

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

How homeless kids catch up

February 26, 2007

PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS can help ensure lifelong success. But homeless children are less likely to be enrolled -- far less than the two-thirds of children who have homes of their own, according to Horizons for Homeless Children, a local nonprofit organization. Missing out on these early education and care programs is a waste, since research shows that disadvantaged children stand to gain the most from them.

One-year-old Emma (not her real name) couldn't talk or stand on her own when she first came to the Edgerley Family Community Children's Center in Roxbury. Such developmental delays are common for very young homeless children, in part because their parents can be overwhelmed by a string of crises. In Emma's case, her mother had been a victim of domestic violence, and, after living with relatives and friends, the two ended up in homeless shelters.

Emma's story is also a troubling one for taxpayers. She has to develop physical, social, and emotional skills to be school-ready. If she doesn't, she will have to catch up, and that could mean spending public money on remediation such as special education classes.

Emma is doing well for now. She has learned to walk and talk, and her mother has found work, according to Sue Heilman, executive director of Horizons, which runs the Edgerley Center. Other homeless children deserve the same opportunity.

But money and outreach are lacking. Some 1,300 preschool-aged children live in state-funded homeless shelters. Another 1,000 live in domestic violence and teen shelters. And a recent report from Horizons for Homeless Children notes that thousands more are living in cars, at campgrounds, or doubled up in other people's homes.

The state Department of Early Education and Care has made needy families a priority, and in this group, homeless children are at the top. They get immediate access to subsidized programs. Currently the department serves 800 children living in shelters. But there's clearly more to do.

Case managers should educate homeless parents, explaining what programs are available and how they help children.

State officials should pay more to all programs that serve homeless families, so that transportation or other extra services can be added. Currently a handful of programs get a higher rate because they have a contract with the state to serve a set number of homeless children. But other programs don't have such contracts, and just serve homeless children as they come.

More money should be invested for all children. The wait list for state-subsidized early education and care has 19,000 names.

Young homeless children need stable settings where they can achieve. Massachusetts should be crowded with such places. ■