

Project HELP:

Giving Children of the Homeless a Chance at Success

Story and photo by Kristin Elmore

According to the Texas Homeless Network, of the 54,000 to 102,000 homeless people in Texas, 34% are families with children. Considering the instability of living in a homeless situation, a homeless child's opportunity to prosper academically is inhibited. Restricted by a lack of resources such as school supplies, clothing, established housing, backpacks, and suitable health care; homeless children are often times left without a proper education. Austin Independent School District's Project HELP (Homeless Education Learning Plan) was designed to ease this predicament.



From Left to Right: Alyshia Ingram, Azucena Zarzoza, Cathy Requejo, and Jerretta Jimmerson of Project HELP

Housed in the Student Support Services Department of Austin Independent School District, Project HELP offers various services to Austin area children currently in a homeless situation. Services offered by the program include, but

are not limited to: tutorial and academic enrichment services, parent education, transportation services, links to childcare services, support to local emergency shelters and local service providers, and provisions such as school supplies, clothing, and school fees. These services are a result of an advantageous collaboration of several AISD departments. For example, under current law, Project HELP works together with the district's transportation department to help children experiencing homelessness to get to their school of origin; a vital first step to alleviating obstacles induced by their homelessness. Project HELP has also teamed up with the Food Service and Special Education Departments at AISD to achieve their worthy goals.

Project HELP Supervisor, Cathy Requejo, spoke enthusiastically about the program's many goals. The primary goal of Project HELP is to assist students currently experiencing homelessness with enrollment, participation, and success in school. This crucial goal is aided by the McKinney Vento Act, the backbone of Project HELP. The McKinney Vento Act, passed in 1987, originated to assist students and their families in accessing a free, public education for students experiencing homelessness. A crucial aspect of this act is its detailed definition of homelessness, which is not as self-explanatory as it may seem. Currently, a child is eligible for educational assistance through the McKinney Vento Act if he or she is living in any one of the following situations: living with family or friends out of necessity, living in emergency or transitional housing, those awaiting foster care placements, those living in cars, parks, or other substandard locations, and migratory children. The full text of the McKinney Vento Act can be accessed at <http://www.serve.org/nche/legis.htm> and all are encouraged to review it for referral purposes. Project HELP strives to build awareness and communicate laws regarding homeless children's educational needs with parents, AISD, and other service providers.

As with any other social service entity, some unavoidable limitations inhibit or preclude Project HELP from assisting children in need. A primary challenge in assisting these children is getting the word out to them. Some children and their parents are hidden or frightened to come forward for fear their children will not be eligible for enrollment due to a lack of proper medical attention (i.e. immunizations), or a lack of previous school records. For this reason, it is critical that area service providers are aware of current laws such as the aforementioned McKinney Vento Act. The law allows homeless children to enroll without normally required paper work; in fact, a campus cannot refuse to enroll a homeless child on this basis. Lack of awareness regarding laws aimed at addressing the educational needs of homeless children is another barrier for the program. Those who could or should know the law may not be familiar, and are thus not referring families or children to providers who can lend a hand, such as Project HELP. Requejo stated, " we [service providers] are aware of who we can serve, more people will be served because they can be referred." According to Requejo, this awareness can be achieved through understanding of the

McKinney Vento laws, more specifically, the official definition of homelessness. Another limitation of the program is a lack of suitable resources. Though it is difficult for most service providers to obtain resources, clothing is a particularly difficult subject for Project HELP. As we know, children do not want to be different from their peers, and clothing is the first line of attack for many school-aged children. Another challenge for these children is their inability to participate in extracurricular activities. Consider the cost of a band member's or cheerleader's uniform. This extra financial burden, as well as transportation and time constraints, leaves children with little opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities that would otherwise benefit them greatly. Yet another struggle for Project HELP is the academic and health challenges many homeless children face. Due to their situation, it is typical for a homeless child to be two or three years behind in their schooling. It is also not unusual for a homeless child to experience more health related problems preventing them from attending school regularly. Consequently, homeless children are at high risk for not graduating. To remedy these issues, Requejo believes success can be achieved through effective collaboration and communication.

As previously mentioned, Project HELP works collaboratively with many AISD departments. In addition, the program also receives great assistance and collaboration from service providers such as: SafePlace, Caritas, Faith Food Pantry, Lifeworks, Foundation for the Homeless, Austin Children's Shelter, MHMR, Push Up, Salvation Army (downtown), and the City of Austin. Project HELP also provides ongoing training for those interested in understanding their services and the laws that guide them. Additionally, Project HELP also offers an Empowerment Academy to homeless parents and their children, during which transportation is provided. If you are interested in the training or academy, please contact Cathy Requejo at 512-414-0760. Information will also be posted on the CTOSH community website at a later date.

Since its inception 11 year ago, Project HELP has served thousands of homeless children. In fact, during the 2002-2003 school year, Project HELP served 1,716 children, and this figure has nearly doubled from the 2001-2002 school year. However, according to Requejo, it is reasonable to believe there are four to eight thousand homeless children in need of assistance. With continued cash donations, backpacks, and school supplies, as well as increased awareness of laws in place to help homeless children, Project HELP can continue to aid this delicate community.