



**STRENGTHENING**  
At Risk and Homeless  
Young Mothers and Children

# Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps

*Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children Project*

An initiative of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, in partnership with The National Center on Family Homelessness, National Alliance to End Homelessness and ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families.

**H**omeless families are everywhere in our nation. During the current economic crisis, the numbers of homeless children increased by more than 448,000. One million six hundred thousand American children, or one in 45, were homeless in 2010, a 38% increase from 2007. This equates to more than 30,000 children each week, and more than 4,400 each day.<sup>1</sup>

Children experiencing homelessness suffer from hunger, poor physical and emotional health, and missed educational opportunities. A majority of these children have limited educational proficiency in math and reading. Not surprisingly, the risks for child homelessness—such as extreme poverty and worst case housing needs—have worsened with the economic recession, even though the total housing capacity for families increased by more than 15,000 units in the past four years, primarily due to the federal Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP).

As a result of the increase in child and family homelessness, there is a need to develop federal and state policies that engage stakeholders including community leaders, service providers, nonprofits, and individuals directly affected by homelessness. This brief aims at helping homeless service providers and local advocates participate in advocacy activities. It offers advice for communicating with policymakers on issues of child and family homelessness.

We know that policymakers will continue to implement policies related to child and family

homelessness whether or not advocates are at the table. Advocates are responsible for helping to develop and influence federal and state policies that support homeless children and families, but advocates need support from concerned citizens and stakeholders across the country. Policymakers care about voters, if enough voters support a policy or program and make it known, policymakers will take notice.

## What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is taking action to support a cause or ideal. It can be as simple as speaking on behalf of oneself or others to accomplish something. It is impossible to work for a nonprofit organization or service provider without engaging in some degree of advocacy. Whether you are a fundraiser, a volunteer, a social worker or manager, your passion for ending homelessness will inevitably be communicated to others. This is advocacy, even if you are simply telling someone in line behind you at the grocery store about the work you do. Your voice can be effective!

The best advocacy has a clear audience, focused messages, and specific goals, such as asking legislators to put more money into a housing trust fund or asking a reporter to write a story about the need for mental health services for homeless children. If you know what you want, it is more likely you will obtain it. Many times, advocacy is easy: telling key audiences about the work you do so they are informed.

1. The National Center on Family Homelessness. (2011). *America's Youngest Outcasts 2010*. Needham Heights, MA.

## Who Is the Audience for Your Advocacy Efforts?

Whether you engage in local, state, or federal advocacy, efforts should be aimed at decision-makers. When working on reducing or eliminating child homelessness in your community, it is likely that policymakers will be a key audience. Many laws originate in your state legislature, so state legislators and Governors are often a logical place to start. Federal legislators are responsible for a great deal of the funding for programs for homeless children and families, so they are a key target. Before you begin, learn as much as you can about both the individual legislators and about laws and perceptions pertaining to homelessness. This is critical to both educating policymakers and figuring out the best ways to approach them.

One thing to keep in mind is that the federal government and many state and local governments work to end homelessness through the direction of the federal government's Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH). USICH's mission is to "coordinate the federal response to homelessness and to create a national partnership at every level of government and with the private sector to reduce and end homelessness in the nation while maximizing the effectiveness of the federal government in contributing to the end of homelessness." USICH promotes utilizing 10-Year Plans to end homelessness in communities. It is helpful to find out if your state has an ICH or a state plan to end homelessness and to review this before starting your advocacy work.

## We recommend five easy steps to guide your advocacy work:

### Step 1: Identify Your Target Audience and Message

In order to create messages that will truly resonate with people who can influence your issue, it is critical to define and prioritize your audiences (e.g., local reporters, funders, state legislators, U.S. Senators and Representatives). It is important to make sure that the audience is narrowly-focused and homogenous enough that you reach them with one set of messages. Groups such as "voters" or "the general public" are too broad and diverse to consider an audience. Narrowing them down into "all Republican women ages 40-50 living within the city limits," would create a realistic audience. Remember, an audience can consist of just one person, such as a policymaker or a funder.

When prioritizing audiences, think about which group or individual you need to influence in order to achieve your goals related to child homelessness. Once you have prioritized your audiences, you need to decide what your "ask" is for each one. You may simply want an audience to have a clearer understanding of the scope of the problem. For others, you may want to ask for money, legislation, or volunteers. Remember that before you ask an audience to take action, you need to ensure that they understand and support your cause.

Some questions that can assist you in refining your messages for each audience include:

- Which audiences are most important to the success of your goals and programs?
- What does each audience value?
- What does this audience know about your issues?
- How do they feel about your issues?
- What values and goals do you share with this audience?

# Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps

Whether you are an individual advocate or part of an organization or network, it is important to know which issues are most important to you. Before contacting a policymaker, make sure you have a specific task or purpose in mind and know who to contact, whether it is your local city council or the U.S. Congress. Informing policymakers about the issues is important, but it should be stated in a very clear and understandable manner.

## Step 2: Do Your Research

Whether you advocate as an individual or as part of a group, organization, or network, it is important to do research before planning your efforts. Taking action may be as simple as briefly researching an issue and picking up the phone to contact your policymaker. When you have more time or are part of a larger group, you should consider additional steps, such as communicating with your allies to maximize impact, learning about local resources, setting your goals, and developing an advocacy plan.

Make sure you understand the legislative process. Even the most basic understanding of the process will help you more effectively express your ideas to the appropriate audience.

### TIP:

For information on the legislative process, including how a bill becomes a law, go to: [www.votesmart.org/education/how-a-bill-becomes-law](http://www.votesmart.org/education/how-a-bill-becomes-law)

Timing is a critical component for effective advocacy. When planning your efforts, keep in mind that federal and state governments work by their own calendar and fiscal year.

Times to keep in mind when advocating on the federal level include:

- **January:** The President gives his State of the Union address, highlighting his priorities for the year.
- **February:** Traditionally, the President releases his Budget on the first Monday in February. The Budget highlights the Administration's priorities and sets the tone for congressional debate.
- **February-March:** Congress begins work on the annual budget process. House and Senate Budget Committees begin work on their own budget resolutions, decide how much can be spent and begin to divide spending totals into broad categories. This is a good time to contact House and Senate Budget Committee members asking them to make child and family homelessness a priority.
- **April:** April 15th is the traditional deadline for Congress to pass its budget resolution, setting broad parameters for federal spending. However, Congress rarely meets the April 15th deadline. During this time, if your member is on the Budget Committee, ask that he/she make child and family homelessness a priority. If your representative is not on the Budget Committee, ask them to contact Budget Committee members about making child and family homelessness a priority.
- **May-June:** House and Senate Appropriations Committees set spending limits for their respective appropriations subcommittees. These committees are very important as they decide how much funding programs serving child and homeless families will receive. This is an appropriate time to contact your member, if he/she is on the Appropriations Committee ask he/she to make programs supporting homeless children and families a priority by increasing funding. If your representative is not on the Appropriations Committee, ask them to contact the Committee members about making child and family homelessness a priority.
- **June-July:** Appropriations Subcommittees pass bills to designate funding for specific programs. In recent years, the Committees have taken longer to do this, sometimes resulting in omnibus appropriations bills or long-term continuing resolutions to fund federal government programs. This is another good

# Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children

time to reach out to your member asking them to increase funding for programs supporting homeless children and families.

- **August:** Congress takes its summer recess. This is a good time to meet with members of Congress in their home states and districts. You can also invite your representatives to visit your organization or a homeless shelter, nonprofit, or other such entity in your district.
- **September-October:** Congress targets this time for adjournment. It is the deadline for passing funding bills. The federal fiscal year begins in October. Congress must enact a continuing resolution (CR) if it fails to meet this deadline. A CR allows the government to temporarily continue operating at the previous year's funding levels. Additionally, during the summer and fall, federal agencies develop and submit budgets to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). These are considered in the development of the President's Budget. This is a good time to ask members to support funding for programs for homeless children and families in the final appropriations bill.
- **November:** Elections are held during even-numbered years.

Each state legislature has its own calendar. Make sure to know this as well. This can usually be found on your state legislature's website.

Before contacting your federal or state representatives, it is important to know which committees they serve on. This will give you an idea of how much influence they may have over homelessness and related issues. For instance, if your member serves on a committee that has oversight on these issues, it is even more important to keep in contact and build relationships with him/her. If your member does not, then it is important to keep him/her informed about the issue and contact them at key times when they can make a difference (e.g., when legislation is up for a vote on the House or Senate floor, you can let them know if they should vote in favor or oppose).

### Step 3: Communicate Your Message Effectively

Whether you are advocating to your local city council or the U.S. Congress, the goals of your efforts are likely to require action by a decision-making body. Working with policymakers requires persistence, respect, and a compelling message.

Elected officials care about what voters think and have to say. To really make a difference as an advocate, you should be informed and engaged. It is key to know the message you want to get across and how to best frame that message for various audiences. You do not need to be an expert or professional lobbyist to be an effective voice for homeless children and families. You will need to know some basics about the issue and where your member stands on these issues. For instance, have they voted in favor of legislation to help homeless children and families in the past? What issues were part of their election platform (what do they care about)? Take a look at their voting records and get to know their policy priorities.

You should stay aware of what issues or bills your policymakers are working on. If there is a debate on education or health care, see if you can find a natural entry point for discussing the issue in relation to homeless children and families. Educating policymakers and keeping them aware of the many ways homelessness impacts children is a vital part of effecting change in your community.

#### TIP:

Some websites to obtain contact information for your state and federal elected officials are:

[www.congress.org/congressorg/dbq/officials](http://www.congress.org/congressorg/dbq/officials)

[www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org)

[www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm](http://www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm)

A key advantage a local advocate has is that he/she can provide policymakers with stories and data directly from their district. You can provide a local perspective and make the problem of child and family homelessness more personal. By making your voice heard regularly, you can help your elected officials understand which policies and programs have a positive effect on their district as well as which ones may not be functioning as intended. Remember, you have the greatest leverage with

# Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps

your own policymakers, rather than with those representing other congressional districts or states.

When the opportunity arises to speak with a policymaker, you will not always have a lot of time to make your case. Ask your policymaker to support your issue or cosponsor legislation. When legislation is introduced, ask policymakers to cosponsor the legislation. Work with policymakers and supply information about how you can help make the legislation most effective. When communicating with a policymaker make sure that you are answering these important questions:

- What is the effect of the issue in their district?
- What does this mean to my organization/homelessness service providers/nonprofits serving homeless children and families in my community?
- What is the cost of not doing anything on this issue?
- What possible actions can be taken? What are the consequences of these actions?
- Who else cares about this issue in my community?

## Step 4: Build Relationships

Building relationships with policymakers and other potential allies—individuals or groups—in your community is important to advocacy. Relationships with policymakers and their staff should be based on respect and trust; this will build a solid foundation to bring the change you seek. For the most part, the more relationships you have, the more effective your advocacy will be.

While relationships with policymakers themselves are useful, more often, it will be their staff members you will be in contact with. Legislative staff members are an important part of a member's office. A member cannot be an expert on every policy issue that pertains to their constituents or district. Legislative staff members advise their legislator on issues and are key allies in influencing their boss. Members rely on staff to guide them in their decisions. Staff members can provide you with information about what their boss is focusing on, what information they need, and what others who might oppose your position are saying. You

will also be able to gage their boss's interest level regarding child and family homelessness policies. In turn, you can help support their work by informing them about child and family homelessness in their district and building support for their work. The following highlights the roles of key staff members for most congressional offices:

### *Legislative Director, Legislative Assistant or Legislative Coordinator*

The Legislative Director is usually the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues. In congressional offices, there are several Legislative Assistants; responsibilities are assigned to staff with particular expertise in specific areas. For example, depending on the responsibilities and interests of the member of Congress, an office may include a different Legislative Assistant for housing issues, child welfare, healthcare, etc. This is most likely the person you will be able to contact and communicate with.

### *Press Secretary or Communications Director*

The Press Secretary's responsibility is to build and maintain open lines of communication between the member of Congress, his or her constituency, and the general public. The Press Secretary is expected to be the expert on print and electronic media and on how to most effectively promote the member's views on specific issues.

### *Scheduler*

This person is responsible for allocating a member's time among his or her many commitments and demands from congressional responsibilities, staff requirements, and constituent requests. This person may also be responsible for coordinating travel arrangements, speaking events, etc.

## Step 5: Contact Policymakers

As an advocate, you can choose from several techniques for communicating with policymakers, including: calling, emailing, personal visits, attending and being involved in hearings, writing policy briefs or position papers, and providing testimony.

### *Making Calls*

Policymakers notice when constituents make the effort to call and convey their views on specific issues. Usually, if an office receives more than a dozen calls from constituents on a particular issue, it will be brought to the attention of the legislator. So, please make your calls, but also urge your family, friends, network, and colleagues to do the same.

When you are connected to your member's office, ask to speak to the Legislative Assistant in charge of homelessness, housing, and/or children and family issues. If they are not available, leave a message on their voicemail or with the staff assistant answering the phone.

Be brief and polite:

1. Introduce yourself;
2. Let them know you are a constituent;
3. Convey the purpose of your call and what action you would like to see taken (for example: support for funding or legislation, voting on a particular bill);
4. Add any supporting evidence, data, or anecdotes about child and family homelessness;
5. Thank the staff for taking your call.

Additionally, you can call the White House at 202-456-1111 or send an email to [comments@whitehouse.gov](mailto:comments@whitehouse.gov). Each of these calls and emails are logged and noted.

### *Writing Your Policymaker*

Writing a letter, email, or fax to your policymaker or completing an action alert is an effective way to let policymakers know your position on an issue. Many state and federal legislators give an issue more attention when they receive many letters from constituents. You can write a policymaker for many reasons including: showing support for a program,

informing them of an issue in their district, supporting or opposing legislation, asking to increase funding for programs related to child and family homelessness, or thanking them for their vote on an issue.

To write an effective letter:

- Include the policymakers name and address.
- State your purpose in the first paragraph.
- Keep it short and to the point (no more than 1-2 pages).
- Be informative and polite.
- Get personal; speak from your own experiences and perspective.
- Ask for a response about their views on the issue or bill. Offer your assistance and state that you are open to discuss these issues further.
- Sign your name and add your address so you can receive a response.

If you are writing about a particular bill or program:

- Describe the effect you think a particular bill will have, if it becomes law.
- Cite the bill by number or the policy by name.
- State your position (are you for or against the bill or policy) and why you hold that position.
- If you are sending an email, identify the bill or program in the subject line.

### *Visiting Policymakers*

Sitting down with your local, state, and federal policymakers is another way to convey your message and is often the most effective way to develop relationships. Elected officials can be visited at their offices (in Washington, the State Capitol, the City Council chambers, local district offices) or whenever they are engaged in public business.

Whether you are meeting with a policymaker or one of their staff take the following steps to ensure a successful meeting:

- Contact the policymaker's office to make an appointment (no one likes a pop in visit!). Tell them why you want to meet and who will be attending.
- Show up on time with any relevant materials that help make your case. Be sure to leave relevant materials behind.
- State your purpose, be brief and to the point.

# Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps

- Speak locally; let the policymaker know how this issue affects his or her constituents and why it should matter.
- Let the policymaker know what you would like them to do to support homeless children and families. For example, support or oppose a piece of legislation, support funding increases or oppose funding cuts to programs serving homeless children and families, etc.
- Ask his/her thoughts on the issue.
- Thank those you met with and show respect. Agree to send follow up information.
- Follow up with a thank you email or note after the meeting.

## *Offering Testimony*

Another effective way to advocate is providing testimony before a committee, public hearing, or legislative commission. Testimony can be submitted in written form or can be given in person. Typically, you must be invited to testify live before a committee, but you should be proactive about getting an invitation. In most cases this takes time, relationship building, and effectively displaying your expertise on the issue. The time allocated for live testimony may be short. Using your time to the best advantage is critical. To effectively provide testimony:

- Introduce yourself and convey why you are interested in the issue.
- Give a brief introduction of the issue and background on the issue.
- Explain your position on the issue.
- Share why you take your position (use data, facts, and anecdotes to back up your position) and recognize alternative positions.
- Ask policymakers to support your position.
- Offer follow up assistance and a thank-you.

## **Additional Options**

You can also use social media including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to advocate. You can post a news story about child and family homelessness on Facebook pages, share links to YouTube video clips of local news stories, invite policymakers or staff to

your events, and encourage colleagues and allies to call or write policymakers. While Twitter may be used as an individual's personal newsfeed, it also can be a useful platform for organizations as well. You can share information, offer feedback to breaking news, team up to spread the word about worthy initiatives, and advance advocacy priorities. Tweets can help educate people and have the potential to influence policymakers.

Even if no immediate action is taken on your issues, you can become the “go-to” organization for your policymakers. Keep in touch with them and their staff on a regular basis to update them on homelessness issues in your community, on how foreclosures and lay-offs are affecting children in your state, and on developing national trends that could affect you locally.

If you are a grassroots, membership organization or a service provider with many clients, don't be afraid to highlight the numbers you serve and the size of your constituency. Organize a letter-writing campaign or a phone banking operation among your constituents. Legislators and Governors are as influenced by public opinion as anyone else. Keep up a drumbeat. As much as possible, try to keep your constituents on message so it will resonate with policymakers.

**Don't give up! Don't let one defeat discourage you. Changes don't happen overnight, but if you stay committed, you will succeed.**

## **Learn More**

You can find information about policies related to child and family homelessness at:

The National Center on Family Homelessness  
[www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org)

National Alliance to End Homelessness  
[www.endhomelessness.org/section/take\\_action](http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/take_action)

Zero to Three  
[www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/](http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/)

# Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps

*Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children* is generating knowledge on improving the housing, health and development of young homeless and at-risk young mothers and their children.

*Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps* was written by The National Center on Family Homelessness. The primary author was Natalie Coupe, Policy Director, Campaign to End Child Homelessness, The National Center on Family Homelessness, with support from Debra Medeiros, Senior Advisor, The National Center on Family Homelessness, and Ellen Bassuk, President, The National Center on Family Homelessness. The *Advocating to End Child and Family Homelessness: Five Easy Steps* is a product of The National Center on Family Homelessness on behalf of the *Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children* Coordinating Center, which is a partnership of The National Center on Family Homelessness, National Alliance to End Family Homelessness and ZERO TO THREE. The Coordinating Center provides technical assistance to program sites, conducts cross-site process and outcome evaluations and develops a range of application products from the study sites. *Strengthening At Risk and Homeless Young Mothers and Children* is an *Initiative* of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.

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For more information on this *Initiative*, please contact The National Center on Family Homelessness, 200 Reservoir Street, Needham, MA; (617) 964-3834 or at [www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org).



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