



Episode 4 - School is Home 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:

I am your co-host, Matthew Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. We are super excited that you're joining us for today's episode of I Will Be Your Voice Podcast. On today's episode, we are speaking with a Regional Coordinator with the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program from Lincoln Intermediate Unit, Sonia Pitzi.

Matthew Butensky:

Sonia has worked with students experiencing homelessness for over 27 years, actually 28 years this fall, eliminating educational barriers for homeless students and unaccompanied teens through partnerships and coordination with school districts, shelters, and other community agencies. We are now really excited to welcome Sonia to today's podcast episode. Welcome, Sonia.

Sonia Pitzi:

Thank you. Thank you both for having me. It's truly an honor and humbling to be part of this, so thank you.

Matthew Butensky:

It's so good to have you here. We're really excited, and we want to just talk about all the work that you have done throughout the last, as we just said, 28 years almost for Pennsylvania's ECYEH program. We wanted to start a little bit more foundational and just talking about Pennsylvania's ECYEH program. Can you describe the role of what you do with the ECYEH program as a Regional Coordinator, and what do our regions do throughout Pennsylvania for students experiencing homelessness?

Sonia Pitzi:

If I just stick with the regional, because I've been on both ends since the beginning of what Pennsylvania had, but if we just do regional, as a Regional Coordinator, we are in charge of our regions that are outlined through our regional map that PD has set forth. I am with Region Three and we call it ECYEH. It needs to be said.

Matthew Butensky:

ECYEH.

Sonia Pitzi:

ECYEH. It needs to be said. But as Regional Coordinators, it is our job to work with all of our school districts in our region. Every region has X amount of counties, X amount of school districts, and we must work with their liaisons and making sure that they know what the McKinney-Vento Act is. Because a lot of the times we found out at the beginning of the regional approach that education liaisons were just put on paper and then we started asking them to do their duties as an education liaison, as outlined in the duties and responsibilities that are mandated through the law.

Sonia Pitzi:

We make sure that all of our districts are in compliance with this federal educational law, and which is very important because if they're not in compliance, they could lose millions of federal dollars. And we don't want that to happen. We built relationships with our liaisons and we do presentations and trainings throughout the school districts. We also work within the community and work with partnerships that work with folks who are experiencing homelessness. Because we need to know what's out there.

Sonia Pitzi:

We can't just say, "Here's a backpack, Kid. Go on, be forth, be a great homeless kid." We need to be able to treat the whole family, treat the student, and figure out what resources are in our community. As Regional Coordinators, we really need to learn what's in our region and work within that to make sure that we are doing everything we can to lift and support our liaisons and our families who are experiencing homelessness.

Matthew Butensky:

Great. You help homeless liaisons at school districts identify students, and then you help with the referral process of getting community resources available to them, whether it be by their school district or another community-based organization or a shelter. You help coordinate and facilitate that?

Sonia Pitzi:

Yes. At first, when we first started, it was absolutely a lot of us finding out that information to share that with the liaisons. As it has grown in the regional approach, a lot of our school districts have built their own relationships within the community. Because we will have certain communities, will have smaller school districts that will be able to work with smaller businesses, let's say a pizza place, and that pizza place will do an awareness event or a back-to-school event. That's not something that I created, it's something that they built. But we helped at the beginning to start looking at, how do we make this look? How do we support our families and our students experiencing homelessness, and how do we meet the needs? Because we all know there isn't money in this.

Sonia Pitzi:

We are asking people to do a lot of things and support these students and families without a lot of money, and certainly no money to be able to do a lot of things. We want them to be able to figure out how to work the problem. That's what I always say to our folks, "We need to learn to work the problem." And they have learned to work the problem by building those foundations within their own communities. We work very closely with a lot of the consortiums, like continuum of care, where they have a lot of meetings. We go to those meetings and we provide that information to our liaisons because they don't have the time or capacity to do that. They're in the building and they're education liaisons, but that's not their only job. They're wearing like 17 different hats.

Sonia Pitzi:

We absolutely bridge that gap between the community and the agencies, communities and the school districts and working to bring them together.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. I love that you play that role because I think it's so important. Because as you said, the capacity at the school district level is thin for a lot of liaisons. I think our regional approach here in Pennsylvania really allows that extra layer of facilitating those services and supports and bridging the gap between schools and communities. But, and you already mentioned it, I wanted to talk a little bit about the changes and the progress you've seen from back when you started. Whether that's at the school district level or statewide, but you've been doing this work for decades. I don't mean to age you.

Sonia Pitzi:

No, I'm proud of it.

Matthew Butensky:

But the program and the work for these students has really, I'm sure, shifted over the time. What are some of the progress you've seen on this work in the last 10, 15 years, particularly?

Sonia Pitzi:

Since the regional approach, it was interesting to come from, I was a school district liaison holding the grant through PDE, and then PDE decided we were going to go from individual grants, like most of the country does, to a regional approach. Making that transition into region from an individual school district, it was an interesting change to try to figure out what that looked like. Because now, you're going from being responsible to one school district to being responsible to, in my case, 53 school districts. At the beginning, it was, how do we create this regional support? What is it supposed to look like? Because no one had a textbook on how to do that and what it should look like.

Sonia Pitzi:

It was great on one hand because it allowed those of us who had been doing this for a while, and I was very lucky to come on young and to know some of the original founders of the program and learn from them, and take that strong foundation and say, okay, this is what we liked being 100% in our school district. Now, how can we build that capacity for our region now to do that? As I said before, some people were just listed as education liaisons on paper. They didn't really take the time to know what McKinney-Vento was, didn't really take the time to really try to identify folks. It was a learning process for a good few years where people started to think, "Well, maybe I shouldn't be in this position."

Sonia Pitzi:

A lot of administrators were in the position and it was, put the superintendent's name down and the superintendent is doing all these other things. The superintendent is not seeing all the direct stuff. Then it became, we'll put in all these other people, and we just continued to evolve and grow, I think, in the more we educated the liaisons and the more we educated the regions. And the more we became educated as Regional Coordinators to know how to support and lift our liaisons.

Sonia Pitzi:

Who should be in the role? Now, there are still some folks who are in the role because of their title and name, because they have a little bit more power than some folks who don't. But

because of the regional approach, we have made sure that people are educated on all levels throughout the school district. School district buildings will have people that will report to the liaison who can then do what needs to be done throughout the district. It's really grown in that capacity, which I think has been extremely helpful, where you only had one person who allegedly knew about McKinney-Vento Act and now having a broader sense of the school district knowing about it.

Sonia Pitzi:

I don't think you can do the job in any capacity if you don't have people within your school district, within your community that know about the McKinney-Vento Act. Because if you don't know about it, how do you know to identify these students? Determining eligibility is always the murky part, but once we determine that they're McKinney-Vento eligible, the rest is cake. We know what must be done, but then it's, how do we determine if they're eligible? And that just comes through educating. With that regional approach and in educating everybody, it's really grown in that capacity.

Sonia Pitzi:

The other part is that as Regional Coordinators, we have been able to support each other. This is a federal law. Nothing is different. Just because my district looks very different from Philly or Northeast Corner or Northwest Corner, it does not matter. It's a federal law. We can share ideas. We can support each other. We can call each other. Because sometimes we are the only ones in our area that are the experts and we need someone else to talk to. We need to be able to share that expertise with each other or bounce questions off of. This is a situation that I have. Have you experienced this?

Sonia Pitzi:

That has been great from a regional perspective that us, Regional Coordinators, are really good about reaching out to each other. I think that that makes us strong as a state to be able to have that.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. Yeah. Being able to form that community among Regional Coordinators and then more locally and regionally, you hold events with homeless liaisons at school districts. It's really building capacity and making that ECVYEH family, that ECVYEH community. And then they take that back to their districts, more people know about it, more education. Yeah, thanks for sharing that.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Sonia, you know that the podcast is called I Will Be Your Voice, but what our listeners don't know is that you are behind the hashtag campaign of I Will Be Your Voice. Can you tell us why that hashtag? Where'd you come up with it?

Sonia Pitzi:

Sure. I have turned down many awards because people have said, "We want to give you this leadership award. We want to give you this community advocate award. We want you to come to this event and we're going to honor you. Will you bring students to this event so that we can photograph you and have you tell them the stories?" I would say, "No, I will not do that." "Well, if you don't do that, then we can't give you the award." Okay, I don't need the award. I'm not doing this job for accolades. I'm not doing this job to say that I have a shelf full of trophies. If I were doing this job for that, I'm in it for the wrong reason.

Sonia Pitzi:

I felt though, because I am different than some of our Regional Coordinators, where I do outreaches, street outreaches to our youth, I felt that their stories needed to be heard. But they did not need to be the face of homelessness, especially while they were experiencing it. While they were experiencing their trauma, they did not need to be the look of it. When we started Awareness Week, that was one of the things that I had a lesson on from TV producers and people. They were just like, "Well, we need a hook. We need a hook."

Sonia Pitzi:

I'm like, "Kids who are experiencing homelessness isn't enough of a hook? What do you mean you need a hook?" "Well, we want to interview someone." "You want to interview this 10-year-old who is going through this very traumatic situation? No, I'm not letting that happen." Then we didn't get pressed because again, I refused to have these students be the face, or these parents be the face of homelessness. But their stories are compelling and their stories need to be heard. Because if we don't humanize this and we don't use that hook that people want, then people are only going to think about the stereotypes that they know about homelessness.

Sonia Pitzi:

During one of my trainings, I always ask the question, when you think of homelessness, what do you think about? It's inevitably the adults. Inevitably, we have veterans, drug and alcohol, mental health, the bag lady, someone sleeping on the bench, et cetera, when we know statistically speaking that the average age of a person experiencing homelessness is between the age of nine and 12. So a person experiencing homelessness is a child, and we need to tell those stories and what that looks like.

Sonia Pitzi:

I, because of my outreaches, would get those stories. And I decided that, you know what? Some of you are old enough to write your stories down. Let's write it down and I'm going to have other people record it. And then I will be your voice. It started out as, I learned to not call it the pound sign because that's aging myself. It was the pound sign. It is the hashtag, and I remember trying to make the little things to make it whatever. The kids would always-

Matthew Butensky:

The hashes.

Sonia Pitzi:

Yes, the hashes.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

The hashes.

Sonia Pitzi:

I don't know. It was just so funny when we started it. The students nowadays are still all about trying to make me hip. I will never be hip and cool, but I will always accept and fully embrace my tech challenges. But because I wanted their stories to be told, I was able to get them to write it. Or if they were too young to write it, I would interview them and put it down on paper, and then someone would read them. A lot of our early videos on our YouTube channel are from people who read it from the very beginning, where they're holding the piece of paper and they're reading the story, I Will Be Your Voice. Because we have to be their voices so they don't have to be the faces.

Matthew Butensky:

That's a beautiful story. If listeners want to find some of those stories, they can find them on your YouTube channel?

Sonia Pitzi:

Yes.

Matthew Butensky:

Okay.

Sonia Pitzi:

If you search on YouTube for ECYEH PA, so E-C-Y-E-H P-A, you will find a series of videos. It'll say our program name on there and it'll have a lot of the videos on there that we have done. It also has the play that was written and I'm not sure if we'll be talking more about that, but yeah.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

No, we would actually love to hear about that.

Sonia Pitzi:

I started when I was 25, so I'm 53. Starting at 25 I think was the perfect age to be a sponge, to learn from the original founders of this program and really take in all the pieces from those people to be able to create basically the region. Once it went regional, no one had a template. So it was, "All right, here you are. You're now a Regional Coordinator." I'm now in my early 30s thinking, "Oh, well, I'm what? You want me to ...? Okay. Sure." I was able to create something. When you create something and you have that luxury of being able to create something how you think it should be, you meet great people.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Summer will be here before you know it. Once summer is over, will you be ready to go back to school? Get all your ingredients ready for a great school year in our Build Your Best School Year! Virtual Summer Camp. ECYEH's camp is designed to provide the skills and self-confidence students will need to start the 2023 school year on a high note. Join us Monday, August 7th to Friday, August 11th from 9:00 AM to 2:30 PM daily. Each camper will receive a Welcome to Camp Kit, including a free Amazon Fire 7 tablet and much more. You can find the link to register in the show notes. Hope to see you there.

Sonia Pitzi:

In my world of meeting people, I happened to meet someone who worked in the Carlisle area, who worked with agencies who were experiencing homelessness, got introduced to her. Chris is very much into theater, drama, has a whole background in all of that. In 2019, we were talking about the I Will Be Your Voice campaign, the hashtag campaign. I was telling her about this, and she's like, "I've always wanted to write a play about homelessness, but I just don't know what to do." I was telling her about these stories and she's like, "We can have monologues. We can have monologues that do this."

Matthew Butensky:

Cool.

Sonia Pitzi:

I was like, "Oh my God, that's awesome." Chris took stories from both of our experiences because she has experience working with families and students who are experiencing

homelessness. I have those experiences. Chris took a couple of stories that were word-for-word written by my students, or had taken some of the stories that I had told during presentations, created these monologues. And then from these monologues, we found actors. In 2019, during Awareness Week, we had the debut of *I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope*, Chris Kapp's play and had it in Carlisle. It was a smashing success. It's one more tool that we use in our toolbox because we have then since used that.

Sonia Pitzi:

In 2020, when the pandemic hit, we had to do Awareness week very differently, and we did a virtual event with that play. From that, we were able to take now just the videos, individual monologues, and be able to play that and pick and choose. But we have it from students who were age six, I think, all the way up to the graduating stories. It's just very impactful, I think, because they're true stories. It's nothing that we made up. They're all true. Again, we just need to be the voices that put it out there. We need to be the humanity that sometimes gets lost because we're talking about a law. We're asking schools to do X, Y, and Z, and they're being asked to do X, Y, and Z with no money coming in.

Sonia Pitzi:

Sometimes there's pushback because it's, you want me to transport them from where to where? That costs this much money. You want to do this? Well, that cuts this. And then it reduces the humanity of the population that we're working with. While I say that, when we work with the law, we have to remove the emotional part of it and I have to go back to what the law says because that's what keeps us in compliance. We are humans and we need to be able to understand why this is such an important law and why it's important that we have this in existence.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's so powerful. I'm so grateful that you're here and just the work that you're doing, giving them the opportunity to share their stories.

Sonia Pitzi:

Thank you.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Not enough people do that. It takes a lot, and it takes a village to really be able to amplify those voices for those students experiencing homelessness. I know earlier, you were touching a little bit on your street outreach. Can you tell us what you're doing on the ground when you're working with street outreach, what you're able to identify? What are the greatest needs maybe that our listeners aren't aware of?

Sonia Pitzi:

I do street outreach probably differently than what ... When people hear the word street outreach, it can mean many different things to many different people. So I will just say when I do my outreaches, what it looks like. What I discovered early on is that our unaccompanied youth who were teenagers did not have supports in resources anywhere. Because our unaccompanied youth who are teenagers did not have those supports, I would do those outreaches to our unaccompanied teenagers. It started out as a counselor saying, "Hey, Sonia, we have someone who's not willing to talk with us. Maybe they'll talk with you." That's how it started, and I learned that through Rooster Valentini from Allentown School District, who is one of the OGs of this program. Phenomenal human being.

Matthew Butensky:

Rooster has had more than one shout-out. He actually had a shout-out last week from Barbara Duffield.

Sonia Pitzi:

From Barbara?

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yes.

Sonia Pitzi:

Yes. Yes.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah.

Matthew Butensky:

Yes. The SchoolHouse Connection.

Sonia Pitzi:

Yes, and as he should. Again, our original founders were people that just did phenomenal things that the country has mirrored: Barbara, being a national person, knowing Rooster, because Rooster has done these great things. Rooster taught me because he did outreaches, and I will say, and I've said this to you all before, and I've said this publicly in many presentations, it's also a selfish thing for me. Because I'm considered now this administrative position, and I'm supposed to do the lot of the paperwork, a lot of the trainings, a lot of the visual. You must do this and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. When we went regional and I had to do all of that, I was fearful that I would lose that connection. But I didn't lose that connection intentionally and purposefully because I needed that, because I see the need for it.

Sonia Pitzi:

The unaccompanied teenagers that I do outreaches with are teenagers who are what we've termed throwaways. They've been thrown out of their homes, they've run away, they're couch-surfers. I have students right now who are in tents, storage units, abandoned buildings, and I work with those students. It started with counselors saying, "Hey, Sonia, do you think you can talk with this student?" I'll say, "Sure." Because sometimes talking to someone outside of your school district is safe. Because I don't have any power within that district, and they then feel like it doesn't matter. I'm not judging them and going to impact their education. But then after they talk with me, they realize that if anything, I'm going to make sure their education is going to be full and complete.

Sonia Pitzi:

You've heard some of the stories where I can't believe some of the districts not allowing things to happen for our students who are experiencing homelessness, who are unaccompanied, walking the stage. This is this time of year, graduation happens. We have had people say, "Well, because of your absences, you're not going to walk the stage." McKinney-Vento says you fully participate in school events. To me, walking the stage is a big thing. I don't care that you have a policy that says you had this many absences. If they were experiencing homelessness, they came to school, they filled the requirements to graduate, they will walk the stage. Every year, I have to talk to someone about why they think that that shouldn't happen. It costs zero money, it costs zero anything, other than the fact that these students get to walk the stage.

Sonia Pitzi:

In fact, I just had a regional meeting last week and one of my liaisons said their guidance counselor said, "Well, they're not walking the stage because they have a fee for a test they never showed up for." Really? Really? No.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

No.

Sonia Pitzi:

Yes, we absolutely need to hold our youth to a high standard. Anyone that I've done outreaches to, they know that I keep them to a very high standard. They ask me, "Can't you cut me a break?" I say, "No, I can't. Just because we have challenges in our life, that does not excuse our ability to work to make things better. That means having to use more tools in our toolbox, but I'm going to help give you those tools." The outreaches that I do, become a counseling session, become a cheerleading session, become a pushing of you to do what you need to do to graduate.

Sonia Pitzi:

I've had students days away from graduating who turned it around and not only graduated, went on to be far more successful than they ever believed. I knew they had the capacity to do that and are far more successful than I would ever be in terms of post-education and all of that. When I talk about outreaches, I'm doing it to that specific population, but I am also asked to speak with some families and things like that. Because as someone who doesn't work for the school district, I can be less intimidating to somebody.

Sonia Pitzi:

I go in there, I am usually dressed, thankfully, jeans and a T-shirt, in my non-girl clothes. Sports tends to be a unifier for people, and I know football, I know baseball. I can talk Steelers. I can talk Red Sox. It shouldn't be like this, but when the boys find out that I can talk sports, and then they try to talk smack to me. Against the Steelers, they'll be like, "Oh, well, New England's going to beat them," or whatever. I'll be like, "Name five players on the New England team," and they just look at me.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

They have nothing.

Sonia Pitzi:

Right. And then if they can list them, I say, "Where do they play?" They just have that look of, "Uh ...". Because if you're going to talk smack about something in anything you do in life, you need to be educated on it. If you want to have a discussion or a debate about sports, then know about it. Don't just try to front something. Everything is a teaching moment.

Sonia Pitzi:

It's funny, when I do things with the teens, they're always like, "Oh my gosh, you're teaching us something again, aren't you? Ugh." Or someone will say something to another teenager and they'll be like, "You got to put in your dues, man. You got to put in your dues. Because if you don't put in your dues, why should you get this?" And then they'll look at me and go, "Oh, crap. You told us that."

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

She was right again.

Sonia Pitzi:

"Ugh, God." I laugh because it's like, oh yeah, it's sticking. This is great. That's where the outreaches come into effect. I get to be outside of the district, but allowing them to be teenagers who are accepted fully in all of their flaws and all of their glory and all of their awesomeness that they don't even know that they have. They need to know that they are worthy of so much, despite the situation that they are living in. I always tell them, "I will believe in you until you believe in yourself." At graduation, they sometimes will be like, "Yeah. Okay, I believe in myself now." I'm like, "Yes."

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's huge.

Matthew Butensky:

That's awesome. I love that you do that, Sonia, that outreach because you see authenticity, and you have breakthroughs when you have that authenticity. And people know when you don't value them. You making those connections, and I think everyone can do better with making authentic connections with these students and kids, and so I think that's awesome that you do that. Thanks for sharing that.

Sonia Pitzi:

Absolutely. No problem. I appreciate that you say that because I think too often, people look at education and what our students need to do when there's a checklist. And there is not a checklist when we are working with students experiencing homelessness.

Matthew Butensky:

Yeah. You said humanizing the law, which is very prescriptive, but that takes away some of the human qualities. It's so important that you do that. With the I Will Be Your Voice campaign, I think you're amplifying that throughout the state in your region. It's really cool.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Definitely. Yeah. I've had some experience with unaccompanied youth in my prior days at Valley Youth House, but can you identify some of the barriers? I know you talked about some of them not being able to graduate due to absences or not paying a fee for a test. What are some of the other areas that you've come across?

Sonia Pitzi:

The biggest thing that I will say, and I will say it until it happens, we do not have enough resources for unaccompanied youth who are under the age of 18 and who are older than 14. I say that because we have a lot more grace and give a lot more grace to our unaccompanied youth who are younger. Our school districts will acknowledge, yes, you're unaccompanied because you're not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, but you're living with a family. We're going to give that grace because it's a little kid. Little kids don't have that choice, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.

Sonia Pitzi:

When we have the teenage set, people bring judgments into it. I don't care how many times people have heard me speak, if they've gone to every single one of my speeches, they hear me

say we must leave our judgment at the door, and with that means the judgment of what we think these students should choose to do. I will have people that will say, "Well, we know the family in this community. Those parents say they can come home at any time. They just have to follow the rules." Well, you know these teenagers nowadays, they just don't want to follow the rules. If they would just take out the garbage." Okay, it's not that easy.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

No.

Sonia Pitzi:

It's never that easy. When I first started doing that and someone said that to me, and I said, "I have a student that I'm working with who's staying in a tent, who'd rather stay in a tent because one of the rules he has to follow is that he's not allowed to be gay. Are you telling me that that's better and that's a choice, and that he should not be identified as McKinney-Vento because of this?" "Well, no, that's not what I'm saying." Again, it's trying to educate people about what unaccompanied youth is. We do not have resources for them. We don't have housing for them.

Sonia Pitzi:

We have some housing programs where they say, if you go through Children and Youth, we may be able to find something for you. Children and Youth may be working with Covenant House. Most of our students don't want to become part of the Children and Youth world. Also, the Children and Youth world is very overworked right now. If they find out that they have a roof over their head, they're not going to say that that's something that needs to be child-lined or helped or whatever.

Sonia Pitzi:

Homelessness is never a reason for there to be a mandated report as we are mandated reporters. But I work with our youth who we put down in a calendar, where are you staying for the next three days? If a teacher or someone calls in and says, "This student's homeless," and then the children youth worker goes and they find out, well, they're staying in a place that has a roof over their head, then it's not something that they can provide the resources for. We don't have enough resources for our youth who are unaccompanied. We don't have enough awareness about how we should identify these youth.

Sonia Pitzi:

We have awareness of how to identify from all the other sub definitions with our McKinney-Vento Act. We have the banner headline of fixed, regular and adequate, and then we have those sub definitions. But unaccompanied youth, and this is literally, I could do a five-day conference, full days, of just unaccompanied youth topics, and I don't think that people would leave there without still having questions and still learning that. We just don't have the resources, and we need to continue to build that knowledge base and build that non-judgmental space.

Matthew Butensky:

Yes. Yeah. I think it's important to remember that analogy of the iceberg. The top of the iceberg above the water is much smaller than what the iceberg looks like underneath the water. It's really important to, as you said, no judgment. We don't know everything that's going on. We don't have to know everything that's going on.

Sonia Pitzi:

Exactly.

Matthew Butensky:

Thank you for advocating for that. As we know, the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on students experiencing homelessness. We're coming out of the pandemic era now. We're getting back to our normal way of life. However, I wanted to get your take on, are we still seeing residual effects of the pandemic on students experiencing homelessness, or are we making gains? Are we getting back into the right path? Are we getting our footing? Are we still seeing a lot of residual effects? What's your take on that?

Sonia Pitzi:

My take on that is yes to all of your questions. Meaning, we absolutely have made gains because we have learned things from the pandemic. I would say broadly, we have learned things both as people in the field, personally, educators in general, and how we can serve and how we can look at serving students differently. Everyone was very much in, this is how we traditionally do things. The pandemic hit and people went just totally berserk. They did not know how to do anything outside of the norm. My ADHD was my superpower. I was never in a box. I never fit into a box. I was able to come up with ideas on how we can solve these problems.

Sonia Pitzi:

From the pandemic, we created solutions that we are now able to continue to have and broaden on, because we have seen that traditional solutions do not have to be the answer for everything. We have to look outside of how we can do things, such as transportation. The fact that that's a growing crisis in the country, we have to look at how transportation needs to look. We've absolutely made gains in how we can serve and create solutions that are completely different than anybody's way of thinking.

Sonia Pitzi:

We still have to start, I feel, back at the beginning of identification. We lost educators during the pandemic. We lost key people in those roles who cared to take that population on in identifying them. Because we lost some of that footing, we are now growing back that capacity and that knowledge base. While we are doing that, we are gaining some of that traction. But as data has proven, we did not identify students who are experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, and that's because school was not in session or did not look the way it needed to look. That, just once again, shows the importance of school.

Matthew Butensky:

Yes.

Sonia Pitzi:

Absolute importance of school. I've always said how important school is for many, many reasons, not just educational stability, but the fact that some of these students regard school as home because they see people all the time that they look at as safe. Home is safe. Home is not just a four-walled building. I listen to Liz Murray, Homeless to Harvard, Liz Murray, and she said, "Home can be a person," and that stuck with me. We can be that person to those students. We've gained in learning how we can better serve and we've lost in our capacity of also our ... I would say just from professionally, the people that have to put these things in service are going through their own sets of trauma now, post-pandemic stress that they've now had to learn.

Sonia Pitzi:

We're in post-pandemic time and we're still learning what that looks like and how we can as people, as educators, and then as advocates and the compliance, the enforcers of this law in

working with our students and how we can help them. There have been gains and losses and we are absolutely, I think, on the up trend of this, and I value that we have looked through untraditional things, solutions for our creative problem, because this is not a black and white issue. People have learned that, that this isn't a black and white. I've known it for years, the pandemic showed that. This is a very fluid problem and people have learned we have to adapt and we have to be fluid.

Sonia Pitzi:

We are absolutely doing things and putting things in place for our students and families experiencing homelessness to be able to identify them better, and get them in school and get them to be identified in school.

Matthew Butensky:

Really interesting. Really good take. I really appreciated that. There's some beauty in the pivot, but we're making gains, but we're still making them. With that, we want to ask you as your last question or last topic, where do we go from here? What advice would you give to homeless liaisons that are new in their role? What takeaways do you have for this program in Pennsylvania? What do you want our listeners to really hone in on today, from today's episode?

Sonia Pitzi:

I want to hone in the importance of school, which is why the McKinney-Vento Act came about. I want to hone in on the fact that we are people that can make a difference in the student's life. Not every student is going to be a success story and that's okay. That's life. If we are doing our job, if we are doing what we need to do to provide education and to reduce the barriers for these students experiencing homelessness to attend school, then we are giving them all the tools. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. That isn't then our failure. It's just life. It's just what happened. Just, whatever happens. But we need to make sure we have these tools. We need to be amenable to learning these tools.

Sonia Pitzi:

While I have done this for over 27 years, I am still learning every day. I am not arrogant enough to say that I know everything. I know this law and I will go toe-to-toe with a solicitor. I will go toe-to-toe with a superintendent, a school board, and I'll tell you about the law. I'm also willing to learn more about how I can make the law doable for the districts to be able to be in compliance. We need to not be judges. We are not in judgment for the choices people make. Just because you wouldn't make the choice to stay in your car because you don't want to leave your family dog and go into a shelter, does not mean that that's a wrong choice. It doesn't matter what led them to where they are. What matters is what we need to do as educators, and that is to create possibilities for these students to succeed in school.

Sonia Pitzi:

Our ultimate goal is to get them to graduate from school and to be adults who don't repeat the cycle of homelessness, to give them the tools that they need to be successful, however that looks. And we don't define how that looks either. That's not for me to say, I think success looks like this. You must go to college or you must do this. That's not what success needs to look like. Success needs to look like whatever that person needs to do to be a functioning and capable adult past high school, and that's our job. We need to not judge, we need to know about the law, and we need to create awareness and create those starting ripples everywhere we go. Because if we can be that starting ripple, then we know that we're just going to just be waves of success for everybody.

Matthew Butensky:

Thank you. It's clear you're a very fierce advocate for these students and we need that. We appreciate that. With that message, we are going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We are excited to work with you, Sonia, this fall for the I Will Be Your Voice Campaign for Awareness Week. We also really thank you for lending us the name of the podcast.

Sonia Pitzi:

Absolutely.

Matthew Butensky:

I Will Be Your Voice. Because it's so fitting for the work that we do, and I think the story of where it came from today is really cool. I'm really happy that you shared that with all of our listeners. We just thank you for being our guest today.

Sonia Pitzi:

Thank you for having me. This has been fun. Thank you. Thank you.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Glad that you're here.

Matthew Butensky:

Wonderful. To learn more, please visit Ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org/podcast. Thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed today's episode with Sonia. Please check back and tune in for our next episode.