness. Early childhood systems do not adequately accommodate homeless families or engage parents in decision-making processes. COVID-19 worsened the financial instability and domestic violence that cause homelessness and highlighted inequities in access to services.</td>
<td>• National accreditation • Case managers, licensed teachers, administrators, and board • 30+ years of org experience in trauma-informed care, ECE, and homelessness • 20+ housing, domestic violence recovery, ECE, &amp; behavioral health partners • Welcoming facility located between diverse South Valley &amp; Barelas neighborhoods • Kellogg support • Databases, case note system, &amp; screening tools</td>
<td><strong>Parent Advocacy Group</strong> • Hire Community Liaison &amp; recruit parents via preschool • Wraparound support to stabilize families • Weekly meetings featuring readings, discussion, training, &amp; speakers selected by parents • Leadership development (conferences, training during group time, online classes, etc.) • Parent-directed projects related to ECE &amp; homelessness <strong>Diversity, Equity, &amp; Inclusion</strong> • Organizational DEI pre- and post-assessment • Professionally facilitated DEI training for board and staff • Development of DEI policies <strong>Community Engagement</strong> • Partner meetings, with parents joining as desired/able • Round Table event, including brainstorming, networking, &amp; formation of a shared vision statement for ECE &amp; homeless recovery post-COVID</td>
<td>• 4–8 parents engaged in group meetings for an average of 1hr/week • Each parent receives 20hrs of leadership development • Community Liaison has 3 partner meetings per month • 100 guests invited by parent advocates partake in 2-day Round Table • 10 board &amp; staff members engage in 12–14 months of DEI training</td>
<td>• Program families achieve stability • Parents exiting homelessness (majority women of color) are empowered with the resources to improve their community and children’s life chances. • Cuidando Los Niños better supports leaders of color, equitably engages community, and centers families in developing solutions at the intersection of ECE and homelessness. • Local partners in ECE &amp; homelessness align around a shared vision for post-COVID recovery.</td>
<td>• Dual generations have a community of support helping avoid or exit homelessness as quickly as possible. • Parents exiting homelessness (majority women of color) are embedded in organization &amp; community decision-making on issues that affect their families. • Partners pursue a shared policy agenda for rebuilding and reimagining ECE &amp; homeless support post-COVID.</td>
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#### Assumptions:
Parents exiting homelessness are invested in their children’s education and wellbeing but lack the knowledge, social capital, and financial means to address issues that affect their family.

#### External Factors:
The COVID-19 pandemic challenges family stability and engagement. People experiencing homelessness, especially people of color, face additional discrimination and systemic barriers to leadership. In response, Cuidando will promote accessibility through cultural and linguistic responsiveness, DEI-trained board/staff, parent compensation, parent voice in all elements of programming, transportation, flexible program hours, and co-location at the childcare facility where parents are already picking up children.

#### Impacts:
In the post-COVID ECE system, fewer families are experiencing homelessness, support services are equitable and responsive, and their children have better chances and life outcomes.
References


