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HEADLINE: City's Homeless Children are "Urgent" Problem

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City's homeless children are "urgent" problem

By Jennifer Lin

Inquirer Staff Writer

Much is made of the nearly 500 homeless people living on Philadelphia streets. But the thousands of homeless children in shelters is no less an "urgent" situation, Deputy Mayor Donald Schwarz said yesterday at a conference on "Philadelphia's Youngest Outcasts."

Sponsored by the People's Emergency Center (PEC), a nonprofit provider of services to homeless families, the conference presented a detailed look at homeless children in Philadelphia and nationally.

City shelters have supported an average of 830 children a night in the fiscal year ending June 30, Schwarz said. To date, 3,328 children have been given emergency housing by the city.

Al B. Quarles Jr., an administrator for the Philadelphia School District, said the picture is actually worse if children who are doubling up with relatives or moving from "couch to couch or house to house" are included in the count.

Quarles, Philadelphia regional coordinator of the state's Homeless Children's Initiative, said that 4,913 homeless children and youth attended Philadelphia public and charter schools during the 2007-08 academic year.

Since then, he said, "our numbers are continuing to increase."

The conference attendees have witnessed the problem first-hand. Most were members of the Family Service Provider Network, a local coalition of agencies that help homeless families. In the last eight years, they have faced tighter funding from federal, state, and city sources.

During the Bush administration, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development placed more emphasis on funding programs for reducing the ranks of chronically homeless adults in shelters or on streets.

"There was virtually no attention paid to children who were homeless," said Gloria Guard, PEC's president. "The number of people on the street has been reduced, while the number of families who are homeless is climbing."

As part of his economic recovery program, President Obama has channeled emergency funds to keep families out of shelters, while moving those already there into permanent housing. Philadelphia will receive \$21 million over three years for "rapid rehousing" efforts, including rent subsidies or grants to pay off utility bills.

Ellen Bassuk, president of the National Center on Family Homelessness, a policy research group, said the money will "definitely help, but you want to do more than that."

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Homeless children, advocates say, need educational attention and medical or behavioral health services, while mothers may need job training or counseling to deal with trauma from domestic violence.

"Stimulus money will help in the short run," Bassuk said, "but in the long run, it does not address the root causes of homelessness."