

Focusing on the Children Breaking the Cycle of Family Homelessness

by Daniel Gumnit

The author is CEO and executive director of People Serving People, which provides shelter and other programs for families experiencing homelessness in Minneapolis and Hennepin County.

Each night an average of 365 homeless children and adults stay at the facility operated by People Serving People. Our family shelter, on the eastern edge of downtown Minneapolis, offers 99 emergency housing units. Last year our staff and volunteers assisted more than 3,400 people. Sixty percent of the guests at our shelter are children, with an average age of six.

During my three years as executive director of People Serving People, I have learned that it is impossible to generalize about the causes of family homelessness. Yet it's clear to me and the shelter's frontline staff that three main issues are contributing to the drastic increase in family homelessness in Minneapolis and the nation. These issues are (1) the lack of affordable housing, (2) racial and socioeconomic disparities in education and employment opportunities, and (3) the cost of high-quality child care.

This article does not seek to downplay the complexity of these problems or deny that they seem insurmountable at times. In the face of such daunting challenges, however, I believe that if our state and nation are truly serious about breaking the cycle of childhood poverty and family homelessness, we need to focus on at-risk children like those sheltered by People Serving People. This article will describe homelessness in Minnesota, education programs at People Serving People, and the crucial role that executive functioning skills play in the academic, social, and economic success of children. I will also describe our collaborative work with the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development and how the programs we have created build executive functioning skills among homeless children.

Minnesota has made strides in reducing homelessness for veterans and other chronically homeless single adults, particularly in urban areas such as the Twin Cities. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for young children and families who are homeless. In fact, since 2009 there has been a 22 percent increase

in the number of two-parent families experiencing housing instability. Children of homeless parents comprise 35 percent of Minnesota's homeless population, up 9 percent since 2009. Today, 11 percent of students in the Minneapolis Public Schools are either homeless or highly mobile. This means that in an average classroom of 30 children, three are staying in a shelter or have unstable housing.

The root causes for this dramatic increase in family homelessness in Minnesota are systemic. The Twin Cities have one of the tightest housing markets in the nation. The extremely low vacancy rate makes affordable housing nearly impossible to find, and rental rates in Minneapolis have climbed rapidly. The average apartment rent in the city is now \$981 per month, up 2.5 percent from just one year ago. Additionally, the disparity in income between whites and people of color in Minnesota is one of the greatest of any state in the union. Sadly, in Minnesota the educational-opportunity gap or academic-achievement gap between whites and people of color is among the greatest of any state as well. Our region's public transportation system is also ill-equipped to move people living in poverty between their homes and employment opportunities.

People Serving People is Minnesota's largest and most comprehensive emergency shelter for children and families experiencing homelessness. We not only shelter families, but provide services designed to achieve our ultimate goal of permanently ending a family's homelessness.

As a frontline human services organization, People Serving People is not in a position to create system-wide changes to increase housing and employment opportunities or reduce educational disparities. Therefore, we focus our efforts on individual families, working to end each household's homelessness by concentrating on both the short and long term. Our first

job is to stabilize the family by addressing the parents' barriers to housing and providing resources for employment opportunities. In the long term, People Serving People works to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty for the children at our shelter through our educational services, including early childhood development as well as elementary-school-age and teen programs. Our programs for young children are shaped by our collaborative research with the University of Minnesota, aimed at developing executive functioning skills in homeless and highly mobile children.

Executive functioning skills are neurocognitive abilities that include self-control, memory, and flexible thinking, or the ability to adjust one's behavior based on various demands, priorities, and available options. These skills make it possible for children to voluntarily focus their attention and regulate their behavior to achieve a desired goal. It is vital for children entering kindergarten to possess sufficient executive functioning skills to be able to wait for their turn, listen to the teacher, and follow directions. Many children develop these skills during the preschool years as the brain rapidly develops and they learn to practice self-control. Many children who are experiencing homelessness, however, do not learn these critical skills. Homelessness disrupts the ability of parents, teachers, and other adult caregivers to set up the framework for children to test and develop these skills through consistent routines and structure. In addition, research indicates that fear and anxiety associated with homelessness undermine the development of these skills. In fact, this "toxic stress" produces a hormone, cortisol, that is harmful to brain tissue, including the neural tissue involved in developing executive functioning skills.

Our work with kindergarten teachers has shown us that while teachers appreciate when the children entering their classrooms from our shelter display a head start on literacy, many of them value executive functioning skills even more. In other words, students need to be able to control their attention and behavior first, so that literacy can follow.

Since 1982 People Serving People has collaborated on research, program development, and publications with Dr. Ann Masten, her associates Dr. Stephanie Carlson and Dr. Philip Zelazo, and graduate students from the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota. The researchers conducted studies with boys and girls at People Serving People and found that executive functioning skills assessed during their stay indicated how well these children would do in school. Higher levels of executive functioning skills were a sign that children would perform better academically, enjoy acceptance by other children, display appropriate classroom behavior, and

have positive interactions with teachers. Research also showed that scores related to executive functioning skills were more relevant than measures of general intellectual ability (IQ) in predicting many aspects of school success. In addition, there is a growing body of literature contending that executive functioning skills predict lifelong success.

People Serving People's Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP) began in 2006 as a drop-in center. The vision for the program was to create a model learning center that would foster best practices in child development for highly mobile, high-risk families in transition. The initial drop-in program was developed collaboratively with the University of Minnesota.

Since then, ECDP has matured to include four all-day classrooms for infants and toddlers in addition to preschool prep and preschool that utilize sophisticated curricula focused on the needs of children experiencing homelessness. One of the unique aspects of our work with young children at the shelter is our focus on emotional self-regulation and executive functioning skills. Our teachers also tailor the curriculum to the average shelter stay of 38 days. In 2013 our program was awarded a four-star rating—the highest possible—by the State of Minnesota's Parent Aware rating system for using the best research-based practices to prepare children for kindergarten.

At People Serving People, we believe that parents are their children's first and most important teachers. We launched our Parent Engagement Program in mid-2012 with support from the Grotto Foundation to help extend the ECDP's impact. The program educates mothers and fathers and responds to their questions and concerns about parenting strategies and their children's development. Support groups and individual sessions with our licensed parent educator increase parents' confidence in their child-rearing abilities. Mothers and fathers also learn about the executive functioning and emotional self-regulation work our teachers conduct with their children in the classroom and how they can help build on those efforts after they leave the shelter.

As a direct service organization for homeless children and their families, People Serving People focuses on our ultimate goal of permanently ending families' homelessness. We realize this is an ambitious mission, but the research and education programming conducted at our facility is in line with the intense national focus on helping homeless and highly mobile children develop vital executive functioning skills to increase the likelihood of academic success. I firmly believe that with further study, programs that emphasize executive functioning skills could be implemented nationwide and lead to improved academic and lifelong success for homeless children. ■