

Response to ACS Concept Paper on Prevention Services

We appreciate the opportunity to give feedback on the Administration for Children's Services' contracted prevention services plans before the agency releases the RFP for new prevention services contracts. We believe that the RFP could be greatly improved if applicants were asked to talk about how they will work with families facing housing instability and educational neglect.

Many families that come in contact with the child welfare system, including those receiving prevention services, have been homeless, are homeless and staying in city shelters, or are seeking homeless prevention services to avoid becoming homeless.

Homelessness is often caused by multiple issues that may also be driving the need for child welfare services and it can be a source of tension and trauma for families, leading to conflicts that can lead to the need for involvement of the foster care system.

Potential providers of prevention services should therefore explain how they will work with homeless shelter staff and HomeBase prevention providers, being prepared to work together to deal with the multiple issues that often affect families in crisis.

Similarly, educational neglect is one of the most common reasons why families are referred to foster care prevention services. Like it is with homelessness, Gateway has found that high rates of school absenteeism (one of the elements of educational neglect) are often caused by multiple factors and it takes coordination among staff from different agencies to solve those problems.

Gateway is piloting the Improving School Attendance for Homeless Children (ISAHC) program in three city homeless shelters to combat chronic absenteeism among homeless children. Data shows that in New York City 34 percent of students living in homeless shelters are chronically absent, compared to 20 percent of those housed and receiving free lunch and 9 percent of students who are housed and do not receive free lunch.

Gateway has found that some of the main causes of high rates of absenteeism are mental health needs of the parents, unmet special education needs of the child, and Department of Education logistical issues including transportation problems.

ISAHC provides coordination and regular meetings between existing staff including the Department of Education Bridging the Gap social workers and shelter-based client care coordinators to address issues that are causing poor attendance.

Our efforts have led to early success. After four months of work, one-third of students that were chronically homeless or severely chronically homeless improved to good attendance. We believe this progress will continue and deepen with more work. These successes would not be possible without coordination between staff from different agencies.

Since many of the children we are helping are involved in the child welfare system because of their attendance problems, foster care prevention providers should have to say what they will do to deal with educational neglect and how they will interact with existing services, which are also working to improve attendance for the same children, to deal with the multiple causes of cause poor attendance.