

DATE: 4/7/09

SOURCE: The Philadelphia Inquirer

HEADLINE: A Mixed Picture for N.J., Pa. on Homeless Children

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By Rita Giordano

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New Jersey and Pennsylvania rank in the top third of states in terms of help for homeless children and how they fare overall, according to a national report.

But they have far to go in providing affordable housing and other services critical to the youngsters and their families, the report and local advocates for the homeless say.

And in a dire economy, those needs are only growing, said those who aid the area's homeless.

According to "America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness," recently released by the National Center on Family Homelessness, Pennsylvania ranked 14th and New Jersey 16th among the states. Connecticut ranked first, and Texas came in last.

The purpose of the report "is to raise awareness about the precarious situations faced by children and families who are homeless" so that recommendations can be made on how to end the crisis, said Ellen Bassuk, president of the nonprofit group, based in Newton Centre, Mass.

The report found that, nationally, 1.5 million children - one in 50 - become homeless in the course of a year.

"This report is important because it's lifting up homeless children so people can focus their attention and, hopefully, resources on them," said Gloria Guard, president of the People's Emergency Center of Philadelphia.

Guard said that she had seen a steady increase in the number of homeless over the last few years. Often, she said, they had additional problems besides needing shelter. Recently, Guard said, she had seen a growing number of people who are victims of the economy who have lost housing.

The report, derived from statistics gathered mostly between 2005 and 2008, based its overall ranking on a number of factors, including each state's homeless-child population. Pennsylvania ranked 34th worst in percentage of homeless among children who were high school seniors or younger. New Jersey had the second-smallest percentage of homeless children in the country.

Also considered were child well-being, which examined hunger and health data; state policy and planning efforts; and risk for child homelessness, which considered housing, income, and support. State and federal policies and programs affected the outcomes.

While Pennsylvania and New Jersey were not among the states with the worst records, the report's data on homelessness showed cause for concern.

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According to the study, one in 34 Pennsylvania children, and one in 38 in New Jersey, do not know where their next meal is coming from. Yet only 57 percent of the eligible children in Pennsylvania and 50 percent of the eligible children in New Jersey are in families receiving food stamps.

Housing costs vary from one part of a state to another, but in New Jersey, according to the report, the typical renter earned \$16.45 an hour, far less than the \$22.25 hourly wage needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment.

In Pennsylvania, wages also were insufficient, but the gap was smaller: Renters earned an average of \$12.73 an hour but needed to earn \$14.52. In both states, the minimum wage of \$7.15 did not come close to paying the rent.

Neither did public assistance. In New Jersey, rent for a two-bedroom apartment at fair-market rate was 273 percent of a Temporary Aid to Needy Families benefit. In Pennsylvania, a two-bedroom apartment required 187 percent of the welfare grant.

In both states, homeless children experienced more health problems, including asthma, traumatic stress, and emotional disturbances.

In terms of state policy, the report noted that Pennsylvania has an interagency council on homelessness, but it rated the state's quality of planning as moderate. It credited the council for creating a plan that aims to end homelessness.

New Jersey's planning for homeless children was deemed inadequate. That may change as the state's fledgling interagency council, created late last year by Gov. Corzine, progresses in its work.

Advocates for the homeless say the need is great, and not only in cities.

Carol Marchand is executive director of the Interfaith Hospitality Network of the Main Line, which helps families who have lost their homes or are in danger of it. In the last 12 months, her organization has seen a 10 percent increase in calls from people about to lose their homes.

"These are families who are working, but they're living paycheck to paycheck," Marchand said.

Volunteers of America Delaware Valley and Catholic Charities of the Trenton Diocese are among the agencies that help homeless and near-homeless families in South Jersey. Even before the current crisis, officials for the groups said, the need was greater than they could meet.

"We can spend a year's allocation" of homelessness-prevention aid "between November and December, and still not meet the needs," said Gina Williams Deas, the VOA's chief operating officer for housing and supportive services, who noted that 55 percent of those they served were children.

Joyce Campbell, Catholic Charities' director of community and government relations, said that while New Jersey's rank in the study was not bad, she would expect better in a state with such a high median income.

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"It's clear that the high cost of housing in the state, the dearth of affordable housing, and stagnant wages for the working poor are putting children at great risk of becoming homeless," Campbell said. "We continue to see increased numbers of families with children struggling to make ends meet."