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SUPPORTING HOMLESS FAMILES

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>> KIMBERLY LEONG: It is time. I'm going to get started. I have 27 slides in 30 minutes. So some of this may be going fast. I have been walking around a little bit asking this question to people. Why are you here today? So why did you choose this presentation? Is there anything in particular you want to get out of it? If there's anybody out there who wants to share who I didn't get a chance to talk to, let me know. If not, I feel like I have some idea of what people are going through at the moment.

So my name is Kimberly Leong, a teacher of the Deaf. I work with infant toddlers who are deaf and hard of hearing through a public school district. We are in the San Francisco Bay area. We have over 70% of kids in our district who are on free and reduced lunch, which as you probably know is an indicator of very low income. I started this when I was working with a family and the family was about to get kicked out of the house. Mom and son were living with mom's aunts and uncle. They didn't know what to do, where to go, and I had to figure out how to help them. And as I started researching and learning and trying to find resources, I just found more and more and learned more and more. And now I have more I can share with others. Because I've definitely come up against some things.

People I spoke with here -- said she works with a school district. I'm like, great, your district has a homeless liaison. They have no idea who we are, what we do, or that their kids qualify.

[CART NOTE: please slow down]

You might be a different type of circumstance.

Who is homeless? That I think is the first question. That also came up as I was walking around just now. Some of these are homeless people right here. This is kind of what we think of typically. This is a little girl who lives in a car with her family on the streets. Right? That is our stereotypical homeless person.

This, if you can see them, that is an actual Bay area family, in the Bay area of California. They live in a garage. As you can see, there is no bathroom, no kitchen, no window. They are paying $1,000 a month for this. A lot of the families I work with would be lucky to have this. In my area this goes for about $1,400 a month. And I have families who cannot afford that, nor would anyone actually want to live there.

This, you can see a whole bunch of people in one small house. We get a love that, too. It might be multiple families, multiple generations of a family. And that is a situation called doubled up. And when you live with another family or another person because you cannot afford your own housing that is considered homeless. So when you have a mom and a baby who is living with grandma and not because grandma is a help but because mom and baby can't afford to have their own house, that is homeless.

This last one that looks like a great little family in their living room. That was taken at a family shelter near where I work.

So who is homeless is not always who we expect, not always what we look at. And a lot of these families would have no idea that they're homeless.

Just some stats on homelessness. The most likely time for people in their lives to be homeless is in the first year of life. The second most likely time for a person to be homeless is in the first to fifth year. So our babies are the most homeless people in this country.

The average age of homelessness in this country is 9. So our kids are affected. It's not just the people that you see on the streets. It's not only the adults panhandling. It's a lot of kiddos.

A lot of what I want to talk about is the law. Because the law is what is behind in helping get these people the service that they deserve and that they need. As I try to find things for these families there's a lot of barriers in my way and as I remind people of their legal obligations it makes it a little bit better.

I believe we are all familiar with IDEA, the law that we work under. It does specify that early intervention must be provided to all eligible infants and toddlers. And it specifically states including those who are homeless. It defines homeless as the definition given in a law called the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. And that is the big law that's dealing with homeless kids.

I don't know if you can read this. If you can't, the PowerPoints are online. They weren't last night. I checked it just before this and they are on the website. You can download the whole presentation.

What is it does is when it's talking about homeless -- I highlighted some of the things here. So if you're sharing the housing of other people, as long as it's due to economic reasons or loss of housing, you are considered homeless. If you're living in a motel, hotel, trailer park, camp grounds, emergency shelters, abandoned hospitals, cars parked, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing which is those places not up to code, don't have electricity or water or things like that, they have mold growing, holes in the floor, rat‑infested, those are considered homeless as well. And the definition is this. They lack a fixed regular and adequate nighttime residence. The law does not define those terms. So what that means is kind of up to the person who is reading it. But those examples really help you figure out what it is.

So this chart you can kind of see the difference. The main thing that I want point out is this huge section of the pie right there. Three quarters of the people who qualifies as homeless are in that doubled up situation. That means living with a friend, living with a family; whether it's short‑term or long‑term it doesn't matter. I've had babies who were born into a house where mom lived with aunts and uncles or grandma and grandpa or somebody else and through the entire time I worked with them up through 3 years, they're still living in that house. But if they are doing so because of economic reasons, they can't afford their own housing, they are homeless.

There's no time limit on homelessness. You can be homeless in the same house for 10 years. If that house is substandard, if that house is somebody else's house, if that house is overcrowded -- I'm not going to get into all of them, but these are some examples on the education website, examples of forms that families can fill out that school districts and other providers can use to determine homeless status. I'm not going to click on it because I think I might mess up the CART. So you can take a look at those and get a good idea.

Actually, we'll do this first one and see how that goes. Ok. That one's not going to work for me. We'll see if number two will work. If not, we'll move on.

So our district has a form. I don't love the district form that we have. A lot of families will not say they're homeless when they are because they don't really understand what the definition is. And so they're not going to check the boxes as homeless.

Some of these forms that I showed or would show that you can look at yourselves go through specifically where are you living. Are you living in a car? Are you living in a hotel? Are you living in a friend or family member due to economic reasons? And those are a little bit better questions than are you homeless because people don't even know that they're considered homeless either.

As I'm trying to figure out this doubled up, this is a really complex topic. Because some people who are living with another family are not homeless. And some people who are living with another family are. So if I have a baby and I'm living with my mom because my mom will take care of my baby while I'm at work, that's not homeless. I'm doing that for social reasons for support. If I have a baby and I'm living with my mom because I can't afford a house on my own, anywhere, then that qualifies as homeless. If I live with my mom because my mom lives in a good school district and I want my kid to go to that school, I'm not homeless.

So it's a complex topic to sort of piece it out. Some things that you can ask families ‑‑ and this is from ‑‑ you can see down at the bottom there, the National Center on Homeless Education. So that is a government website. So these are questions that they suggest. So why did the family move in together? Was it for a mutual benefit or due to other crisis? Is there a plan for the household to remain that way over a long term or is it short‑term?

So it could be long‑term because of a crisis. So I have lots of families who moved in with mom and they don't have a plan to move out because mom can't work, baby has disabilities, baby has 20 doctors' appointments in a week. So they have to live with grandma until this kid is old enough that mom can get a job again.

Where would the family be if they were not able to stay where they are if mom kicked them out. Say they had a big fight. Where are they going to be that night? Are they going to able to get their own place or are they going to be on the streets or with a friend?

Does everybody have their own bed to sleep in? Do the kids have their own bed to sleep in? In some families it's cultural that they will share beds in some families they really would have other beds but they're sharing because they don't have enough space. There are some families I have no idea how many families live in these houses. You walk in the front door and there's just sheets partitioning off areas. It's like, ok, we have this area. There's a bed, there's a bed, and there's a dresser and there's a sheet and we're kind of sitting on the beds. Is that adequate? Is that enough space for everybody for that family? Clearly not.

Is the family being added to the lease? So, I know for me in my house if I had extra people in my house that were not written on the lease, I could get evicted because on my lease it says that these people aren’t living there. And I've had families in similar situations where one family lost their house, moved in with mom's sister but they couldn't tell anybody. And mom's sister was like, you can't stay here very long because as soon as somebody finds out, I'm going to get evicted and none of us are going to have a house. So are their names on the lease? Have they signed it?

Does the homeowner have a right to force them to leave? If there's a fight in the house, if the two families or two people in there have a fight or the landlord just decides he doesn't like you anymore, can they kick you out? If so, if you don't have a legal right to stay, you are homeless.

Some things that I ask ‑‑ that having a fight one, that has happened to several of my families. You have a disagreement with somebody; then you're without a house.

Another one I ask, If and when you could afford on your own, would you stay here or move out? And that's one that has picked up a lot of families as well. The moms living with their moms. And so they live with their moms and it's like, Well, do you want to live here? Is this where you live because you have to or is this where you live because it's helpful for you? Does the landlord know you're living there? If they find out, will you get evicted?

And I've had families who don't have access to a kitchen, a bathroom, enough space for their family. They have one room in a corner of a house and they're only allowed that room and the kids can't play in the living room and can't go to the kitchen to make their food. They have to have a mini fridge in their little room and that's it.

So the act is the law that protects us. These are some of the things that are kind of listed on what they get and have been helpful for families. It applies to all school‑aged children. So it really is tailored more to school‑aged kids. They have to be immediately enrolled. You can't wait for residency documents. You can't wait for immunizations. You can't wait for anything. If they come in and they're homeless, they are in right away and they can start classes right away.

The next thing that's been helpful is this idea of school of origin. So if they live in a certain place and they're transient, they move somewhere else, they have the right to continue in the school that they were in.

Those of us who were in school districts -- we have school district boundaries. I had a family who lived in my area. They star started in our school. And then mom had to move somewhere. The kids started in a Head Start program in a different city and now, well, I can't get to them. My boss has this little boundary that I have to stay in and I can't do home visits in this other city. But because of this law I was able to bring that to my boss and say I have to, they're homeless; we are the school of origin. And I was able to keep serving that family. And then as they keep on moving, that kid gets stability and consistency.

So if you have ‑‑ even if it's an Early Intervention program, we have a mom and baby and caregiver, toddler classes, and our kids are able to stay in our class even if they move.

The school district provides transportation. How many of your kids get transportation? Yeah. Not many. Early Intervention doesn't typically come with transportation. The McKinney act does guarantee these families get transportation. So if you're having kids ‑‑ school‑based program, they can get transportation to that. If you're having a family class. If you're having Parent‑Ed, they can get transportation. We'll talk a little bit later about more medical settings like if it's not IFSP how to do a transportation.

You have to have access to comparable services including Early Intervention and this idea of a full and equal opportunity to succeed in schools. And so that is kind of a broad category of what do these kids need to help them succeed. So with older school‑aged kids it might be buying them school supplies, helping them get their clothes washed at the laundromat and things like that. But people don't necessarily know what our babies need. They don't need the pens and pencils that fourth and fifth graders need.

So the act applies to Early Intervention and a lot of people do not know that. It is stated in the law that any state revving a Part C grant must make Early Intervention services available to infant and toddlers with disabilities who are homeless. That is every U.S. state. It is also the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, [Indiscernible: Speaking too fast] probably every place that someone in here is from.

Children ages birth to 5 are generally not eligible for McKinney-Vento protections because they're not in public programs. They are eligible if they are in public early childhood programs. So that includes head start. Preschool programs that are run by your school district are run by the state. And special education. So if your child has an IFSP, they are eligible.

At the bottom, you can't read that last one. Preschool programs that are funded through the LEA. And the last one that you can't read right there says Home‑Based Early Childhood Educational Services that are funded and administered by an LEA. So that's our home visit programs as well.

So McKinney-Vento is really for older kids or people think so. Most people are older. Our group is a very little‑known tiny sliver of the students. I found that I had to educate my homeless liaison in my school district. And you may be in a similar predicament.

Some of the barriers that these families face. Think about this. If there's any I don't cover here, I'll ask you in a moment.

First one is basic needs. They need food. They need clothing. They need shelter.

Loss of contact. We lose these families. They disappear. If you do home visits, they don't have a home or they have a home they don't want you in or you don't want to be in.

Inconsistent attendance, whether class or home visits or appointments. They're transient. They may leave. They may move a lot. They don't have access to medical appointments, including audiology, therapy, hearing aids for a variety of reasons.

And lack of transportation.

You may be familiar with this, [Indiscernible] of needs. So the basic idea that is you need to have each lower level before you're able to move up. So our families are here at this physical insecurity level. They need food, water, health. They need safety, shelter, stability. Before they can move up to a lot of us want to work on up here, development. And so development cannot happen, we cannot help these families with it until we meet their basic needs.

So I have had some families where every one of my home visits for weeks or months have nothing to do with language. They have nothing to do with the hearing aids. They have nothing to do with speech. They have nothing to do with most of this general development stuff. It's getting the kids into therapy. It's getting mom into therapy. It's helping them sign up for low‑income housing, make being sure they have food, a place to sleep that night. And that's what we're working on. So I went from teacher to social worker and that's what they need. And in order to continue a relationship with this family, that is what I had to do for them.

So when we look at the basic needs, we do have to meet those physical needs before the other goals. Make yourself useful to the family so they will stay connected to you. If they see you as helpful to them, then they're going to prioritize your relationship. If they see you as someone who is sitting there just telling them over and over again to do something that they just do not have the bandwidth to do, then you're going to drop off the map quicker. And as long as you're helping them with the things that they need, they'll keep in contact. If they keep in contact, you can help meet those basic needs. After that, you're going to be able to start working on the other things that are on your list of things to do.

Finding local resources to pass on to families. So I have some places here to start looking. Every school district should have a liaison who is the McKinney-Vento liaison. There is a list -- if you do not know yours, there's a list of every liaison in the state. So there's a state level one, school district one. I have later in the presentation the website to find your state liaison. So if you cannot find your school district liaison, find your state liaison. A lot of you don't work for school districts. It does not matter. Go to the school district that the kid lives in and that liaison should help.

Local homeless shelters are a wealth of information even if this family is not accessing it. There's a thing called wrap‑around programs. They offer a variety of resources. So, they may offer job placement help. They may help the families get signed up for WIC, food stamps. They may offer mental health. They may help figure out childcare. So a little bit of everything. And so that term wrap-around is something as you Google your area trying to figure it out, try that.

Religious organizations and ask around in the community. There's definitely some churches near me that are known for doing this sort of thing. It's like, oh, in this community there's this church right here and Father so‑and‑so is amazing at this. So look around for that.

There's other non‑profits around as well that really work with homeless families.

211, are you familiar with that? 211, it's a phone number, website. Give them a call, go to the website, figure out the resources.

It's important for you to do the leg work. Figure out what this family needs. You call these places and basically just stick it in their laps because they do not have the time and energy to do all of this research. We don't have a lot of time as well in a lot of our jobs but doing that makes it easier for them. It gets you in that place where you are useful to this family and then you're going to be able to start working on other things later.

These are some of the common things that I see as the needs of my homeless families. When I was talking with my school district liaison and they were like, what do babies need, this is a lot of the stuff the babies need. Some families need some of them. Others need others. Some of them are things that we would think ‑‑ shelter, mental health support is big.

That is something if you call 211 you should be able to get some resources. I know in my area we have an Early Childhood Mental Health that does work with families on our Medicaid program for kids. Showers, laundry. Legal help was a big one. We've had families going through domestic violence or child custody. Housing is something that I've had families deal with. Social Security, I had ‑‑ I've never in the past had a family able to get Social Security for a child with unilateral hearing loss. I had a family who was able to do it with legal help. And this is one of my homeless families. And the mom was like, get a lawyer and we were able to get it. And it was amazing.

So one of the barriers that I heard around here is they're difficult to contact. They may have different phones. They'll have temporary phones. Move to a different number. They won't have a phone for a while. There's a national program called Lifeline. Each state has their own version. You can look it up. It will provide free phones to low‑income people. It can be cell phones. It could be a land line. It's one or the other. The cell phones can come with data plans. So you can have data, text messages, voice. All for free or low costs. There's different options. So the family can pick their carrier and get that. The phone itself is included, too. It's not going to be an iPhone. It's not going to be necessarily, you know, Verizon. But it gets you a phone, data, messages and voice. And it's consistent. They will keep the same number.

Social networking has been huge. I have families that the only way I've been able to contact them sometimes is through Facebook. I set up a Facebook account. I have my own personal account. I set up a professional account. So I have my Facebook account that it has a picture of me and it has my friends from work and that's it. So I don't really post. I don't put personal stuff up there for the most part. Sometimes I'll share information about upcoming events but that's it. And I use it to message families. Because for some reason these families, if their phone isn't working and they don't have internet in the house, they can somehow still Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or WhatsApp?

So when you talk with families, do your intake, ask what kind of social networking they're part of, what their Instagram name is, those things. And connect with them there early on so that way when they disappear, you won't be like, oh, I wish I had done that.

And I've had several families that the only way I could contact them was through Facebook. You could show up, go to the house, wait them out. That doesn't always work around me. Richmond, California is not the safest area. And a lot of the families have very secure gates outside. So you can't even get up to their front door. And standing out in the rain out there doesn't really help.

It does help to know some idea of the family's schedule. So if they have an older sibling in school, they're going to be school pickup. They're going to be school pickup at the time school is out. So showing up right before or after school gets out, you'll probably catch the family. When you show up, a neighbor, a landlord, a roommate may often know where that family is or know how to get a hold of them. Neighbors or friends often have phones. These families, when their phones go kaput, they still have somebody that has a phone. They're still contacting people. So figure out who that person is.

And sometimes send a letter. Some of the families I work with don't have literacy skills so letters don't work. But some of the families do. One of my homeless families has a PO Box. If they're staying at a shelter, you can send mail to shelters. You can also send mail to the local Post Office under general mail and then families can just pick it up at the Post Office. They need to know and they need to put that in as their plan. But that's another way that you would be able to contact them.

Home visit locations, of course they don't always have to be at home. I found it helpful to do it at different ‑‑ that they may not even be accessing yet. So go to the place that has food distribution. Go to the soup kitchen with them. Go to the WIC office with them. And that kind of does double duty. You get to do your home visit and get to show them what's out there.

I have families that do home visits at my school because that's the only place they can get to. We have done it before/after medical appointments that are priorities for them. So my home visit might not be but maybe audiology was. Maybe cardiology is. Whatever it is, I can show up at the hospital and meet with them there.

And public spaces. Some of these are probably already on your mind like the library. McDonald’s has been a great one because there's a great play place there and it's something familiar to these families. And children's museums, there's some children's museums near us that we have developed a partnership with that have free admission for homeless families. And so we're able to get this family in for free, give them a great place for their kids to play, and we're able to do our visits there. So there's a lot of places out there that will do that sort of program with you if you ask.

Inconsistent attendance. Be in contact. Be flexible. I'll schedule this family's home visit on Monday and then when they're not there on Monday I'll give them a call and see if they can meet Tuesday. If not Tuesday, Wednesday. So do that as much as possible. Reschedule things. Get these families in. I give them a call before I'm supposed to get there. If they're not home, ok, great, where are you? I'll meet you there.

Transient families, as they move from place to place if it is at all feasible, keep working with that same family that way you are still the school of origin. You will be able to get through whatever barriers your organization puts up and hopefully it should be able to get some funding through the school district for transportation to make that happen.

Sometimes they move too far away. If they're moving three or four hours away, that's not going to work. If they want to move to a different service provider, again, do the leg work for them. Contact the person that they're going to be working with, help that person know this family. And if possible, be there for the first visit to help them understand this family and the history and what you've been working on so that they can kind of just pick it up and keep going.

Access to medical services. In California we have Medi-Cal, our version of Medicaid. If they're not signed up, get them signed up. If families don't have hearing aid coverage, California, we have this great thing called California Children's Services which does provide hearing aids for low‑income families. But this website -- that's part of NCHAM's website -- gives some ideas on how to get families get hearing aids if they don't have coverage. And I've been at a school where we set up our own loaner bank.

I have just a couple of minutes left. I'm going fast.

Transportation. So McKinney-Vento will do educational‑based transportation. Medical, Medi‑Cal or Medicaid will provide non‑emergency medical transportation. It may be hard to get it. They may not know about it. You may have to tell them about it. But that can get families to appointments.

Paratransit. If families are eligible, their kid might be. They probably don't know about it because it doesn't get advertised for children. About if your child has other disabilities, they might qualify.

Local transportation, we partnered with some of our county bus companies. And they give free bus tickets. And I've also recently found Lyft has a $1,000 community grant. So your organization can get a grant to provide transportation to these families.

When you fill out that form to be part of McKinney-Vento, that form and our school district, I realized, has a lot of power. You can take that form to Head Start, you get bumped to the top of the waiting list. Take it to the low‑income housing, which in our area has a three to seven‑year wait, and you get bumped to the top of the list. And then other community‑based programs for food, for museum entrance, for all sorts of different things, that form, once they fill it out, labels them as homeless and gets them access to things.

And this is my last one. So resources, your state coordinator. So this website right there, that is going to tell you who in your state is in charge of the McKinney-Vento programs. If you cannot figure out who your school district person is or what to do when you're not part of a school district, they can help you out.

The National Center for Homeless Education, they have tons and tons of resources. That has been my go‑to on figuring out what to do about this and what information to share with my liaison to help them know how to work with the babies.

And the next few are specific ones about how McKinney-Vento deals with IDEA, transportation, special education.

And the last one is a brief summary of the McKinney-Vento Act and what that means for our kids.

And I am pretty much right there out of time. I am here for a few minutes so if anybody has questions, feel free to ask me. If you don't, you are free to go.

[Applause]

>> [Inaudible; off mic]

>> KIMBERLY LEONG: What if they're not legal? A lot of my families are not legal. So some of these will apply and others will not.

So basic needs. If you are not legal, you can usually still access food. Free phones do not apply if you're not legal, I learned. WIC still applies. Some apply some don't. If the child is legal, it opens up more for them.

Other questions?

[No Audible Response]

Ok. Thanks.