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'The current system is not built for families that are homeless': New Mexico providers outline the barriers in early childhood services

By Esteban Candelaria / Journal Staff Writer July 28, 2023

As New Mexico aims to expand its services for young children, child care providers who work with families facing homelessness say there are still some major barriers for some of the families who are the most in need.

And right now, there's a lot of ground to cover.

"The reality is, the current system is not built for families that are homeless," Jeff Hoehn, executive director of Cuidando los Niños, an early childhood center in Albuquerque focused on breaking the cycle of housing insecurity in families, told lawmakers at a Legislative Education Study Committee meeting on Wednesday.

New Mexico has made strides in helping children and families experiencing homelessness or some form of housing insecurity, Early Childhood Secretary Elizabeth Groginsky told the Journal in an interview.

Those include waiving copays for parents and enlisting staff who work more rigorously with families experiencing homelessness in making sure they're getting the services they need.

"If a family is flagged as what we call 'at-risk' — and that may be because they're involved with the child welfare system, or they're experiencing homelessness, or they may be a grandparent raising grandchildren — ... we pay for their child care using our state child care dollars, and the program managers working with those families ... provide more intensive check-ins," she said.

The U.S. Department of Education estimated based on 2018-2019 data that only about 5% of children under 6 who were experiencing homelessness were being served in federally funded education programs in New Mexico — a number Hoehn said is of "great concern" because those are the students who would most benefit from early childhood services.

It's not entirely clear what that number is now. Still, in a response to questions, the early childhood department said it serves just over 1,200 children statewide experiencing homelessness or some other form of housing insecurity who are enrolled in its child care assistance programs.

Almost 870 children enrolled in home visiting programs are facing housing insecurity or homelessness, according to the most recently available data provided by the department.

One of the biggest issues facing those children, Hoehn said, is a lack of transportation to child care services.

"You need a way to get to an early learning center. Oftentimes, these parents are working jobs where the hours are very nontraditional, and so actually accessing early childhood education for families that are homeless is a great challenge," he said.

Acknowledging that transportation is one of the biggest barriers to families in accessing early childhood services, Groginsky said the department does what it can.

In some pre-K programs, for example, the department can support transportation costs if they ask for it, and home visitors solve that problem by definition.

Some transportation is also factored into child care reimbursement rates from the department for providers, spokesman Micah McCoy said, but added that it's not typical for centers to pick up and drop off young children.

Also contributing to access problems such children and their families face is that centers can find themselves stuck at capacity because of space issues.

At least, that's the case at Jardin de los Niños, a Las Cruces-based center that also aims to provide opportunities to families and children facing homelessness, where Chief Executive Officer Michelle Adames said there's a waiting list in all of the center's classrooms.

"We're trying to provide them with support through our anti-hunger and wellness program, through our behavioral and mental health services that are on site, and all of the medical (and) dental services," she told lawmakers. "But the goal is to really help them to get into an early childhood program, because we know ... that early learning component is essential."

Because children facing homelessness are far more likely to experience some form of trauma, Adames said they benefit from support from educators equipped to respond to that trauma.

Groginsky said the state is working on improving its pipeline of educators with that training through an effort to make professional development in infant mental health accessible online for educators.

The department, Groginsky said, is also in the process of contracting mental health consultants to help educators make their classrooms more "trauma-responsive" environments and help them better understand the behaviors of children dealing with traumas.

Despite the access issues families experiencing homelessness consistently face, Hoehn said that a rising tide raises all boats when it comes to expanding access to early childhood services, arguing that New Mexico's plans to expand access to pre-kindergarten by 40% will also help the children who need it most.

"I think the challenges of you not having transportation, or a job, or the hours are nontraditional — there'll always be those challenges, but at least now we're going to have more seats and more opportunity to get those children in," he said.

But as that expansion happens, Hoehn said, it's important to also take care of children as they continue their education, and asked lawmakers to look into how to bolster the link between pre-K and kindergarten.

"If we're going to see education as a continuum, of birth (to grade) 12, then we have to build this bridge in this place now," Hoehn said.