



STATE-LEVEL BRIEF UPDATE: AN ADDENDUM

YOUNG CHILDREN IN PENNSYLVANIA WITHOUT A STABLE HOME

February 2025



This Addendum to the earlier *State-Level Brief Update*¹ aims to examine further the multiple ways a young child may lack a stable home, face transitions in relationships and surroundings, and thus experience challenges to the typical course of development. The earlier brief presented a range of data available to explore early childhood program access and participation trends of young children experiencing homelessness or foster care. This report will continue this exploration.

Data for these two populations can be confusing² due to the ways homelessness and foster care are defined, the ways young children are identified and counted when in either of these transitional housing situations, and because of how these two categories of housing can blur across service sectors. The current Addendum aims to increase the identification and engagement of children living in transitional housing situations, enhance understanding of their needs, and promote practices that remove barriers to their access and full and stable participation in quality early care and learning programs and services.

Definitions of homelessness and foster care vary. The *State-Level Brief Update* and earlier briefs³ describe how the definition of ‘homeless’ varies. On page 2 of this

CHILD WELFARE (45 C.F.R. § 1355.20(a))

Foster Care:

24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians, for whom the child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility. Under this definition, “foster care” includes, but is not limited to, placements in:

- Foster family homes;
- Foster homes of relatives (known as “formal kinship care”);
- Preadoptive homes;
- Children placed in trial reunification with their parents while the child welfare agency retains placement and care responsibility.

HEAD START (ACF-IM-HS-19-03)

Foster Care:

- A child is considered to be in foster care if the child is placed in a setting away from parents or guardians by the child welfare agency having placement and care responsibility regardless of whether the foster care arrangement is licensed and the child welfare agency makes payments for the care of the child.
- If the child welfare agency has placed the child away from parents or guardians and in the care of relatives, the child is considered to be in foster care and is eligible for Head Start.

Homeless:

- If a child is living with non-parent relatives due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, the child may meet the definition of a homeless child. Some examples of circumstances leading a child to kinship care include economic hardship, substance misuse, or incarceration.
- If the child is living with non-parent relatives for these or similar reasons, the child may be considered homeless and eligible for Head Start.

McKINNEY-VENTO/EDUCATION (42 USC §11434a)

Homeless:

An unaccompanied youth is a child who is homeless and not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

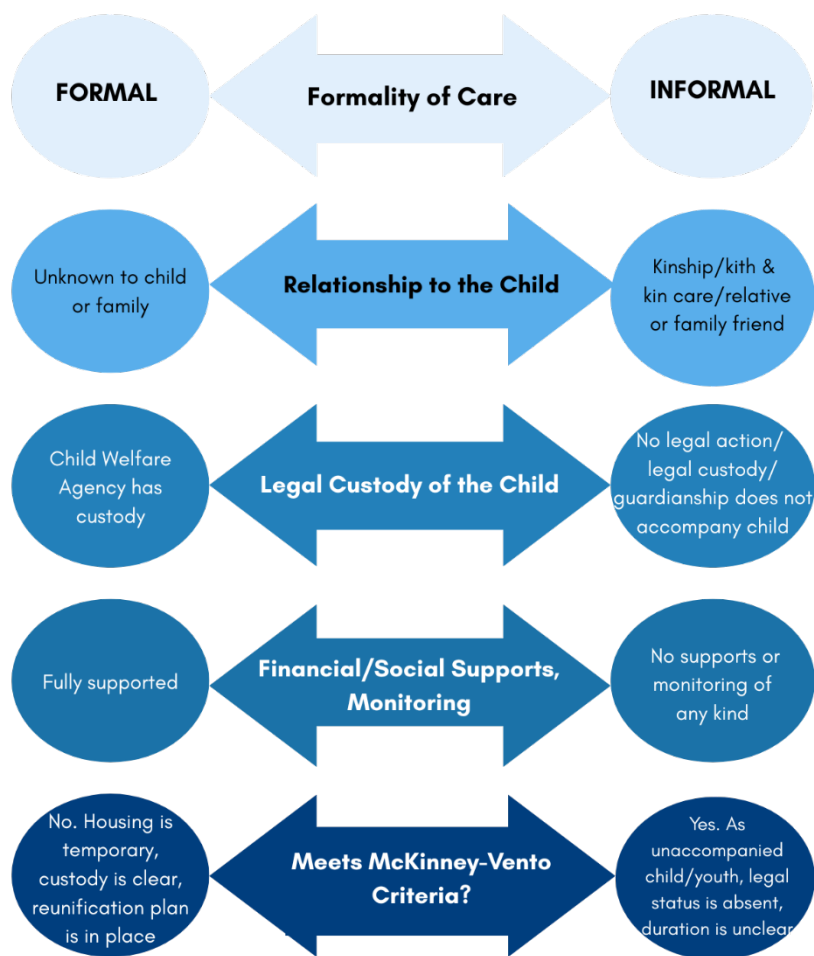
¹ *State-Level Brief Update, A Call to Action: Participation of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness and Young Children in Foster Care in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania* (February 2024)

² Same as above. See Table 2 on page 9.

³ *A State-Level Brief: Participation of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania*
A State-Level Brief: Participation of Infants and Toddlers Experiencing Homelessness in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania

document, additional living situations defined in federal law are presented. Figure 1 illustrates the multiple ways out-of-home care can vary independently, and the three scenarios – ‘Samie’, ‘Ellie’, and ‘Krissy and Kara’ – provide examples of what these variations may look like for children and families. Regarding out-of-home care, the law captures foster care, but most out-of-home care is with people perhaps unknown to the young child but known to the originating family. This is called kinship care.

Figure 1. The Complexity of Out-of-Home Care for Young Children



Exploring a bit further, kinship care can be the result of a formal agreement developed by the local child welfare agency involving the transfer of legal custody, the support of stipends and services, and a plan for family reunification. Kinship care can also result from informal arrangements made by the local child welfare agency without the transfer of legal custody, without financial or other services for the kinship family or the child, and without any ongoing monitoring or plan for parental involvement and reunification.

It is believed that most kinship care arrangements are made out of necessity without any formality or system involvement. Whether informal kinship care results from child welfare agency involvement or under duress, such out-of-home care lacks clarity and supports, and any guidance regarding how the kinship family might obtain access to entitlements and assistance (e.g., Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], Supplemental Security Income [SSI], Women Infants Children [WIC], Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], Head Start, Early Intervention, Home Visiting, Child Care Works, etc.). Kinship families have a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness due to the many responsibilities associated with caring for a young child.

Further, legal custody often does not accompany the child's changed physical custody when in these

Scenario: Samie

Ms. Zebuine is Samie's aunt trying to enroll him in PreK. She does not have custody but explains that Samie's mom is nowhere to be seen, and her dad just got arrested yesterday.

Scenario: Ellie

Charlotte is the mom of five-month-old Ellie. Charlotte aged out of foster care just a few years ago and has been living with friends and working when she can. She became pregnant unexpectedly with Ellie and feels that in her situation, she is unable to care for her child. Charlotte remembers her foster mom, Gretchen, as a good mom and brings Ellie to her. This is the second time Gretchen has been asked by one of her former foster children to take in a child they were not equipped to care for. Because this is not a formal foster care or kinship care arrangement, Charlotte will not receive financial assistance or supportive services.

Scenario: Krissy and Kara

Sandy wants to register her sister's two daughters, 2-year-old Krissy and 4-year-old Kara, into early learning but is having difficulty because she does not have the documents needed for enrollment. Linda, the girl's mom, has essentially abandoned her children. Linda recently dropped Krissy and Kara off with Sandy, and although she did not indicate that she would not return, Sandy has no idea when or if she will see Linda again and has no way of contacting her. Sandy has already taken two weeks off from her and must find care for them, or she will lose her job.

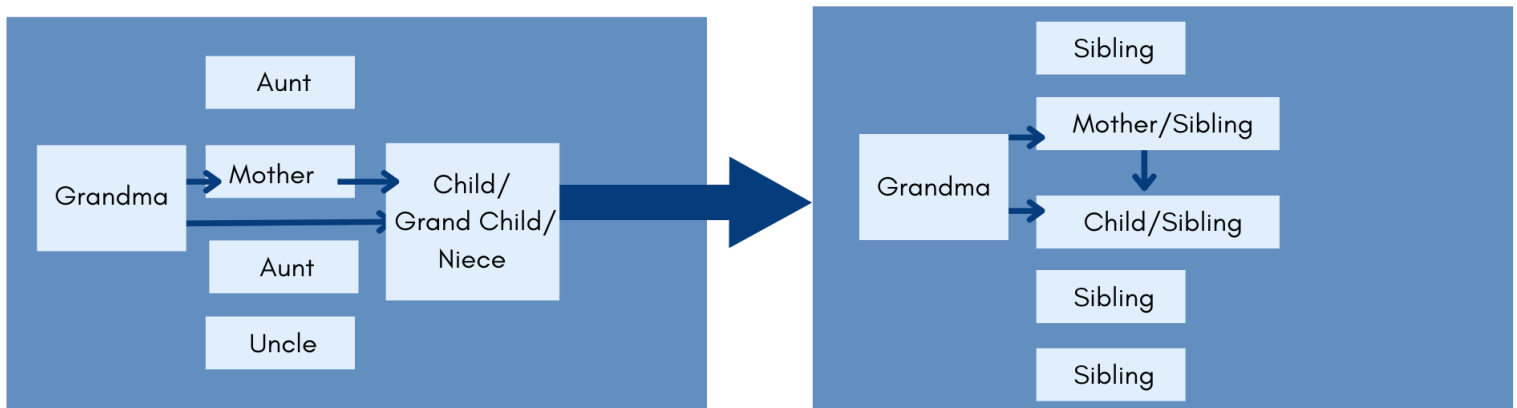
Because Sandy is not a foster parent, she cannot receive financial support or services from child welfare, and this living situation doesn't fit the definition of kinship care.

kinship situations, and there is no specific plan for reunification. While a note or affidavit may accompany the child stating that the child’s physical custody has changed, such documentation is insufficient when a legal custodian is needed to access services.

Notable is that children living in informal kinship arrangements can meet the criteria of *unaccompanied youth* under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act but young children can be overlooked because the term *unaccompanied youth* is typically understood to refer to an older child and/or runaway youth or because the child has a place to stay, especially if living with a grandparent or other relative, so the stability of the living situation is not explored. Even when cultural values and practices promote extended family or multi-family living arrangements, it cannot be assumed that all of these living situations are due to cultural norms. The same basic McKinney-Vento criteria that housing be safe, stable, and adequate are important to determine.

Additionally, as living situations change, so do relationships within the family. Figure 2 illustrates how the relationships of each member shift as the roles of family members change. Understanding the influence of such transitions on children and caregivers, including caregivers in an early care setting, can help maintain identity and stability despite the many stresses such changes create.

Figure 2. Considering Relationship Changes with Kinship Care



Partners and Resources

PA Department of Human Services/Children and Youth Services Agencies:

www.dhs.pa.gov/Services/Assistance/Pages/Regional-OCYF-Offices.aspx

Pennsylvania's child welfare system is state-supervised and administered by the County. Every County has a designated Children and Youth Services Agency to organize and manage County services. Counties vary in how they respond to and implement out-of-home care, so identifying a local partner can help understand local services and access local resources and support for children and families. Directory of Children, Youth, and Families SERVICES by County: www.dhs.pa.gov/KeepKidsSafe/About/Documents/c_260653.pdf

Generations United Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network: www.gksnetwork.org

National Technical Assistance Center for those who Serve kinship/grandfamilies. Programs may wish to partner to access training for staff and peer support for kinship caregivers. Subject Matter Expert Dr. Joseph Crumbley www.drcrumbley.com

PA KinConnector: www.kinconnector.org

PA KinConnector provides guidance, advice, and support for grandparents raising grandchildren and other relative and non-relative Kinship Caregivers. Programs may wish to partner to access training for staff and peer support for kinship caregivers.

PA ECEH: ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org

Children in the foster care system have the right to a stable education. Under the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), school districts and County children and youth agencies must collaborate to remove all barriers for children in out-of-home care. PA's Educational Stability for Foster Care Youth Program, through ECEH in Region 2, can partner to share insights, resources, and support.

PA LawHELP.org

PA LawHELP.org provides legal information and referrals to free and low-cost legal services in Pennsylvania, including legal custody and guardianship, accessing public benefits, e.g., TANF benefits for the child, and kinship care. Partnering to obtain legal guidance and resources can assist in clarifying and addressing custody-related barriers to accessing support and services.

- Children and Families: www.palawhelp.org/issues/children-and-families
- Housing and Shelter: www.palawhelp.org/issues/housing-and-shelter
- Public Benefits: www.palawhelp.org/issues/public-benefits
- Local Contact Information: www.palawhelp.org/find-legal-help

National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement: eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/community-engagement/article/head-start-programs-child-welfare-partnerships

National Head Start Association and Kinship Foster Care: nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023.04-Kinship-Foster-Care.pdf

Child Welfare Information Gateway and Kinship Care: www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/kinship-care/?top=123

This brief is brought to you by the Pennsylvania Head Start Collaboration Office in partnership with Grace Whitney, PhD, MPA, IMHE®.

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