

# Summit IV: Executive Summary

For the first time in our nation's history, there are more poor residents living in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas than in the cities. In the 100 largest metropolitan areas of the U.S., 56% of the poor live in suburbs. Here in Allegheny County, the suburban poverty rate increased by 15.7% from 2000-2011, compared to 6.3% in the city.

On Friday, November 15, 2013 nearly 200 educators, community leaders, and service providers from across the region confronted the reality of these statistics at the Homeless Children's Education Fund's fourth annual summit, "Beyond the City – Responding to the Spread of Poverty and Homelessness to Suburban Communities." Participants heard from both national and local experts who framed the issue, gave them the facts, suggested solutions, and inspired them to work together to make a difference for at-risk families in their own backyards. The following is a summary of key ideas and recommendations that emerged from this event.

## Key Idea #1:

**There is an urgent need for affordable and accessible transit options for families experiencing homelessness.**

Participants from all regions identified lack of transportation as the most significant barrier preventing homeless families in the suburbs from connecting to the resources and programs needed to become financially self-sufficient. Homeless families tend to spend a large portion of their monthly income on transit. Lack of affordable transportation creates isolation, severing ties to the major homeless service centers which are concentrated in urban areas. For children who live in suburban areas with long distances, few sidewalks, and limited transit options, missing the school bus can cause problems with truancy.

Specific recommendations:

- Engage the Port Authority, other transportation stakeholders, and county officials in community dialogue about poverty and homelessness. Advocate for restoring transit routes and preventing further cuts in areas with documented need.
- Stimulate greater collaboration between school districts and outside partners to identify viable and cost-effective transportation solutions for students experiencing homelessness.
- Identify, develop and implement best practices for families in need, such as car sharing programs.

## Key Idea #2

**Key Idea #2: The stigma of being homeless prevents many families from seeking help.**

Many newly homeless families struggle with shame and may attempt to hide their situation from friends, family and schools. Those who are experiencing homelessness for the first time may not recognize themselves as homeless (for example, those who are doubled up or move frequently) and therefore lack awareness that they qualify for services and support under the McKinney-Vento Act. Homeless families in the suburbs are often formerly self-sufficient families who are unaccustomed to asking for help and may lack knowledge of how to obtain shelter and other forms of assistance.

Specific recommendations:

- Take time to develop trusting relationships with families so that they feel safe disclosing their challenges and support needs.
- Offer support in ways that reduce stigma. Eliminate "us vs. them" language and attitudes that stigmatize families experiencing homelessness.
- Empower families with information so they can know their rights and advocate for their children. (e.g. poster campaign on Port Authority buses, post offices, and other public locations)

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## Key Idea #3:

**Collaboration is the key to improving educational outcomes for children who are homeless.**

When it comes to ensuring that the educational needs of children are met, school district homeless liaisons shoulder many responsibilities alone. In addition, many participants felt that the fragmentation of services across geographical and organizational lines makes it difficult for families to get their needs met.

### Specific Recommendations

- Convene regional working groups comprising nearby school districts and community organizations to share data, contacts, and ideas.
- Create seamless transitions for children transferring schools because of homelessness, blending in services and support.
- Provide more homelessness training to superintendents, principals, guidance counselors, teachers, nurses, and other school professionals.

## Key Idea #4:

**More work is needed to raise awareness across all sectors and to the public.**

Participants observed that poverty is a hidden problem in our suburban areas. Many people in suburban areas are simply not aware that homelessness exists in their own communities. Better and more thorough local analysis of homelessness, and in particular the educational outcomes associated with children in homeless situations, is needed to ensure that policymakers are aware of the needs of suburban communities so that adequate resources and funding may be allocated.

### Specific Recommendations

- Educate school board members, township managers, landlords, hotel managers, law enforcement, judges and other community stakeholders about the prevalence of youth and family homelessness in their neighborhoods.
- Use public service announcements in a variety of media to educate Allegheny County residents and generate greater public will for initiatives that would serve the homeless population.
- Educate young people about the shifting homeless population and encourage them to get involved through service-learning projects.

## Summit IV Attendance by Region and Sector

