

SOURCE: Dayton News

DATE: April 10, 2010

HEADLINE: Homeless students present challenges for school districts

Dayton News - News

Homeless students present challenges for school districts

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Published: 04.10.10

The State of Texas has one of the largest populations of homeless children in the country and one of the worst track records when it comes to helping them.

According to a 2009 report from the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH), the State of Texas has an estimated 337,000 homeless children.

The state ranked 50 in the nation when it came to implementing policies to combat homelessness amongst families.

According to a statement from Dr. Ellen Bassuk, NCFH president and founder, one of the main things leading to homelessness in families is poverty.

"Poverty is a structural factor in homelessness," said Bassuk.

The NCFH report cites other factors that put families at risk for homelessness, such as a lack of employment opportunities and the percentage of average monthly income that a family has to spend on rent.

The report states that "a two-bedroom unit priced at the fair market rent (FMR) falls outside of the financial reach of a full-time worker earning minimum wage in Texas."

Bassuk added that the number of affordable housing units throughout the state contributes to the difficulty of families finding housing.

Those who can find affordable housing often may need assistance to offset the difference between the cost of living and wages.

However, government assistance is difficult to receive. The report states that the Section 8 housing voucher program is critically under funded.

"Current funding for the voucher program meets the needs of only one-quarter of homeless families. Providing housing at fair market rent for homeless families in Texas would cost an additional \$6,000 per family, an annual total cost of \$834 million, or approximately 2 percent of the state budget," reads the report.

Approximately 51 percent of the households on the Section 8 waiting list and 49 percent of the public housing waiting lists are low-income families.

Stuart Campbell with the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) said the state has begun initiatives to combat homelessness.

"Last year the Texas Legislature appropriated \$20 million for homeless housing. It was the first time the state approved programs specifically for homelessness," he said.

Campbell added that the first round of funds will only be going to the state's eight largest cities. The cities that are receiving the funds will have a wide latitude as to how they can spend the money.

According to Campbell, some of the cities are using it to build more shelters while others are using it to provide rental assistance.

In addition to the state funds, the federal government allocated approximately \$100 million to Texas to combat homelessness. Of those funds approximately, \$60 million went straight to cities and counties and approximately \$40 million went to the TDHCA. Schools districts received \$6 million of the monies.

However, like the state funds, most of the federal money went to large urban areas.

Part of the reason is that homelessness in rural areas is difficult to find.

"Rural homeless looks different. You don't see a string of shelters, People get housed wherever they can," said Bassuk.

Cleveland ISD (CISD) Kerry Cowart has had experience with the problem of rural homelessness.

Cowart stated in December 2009 CISD had 141 students that were classified as homeless and eight students that had been classified as severe homeless.

According to federal guidelines, any student who is not living with his or her family is living in what is described as "a transitional state" and is considered homeless.

"We have families who are living in motels. We have one family who is living in a storage unit," said Cowart.

Cowart stated that the eight severely homeless students are all "older, high school students" and that at least one "lives in a car."

"We have students who ... in three nights, don't know where they will be staying," said Cowart.

Another problem that occurs when dealing with rural homelessness is the reluctance of community members to discuss it.

In December, CISD presented tokens of appreciation to First Baptist Church of Cleveland and First United Methodist Church of Cleveland for their work in providing assistance to the district's homeless students.

However in April, a spokesperson for First United Methodist Church of Cleveland stated that they "have no ongoing plans to work with the homeless."

Bassuk stated that the belief that homelessness is not a rural problem is not peculiar to Texas.

She explained that recently her organization has been working primarily in the delta region of Mississippi and that they "have been in areas that don't identify homelessness as a problem."

Locally many feel the same way. In January 2009, a spokesperson for Dayton ISD stated that the district had no homeless students.

However in April 2009, Jo Riley, a spokesperson for Dayton ISD, stated that the district has 56 homeless students.

A majority of the students, 24, are in Dayton High School.

The second largest population, 13 students, is at Kimmie Brown Elementary.

The rest of the students are divided among the remaining schools.

According to Andrea Seale, director of special programs for Coldspring-Oakhurst Consolidated ISD, one of the main problems in serving homeless students is identifying the ones who become homeless through the school year.

In a January 2010 interview, Seale said that students that become homeless after the start of the year, for whatever reason, often don't inform their teachers of the change in their living situation.

Tarkington ISD Superintendent John Kirchner stated that, in this area, often times older students become homeless due to conflicts at home.

"Fourteen to 18-year-olds get kicked out a lot out here," said Kirchner. He went on to state that while Tarkington doesn't have any students who qualify as homeless currently, they have had in the past.

"We've had two or three before," said Kirchner. He explained that, like all districts in the area, when it is determined that a student is homeless, certain procedures are enacted.

"If they are being enrolled, we waive all the requirements and enroll them," said Kirchner. The US Department of Education has identified seven barriers to enrollment that homeless students encounter.

The barriers range from being current on immunizations to having access to medical and school records.

Some of the barriers faced by homeless students are also barriers faced by homeless people in general, including access to transportation and homeless social services.

Campbell stated that in rural areas a lack of public transportation makes it more difficult for homeless people in general and homeless students to access what services are available.

Bassuk stated that one of the barriers faced by rural homeless people of any age is geography.

"Distances make it harder to get access to services," said Bassuk. She went on to state that in rural areas there are fewer case workers able to provide services.

Often times the burden for case management services falls to school districts.

Kirchner stated that homeless students are automatically signed up for the free and reduced lunch program.

Counselors and administrators will attempt to keep the child's living status private from other students, but they will inform teachers.

According to Kirchner, the decision to inform the teachers is done to ensure that homeless students are not facing

unrealistic expectations when it comes to schoolwork.

Kirchner stated that asking a child to focus on homework when they don't have a place to live or food to eat "violates the hierarchy of needs."

According to the University of Hawaii, psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of five levels of basic needs.

The first level include needs for survival, like food, water and shelter.

After that comes the need for safety and security. The third level is the need for love, affection and belonging.

The fourth is the need for esteem and the fifth is the need for self-actualization.

"In the levels of the five basic needs, the person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied, nor the third until the second has been satisfied, and so on," states a University of Hawaii website.

Kirchner stated that it is difficult for a student to focus on completing home work when he or she "can't control what is happening at home and hasn't had anything to eat."

Bassuk indicated that often times homelessness causes smart students' grades to start slipping.

"When you move a lot it takes its toll on the entire family," said Bassuk.

One of the criticisms that has been levied at the State of Texas by organizations like Bassuk's is that the state has not been active in planning to combat homelessness.

Bassuk said that Texas currently doesn't have a 10-year plan for addressing homelessness.

The NCFH report also states that Texas does not have a statewide definition of homelessness.

Campbell responded by saying that the state is correcting those problems.

"We are in the process of drafting and developing a 10-year plan," said Campbell.

He went on to say that the state "doesn't want to write a plan and have it sit on the shelf like so many other plans do."

"We want to put a lot of thought into it," said Campbell.

Even without a statewide plan, Bassuk said, there are many steps that can be taken to help homeless students and rural homeless people in general.

The trick is outreach and the coordination of community services," said Bassuk.

Liberty ISD, which currently does not have any homeless students, ensures that when presented with a homeless student, that student's family is made aware of all the social service opportunities available in the county, if any are needed.

"We make sure the kids have access to every special program we have to offer," said Margaret Gardzina, director of federal and student programs for Liberty ISD.

Liberty ISD receives Title I funds from the federal government to provide supplemental programs and materials to homeless students.

Kirchner explained that those supplemental programs and materials can range from letting students take showers in the dressing rooms before or after school to providing the students with pens and paper.

Gardzina stated that some of the groups that provide services in the Liberty and Dayton area include the Spirit of Sharing and the Liberty County Hospital District #1.

Kirchner stated that when counselors in Tarkington learn that a student is homeless they will have a conversation with the parents and they will attempt to put them in contact with agencies that can be of assistance.

The lack of available resources for the rural homeless is not lost on the state.

There are funds available to counties and cities in rural areas to help address homelessness, but those funds are distributed through a competitive grant process, according to Campbell.

"There's no doubt more could be done for rural homeless Texans," said Campbell.

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In the public school system of the Greater Houston region, the dropout rate is high, the graduation rate is low, and there are growing concerns about the quality of its teachers and the inequities in its funding structure.

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HoustonPBS, in partnership with the Center for Houston's Future, Houston Community Newspapers and KUHF Houston Public Radio, presents a rare opportunity for the public to have a voice in the discussion on the future of public education during the televised town hall forum Houston Have Your Say: Education Crisis.

HCN Reporter Melecio C. Franco contributed to this article.