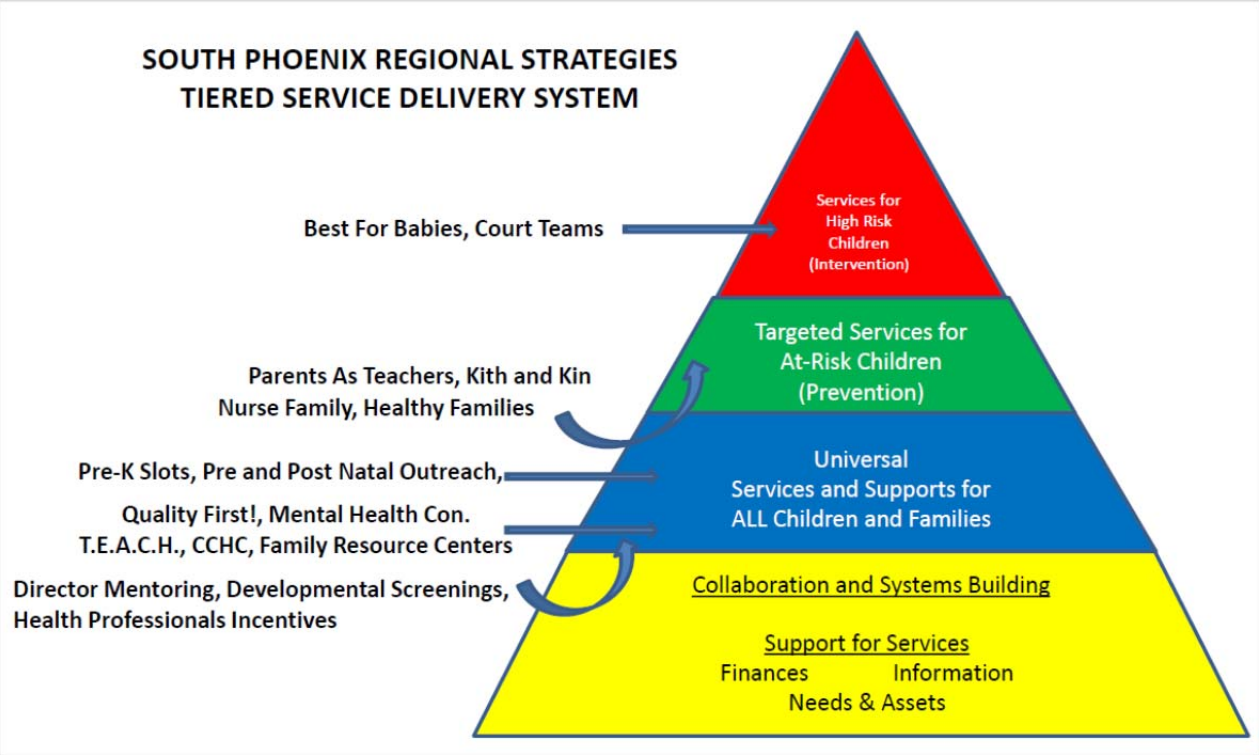
**Strategy Name: Playspaces for Homeless Children**

**Strategy Description:**

There are a number of challenges facing families in the South Phoenix/Maryvale regions that more recently have been compounded by the rates of foreclosures and job loss in the region. Due to these factors, many families are facing homelessness. Qualitative data suggests that many families are sharing housing with multiple families and based on the rates of foreclosure provided by the City of Phoenix Housing Department (GIS, Distressed Communities 2009) there were 7, 131 foreclosed homes in the South Phoenix region. While the estimates of how many families with children ages 0-5 cannot be determined based on the available data, a fact sheet by the Maricopa County Homeless Awareness Coalition, estimates that 35% of homeless persons sheltered in Maricopa County are members of families with small children (2009 Fact Sheet; Homeless Management Information System, 2008).

The South Phoenix Regional Partnership Council has already funded Court Teams (*Best for Babies)* Strategy in the current fiscal year that targets high risk children in foster care (see diagram below). Because the identified population of homeless or displaced families is also at high risk, the Council hopes to address this need by funding a strategy targeted at children's social-emotional development which is critical to school readiness (Espinosa, 2002; Raver & Knitzer, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).




**Protective Factors**[1]

Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are increasingly thinking about factors that strengthen families and reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. Research shows that while certain risk factors have detrimental effects on children and families, other "protective" factors can mitigate those effects and provide benefits, resulting in greater resilience for parents and children. Successful family support activities and child abuse prevention programs are designed to promote these protective factors.

Protective factors are conditions in families and communities that, when present, increase the health and well-being of children and families. These attributes serve as buffers, helping parents to find resources, supports, or coping

strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress. Research has shown that the following protective factors are linked to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect:

- Nurturing and attachment
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Concrete support for parents

Successful family support and child abuse prevention programs bolster protective factors by [1,2,3]:

- **Facilitating friendships and support**
  Offer opportunities for parents in the neighborhood to get to know each other, develop support systems, and take leadership roles. Strategies may include sports teams, pot lucks, classes, advisory groups, board leadership, and volunteer opportunities
- **Strengthening parenting**
  Develop ways for parents to get support on parenting issues when they need it. Possibilities include classes, support groups, in-home visits, tip sheets in pediatricians' offices, and resource libraries.
- **Responding to family crises**
  Offer extra support to families when they need it, as in times of illness, job loss, housing problems, and other stressors.
- **Linking families to service opportunities**
  Provide referrals for job training, education, health care, mental health, and other essential services in the community.
- **Supporting children's social and emotional development**
  Some programs specifically focus on helping children articulate their feelings and get along with others. When children bring home what they have learned in the classroom, parents benefit as well.

The Council recognizes the importance of protective factors listed above and has funded multiple strategies that help bolster a family's health and well-being. However, the Council has identified a gap in services for those families and children that are most at risk such as those in foster placement and experiencing family homelessness.

Young children experiencing homelessness are eager to learn, but due to the risk factors cited below (see Table 1) many children face obstacles to healthy social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development.

**Table 1. Early Childhood & Homelessness: Potential Risks to Healthy Development[6]**

| Risks Associated with Developmental Problems | Risks Associated with Homelessness |
|---|---|
| Poor maternal health care | Inconsistent or inadequate health care |
| Poor prenatal health care | Adolescent mothers |
| Maternal age (adolescent or over 40) | Inadequate nutrition |
| Premature birth or low birth weight | Inadequate or unstable housing |
| Exposure to toxic substances | Disrupted or limited family support |
| Difficult parent-child relationships (high conflict or low engagement) | Lack of social support network |
| Limited physical, emotional, or social stimulation | Emotional stress or depression |

| | |
|---|---|
| Family or neighborhood violence | Poor financial resources |
| | Limited maternal education and reduced employment options |
| | Domestic violence |
| | Substance abuse |
| | Unsafe dwellings |

**([6]Reed-Victor, Popp & Myers (2003). *Using The Best That We Know: Supporting Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*. Project HOPE Virginia, Information Brief, Number 9, Fall 2003. Funding from Virginia Department of Education)**

**PROPOSED PROJECT – REPLICATION OF PLAYSPACES PROGRAMS**

A careful review of the literature has revealed the promising evidence-based model known as Playspace. Playspace has been implemented in 31 states across the United States, including the Washington D.C. area.

Horizons for Homeless Children (HHC) has been operating *Playspaces* in family shelters since 1990. We now operate 140 shelters throughout Massachusetts. We are also partnering with the

Bright Horizons Foundation for Children to establish an additional 250 play areas for young homeless children across the country in 38 states and Washington D.C.

These spaces create a place for children to engage in play that encourages their development. Without them, these children would have no place to play, and few toys with which to play. The Playspaces serve children ages 2 months to 6 years old living in the shelters, and provide critical early play and learning opportunities to them, helping each child gain the cognitive, physical and social/emotional skills that are essential to their future social and academic success. HHC equips each Playspace with books, play equipment, and art supplies appropriate for the range of children—both age and developmentally—who live in the shelter. Because it is a mixed age group, the Playspaces are well organized, with labeled equipment and play areas, and open-ended materials.

Various activity areas are provided to address the age and interest levels of all the children, including dramatic play, art, manipulatives, literacy, and infant mobility.

A key aspect of the Playspace Programs is the volunteers' interactions with each child. For children living in a shelter, the visits from our Playspace Activity Leaders (PALs) may be the only opportunity a child has to run, jump, have a story read to him or her, use his or her imagination to create a work of art, or just have fun. These interactions are critical to fostering a healthy environment from which a child can benefit. Our PALs attend a six-hour training session that specifically prepares them for the challenges and the joys of working with homeless children, and helps them understand how play is a crucial element in child development. During this session and periodically throughout the year, the volunteers are trained by our Playspace Programs staff on how to plan developmentally appropriate games and activities that will entertain and inspire a child. Each volunteer makes a 6-month commitment in order to ensure stability in the lives of the children served. Because there are at least two volunteers present at all times, they can engage children at varying developmental stages in different activities.

In focus group discussions with staff from family shelters working with the Playspace Programs, shelter staff have expressed that the Playspaces and the PALs have a highly significant and positive impact on the lives of the children and parents who reside at the shelters.

**REPLICATION IN SOUTH PHOENIX**

The South Phoenix Council proposes to replicate the Playspaces Programs model in South Phoenix through one of the following three models:

1. Family Shelters in South Phoenix, Arizona, will submit applications to be part of a Playspace Programs Replication Project. If funded, the family shelters will contract with HHC's Playspace Programs to work with the shelter to totally replicate the Playspace Programs. The replication will include: (1) training on the impact of homelessness on young children; (2) training on the role of play and a Playspace in a family shelter; (3) a meeting with shelter staff and parents to introduce the concept and goals of the program in the shelter, and the process of the Playspace installation; and (3) design and install the Playspace.

2. All components of the above program model. In addition to applying for the funding of the Playspace, the shelter would be required to include a proposal for developing a volunteer program. Funding would be contingent upon a solid plan of volunteer recruitment, training, and volunteer management to staff the Playspaces. HHC would provide training to the funded shelters on the development of a volunteer program (recruitment, training plan, and a plan for volunteer management).

3. All components of the first model description. An independent organization would be funded to develop a training program for all of the funded shelters. HHC would develop a train the trainer program for the funded agency. The recruitment, training and volunteer management for the funded shelters would be managed by the funded agency.

**Identified Possible Community Partners Include:**

- Phoenix Rescue Mission
- Sojourner Center
- UMOM
- Homeward Bound
- Crisis Nursery
- Chicano Por La Causa
- Salvation Army KROC Center
- Transitional Housing Providers; Urban League, Faith Community Development Corporations
- Labors Community Service Agency
- Chrysalis
- Maggie's Place
- Watkins's Shelter
- Vista Colina
- West Valley Child Crisis Center

**Footnotes**

**[1] Prevent Child Abuse America, Child Abuse Prevention Strategies, 2009**

**[2] Child Maltreatment: Prevention Strategies, October 2009, Center for Disease Control**

**[3] Making the Case for Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: An Overview of Cost Effective Prevention Strategies, 2005**

**Espinosa, L (2002). *The Connections Between Social-Emotional Development and Early Literacy*. Set for Success: Building A Strong Foundation for School Readiness Based on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children. The Kauffman Early Education Exchange.**

**Raver, C. & Knitzer, J. (2004). *What research tells us about interventions to promote emotional health and school readiness in preschool-aged children*. New**

**York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.**

**Shonkoff, J.& Phillips,D.A. (Eds.) & National Research Council. (2000).** ***From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*****. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.**

**[6]Reed-Victor, Popp & Myers (2003).** ***Using The Best That We Know: Supporting Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*****. Project HOPE Virginia, Information Brief, Number 9, Fall 2003. Funding from Virginia Department of Education.**

**Goal Area:** Family Support

**Goal:**

**Key Measure/s:**

**Target Population:**

Children and families experiencing homelessness (as defined by McKinney-Vento Act).

| | units | SFY 2013 | SFY 2014 | SFY 2015 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Regional Council Target Service Numbers** | Total number of children participating in play space activities | Not Funded | 400 | 400 |

**Performance Measures:**

- 

**SFY 2011 Expenditure Plan for Proposed Strategy**

| | |
|---|---|
| **TOTAL ALLOTTMENT for proposed strategy** | $120,000 |

**Budget Justification:**

Requesting applicants seek matching grant, per Council request to have sustainability plan included in the implementation.