Episode 12 – "Advancing Educational Access for Students Experiencing Homelessness with Pennsylvania's State Coordinator" Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Hello, and welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am one of your hosts, Melissa Turnpaugh, youth development coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities.

Matthew Butensky:

And I'm your co-host, Matthew Butensky, project manager at the Center for Schools and Communities. Thank you for joining us on today's episode of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. Today on our podcast, we're very lucky because we have our state McKinney-Vento coordinator and coordinator for Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program, Mr. Storm Camara, with us today. Mr. Camara, welcome to the podcast.

Storm Camara:

Thank you for having me, everyone. I'm glad to be here today.

Matthew Butensky:

Yes, Melissa convinced you to join our podcast episode, so we're so excited to have you. We're actually having coffee and conversation today in our podcast. So, we wanted to start off with asking what is everyone's morning beverage of choice?

Storm Camara:

So for me, I guess I would have to say green tea with a little lemon and some honey works every time.

Matthew Butensky:

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Nice. So you get a little caffeine. Not too much. Melissa?

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Well, if I am at home, then it is a nice cup of coffee with some caramel macchiato creamer. But if I'm getting fancy and stopping somewhere, then I like either a hot caramel macchiato or a cold one. So, anything caramel will do.

Matthew Butensky:

The famous caramel, Melissa.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Always.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah, I like to start with coffee. I'm a huge coffee drinker. So, coffee with some lovely seasonal creamer, and then I move into maybe a latte later in the day. But yeah, those are our coffee choices and tea choices. We're spilling the tea today on the McKinney-Vento program here on the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. So, we're going to get started. And, Melissa, why don't you get us started with our questions today for Mr. Camara?

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Mr. Camara, thanks for being with us today on our podcast. So as Matt mentioned, you are PA's Education for Children and Youth State Coordinator. So, can you tell us more about your role for our listeners and maybe what the functions of the state coordinator does?

Storm Camara:

As a state coordinator, I am appointed and commissioned by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to be the gatekeeper, so to speak, for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth federal grant. So, my primary goal there is to ensure that those funds are spent equitably around the state, appropriately, and that we document those uses of funds.

Another significant part of my job is to settle any kind of disputes amongst the Commonwealth between parents and the corresponding school districts in which they live. Another major role since 2017, 2018 is that I have been dealing with the independence monitoring by third parties that the state is now required to perform due to directions from the federal government. So those are the three major areas that I'm responsible for.

Matthew Butensky:

So that's a lot to unpack there. And I wanted to talk about the disputes. So, what are some of the disputes, why might disputes arise for our listeners who might not be familiar with the

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ECYEH program McKinney-Vento? Why do disputes arise around the education of children, youth experiencing homelessness?

Storm Camara:

As we move forward, and we all can view the economic environment in the country, let alone the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, individuals both pre and post-pandemic have been increasingly experiencing homelessness. So, individuals may be displaced from their homes due to losing their homes. They may be displaced due to fires or natural disasters. The parents may divorce and suffer economic hardship or various other situations involving unaccompanied home issues, teens, and other domestic issues.

So, because of those increases, individuals have had to move to other school districts. They may have to move in with family members in another school district. It may be economically more prudent to move into another school district. There may be concerns of transportation and other matters. There may be special education concerns involved. So, when those parents and school districts disagree, they seek my office and my corresponding regional coordinators to assist in those disputes.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah, got it. So, kind of mediating those disputes and making sure that the kids get what they need and have access to education.

Storm Camara:

Yes.

Matthew Butensky:

So going back to that equity piece you were talking about. You also talked about monitoring. So, this is a federally protected special group of students, and I don't know if a lot of people know that schools are monitored for their compliance with this law. Can you talk a little bit more about monitoring?

Storm Camara:

Yes. So, we have two levels of monitoring. Because we have a regional system, the regional monitors, which are eight regions throughout the Commonwealth, are monitored directly by me as the state coordinator. Then we have individual LEA monitoring that is done by a third-party group of independent contractors. Those monitorings are then reviewed by myself and the state data team.

So, every LEA, including public schools, charter schools, and tech programs. Every cycle, a cycle is once every three years, will be monitored by the state. And that monitoring process includes reviewing their use of Title 1 funds, their training and identification practices, their use of, currently, the ARP-HCY funding and their staffing.

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Matthew Butensky:

Yeah, thank you for that. Great. Any other questions about that, Melissa, that you had for Mr. Camara?

Melissa Turnpaugh:

No, not at this moment.

Matthew Butensky:

Okay. How long have you been in this role?

Storm Camara:

I would say approximately eight years, since April of 2016.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

How have you seen the program grow within the last several years that you've been here?

Storm Camara:

That's a great question. So, I have seen the program grow in various ways. At my office, of course, at the state level, there is myself at the Pennsylvania Department of Education. I have an increasingly growing team at the Center for Schools and Communities that works with us. And then we have also a data team out of IU 3 in Pittsburgh. In that time period, there have been changes in our technology use. There have been increases in staffing.

We have improved our data practices and transmitting that data to the federal government. Of course, identification and the ability to identify both increases and improves our funding and access to other resources. So, the better we identify, the better we are able to demonstrate to the federal government that not only are we doing what is best for our students, but we are ensuring that they have the appropriate information necessary to justify the funding that we request.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. Identification is such a huge part of the work that you do and that we do here to try to improve scenarios for students that are experiencing homelessness. So, thanks for that. We wanted to talk a little bit about how the work is completed here in Pennsylvania, and you just talked about your role as the state coordinator.

Pennsylvania also has a regional support network, and that is pretty unique to Pennsylvania. A few other states have a similar model. Can you talk a little bit about the regional support network that we have here in Pennsylvania?

Storm Camara:

Yeah, so as I stated earlier, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has eight regions, region one primarily consisting of the Philadelphia area. We have then our regions 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Some have larger geographical areas than others. Primarily, we look at those geographic areas and then review the numerical density of students experiencing homelessness. So that ratio typically balances out. So, some may look at our map, which is at the Pennsylvania Department of Education website and wonder why region one is so small.

When you factor in the density of the number of students experiencing homelessness in the Philadelphia region, it begins to make a little more sense. So, amongst those regions, of course, we have urban centers, we have suburban centers, and then we have our large rural areas. And then those regional coordinators have a great depth of understanding of the needs in their areas. So, of course, being in a rural area and an urban area may have some similarities, but they also often have some dramatic differences as well.

Matthew Butensky:

What do you think are the benefits of our regional model here in PA?

Storm Camara:

So, one of the great things is that we, as best as we can, using the data, distribute funding as we find our students experiencing homelessness. Again, when we look at our density and then look at the data, the money is going to go in Pennsylvania where the students are.

There are other states, of course, we are not stepping on toes, but other states that focus most of their federal and state funding on particular cities and they omit the needs in greater or larger rural areas. In Pennsylvania, we, as equitably as possible, during my tenure, have distributed using the data, our funds, our resources, and our experience.

Matthew Butensky:

That's really helpful to know. Pennsylvania is a big complex state and like you described, we have urban centers, we have rural areas, but homelessness occurs in all of them. Even though the density might look different, it is still something that happens everywhere. So, thank you for sharing that.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

And you touched on when talking about the regional approach and just the data that we collect, how have you seen different trends across Pennsylvania and how that has either increased, decreased, any of the insights that you might be able to share from that data to show our listeners how there's been students experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania in all different settings.

Storm Camara:

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So gradually, over, I think the past eight years, one of the biggest rises we've seen is the area of unaccompanied homeless youth. So that age of unaccompanied homeless youth typically were our teenage years where young men and women are starting to identify themselves and understand themselves. So those secondary high school students where they start to disagree or rebel against their parents, we start to see those examples of unaccompanied homeless youth. Those age ranges, however, have started to become younger that we've identified in the past eight years since I've been sitting in this chair. One of the other things that have increased over the past eight years that we've identified is an increase in the need for transportation.

And people who are experiencing homelessness are moving further away from their school districts of origin, which calls for this need, sometimes necessary, sometimes voluntary or involuntary. There's a greater distance requiring an additional need for transportation along with the increasing cost of transportation and the lack of availability in certain areas for transportation. So that's been an increasing need as well. One of the other areas we've identified that have begun to increase and modify over time is our early childhood students. So, in looking at our kindergarten, first, second-grade students, our primary grades, we start to pay more attention to the data and, of course, identify that if there's a 5- or 6- or 7-year-old child in the household, there may be some 2-, 3- or 4-year-olds going into early childhood education in need of early childhood education services.

And of course, if that first-grader or second-grader is homeless, their corresponding siblings are also experiencing the same thing. Those have been some of the three biggest areas that have been a concern. Since the mandate in 2016 of ESSA, Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016, we have also started to take a great look in using our data to examine how many students are leaving the secondary environment and going into higher education. Although those numbers have gradually been increasing, we're also trying to identify as a state, how can we assist those students experiencing homelessness and leaving the secondary or public school or charter school environment, how we assist them in moving forward in higher education or, of course, their trades, et cetera.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's super important. Thank you for sharing just the increase. You mentioned a couple of different populations. We have our unaccompanied early childhood. How can you explain to our listeners what some misconceptions might be about students experiencing homelessness that they may not be aware of?

Storm Camara:

So, there are students experiencing homelessness in every arena. You will find students experiencing homelessness in our most affluent school districts, you'll find students experiencing homelessness in our rural areas, and, of course, our urban centers. You'll find students who are meeting the needs or definition of special education, not just special education as academic deficiencies, but also those who are mentally gifted experiencing homelessness.

The action or situation of experiencing homelessness affects all of us. A person or a family can lose a job or lose a home through a fire. Anything could happen at any time. So, a lot of the

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misconceptions of homelessness span from that lack of understanding that we are all, or we all can be affected by this.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, I know sometimes when I have random conversations, a lot of people are unaware of exactly how many students are experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania. It always comes as a shock because a lot of times when people think homelessness, they just think 18 and older. So, thanks for sharing that.

Storm Camara:

I'd also like to add there that we also have, under the definition of McKinney-Vento, a lot of individuals who are multi-generational, so they are living with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles. So, though you don't see them living in a car or you don't see them in a park or you don't see them in your urban centers downtown on a bench, that doesn't mean that they are not experiencing homelessness because they're doubled up in these other environments.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's a really good point.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. I know you've talked to us a lot about how there is an element of invisibility to a lot of children who are experiencing homelessness, so we try to keep that in mind in our work. And as you talked about, there's all different causes of homelessness. Why is this such an important topic for schools to engage in? Why is it so important to reach these children and youth in schools and during the school day?

Storm Camara:

So, there's a term of understanding that says 10% of anything can become a tipping point. The population of students experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania, when you look at the big picture, may only range to 2 to 3% at any given time across the entire Commonwealth. And people may say that that 2 to 3% is a very small percentage of our students. However, when you factor in the volume of a particular school or the density of a particular area, that number becomes larger and larger. So, 2% of a school district that is 3 million is a pretty significant number.

Two percent of a school district, that's 500,000, it's still a significant number. So, I think that's the gauge in which we have to measure that 2 or 3%. Also, these 1 or 2 or 3% may be the children of our future that we need to influence the next ideas in medicine, the next STEM research, the next artists, the next musicians, the next engineers. So, reinforcing and help assisting them in facilitating their academic process can be one of the best benefits we as a commonwealth can do for our populace.

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Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. And speaking of the numbers, I know that Pennsylvania's identification has been increasing. So where are we around for this year in the numbers?

Storm Camara:

So as of last year, we were just above 40,000, and we are possibly seeing an increase of anywhere from 4 to 8%. Don't quote me on that, I'm not-

Matthew Butensky:

Sure, I get it.

Storm Camara:

I don't have those numbers in front of me. It may be more. We, of course, don't have all of our data finalized until typically October of the following school year. But as of our last verified numbers, we were above 40,000.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah, that's a lot of children and youth. So, the American Rescue Plan - Homeless Children and Youth program, also known as ARP-HCY, it really provided a large injection of funding to support students experiencing homelessness throughout our country, but also here in Pennsylvania too. How have the funds from ARP-HCY benefited students experiencing homelessness here in PA? What are some of the things that you've seen?

Storm Camara:

We've had a great opportunity to infuse new measures in technology from our app, Finding Your Way in PA. We have also had the ability to look at an oncoming online mental health platform, and that is titled The Bridge. You'll be hearing more about that soon as we move into the end of this school year and into the next one. We've had the ability to provide various technology from cell phones to iPads to laptops to students all over the Commonwealth and provide them with phone service, internet service to give them access to everything they need and some of the things they may not.

And it's also given us the ability to increase staffing, which is a very appropriate use of the funds, being able to provide assistance with extracurricular needs, wraparound services. So overall, there's been a great assistance to move ideas forward that we've had but did not have the finances to perform.

Matthew Butensky:

Yes, we've been able to do projects a little bit outside of the box, like you've said, and it's been exciting to see those projects unfold here in PA. And I think it has lent to progress for a lot of

schools and our regional offices as well, and of course, here at the state level too. So exciting times with ARP-HCY, but we know it's been a lot of funding and it's been interesting to use that funding and see how it's been working.

So, we wanted to talk a little bit, we talked earlier about the history context of PA's ECYEH program, what are the trends you've been seeing? We wanted to think forward and we wanted to talk a little bit about what are your hopes for this program here in Pennsylvania? What would you like to see happen or continue to happen and how that might affect the students that we are focusing on in this work?

Storm Camara:

So, one of my largest motivations currently, and one of the things I discussed internally with my regional coordinators and their staff in the previous school year, is that I would really like to see us focus on our students who are in secondary education and start getting them into these new and exciting trends in trade schools. We have, in America as a whole, forgotten our plumbers, our electricians, our water conservationists, all of these folk that use their hands or as some would say, have the skills to pay the bills. It was never intended that we all be academics or doctors or lawyers. We need plumbers, we need welders, we need carpenters.

All of these people make the world move. They are necessary in the 21st century in moving forward. There are also jobs and skills that will always be needed as long as we have a human populace. That being said, we need to make sure that our students, if they choose to, have access and information about getting into those careers because there are different kinds of intelligences as well. So whereas some of us are better readers or listeners, some of us are really great with our hands, so we need to focus on those students as well. And those are where some of the more exciting and adventurous careers are coming from, especially with this increase in technology.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. Obviously, our work is focused on identification, but then we also really uncover how much we can do collaborating with other bodies at PDE, the Department of Education, and outside of PDE, like as we talked about earlier, early childhood education, career and technical education, higher education. There's a lot of opportunity to uplift these students by collaborating. So I think that will be an important direction to head and well said. So, thank you, Storm.

Storm Camara:

I would also like to share with our listeners that coming this fall, October 16th through 18th, 2024, in King of Prussia, we will be hosting our Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference, our state conference that demonstrates and highlights all of our information concerning students experiencing homelessness. So again, our fall conference hosted by the Pennsylvania Department of Education will be October 16th through 18th, 2024, in King of Prussia, Paving the Way to Educational Success. Stay tuned.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

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Thank you for sharing all the different things and just giving the data and information about our regional approach and being able to identify those experiencing homelessness. We want our listeners to know, are there other ways that they can help in their communities if they know of students experiencing homelessness and how they might be able to do that.

Storm Camara:

So that first step that's been mentioned throughout this podcast is identification. So, if a student who may be too shy to inform their school district or someone in their staff that they are experiencing homelessness, by all means reach out to a school counselor, reach out to a principal or a vice principal. I know we don't say that I'm showing my age in assistant principal. Let them know that a student is experiencing homelessness. That's step one. Beyond that, in our community centers, our Boys and Girls Clubs, our PAL clubs, all of those things and places where people go after school, those students experiencing homelessness may not have the funding or accessibility to various objects they need or uniforms or equipment.

So, supporting those places where students who are experiencing homelessness as well as other students may need those extracurricular supports, assist them there. The third part is the social-emotional component, letting those students know whether they're at elementary or secondary school, that they are still important and needed, and if they need someone to speak to about anything, you're there to give them that listening ear and that support.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's great advice. And hopefully, people in their communities are aware of the different community organizations that are around and are able to step up and volunteer or find ways that they can participate. So, I think that's great advice for our listeners. So, we just want to thank you for being with us today. So, with that message, we're going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you, Mr. Camara, for being with us today.

Storm Camara:

Again, thank you for having me.

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