

Children's Services Coordinator Concept Paper



Children and families represent the majority of District residents experiencing homelessness each year. Hundreds of children, infants through teens, enter the family shelter system lugging the baggage of risk factors, weighing down their resilience to reach their full potential. The District of Columbia spends millions of dollars annually on housing homeless families. Incredibly, the city does not invest in evidenced-based services to help children break the cycle of chronic homelessness. The role of the **Children's Services Coordinator** in shelter settings is considered by experts in the field to be best practice in a two-generation approach serving children and families recovering from homelessness.

Why is this Position Needed? Here in the District, nearly half of the unaccompanied homeless youth who visit Sasha Bruce have been in the homeless family system, suggesting their stays in family shelters have not helped prevent them from returning to the homeless system as teenagers and young adults. Significant political and financial resources have been put into the family system, and yet virtually no specialized services for children and youth are offered in the city's overflow shelter hotels or Short-term Family Housing sites (STFH). Children's Services Coordinators would help ensure that the special needs of children are met while under DC's care. Our city cannot achieve its vision to end homelessness as we know it without investing in prevention and intervention for children living in family shelter settings now.

Unique Risk Factors: Compared to their peers, children experiencing homelessness and housing instability are more vulnerable to and experience higher rates of mental health problems, developmental delays, poor academic and cognitive outcomes, behavioral issues and depression. Children without stable housing are also more likely to miss well baby visits and use emergency department services due to a lack of a regular health care provider. Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences and the "[Intergenerational Transmission of Risk](#)" reminds us that acute trauma is happening right now to children experiencing homelessness, and we ignore it at our peril.

Protective Factors like enrollment in early childhood education programs, developmental assessments and early intervention programs, home visiting for parents of young children, and after-school enrichment programs can help children get their developmental needs met and stabilize the whole family. Educational advocacy, mental health programs, school-based supportive services, and summer programs are other critical services children are not being routinely connected to in shelter. Relationships with trusted adults outside one's family are especially important for children during times of crisis. Older youth have their own case management needs revolving around access to schools that are the best fit for them: enrollment in the Summer Youth Employment Program, and goal setting, which they are also not receiving in the District's family shelter system.

What would the Children's Services Coordinator do? Upon a family's entry to shelter, the Children's Service Coordinator would provide children and youth with their own needs assessment and service plan, which would identify any needed referrals for services and connections with schools and other community-based supports. The Coordinator would work with the parent and the schools to help the family enroll in programs they need to best support the child. The Coordinator would also provide on-site crisis intervention and counseling services, which is critical since there is always a waiting list for children's mental health services in the District. They could provide group therapy for children or parents. Coordinating delivery of donations to meet concrete needs is also important, such as helping families obtain baby care items such as strollers, cribs, car seats, diapers, and toys. This position would also manage partnerships with other community service providers for children and oversee any in-house children's programs. In addition, the Children's Services Coordinators would provide a critical warm hand-off to

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future housing program case managers when families move after their 90-day stays, to ensure plans and resources developed while at the STFH sites will continue to support families after shelter.

What are the position qualifications? It is recommended that the Children's Services Coordinators are Licensed Graduate Social Workers (LGSW) or Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW) with a master's degree in social work and a background in child development and family systems. This background best prepares them to provide clinical case management focused on the needs of children, collaborate with housing case managers at the STFH sites, know how to navigate school systems and behavioral health systems, and provide direct services like crisis counseling to children and families in-house.

Why can't the existing case managers do this? The case managers at the STFH sites are charged with the unprecedented mandate to move families into housing within 90 days, a herculean task that should remain their focus. In order to make that possible, they must help families straighten out their credit, connect them to job readiness programs, address the multiple barriers to housing and employment, obtain furniture and transportation for their housing placement, etc. In addition to not having the capacity to do more, housing case managers do not have the expertise or the training to support parents in how best to meet their children's needs and provide clinical counseling services.

Who should provide this service and how? It is recommended that the city fund these positions and craft an RFP to seek qualified nonprofit contractors to apply for the bids. One Children's Services Coordinator in each of the STFH sites would be supervised by the nonprofit agency who wins the contract. This would ensure that the Coordinators would receive not just weekly individual supervision but also group supervision, to help them learn from each other and coordinate strategies and partnerships that benefit children and families in each of the sites. Salaries of at least \$65,000 per Children's Services Coordinator should be budgeted, plus fringe benefits, plus clinical social work supervision and administrative costs.

Why this investment, why now? The District made the bold move under Mayor Bowser to close D.C. General and instead invest in ward-based smaller temporary housing programs integrated into neighborhoods. We are unique among cities in creating seven new STFH sites across all parts of the city. All eyes are on the success of the Short-term Family Housing sites. Adding this critical service in-house at each of these programs would maximize the enormous investment to better ensure whole family stability. Prevention is a requirement for breaking the cycle of homelessness.

Case Examples: Homelessness (and the reasons behind it) represent an incredibly destabilizing experience for children, whose developmental needs require safety, stability, and routine. For the last two years, the Homeless Children's Playtime Project has provided social work support to children and families enrolled in our program at D.C. General and three overflow shelter hotels. We've met a single mother with an intellectual disability raising four children under the age of five, two of whom were nonverbal children with autism. At no point in time during her year in shelter was she offered assistance enrolling her children in the services they were entitled to under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Nor did her caseworker speak with her about her children's rotting teeth or notice how overwhelmed she was. Her family's needs clearly go well beyond housing. We helped walk her through the process of enrolling in the portfolio of services and supports her children needed, and continued working with those agencies after she left shelter to ensure a smooth transition.

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This year, we met a mother with a history of trauma, bipolar disorder, and depression, pleading for help getting her six-year-old daughter mental health services with no response from the shelter. Despite the child's history of sexual abuse and talk of self harm, the shelter only offered her a Rapid Rehousing voucher. Within a month of working with Playtime's social worker, she moved into a specialized domestic violence shelter, was connected to her child's school social worker, and was put on several waiting lists for counseling. While waiting for ongoing mental health services, our social worker offered 1:1 counseling for the child to help stabilize her. She also provided coaching to the parent for what to say when the child expressed thoughts of self harm, books and tools to help her at home, and home visits after she left the shelter to help provide the mother with the support she requested. This child is literally in the epicenter of "Adverse Childhood Experiences." However, for the past year, her cries for help have been ignored by the District's entire human services infrastructure. Playtime's social worker filled in critical gaps that a Children's Services Coordinator would ordinarily take on.

In conclusion: Stabilizing the child means stabilizing the family. Stabilizing the family puts the parent in a much stronger position to obtain and retain stable housing. The creation of Children's Services Coordinator positions will help strengthen the District's commitment to being a leader in cracking the code and turning the tide on the nation's homelessness crisis by investing in prevention.

For more information, please consult:

[America's Youngest Outcasts](#) (National Center on Family Homelessness)

[Trauma Informed Organizational Toolkit](#) (National Center on Family Homelessness)

[Early Childhood Self Assessment Tool for Family Shelters](#) (HHS: ACF)

[Assessment Checklist for Families Who Are Experiencing Homelessness](#) (The Bassuk Center on Homeless & Vulnerable Children & Youth)