Child and family homelessness is increasing in all parts of the country; the number of homeless families has increased by 38 percent since 2007.¹ More than 1.6 million, or one in 45, children in America experience homelessness each year.² This equates to more than 30,000 children each week, and more than 4,400 each day.³

The impact of homelessness on children and their families is devastating. Without a place to call home, children are challenged by unpredictability, insecurity, and chaos. Homeless families are extremely vulnerable; most have experienced extreme poverty, residential instability, and violence, and have limited education and work histories. The mean income of homeless families is less than 50 percent of the federally established poverty level.⁴

Research, program evaluation, and front-line experience have yielded extensive information on how to prevent and end family homelessness. Families need access to safe, affordable housing as well as services and supports. All families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, need a basic combination of supports and services to survive, including affordable permanent housing, jobs that pay a livable wage, child care, health and mental health care, basic services for children (e.g., afterschool programs, tutoring), and transportation. Homeless families need even greater access to these services and supports because they tend to have less economic and social resources to facilitate these connections. Yet, homeless families tend to have little access to programs that would provide services to improve their circumstances.

The federal government provides targeted programs aimed specifically at serving people experiencing homelessness. Examples of targeted federal programs for people experiencing homelessness are the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth program and Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness.

Targeted programs alone cannot meet the needs of all homeless families; these families also need access to mainstream programs that offer a wide range of supports to meet basic needs such as housing, employment, income, child care, food, health, and mental health. To use these programs, people must qualify based on criteria, such as income, disability, and family composition. Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are the two largest mainstream programs that can help homeless families. Other examples of mainstream programs important to homeless families include nutrition programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly the Food Stamp program) and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children); health and mental health programs (Community Health Centers and Medicare); Supplemental Security Income; employment supports from Workforce Investment Act programs; and housing subsidy programs (public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers).

Access to targeted and mainstream programs, as well as housing, is essential for moving families out of homelessness. Homeless families face a number of challenges when trying to access mainstream programs. Research shows that homeless people tend to access mainstream services at rates lower than others living in poverty.⁵ The inability of many homeless families to receive benefits and services through

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mainstream programs can be mitigated through policy changes that would improve access to programs. This brief reviews the barriers and provides recommendations for improving access to mainstream programs.

**BARRIERS TO ACCESS**

Barriers and gaps in services to homeless families are common across all mainstream programs. A multitude of studies have documented that many people eligible for mainstream programs do not enroll or receive them. According to the U.S. General Accountability Office, “homeless people are often unable to access and use federal mainstream programs because of the inherent conditions of homelessness as well as the structure and operations of the programs themselves.” Barriers to mainstream programs include: difficulty serving homeless families, data collection issues, lack of information, structural obstacles in eligibility and program requirements, and fragmented programs and funding streams.

Homeless families can be more difficult to serve than other low-income populations because of the inherent conditions of homelessness (e.g., lack of stable housing and resources). Homeless families often need a complex range of supports and services and have fewer resources than other segments of the low-income population. They also can be more expensive to serve. States, localities, and providers who receive federal money but face funding constraints may therefore be deterred from making the special efforts that are needed to reach out to and serve people who are homeless. Many mainstream programs do not provide adequate incentives and training for providers to serve this population. Additionally, some case managers and service providers working in mainstream programs do not have the expertise and experience to address the needs of homeless families. Providers may not be organized or equipped to serve these families, knowledgeable about their complex needs, or have adequate training.

Mainstream programs do not track whether people are homeless or not. Few mainstream programs are required to collect information about the housing status of enrollees at intake or on an ongoing basis. This makes accurate national data on access to mainstream programs for homeless families difficult to collect.

While a lack of information can be an obstacle to all low-income people, homeless families are less likely to have access to as many sources of information as people who are housed, in part because they are less likely to be connected within their community. As a result, homeless families may be unaware of their eligibility for a program or how to apply for services.

Homeless families also face structural obstacles in eligibility and program requirements, such as program location and application documentation. Homeless families often lack the transportation needed to make multiple trips to benefits administrators’ offices and program locations. Application processes can be lengthy and complicated. Mainstream programs require documentation proving identity, income and financial resources, and citizenship. Due to a homeless family’s lack of stable housing, completing requirements and communicating with providers and agencies can be difficult.

Federal mainstream programs are highly fragmented. Each has separate eligibility requirements, applications, documentation and program requirements, and limits on the use of funds. This makes it difficult for homeless families to receive comprehensive and integrated services. Fragmentation at the federal level also impedes local coordination, which results in under-identification of homeless families and barriers to services. Funding for mainstream programs is also fragmented. Local providers must often cobble together funding from various resources. Access to benefits can be delayed or denied because of a lack of supply, funding, and insufficient value of benefits and services. For example, the Child Care Development Block Grant program has a limited number of vouchers—only one in seven families who qualify receives vouchers.

To fully prevent and end family homelessness, the federal government must increase resources and remove barriers to mainstream programs.

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8-10 Burt, M.R. et al. (2010).
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS

In June 2010, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* with the goal of ending family homelessness in ten years. This Plan represents an unprecedented opportunity for the federal government to address homelessness in a coordinated, strategic manner. Adequate funding and political will are needed to meet the goals of the Plan. The extent to which the federal government can influence mainstream program implementation and access varies significantly according to the structure of each program. Leadership from the USICH could help improve access and facilitate the implementation of best practices for serving homeless families.

Given the barriers, changes that recognize and take into account the unique needs of homeless children and families are needed to increase access to mainstream federal programs. Recommendations for changes needed include: increased coordination and collaboration among mainstream programs, training for service providers, improved use of technology, prioritizing access for homeless families, increased data collection, and a single definition of homelessness across all federal programs.

Mainstream programs must work together in a coordinated, collaborative, and flexible manner to more effectively serve homeless families. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the complex needs of homeless families—which may include medical care, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, housing, and income and employment support—should not be addressed in isolation, but rather through programs that are integrated and coordinated. The federal government should promote integrated care for homeless families by incentivizing providers and local agencies to coordinate and collaborate by allowing flexibility in combining funding streams. The federal government should also shorten and simplify program applications and encourage outreach to homeless families through incentives for agencies and service providers.

Barriers should also be removed by co-locating mainstream eligibility workers in homeless assistance programs; creating “one-stop” intake centers for people experiencing homelessness where representatives of many mainstream agencies are present to offer help in applying for benefits; situating mainstream offices conveniently; utilizing combined applications; and including access to language translators. Automatic enrollment could also help; some communities automatically assume eligibility for programs if a household or individual receives TANF or SSI benefits, skipping the need for verifying certain eligibility criteria. This process could reduce administrative work for staff and documentation requirements for applicants.

Training for service providers and case managers is needed so they can be more effective in helping homeless families negotiate complicated application procedures. Quality case management can help homeless families manage these processes.

Technology is a powerful tool for improving benefits outreach and access. Case management should be simplified by using online benefits access technology. Some states and nonprofit organizations have developed automated systems to increase efficiency when connecting families to services and supports. For example, online applications provide access to multiple programs and can increase access to benefits. Applicants no longer need to meet with service providers in person. They can upload and send documents, use electronic signatures, and easily track their application status.

Many barriers could be removed throughout mainstream programs by prioritizing access for people experiencing homelessness. For example, Congress amended the Head Start Act to require Head Start agencies to prioritize homeless families for enrollment. Head Start agencies also require providers to immediately enroll homeless families in programs while paperwork is being obtained. Homeless families would more easily benefit from other mainstream programs if their access was prioritized.

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To learn more about increasing access to mainstream programs for homeless families, programs and research supported by federal agencies that serve low-income people should be required to collect data on housing status. They should also ask questions about the health, education, and safety of homeless children. Incentives could be provided to programs that collect data on the homeless families they serve.

Many families are doubled-up or live in motels and other crowded and unsafe situations, often due to a lack of shelter access or shelter policies requiring families to split up in order to receive assistance. In 2008 and 2009, 72 percent of all homeless children and youth enrolled in public schools lived in the situations described above. The U.S. Department of Education (ED), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and other federal agencies officially recognize these vulnerable children and families as homeless. However, these families are not eligible for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) homeless services. The HUD definition of homelessness is limited compared to other federal agencies. It excludes many homeless children and families. Amending the HUD definition of homelessness and aligning it with ED and HHS would help homeless families receive the integrated set of supports and services they need.

**NEXT STEPS**

While mainstream programs provide services homeless families need, they are often difficult to access. Implementing the recommendations in this brief would greatly improve access to federal mainstream programs for homeless families. It is imperative that we work together to advocate on the federal level for programs and policies that connect housing and quality services and supports. Ending family homelessness is possible if collaborative and strategic efforts are made by national, state, and local political leaders, service providers, advocates, and the business and philanthropic communities. A stable, fully-funded, high quality, and efficient system of services and supports in addition to housing for children and their families is essential to meet this goal.

**Campaign to End Child Homelessness**

The Campaign to End Child Homelessness is an initiative of The National Center on Family Homelessness that leads the effort to raise national awareness and galvanize action to ensure stable housing and well-being for families and children. The National Center learns what works and brings solutions to caregivers and policymakers that strengthen their capacity to help families in need. With the power of knowledge and the will to act, we will end family homelessness across America and give every child a chance. For more information about us or to join the Campaign to End Child Homelessness, visit www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org and www.FamilyHomelessness.org.