



# ATTENDANCE MATTERS: A Model Program Pilot

*A brief report on the implementation of Gateway Housing's Attendance Matters initiative, a quasi-experimental program pilot to improve the school attendance of homeless children, launched in a small number of nonprofit-operated family shelters in New York City in July 2018, and concluding when the Coronavirus pandemic closed schools in March 2020.*

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## GATEWAY HOUSING

Gateway Housing is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established in October 2015 to transform New York City's homeless shelter system into an effective, evidence-based intervention that assists homeless people to become more independent and integrated into their communities.

Led by a board of directors and staff members with extensive expertise serving homeless New Yorkers and financing affordable housing, Gateway Housing works closely with government and nonprofit service providers to rehabilitate aging shelter stock, helping nonprofit service providers and government to develop financing and legal structures, architectural designs, project scopes and resident relocation plans to create innovative transitional housing.

And because homeless New Yorkers often spend years in the shelter system, Gateway Housing evaluates the services and supports that most effectively help families and individuals become as independent and stable as they can be. To this end, Gateway Housing facilitates independent program development and evaluation to identify transitional service interventions that have measurable impacts on residents' long-term housing stability and other positive life outcomes. The Attendance Matters program pilot is the first of these efforts.

## THE SAMUELS GROUP

The Samuels Group provides organizations with insights, research and direction to improve the successful achievement of their mission and goals. Led by Dr. Judith Samuels, its work includes organization-wide strategic measurement planning, and developing innovative data-informed, evidence-based and best practice solutions to address some of the most abiding and complex public challenges. From small local programs to global initiatives, the Samuels Group helps organizations maximize their impact, while providing right-sized, cutting-edge tools to keep them at the top of their field.

## FUNDING FOR ATTENDANCE MATTERS

The development, implementation, management and continuing evaluation of the Attendance Matters program model were funded by the Robin Hood Foundation and the JPMorgan Chase Foundation. Additional support for Gateway Housing has been provided by the New York Community Trust, and the Richman, Oak, Deutsche Bank Americas, Revson, Capital One, M&T, Altman and Citi Foundations.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For children experiencing homelessness, success in school offers one of the only pathways out of a lifetime of deep poverty. But the persistent housing and familial instability experienced by almost all homeless children results in high rates of school absenteeism. The subsequent disruption to the learning process reduces the likelihood homeless children will acquire the subject matter expertise, life skills and resiliency necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.

To address the issue, Gateway Housing contracted with Dr. Judith Samuels and the Samuels Group to work with nonprofit shelter providers, government and other stakeholders to develop and implement the Attendance Matters program model, a shelter-based intervention focused on improving the school attendance of homeless children living in nonprofit-operated “Tier II” shelters in New York City. Ongoing partnerships with the New York City Department of Homeless Services Family Services Division and the Department of Education’s Office of Community Schools/Students in Temporary Housing have been key to the success of this effort.

The two-year Attendance Matters program pilot was launched at three family shelters in July 2018, and expanded to a total of six shelters by the beginning of the 2019-20 school year. The pilot occurred against the backdrop of substantial, multi-year efforts by the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio to increase clinical services at DHS shelters and reduce chronic absences through school-based initiatives at DOE.

An independent evaluation is being conducted to determine if the Attendance Matters initiative has succeeded in measurably improving homeless children’s school attendance and other positive life outcomes, but there are early indicators of success, and we’ve already learned much from the initiative’s implementation. During the initial year of implementation, intervention activities were regularly reviewed and modified in response to feedback from residents, staff and data reports. The resulting variation in the program model over the first year is expected to be reflected in the outcomes measured by the independent evaluation. Similar adjustments to the program model occurred when the initiative expanded to the additional second-year sites.

Originally scheduled to operate over two complete school years, the AM pilot was cut short three and a half months early in the second year by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, which closed New York City public schools on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020. At that time, Gateway Housing and its pilot partners necessarily shifted focus to facilitating remote learning and increasing onsite educational opportunities at the shelters, efforts not subject to the independent evaluation and not covered in this report.

**HOMELESSNESS AND SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN NEW YORK CITY:** More than 10 percent of the 1.1 million students in New York City public schools are homeless or temporarily housed at one point over the course of a year. Just over one-third of these “Students in Temporary Housing” live in homeless shelters, while 58 percent live in doubled-up situations, and another 8 percent reside in other temporary housing.

Students in temporary housing have higher rates of absenteeism than their stably-housed peers. And homeless students living in shelter are absent almost twice as often as those living doubled-up, with the higher absenteeism of sheltered children often predating their entry into shelter. According to a 2016 analysis of DOE data by the New York City Independent Budget Office:

- Almost 27 percent of students in permanent housing missed 10% of school days or more (defined as chronic absenteeism);
- Over one-third of students living double up had chronic absenteeism
- Almost two-thirds of students experiencing homelessness and residing in shelter had chronic absenteeism.

**THE ATTENDANCE MATTERS PROGRAM MODEL:** Attendance Matters employs a pragmatic, problem-solving approach that addresses barriers to school attendance, and uses these efforts to identify deeper individual and familial challenges facing homeless children. In many cases, the AM program quickly identifies and addresses individual children’s logistical and administrative barriers to school attendance. In other instances, when more complex issues are identified, the AM team coordinates a clinical and social service response to address these challenges in the nonconfrontational context of getting children to school.

The Attendance Matters model is designed to rely predominantly on existing resources, adding only one staff person who works across multiple shelter sites, and has access to flexible funds for incidental spending. These minimal additional resources improve coordination between DOE and DHS-contracted shelter provider staff, allowing them to work together to address multiple personal, familial and intergenerational issues, as well as systemic and logistical barriers, in order to facilitate the school attendance of homeless children. Attendance Matters leverages recently-added staff at DOE and DHS, as well as the de Blasio administration’s redoubled focus on reducing the chronic absenteeism of vulnerable students.

**AM PROGRAM MODEL COMPONENTS:** Attendance Matters relies on three primary program components:

1. Coordination through a Multi-Agency Team Approach
2. Use of Data to Identify Students and Track Progress
3. Training in Evidence-Based Practices.

Attendance Matters improves coordination between DHS-contracted shelter provider staff and DOE staff by establishing interagency teams of multidisciplinary professionals at each shelter. These teams hold weekly meetings to review and track resident students’ school attendance data, presented in a user-friendly format.

With a diverse range of expertise, experience, skills and knowledge, AM team members collaboratively assess the situation of each child identified as having poor school attendance. The teams then assign tasks, track progress and employ a holistic approach to identify ground-level solutions across agencies and systems, to address familial challenges related to poor school attendance. Team members are given additional, advanced training as a group in evidence-based practices, such as motivational interviewing and trauma-informed care, as well as how to navigate the DOE system and processes.

**IMPLEMENTATION:** The Attendance Matters program was implemented during the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, beginning with four shelters serving approximately 800 homeless children, operated by three nonprofit shelter providers: BronxWorks, Win, Inc and HELP USA. A second shelter operated by BronxWorks and a large shelter operated by CAMBA were added to the initiative before the beginning of the second school year. Government partners participating in the initiative included NYC DHS, DOE, HRA/DSS and the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI). Each of these stakeholders sit on an interagency workgroup monitoring the program’s implementation at meetings held throughout the year.

During the first year, the AM Leader was hired, teams were formed and trained at each shelter, staff roles were defined, information and celebratory events were held at the shelters, and the initiative experimented with different prioritization, engagement and service strategies.

In addition to expected start-up challenges, the initiative encountered issues that had impacts on program performance, including: shelter and DOE staffing vacancies; seasonal challenges; inconsistent access to healthcare services; and challenges related to working with large families in large shelters in neighborhoods with few community-based supports and services.

**INDEPENDENT EVALUATION:** Independent researchers from the University of Pennsylvania, Marist College and Rutgers University are evaluating the short- and long-term outcomes of the Attendance Matters model and

two-year pilot. This independent evaluation will compare data about children and families at the pilot sites with children and families in similar shelters in the DHS system not participating in the AM initiative, to measure the Attendance Matters program's impact on school attendance and other outcomes. The independent evaluation will be able to consider and account for additional factors that may impact school attendance and other outcomes, including how the student population in shelters changes over time. Because the evaluation depends on data from DOE that is only now available, the Year 1 independent evaluation report will not be completed until Fall 2020. The evaluation of Year 2 of the pilot will follow when Year 2 data becomes available.

**INITIAL INDICATORS:** Preliminary program data from the Attendance Matters pilot indicates promising improvements to homeless children's school attendance. While not yet confirmed by the independent evaluation, these preliminary results offer interesting insights into the program's implementation:

- The percentage of children with good attendance improved at all four shelters in the pilot, when comparing May 2019 attendance data to the same month in the previous year;
- Chronic and/or severely chronic absenteeism declined at all four program sites;
- These apparent improvements occurred when the program model was still being adjusted in response to environmental factors, including staffing vacancies at some of the pilot sites;
- Shelters reporting weekly data showed consistently higher attendance in the pilot years over the previous year (without the program);
- Comparison shelters operated by participating providers without the AM program showed no year-to-year improvement in attendance.

**INITIAL FINDINGS:** The implementation experience suggested that three premises of the program model's design are valid:

1. That a shelter-based intervention designed to improve the school attendance of homeless children can be implemented.
2. That poor school attendance can be a useful indicator for identifying families with deeper physical health and behavioral health challenges.
3. That addressing school attendance issues appears to offer shelter staff a non-confrontational engagement strategy to facilitate their work with families facing more complex challenges..

The most common reasons for absenteeism encountered by the AM teams included:

- Behavioral and Physical Health Issues of Parents
- Poor Mental and Physical Health of Students
- DOE Enrollment and Administrative Challenges
- Challenges Facing Families with Infant Children
- Other Childcare Issues
- Initial Transition to Shelter and Children's Presence at Social Service Appointments
- Long-Distance and Local Transportation Challenges

**EARLY OBSERVATIONS AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS:** The AM program experience suggests that components of the AM program have value:

- Holding weekly meetings between shelter and DOE staff to review attendance data helps to elevate attendance as an important goal, provides a forum for coordinating interagency efforts to get children to school, and can be integrated into the routines of family shelters.
- Reviewing attendance data allow shelters and schools to identify families likely to benefit from clinical support.
- Shelter staff are able to serve families by leveraging additional DOE information, like IEP records, teacher assessments and grade reports.
- Training staff together not only educates staff, but also helps to strengthen teams; logistical challenges can be overcome by offering trainings multiple times on-site at shelters.

- Access to flexible funding allows teams to respond rapidly to on-the-ground problems (like arranging backup transportation, doing laundry, or buying food), as well as to hold events to inform and celebrate the families and children in the program.

**Staffing Recommendations:** The pilot experience suggests that the following actions may benefit AM program operations:

1. Preserve and expand on-site clinical staff at shelters.
2. Investigate and improve shelter staff retention.
3. Hire more bilingual shelter and DOE staff.
4. Permit lower DHS Client Care Coordinator staff-to-client ratios to account for larger family sizes.
5. Make more DOE staff available to shelter residents during summer months
6. Post additional DOE STH staff at larger shelters.
7. Increase DOE staff at PATH.

**Program Recommendations:** In addition to addressing the staffing issues above, the AM experience identified additional policy changes that could help improve the school attendance of homeless children:

1. Continue efforts to ensure homeless families' connection to healthcare services.
2. Distribute 30-day MetroCards to all homeless families in shelter.
3. Create protocols for walking to nearby schools.
4. Make on-site childcare more flexible.

**NEXT STEPS:** With the AM initiative having recently concluded the second year of its two-year pilot, Gateway Housing is taking next steps to: complete the independent evaluation; disseminate findings; and modify the program model to facilitate continuation and replication of the program.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Attendance Matters In Action

When the Attendance Matters (AM) Leader organized the first AM meeting at a Brooklyn Department of Homeless Services (DHS) family shelter in September 2018, he brought together the nonprofit shelter provider's staff with New York City Department of Education (DOE) workers charged with assisting homeless students. From different nonprofit and governmental agencies, many of these employees were in positions newly-created by the de Blasio administration, and had never met before, despite their common interest in the wellbeing of homeless children.

The Attendance Matters Leader (an employee of the nonprofit Gateway Housing, independent of DOE, DHS or the shelter provider) guided the new AM team in reviewing available, attendance data, made possible through a recent Memorandum of Understanding between DOE and DHS. The data helped the team immediately identify the twenty families at the shelter with the lowest school attendance over the previous four weeks, including Terry and her son, Sean, as well as Patricia, her two children, Emma and Harry, and granddaughter Carly.<sup>a</sup>

The shelter and DOE staff compared notes and quickly set about enrolling and successfully securing transportation for Sean, so that he could attend a nearby middle school. But Patricia's family's challenges were not so easily addressed. The children rarely attended school, even before they had become homeless two years before: Emma's persistent absenteeism had left her behind so many times that, at age 16, she was still in middle school; Carly, Emma's six year-old daughter, was not enrolled in any school whatsoever; and 11-year-old Harry was doing only slightly better, attending class less than half the time.

The Attendance Matters case review helped workers in the new team better appreciate the complexity of the family's needs. Because the children each had a different last name, DOE staff had not understood they were members of the same family unit. And shelter staff had not realized the full extent of the recently arrived family's challenges, until they saw the data on their poor school attendance.

Comparing case notes, the team discovered that Patricia had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, traumatized by physical abuse from Emma's father. Emma also had suffered abuse at the hands of both her father (presently incarcerated for statutory rape) and Harry's father, who had impregnated her at age ten, leading to the birth of Carly.

Members of the AM team used the conversation of school attendance as an entry point to established trusting relationships with the family, helping Emma to see how returning to school herself would set a positive example for her daughter. They enrolled Carly in school, and transferred Emma to an alternative program for over-age and under-accredited teen mothers. They arranged wake-up calls and transportation, and connected both Patricia and Emma to psychiatric support, therapy sessions and medical care.

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<sup>a</sup> Case history names have been changed.

The AM team's work led to significant, measurable improvements in school attendance for both families. But it did much more: it helped Patricia and her children better function as a family, and, by the end of the 2018-19 school year, the DOE STH workers and shelter provider staff had assisted the family – who had lived in shelter for an extended period of time – to secure permanent affordable housing.

The experiences of these two families demonstrate both the extreme and relatively straightforward challenges homeless families face, and how they can benefit from a pragmatic intervention like Attendance Matters. Most promising, the AM intervention addressed more than just the children's school attendance, and put the multidisciplinary team in good position to tackle much more complex challenges faced by the families.

This report recounts the implementation of the Attendance Matters pilot, including:

- background information on the challenges homeless children face attending school;
- a description of the Attendance Matters program, its implementation and forthcoming independent evaluation;
- a discussion of what we have learned through implementation so far, including the primary reasons for high absenteeism of the families served by the AM initiative;
- some initial observations and recommendations for systemic changes; and
- a look at next steps for the program, including replication efforts.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### Education is the Gateway to Future Success

Satisfactory academic achievement and high school graduation are normative goals in the United States. Attendance in primary and secondary school (kindergarten to 12th grade, or K-12) is related to the development of knowledge and skills, as well as prosocial relationships, resiliency and other competencies, that are necessary for future success.<sup>1 2</sup>

If a child does not attend school on a regular basis, however, these basic achievements will remain unattainable, and his or her opportunities for success will be severely limited.<sup>3</sup>

This report uses widely accepted measures of attendance:

- attending over 90% of school days in a year is considered “good attendance;”
- missing 10% to 20% of school days is considered “chronic absenteeism;”
- missing over 20% of school days is “severely chronic absenteeism.”

The release by the US Department of Education (USDOE) of the 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)<sup>4</sup> provides a view of absenteeism in nearly every U.S. public school.<sup>5</sup> The USDOE’s Report, as well as a report by nonprofit Attendance Works and the Johns Hopkins School of Education’s Everyone Graduates Center,<sup>6</sup> highlight important evidence-based facts related to poor school attendance. The most striking include:

- Over seven million U. S. students (one in seven) miss nearly a month of school each year;
- Students who miss ten percent (about eighteen days) or more of the school year have poorer academic performance;
- When students improve their attendance rates, they improve their academic prospects and chances for graduating from high school.
- A child’s absenteeism in the first month of school predicts poor attendance throughout the school year;
- By sixth grade, chronic absenteeism is a leading indicator that a student will drop out before completing high school;
- Students who live in communities with high levels of poverty are four times more likely to be chronically absent, frequently for reasons beyond their control, such as unstable housing, unreliable transportation and inadequate healthcare.

As the USDOE report notes: “Frequent absences from school can shape adulthood. High school dropout, which chronically absent students are more likely to experience, has been linked to poor outcomes later in life, from poverty and diminished health to involvement in the criminal justice system.”<sup>7</sup>

The Attendance Works/Johns Hopkins report notes that chronic absenteeism is often a multi-generational behavior.<sup>8</sup> Motivating parents or guardians to help their children go to school (regardless of their own past educational achievement or experience) is critical to improving attendance and educational attainment.

### Homelessness and School Attendance

For children experiencing homelessness, success in school offers one of the only pathways out of a lifetime of deep poverty. But the persistent housing and familial instability experienced by most homeless children results in high rates of school absenteeism in this population. Homelessness creates a chaotic home learning environment, makes it difficult to commute to school, and is detrimental to a child’s emotional and psychological well-being. The subsequent disruption to the learning process reduces the likelihood homeless children will acquire the subject matter expertise, life skills and resiliency necessary for successful transitions to adulthood.<sup>9, 10 11</sup>

Moreover, the stress of homelessness can hinder children's school attendance. Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) can have lasting, deleterious effects on an individual's academic achievement and likelihood of graduation.<sup>12</sup> Despite mitigation from known protective factors (such as social support and training for parents),<sup>13</sup> homelessness can exacerbate the known negative relationship between parental ACE scores and child success.<sup>14</sup>

## Homelessness and School Attendance in New York City

On a single night in 2019, the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter system provided temporary housing to 21,700 children in more than 12,200 families.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 15,000 of these children are school-aged.<sup>16</sup> While these numbers represent a 56 percent increase in family homelessness since 2009,<sup>17</sup> they have held relatively steady in 2018 and 2019, and more recently have declined.

Approximately two-thirds of the families residing in the DHS shelter system live in "Tier II" shelters operated by nonprofit service providers, while the balance reside in commercial hotels and "emergency cluster-site apartments" in privately-owned rental housing.<sup>18</sup> Homeless families residing in Tier II shelters have more access to services than those living in other types of DHS shelter, but experience similar challenges attending school. The de Blasio administration's March 2017 *Turning the Tide* plan initiated a five-year effort to end the use of hotels and cluster sites, and create new nonprofit-operated shelters, to eventually allow the family shelter system to rely exclusively on Tier II shelters.

For students living in DHS shelters, race is a defining factor. Two studies of 2013 and 2016 DOE data (by the New York City Independent Budget Office and the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness) describe an unchanging picture: nearly all homeless students residing in shelters are either African-American (53%) or Latino (42%).<sup>19 20</sup>

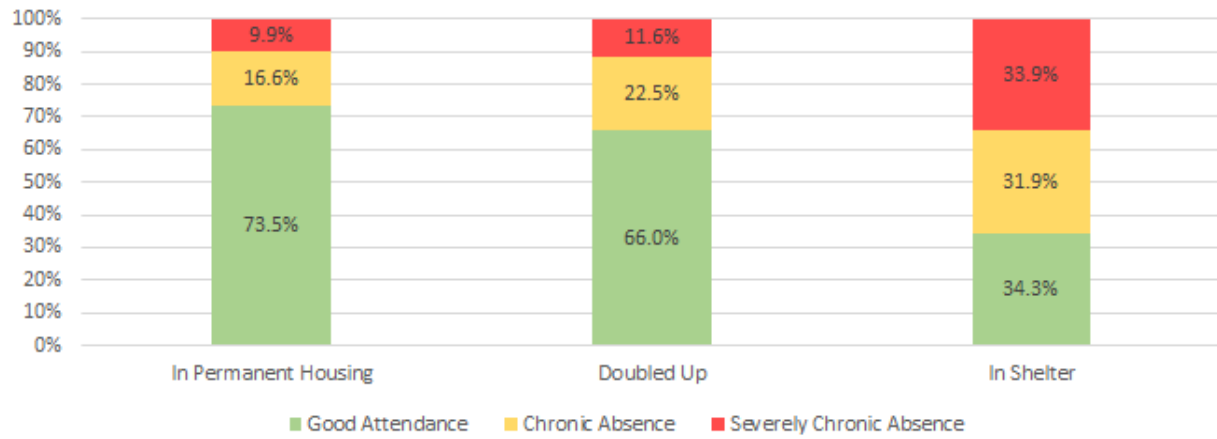
The U. S. Department of Education (DOE) uses a broader definition of homelessness, "Students in Temporary Housing" (commonly abbreviated as STH), that seeks to capture all unstably-housed students, not just those residing in homeless shelters. Like the shelter population, the STH population has grown steadily over time, increasing by 70 percent since 2009.<sup>21</sup> Today, over 10 percent of the 1.1 million public school students in New York City are homeless or temporarily housed at one point in the year.<sup>22</sup> The number of students in temporary housing among all New York City public school children was approximately 105,000 students over the course of the 2017-18 school year<sup>23</sup>, with about 15,000 students residing in homeless shelters on any given night.

The statistics, while alarming, actually underrepresent the extended housing instability these children endure, as many experience homelessness during multiple school years. Two-thirds of the students who reported living in New York City homeless shelters during the 2013-14 school year had lived in a shelter in one or more of the previous three school years.<sup>24</sup>

Students in temporary housing have higher rates of school absenteeism than their stably-housed peers. And students living in shelter are absent almost twice as often as those living doubled-up. According to the 2016 analysis of DOE data by the New York City Independent Budget Office:

- 26.5 percent of students in permanent housing had chronic or severely chronic absence;
- 34.1 percent of students living double up had chronic or severely chronic absence; and
- 65.8 percent of students living in shelter had chronic or severely chronic absence.<sup>25</sup>

### School attendance of housed and homeless children



Source: NYC Independent Budget Office, *Not Reaching the Door: Homeless Students Face Many Hurdles on the Way to School*, 2016.

Chart 1

### 3. THE ATTENDANCE MATTERS PROGRAM – HELPING HOMELESS CHILDREN GET TO SCHOOL, AND MORE

Mirroring similar efforts taking place in New York City Community Schools, the Attendance Matters<sup>b</sup> program model is an intervention that is shelter-based, focused on improving the school attendance of homeless children living in nonprofit-operated “Tier II” shelters in New York City. It employs a pragmatic, problem-solving approach that first seeks to address barriers to school attendance, then uses these efforts as an opportunity to identify and address deeper family and individual challenges facing homeless children.

In many cases, Attendance Matters quickly recognizes and remedies individual children’s logistical and administrative barriers to school attendance. When more complex issues are identified, the AM intervention coordinates a clinical and social service response to address these challenges in the nonconfrontational context of getting the children to school.

The Attendance Matters model is designed to rely predominantly on existing resources, adding only one staff person who works across multiple sites, and has access to flexible funds for incidental spending. These minimal additional resources improve coordination between DOE and DHS-contracted staff, to identify and address multiple personal, familial and intergenerational issues, as well as systemic and logistical barriers, in order to increase the school attendance of homeless children.

To develop the Attendance Matters program model and pilot, Gateway Housing engaged Judith Samuels, PhD, an expert in family homelessness, and her organization, The Samuels Group. Dr. Samuels developed the Attendance Matters model with the input and assistance of service providers and other governmental and nonprofit organizations that work with homeless and impoverished children and families, including policymakers and program experts at the New York City Human Resource Administration (HRA), Department of Homeless Services (DHS), Department of Education (DOE), the nonprofit Advocates For Children of New York, CUCS and four New York City nonprofit shelter provider organizations: BronxWorks, Win, Inc., HELP USA and CAMBA.

The development and continuing evaluation of the Attendance Matters program model are funded by the JPMorgan Chase Foundation. Implementation and management of the pilot program are funded by The Robin Hood Foundation.<sup>c</sup> The pilot program was designed to operate for two school years, from August 2018 to July 2020, though most activities were cut short in March 2020, when the Coronavirus pandemic closed schools.

While the Attendance Matters model is designed primarily to improve school attendance, additional potential outcomes include improved school performance, shorter shelter stays, and increased stability upon shelter exit. The Attendance Matters program pilot began in three shelters serving homeless families with children in New York City, each operated by a different nonprofit shelter provider organization. By the end of Year 1, Gateway Housing learned that the three original shelters share supervision and many resources with other shelters in their organizations. This led to AM program components and practices being informally adopted at other shelter sites. To counter this “intervention leakage,” the pilot was officially expanded to two additional shelters during the first year, in the Fall of 2018 and the Spring 2019. A sixth shelter joined at the beginning of the second school year.

Of the six shelters participating in the program pilot, four are similar in size — medium capacity facilities sheltering 50 to 100 families at any given time. The remaining shelter participating in Year 1 is notably larger, with a capacity

<sup>b</sup> The program was originally called Improving School Attendance for Homeless Children (ISAHC). During the summer of 2019, the program was renamed, “Attendance Matters.”

<sup>c</sup> Additional support for Gateway Housing has been provided by the New York Community Trust, the Richman Foundation, the Oak Foundation, Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, the Revson Foundation, the Capital One Foundation and the M & T Foundation.

of over 200 families. This site also shelters predominantly larger-sized families. After the first school year, Gateway Housing added one other large facility, for a total of six AM program shelters in the second year of the pilot.

**THE ATTENDANCE MATTERS PROGRAM MODEL AND ITS COMPONENTS**

The Attendance Matters model relies on three primary program components:

1. Coordination through a Multi-Agency Team Approach
2. Use of Data to Identify Students and Track Progress
3. Training in Evidence-Based Practices.

**1. Coordination through a Multi-Agency Team Approach** - The most important element of the Attendance Matters program model is the focus on improving coordination between DHS-contracted shelter staff and DOE staff (both school-based and from central and regional DOE offices). Coordination is improved by establishing interagency teams at each shelter, holding weekly meetings, having a team leader to track case progress, assign tasks to and regularly communicate with individual team members, and holding regular interagency workgroup meetings to monitor outcomes and troubleshoot systemic issues.

The Attendance Matters teams at each shelter include a constellation of professionals from different agencies and organizations. Each of them have different roles, but are all in some way responsible for assisting homeless families to ensure their children attend school. With a diverse range of expertise, experience, skills and knowledge, Attendance Matters team members collaboratively assess the situation of each child identified as having poor school attendance. They then employ a holistic approach to identify ground-level solutions across agencies and systems to address familial challenges related to poor school attendance.

**Attendance Matters Team Members**

Members of the Attendance Matters teams include, but are not limited to:

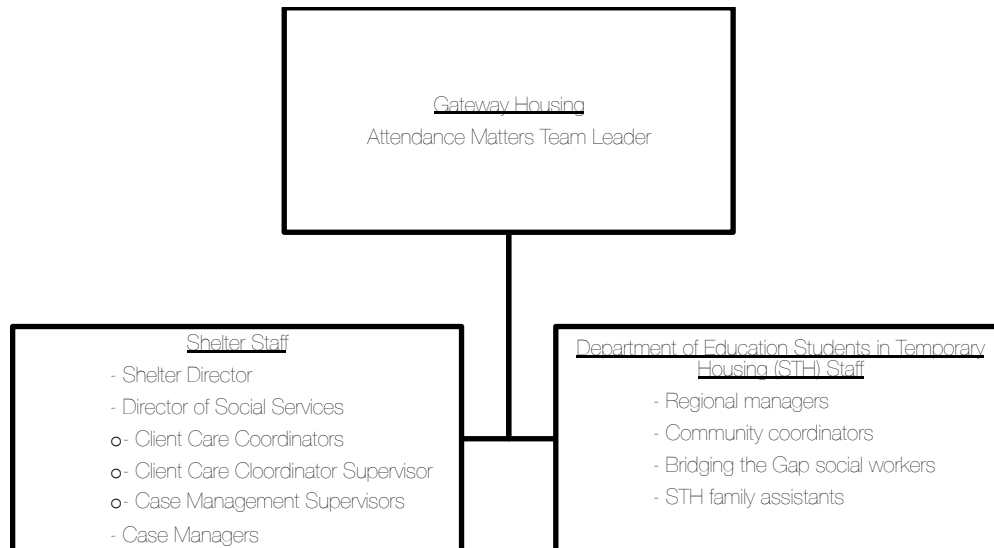


CHART 2

- **The Attendance Matters Leader** is a new position created for and funded by the pilot who assists all Attendance Matters pilot teams. The Attendance Matters Leader leads a weekly team meeting at each shelter site, helps the teams use data to identify and review cases, keeps progress notes on all open cases, follows up with and coaches team members, and helps with problem solving of cases, including escalating issues that require higher-up, systemic solutions. The AM Leader manages communications

and ensures that participating schools local to the shelters are informed and kept up-to-date on the work and progress of the Attendance Matters teams, at times meeting with school principals, DOE STH Community Coordinators and other school staff members, or inviting them to AM team meetings, as appropriate. The AM Leader establishes relationships with the DOE Regional Managers located in the borough STH offices, and encourages team members to engage families in their efforts to improve school attendance. The AM Leader also organizes and hosts events at the shelter, including informational parent education sessions and celebrations recognizing families whose children have good and/or improved school attendance.

- **The Shelter Director** plays a critical role in Attendance Matters: his or her presence at meetings emphasizes to shelter staff that school attendance is a priority, and the director's more clearly defined authority supplements and supports the AM Team Leader (who, being from a separate organization, must rely primarily on the power of persuasion). The Shelter Director's experience and leadership are often invaluable to teams' efforts to problem solve and address individual family cases.
- **Client Care Coordinators** and their supervisors are Licensed Master and Clinical Social Workers (LMSWs and LCSWs), and a relatively new addition to the New York City shelter workforce. Funded by the de Blasio administration's ThriveNYC mental health initiative, Client Care Coordinators play an important role on the Attendance Matters team. Sometimes called ThriveNYC social workers, these clinically trained staff members have Masters degree-level social work training, helping to ensure that solutions the team develops are appropriate and realistic for the families served. Their insights regarding the clinical features of challenges facing homeless parents and children are a valuable asset to the Attendance Matters teams. As part of their regular work responsibilities, Client Care Coordinators conduct biopsychosocial assessments of families in shelters.
- **Additional Shelter Staff** on each Attendance Matters team vary, as determined by the shelter director at each site. Directors are encouraged to assign staff of different responsibility levels, such as case managers, case management supervisors and directors of social services, as appropriate. These staff members should be the most familiar with the families and their daily lives and challenges. Shelter staff members working directly with families who have children with chronic school absenteeism are encouraged to participate in Attendance Matters team meetings, particularly when their assigned children are being discussed.
- **STH Family Assistants** are DOE employees assigned to work on-site in shelters, including all of the shelters participating in the pilot program. They are important members of the Attendance Matters team, as they bring knowledge and information about DOE and the schools that shelter staff may not have, including additional data about children's attendance, education status and school performance available only in the DOE data system. Family Assistants also play a key role in the school choice decision-making process. If a child is going to remain in his or her school of origin, the selection often entails working with the Family Assistant to set up a workable travel plan (which can involve public transportation or special DOE STH busing). Family Assistants play an active role in AM team trouble-shooting when issues arise.
- **Other DOE Staff:** Over the past year, in an effort to increase support for students living in temporary housing, DOE has expanded the types and number of staff focused on the needs of students in temporary housing. DOE has added 12 STH Regional Managers (for a total of 18), 107 STH Community Coordinators (a new staff position at DOE), and 31 Bridging the Gap Social Workers (for a total of 100, assigned to schools with high percentages of STH children). Each of these staff positions is important to the Attendance Matters teams.



- **DOE STH Regional Managers** sit in on weekly AM team meetings about once a month, to provide insight and support to STH staff they oversee, including Bridging the Gap Social Workers, Community Coordinators and Family Assistants. Regional Managers help troubleshoot the most challenging cases, particularly those that require administrative interventions at DOE.
- **DOE STH Community Coordinators** are based in schools with concentrated STH populations, and act as liaisons between school and shelter-based staff. They provide logistical support to the AM teams, and act as advocates for families prioritized for AM assistance in shelter.
- **DOE Bridging The Gap Social Workers** are also based in schools with concentrated STH populations, and act as a bridge between the school and shelter-based staff, providing clinical (rather than logistical) support to the families and children in need.

Ensuring homeless children's school attendance has long been a responsibility of all these DOE and DHS-contracted staff positions. But before the Attendance Matters initiative, regional and school-based DOE staff and shelter-based DHS provider staff largely worked separately on the issue, with little interaction between the agencies. By coordinating these staff members' efforts, and building a team approach, the Attendance Matters pilot increased the sum result of these efforts. DOE and DHS continue to build on these efforts, and are rapidly improving coordination between the two agencies.

**2. Use of Data to Identify Students and Track Progress** - Regular team meetings are the most essential element of Attendance Matters, and these team meetings are built around better use of data. Each weekly meeting begins with a team review of the most recent attendance data. Much of this data is available in a report in the DHS Client Assistance and Rehousing Enterprise System (CARES) case management database system. The existing system showed the last four weeks of each child's school attendance. But to make this process more efficient and effective, Gateway Housing worked with DHS to redesign the report to provide more context, so that it also showed the last five days of each child's school attendance. Using data in real time in this way allows the team to immediately recognize when absences are becoming a problem for a child or family in the shelter, helps the team focus resources, and provides insight into the success or failure of interventions.

The first year of the pilot program spent time testing and learning the best ways to access and review the data. During this time, one of the provider organizations developed a tool for their Attendance Matters team that extracts and compiles the weekly data from the DHS CARES report and displays a child's school attendance rates over time, as the school year progresses. This proved so useful that Gateway Housing worked with the other providers to produce similar tracking tools for their teams and organizations.

The AM teams use the attendance data reports to identify children in the shelter who are experiencing high or chronic absenteeism. In their discussions, they prioritize children with the highest absentee rates, but work to resolve both simple and complex issues preventing children from attending school. The teams also use the data to identify children who have good attendance, so they can celebrate them and their families at shelter events with certificates for children with perfect and improved attendance.

Regularly reviewing data as a team permits members from different organizations to share additional information they know about students and families that would normally be available only to the school or to the shelter provider, including demographic, work, residential and other information about the parents and children from the CARES system, as well as school-related information from DOE, including any special needs of students. This information is supplemented by the Client Care Coordinators' biopsychosocial assessments, and observations of the families by the individual team members.

**3. Training in Evidence-Based Practices** - The Attendance Matters model offers formal trainings by outside practitioners to give team members additional skills and knowledge in three specific areas: motivational interviewing, trauma-informed care, and navigating the New York City education system. The first two courses have been provided by the NYU School of Medicine Child Study Center and the Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) Training Institute, leaders in social service sector training in New York City. Working with Gateway Housing, CUCS and NYU modified their courses to fit the circumstances specific to homeless families in shelters, and to focus on addressing school attendance and related issues. The modified courses include case histories and other examples related to the work of the AM teams. Trainings on the DOE system are offered by Advocates For Children of New York. Courses are delivered on-site at each of the shelters. Trainings began in September 2018; to accommodate expected staff turnover, the training courses are offered several times during the year. These training sessions supplement similar trainings offered to staff by DHS. Attendance Matters trainings include:

- **Motivational Interviewing (MI)** is an evidence-based practice developed by Miller and Rollnick that helps people recognize and address problem behaviors (present or potential), and get them moving along the path to change. Motivational interviewing is intended to help resolve ambivalence and create an openness to change, as a prelude to accepting additional services and further therapeutic work. The AM training provides team members with an introduction to the basic principles and skills associated with MI, including expressing empathy, rolling with resistance, and avoiding common roadblocks to change.
- **Trauma-Informed Care** is an evidence-based engagement technique that recognizes the presence and influence of trauma histories in the lives of people receiving services. The high incidence of trauma among homeless families shape those families' responses to services. This training provides an introduction to the new diagnostic criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other trauma-related disorders, as well as other symptoms and behaviors resulting from trauma. Assessment, safety issues, medication and symptom management are explored at both case management and programmatic levels. Training attendees acquire a better understanding of trauma-informed care and the clinical skills needed to support persons healing and recovering from trauma histories.
- **New York City Education System trainings** are offered by Advocates for Children of New York, a nonprofit organization that supports at-risk children in the education system, and is deeply involved in ensuring that appropriate programs and services are in place for New York City students in temporary housing. These training sessions have been offered quarterly at each shelter during the school year, as modules on a variety of topics, including:
  - **Where to find help at school:** an overview of the DOE, the education system in general, and how New York City school supports are structured and can be accessed;
  - **Educational rights of New York City students in shelters:** the basics of federal and local regulations, with an emphasis on school stability and trouble-shooting transportation issues;
  - **DOE processes and services for children with special needs:** the Independent Education Plan (IEP) process, IEP forms and reports, services offered at schools, special education schools;
  - **School discipline and suspensions:** types of disciplinary actions, what suspension means, student access to education while suspended.

The Attendance Matters trainings supplement and reorient the work of the teams to an approach that employs evidence-based practices and improved understanding of the challenges faced by homeless children and families. Training team members together helps to unify teams and give them a common vocabulary and toolkit with which to engage the families and children served by the program.

## 4. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

### SHELTERS PARTICIPATING IN THE ATTENDANCE MATTERS PILOT

Three nonprofit shelter providers participated in the first year of the Attendance Matters pilot program: HELP USA, BronxWorks and Win, Inc. Each of these organizations designated two of their shelters to participate in the pilot. An additional provider and shelter site were added in the second year of the initiative, the CAMBA Flagstone Family Residence.

The pilot was originally structured so that each organization would implement the Attendance Matters program model at one shelter and designate another shelter that did not follow the model, to be studied as a comparison site. However, during the second half of the school year, Gateway Housing became aware of an interesting phenomenon: at two of the organizations, the pilot site and the comparison shelter share key supervisory staff, including the Client Care Coordinator Supervisor. As a result, practices of the Attendance Matters model seen as successful were being implemented at the comparison sites.

Also, during this time the outcomes evaluation team developed a more robust methodology to compare the Attendance Matters pilot shelters to similar shelters in the homeless family shelter system. After assessing the Attendance Matters Leader's work schedule, Gateway Housing decided to add the comparison shelters as Pilot Program sites. Table 1 displays the capacity of the six pilot shelters, with the three added after the initial start in *italics*.

**Table 3. Attendance Matters Pilot Program Shelters**

Provider Organizations	Designated Shelters	# Family Units	K-5	6-8	9-12	Total Kids in School
BronxWorks	Nelson	79	83	26	38	147
	<i>Jackson (Fall 2018)</i>	95	73	26	11	110
Help USA	Crotona 1	96	74	21	19	114
	<i>Crotona 2 (Spring 2019)</i>	33	21	11	3	35
Women in Need	Junius	216	206	104	86	396
<i>CAMBA</i>	<i>Flagstone (Fall 2019)</i>	158	148	65	94	307

Of note, New York City students who reside in shelters have the choice to remain in their “school of origin” (the school they attended before moving to shelter), or transferring to a school close to the homeless shelter in which they have been placed. While the schools with the highest numbers of students in temporary housing are geographically close to shelters, homeless children attend schools in every school district.<sup>26</sup> The Attendance Matters Leader, working with Family Assistants, has engaged the schools deemed local to each of the Attendance Matters shelters.

Local schools to the AM sites include:

- BronxWorks Nelson: PS 170, PS 303, PS 70
- BronxWorks Jackson: PS 65
- Help USA Crotona 1 and Crotona 2: PS 411 (CS), PS 10, PS 352, East Bronx Academy for the Future (CS)
- Win Junius and CAMBA Flagstone: Christopher Avenue Community School, PS328, PS150, PS298

Very few of the schools attended by children in the Attendance Matters pilot are part of the NYC DOE Community Schools (CS) initiative. Community schools have enhanced resources and staff (including on-site therapists, physicians and additional social workers) to better address the educational inequities faced by low-income students (with a particular focus on students in temporary housing). In the rare instances when the AM and CS initiatives had students in common, the AM Leader engaged Community School principals and staff to ensure the needs of AM children with poor attendance were identified and addressed.

Notably, the BronxWorks Nelson Family Residence and the HELP USA Crotona 1 and 2 shelters are in school districts with the second and third highest number of students in temporary housing. And importantly, the Christopher Avenue Community School is a Community School in name only. It is not part of the official DOE Community School program, and thus does not have all of the rich resources commonly available at a DOE Community School.

### FIRST YEAR IMPLEMENTATION

The first year of the Attendance Matters pilot initiative began in July 2018, and coincided with the 2018-19 school year. Activities pursued and milestones achieved during the year included the following:

**Hiring the AM Leader:** The Attendance Matters program pilot initiative began with the July 2018 hiring of the AM Leader, who is responsible for overseeing the initiative on-site, predominantly at shelters and sometimes at schools. The Attendance Matters Leader was intentionally hired as an employee of Gateway Housing, to allow the position to remain independent of DOE, DHS and shelter provider staff. This independence has proven to be valuable during the first year of the pilot, allowing the AM Leader to serve as an honest broker between agencies and systems, in a position to elevate systemic issues to responsible officials in those systems. This independence has also proven helpful in the second year of the pilot, as the AM Leader contributes to efforts to disseminate and replicate the program.

**Formation of AM Teams:** Soon after the AM Leader was brought on board, work began with each of the participating shelter providers and DOE workers, to determine which staff would become members of the AM teams. Few requirements were laid out to participating organizations, but consensus grew organically that all the teams would give primary roles to the shelters' Client Care Coordinators and the DOE Family Assistants working out of the shelters.

**Defining Staff Roles:** As the year progressed, staff roles became clear. The shelter provider's case managers and DOE's shelter-based Family Assistants took the lead in resolving simpler, logistical or administrative problems. Systemic DOE issues were investigated and often resolved by higher-level DOE supervisors, like Regional Managers and Community Coordinators. School-based DOE Bridging The Gap social workers were often useful in resolving more complex, clinical issues related to families' behavioral health problems and other special needs, but the Client Care Coordinators employed by the shelter provider most often took the lead resolving these more complex challenges. In all cases, solutions were achieved by multiple team members working in coordination as part of an interagency collaboration.

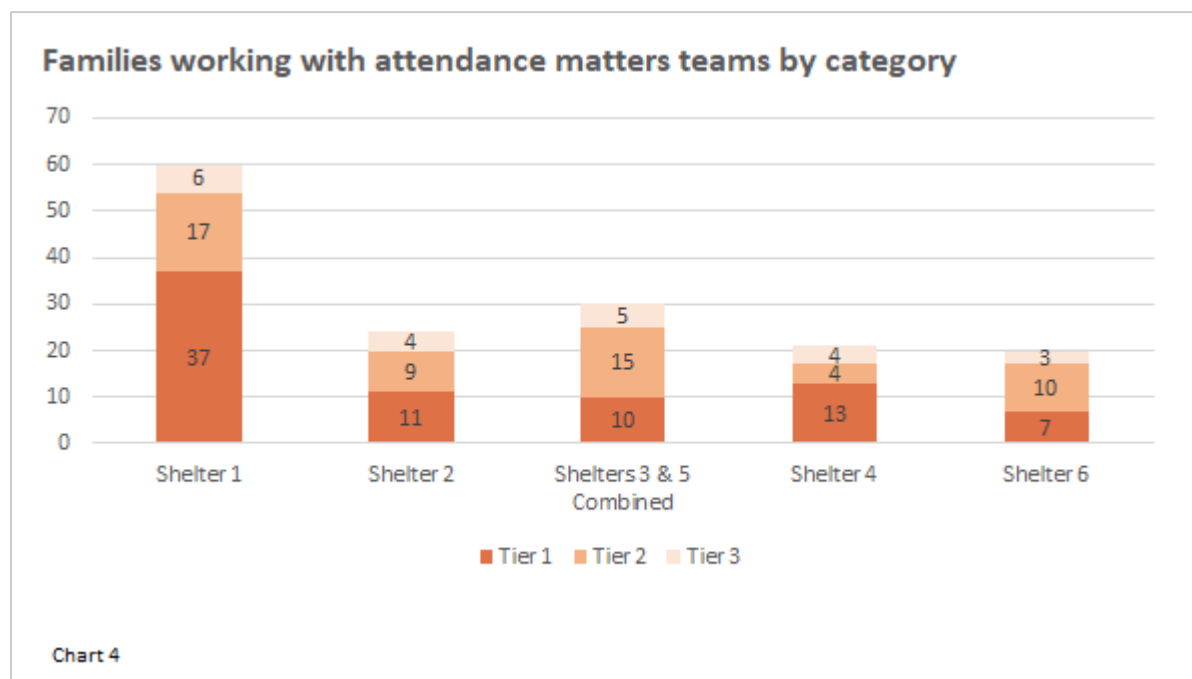
Teams found that clinical staff recently added by the de Blasio administration at both DHS and DOE – in particular the shelter providers' Client Care Coordinator positions – provide essential support to the Attendance Matters initiative. They also reported that the program becomes noticeably more effective when DOE supervisory staff members are committed to the goals of the AM initiative. Many of the solutions to the cases turn out to be relatively simple, but a good number are not. Almost all require an interagency, multi-disciplinary team like Attendance Matters offers to ensure that any and all issues can be addressed.

**Kick-offs and Other Events:** Kicking off the school year at a shelter often means having an event to distribute donated backpacks and school supplies. At the AM shelter sites, the AM Leader and team increased the impact of

these occasions by inviting representatives from a variety of DOE offices to attend and provide critical information to families and shelter staff, on topics ranging from transportation and registration, to securing services for special needs children. Later in the school year, the AM teams held additional, increasingly popular, celebratory events, with pizza and gift certificates, to honor students with good and improved attendance.

**Prioritizing Assistance:** When the teams first began to meet, the AM Leader directed them to focus on the elementary school children in each shelter beginning the school year with the most absences. Under the AM Leader’s guidance, the teams became familiar with using the weekly attendance report data to identify the children most in need of assistance. Each week, the team selected cases and assigned primary responsibility to appropriate team members, reviewed next steps, and mapped out activities for the rest of the week. Having staff with diverse expertise from both the shelters and schools brought new information and solutions to the table. Some cases were resolved quickly. More complex cases, involving multiple children and family challenges, required hours of staff time, and could take months to address.

After three months, the AM Leader realized that the families with the most complex challenges could monopolize staff members’ time, leaving them little opportunity to assist families with fewer barriers who could still benefit from the intervention. By asking the teams to concentrate their efforts solely on the students with the most severely chronic absenteeism, the program was forgoing the opportunity to assist students with less severe, but still chronic absences. Many of these students faced challenges fairly simple to address, like changing school registrations, arranging transportation, or having clean clothes to wear each morning. At this point in the pilot, the teams were asked to divide their efforts between students with severe chronic absenteeism (less than 80% attendance) and students with chronic absenteeism (from 80% to 89% attendance). For families and children in need of a stronger clinical intervention, the AM teams worked with shelter staff to facilitate placement of the families into supportive housing, where they can receive appropriate, ongoing services. By the end of Year 1, the families at each site in the AM caseload were prioritized into Tiers 1 (most complex) to 3 (less challenged), as shown in the table below.



**Training:** By the third week of October, AM teams at all three shelter locations had been trained in the evidence-based practices Motivational Interviewing and Trauma-Informed Care by the Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS ) Training Institute. Both DOE and nonprofit shelter provider staff attended the trainings, which were held on-site at each shelter. Another series of trainings, on navigating the NYC DOE system, were offered in October and December by Advocates For Children of New York, at each of the three locations. In all cases, the trainings were offered to every member of the team, and members were encouraged to train as a team unit (though this was not always possible, given staff schedules and other job commitments). Team members found the practical information offered in the Advocates For Children training immediately helpful, though the clinical practice trainings were also useful in establishing a common programmatic understanding among the team members.

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The Attendance Matters program encountered a number of challenges over the course of the first year of implementation. Some were anticipated; others unexpected. Challenges that had the most impact on program implementation included:

**Staffing Vacancies:** At times during the AM pilot's first year, vacant staffing lines at both the shelter provider and DOE reduced the effectiveness of the AM teams' at many of the sites. The lack of appropriate staff available to respond to any and all problems encountered by the teams corresponded to an increase in absences of the children served by the AM program, particularly those who had the most complex, time-consuming challenges. The relatively new Client Care Coordinator masters-level social work positions have been a challenge for DHS providers to fill and keep filled at some locations.

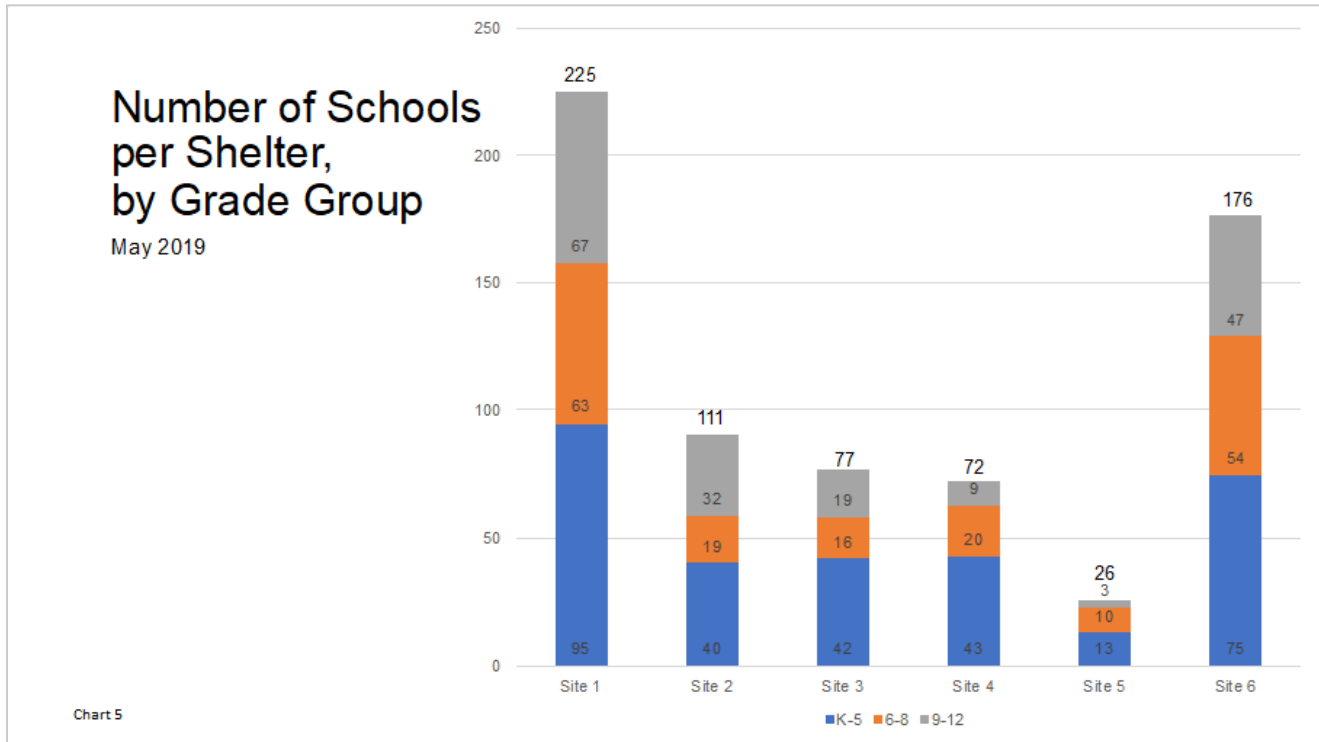
**Consistent Implementation:** Different circumstances at the three shelters led to uneven implementation early in the program. Two of the shelters were quickly able to begin implementation early in the school year. However, one of the shelters started more slowly, due to staff turnover and early uncertainty over roles. These issues were resolved within the first two months of implementation, and the program has since taken hold at all of the original pilot shelter sites. When the AM program is replicated, close oversight in the critical first weeks and monitoring of program fidelity are necessary to ensure successful implementation at all sites.

**Seasonal Challenges:** Throughout the school year, the teams successfully intervened in scores of cases, measurably improving the school attendance of many individual students. But the teams also found that certain events and seasonal dynamics influenced attendance more than expected. Holiday weeks were notable for a general decrease in attendance, and a February cold snap reduced attendance across the board, as some children were unable to get to school on particularly cold mornings. Likewise, attendance dips across the school system as a whole when the school year comes to a gradual close in June. In addition, shelters with high turnover of families often saw significant increases in absenteeism, as the disruption experienced by newly-arrived families often causes absences to spike in the shelter's attendance data.

**Access to Healthcare:** The AM teams found that more absences than anticipated were caused by children's chronic health conditions, with an especially high incidence of asthma. Having healthcare services readily available on-site at the shelter made the teams more effective and better able to respond quickly to daily barriers students encounter. But some of the AM program shelters do not have room for on-site clinics, making chronic health conditions at those sites harder to address. Recent efforts by DHS to link these shelters to community-based clinics are expected to improve these sheltered families' access to healthcare.

**Large Families:** The Attendance Matters teams found that, as a general rule, larger families in shelter tend to face more complex challenges, and may benefit most from the clinical supports DOE and DHS-contracted social workers can provide. However, large families' more extensive needs can overwhelm DHS-contracted Client Care Coordinators' capacity to serve them, as the position's staff to client ratio is set at one Client Care Coordinator for every 25 families, regardless of the number of children, and level of need, in each family. As a result, the high

number of children at some of the shelters has strained the capacity of the Attendance Matters teams, particularly when children in the shelter attend many different schools, often far from the shelter (under the federal McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act, families have the right to keep children in their school of origin after becoming homeless). At one AM program site, more than 400 children attend over 220 different schools (see Chart 5). This can negatively impact the ability of an Attendance Matters team to provide the support that the children and families need to ensure good school attendance.



## 5. EVALUATION

Gateway Housing is funded by the JP Morgan Chase Foundation to evaluate the short- and long-term outcomes of the Attendance Matters model and two-year pilot. The independent evaluation will compare data about children and families at the pilot sites with children and families in similar shelters in the DHS system not participating in the AM initiative. Taking a quasi-experimental approach, the formal evaluation will provide more conclusive evidence on the Attendance Matters program's impact on school attendance and other outcomes. The Logic Model in Table 6 below guides the evaluation and lists the many outcomes to consider.

**Principal Investigators:** Gateway Housing has contracted with Social Policy Analytics, a social policy research firm led by Dan Treglia, PhD., to act as principal investigator of the Attendance Matters program. Dr. Treglia is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice, and will be working closely with Jay Bainbridge, PhD, associate professor of Public Administration at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY. Previous to their current positions, both served in the New York City's Department of Homeless Services, Dr. Bainbridge as the Assistant Commissioner of Policy & Planning, and Dr. Treglia as Deputy Director of Research. Both have designed and conducted experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of programs addressing homelessness and their impacts through primary survey data, qualitative interviews and administrative records from New York City DHS, HRA, Administration for Children's Services (ACS), New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and the Veterans' Administration (VA). Drs. Treglia and Bainbridge will be supported in data management and analysis by Mike Cassidy, a doctoral candidate at Rutgers University specializing in applied microeconomic analyses of homelessness and education.

**Evaluation Structure:** Drs. Treglia and Bainbridge are using a mixed-methods approach, combining DOE attendance data matched to the DHS shelter census, quantitative administrative data from relevant city agencies, and interviews with families who have experienced the Attendance Matters program. Key to the evaluation is a collaboration with the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI), a research and policy center located in the Office of the Mayor of the City of New York and led by Maryanne Schretzman. Dr. Samuels provides additional assistance to the evaluation, by managing several aspects of the qualitative data collection and analyses examining the implementation of, and fidelity to, the Attendance Matters program model. Quantitative outcomes will be evaluated using multivariate regression, controlling for differences in families, schools, placement types and facilities. Qualitative data, collected during interviews with parents of children in Attendance Matters shelters, will be coded to reveal prevailing themes, and be used to contextualize and expand on quantitative results.

**Implementation/Fidelity Evaluation Study:** The evaluation team is also conducting an ongoing evaluation of how the AM program model is being implemented at the different sites, and the degree to which there are variations to how different teams follow the model. Using qualitative data collection methods, this model fidelity study was conducted in Year 1 of the pilot.

**Interagency Workgroup:** An important component of the evaluation is an interagency workgroup comprised of representatives from Gateway Housing and the evaluation team, CIDI, DSS, DHS, DOE and the participating shelter providers. The workgroup meets every two to four months to review preliminary program data in order to identify and troubleshoot issues around the implementation of the AM program. Mirroring the AM Team meetings in the shelters, the diverse skill sets and perspectives around the table make the workgroup an effective forum for addressing systemic and management issues affecting the program. In Year 2, the initiative began experimenting with government-only and provider-only workgroup meetings, supplemented by meetings of data specialists within the provider organizations.

**Progress of the Independent Evaluation:** The independent evaluators worked with members of the interagency workgroup to finalize the evaluation protocol. Importantly, the protocol uses an adaptive design



approach, meaning that the qualitative evaluation allowed the team to regularly appraise model fidelity and immediately incorporate findings into the design and implementation of the Attendance Matters program during the pilot's execution.

Because the evaluation depends on data from DOE that only recently became available, the Year 1 independent evaluation report will not be completed until Fall of 2020. The primary outcome of interest to the evaluation will be the Attendance Matters program's impact on school attendance, comparing the pilot shelters with other shelters throughout the city. Other outcomes, like shelter use and other measures of familial stability, may be assessed, depending on data availability. Outcomes from the first-year evaluation are expected to reflect program model changes that occurred as the initiative was refined. A second, more comprehensive independent evaluation of the Attendance Matters pilot will be completed when Year 2 data becomes available in 2021.

Table 6. Attendance Matters Pilot Program Logic Model

Inputs	AM Program Elements	Proposed Outcomes – Year 1*		
		Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
<p><b>Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NYC Families at 6 Tier II shelters i</li> <li>• Children in K-12</li> </ul> <p><b>Shelter Staff:</b> CM supervisors, Thrive/social service staff, shelter director</p> <p><b>DOE Staff:</b> Family Assistants, STH Regional Mgrs, BTG Social Workers , STH Community Coordinators</p> <p><b>Local Schools:</b> School based social workers and administrators</p> <p><b>AM Leader</b></p> <p><b>Interagency work group:</b> CIDI, HRA/DHS, DOE.</p> <p><b>Data:</b> Weekly shelter attendance report, DOE ATS reports, provider data tracking tools, shelter census, CARES Notes, IEP’s, medical records (HIPAA consent)</p> <p><b>Add’l resources:</b> small monthly cash allowances</p>	<p><b>Team meetings:</b> Weekly to address issues related to chronic absenteeism. AM Leader will provide attendance progress tracking tools and support to team by engaging other professionals as needed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure immediate school enrollment/attendance upon shelter move-in.</li> <li>• Provide ongoing support as needed (cash funds avail.).</li> <li>• Celebrate students/families with excellent attendance (cash funds can be used).</li> </ul> <p>AM Leader tracks attendance during 3 periods: transition into shelter, shelter residence, transition to perm. housing.</p> <p>AM Leader will track attendance-related issues, team solutions, challenges outside team’s control.</p> <p>AM Leader to engage local stakeholders: schools (principals, teachers) and local nonprofits (afterschool programs, healthcare, legal).</p> <p>Interagency work group meetings: AM Leader to provide progress reports, successes and challenges.</p> <p><b>Training:</b> Inter-agency teams formed at shelters. Team trainings include: Motivational Interviewing, DOE/Navigating NYC School System, Special Education IEP’s/504, DOE Discipline Policy &amp; Student Rights, Transportation. CE credits available.</p>	<p><b>Improve Attendance (ST)*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in # children with severe chronic absences from the year prior to Attendance Matters</li> <li>• Reduction effort concentrated on children in grades K-8.</li> </ul>	<p><b>For children:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase school achievement: grade advancement, school performance at grade level (MT)*</li> <li>• Decrease ACS involvement (education neglect) (MT)*</li> <li>• Continued school achievement post shelter (LT)*</li> </ul> <p><b>For families establishing school attendance routines:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce family chaos (ST)*</li> <li>• Increase parents’ ability to meet Individualized Learning Plan goals (MT)*</li> <li>• Reduce LOS (LT)*</li> <li>• Improve housing stability (LT)*</li> </ul>	<p><b>For children:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase likelihood for high school graduation (LT)*</li> </ul> <p><b>For families:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased income security (LT)*</li> <li>• Reduced likelihood of return to shelter (LT)*</li> </ul>
<p><b>*Outcomes</b></p> <p>ST: Short Term MT: Medium Term LT: Long Term</p>	<p><b>Mediating Factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children with IEPs, or in process of getting and IEP</li> <li>• School transfers</li> <li>• Parent challenges such as ACE score, mental health, health challenges</li> <li>• Family characteristics: size, length of stay in shelter, homeless history</li> <li>• Housing placement type</li> <li>• Parent work status at baseline</li> <li>• Benefits at baseline</li> </ul>			

## 6. INITIAL FINDINGS

After the two years of the pilot, there are already many stories of individual child and family school attendance improvements. These successes are supported by the program data used by the teams to track attendance. While not yet confirmed by the independent evaluation, these preliminary results show promising improvements to homeless children's school attendance, and offer interesting insights into the program's first-year implementation.

**Early Successes:** A review of the preliminary program data of the pilot showed promising improvements at participating shelters. Comparing attendance data from May 2019 (towards the end of the pilot's first school year), with data from May 2018 (before the Attendance Matters program was introduced at the sites), the percentage of children with good attendance (90% or better attendance) improved at all four shelters participating in year one, year over year. More to the point, the combined percentage of students with chronic (less than 90%) and severely chronic (less than 80%) absenteeism declined at all four first-year program sites. Even more encouraging, three of the four sites achieved reductions in severely chronic absenteeism. Promisingly, these improvements occurred during the first year of the pilot, when the program model was still being adjusted and adapted in response to unanticipated environmental factors, including substantial staffing vacancies at some of the pilot sites. Despite these challenges, each of the sites appeared to see significant improvements to attendance. The preliminary program data showed continuing improvements in the second year of the pilot. These initial indications are now being investigated by the independent evaluation.

One of the participating shelter providers documented school attendance in three of its shelters during the first year of Attendance Matters. The AM program was implemented at two of the shelters, while the third shelter did not participate in the pilot, and instead provided the usual services offered in the DHS shelter system.

The preliminary data showed that the two shelters receiving the intervention had many weeks where attendance in the current year was much improved over the previous year. In contrast, the shelter without the intervention had attendance rates that were very similar across the two years.

Another shelter provider participating in Attendance Matters recorded similar outcomes in its data, with its AM shelter sites experiencing an increase in attendance compared to the previous year, and other shelters not participating in the program showing no improvement. Analyzing the school attendance of children in its AM shelters, this provider found that cumulative absences among K-5 students were reduced in 2018-19 (the AM program year) as compared to the previous school year (before AM was implemented).

### CONFIRMING PROGRAM DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS

The first year of the Attendance Matters initiative has provided valuable information and insights on the school attendance and absenteeism of homeless students. Importantly, the implementation experience suggested that three premises of the program model's design are valid:

:

1. That a shelter-based intervention designed to improve the school attendance of homeless children can be implemented.
2. That poor school attendance is often an indicator of deeper familial, health and behavioral health challenges.
3. That addressing school attendance issues is an effective way for social service staff to initiate and build strong relationships with homeless families in order to address the more complex challenges they face.

Unsurprisingly, Attendance Matters teams found that the children with the lowest rates of school attendance are likely to face the most complex and greatest number of challenges. The AM teams found that whether poor school attendance preceded, or began with, the shelter stay did not have much bearing on how the team

responded. Rather, the implementation experience suggests the most critical aspect of the ensuing intervention was that the AM team members work together, to gather and share information, and to develop customized plans to address identified issues quickly and effectively.

Regardless of whether the independent evaluation eventually confirms the AM program as an evidence-based intervention, the initiative has already improved our understanding of school absenteeism among homeless children, and demonstrated ways to increase coordination between shelters and schools to address the problem.

### REASONS FOR HOMELESS STUDENTS' ABSENTEEISM

In its first year, Attendance Matters identified the most frequent causes of school absences among the children served by the program, as well as pragmatic strategies to address them. Below is a list of the seven most frequent causes for absenteeism identified by the Attendance Matters teams, and the interventions used by the teams to solve these challenges. It is important to note that these issues often overlap, and many homeless students encounter multiple barriers to attending school regularly that are often exacerbated by transportation and other logistical issues. In descending order of importance, the most common reasons for absenteeism encountered by the AM teams included:

- **Behavioral and Physical Health Issues of Parents:** Parents' mental health has a great impact on family functioning, including children's school attendance. And the traumatic experience of becoming homeless, along with the sometimes challenging shelter environment, can exacerbate mental health issues. Poor physical health can also inhibit parents' ability to look after their children. **To address these issues:** AM teams' clinical staff members have used poor school attendance to help them identify and support families with a parent in need of mental health services. In addition, teams have developed procedures to ensure that parents with serious mental and physical health issues are prioritized for assistance applying to placement into supportive housing.
- **Poor Physical and Mental Health of Students:** Approximately thirty percent of the students in the AM shelter sites participate in the DOE's Individualized Education Program (IEP) for students with special needs, have DOE "504 Plans" (designating accommodations for children with disabilities), or have been identified as requiring evaluation for these programs. Transportation problems can be particularly challenging for students with special needs, who may also not attend school because they and/or their parents believe the current placement is not a good fit. Some also miss school while they are awaiting approval of their IEP or 504 plan and school placement. **To address these issues:** Attendance Matters contracted with Advocates For Children of New York to provide training to teams with general information about how IEPs and 504 plans work at DOE, and how they and the child's parent can advocate for the child's needs during IEP meetings. Evaluations for these plans are complex, have many steps, and can be overwhelming for parents in the most stable conditions. For families living in shelters, often far from their personal social supports, the assistance of an AM team member can be essential. In several cases where students with special needs were missing school on a regular basis, Attendance Matters teams successfully advocated to have the children reevaluated to ensure the students' needs were being met, with some transferred to other schools that better supported the children's needs.
- **DOE Enrollment and Administrative Challenges:** All the Attendance Matters teams have encountered enrollment and administrative issues working with DOE. The most common involve action items, like registrations, evaluations and transfers, not processed in a timely or proper manner, especially related to IEPs for students with special needs. **To address these issues:** in addition to the aforementioned staff trainings, the teams have taken a variety of actions to acknowledge students' rights, including hosting workshops for parents on the IEP process, and bringing together representatives from multiple agencies to solve specific case problems. In one example, a homeless child's difficulties with verbal communication were not being addressed at the school, leaving the child to spend over a month receiving very limited instruction in the school's office, instead of the classroom. The AM team worked

with DOE's Special Education Unit, Advocates For Children and shelter staff to advocate for the proper implementation of the child's 504 plan to accommodate her disability. Through the collective efforts of DOE and the team, all of the requirements of the student's IEP and 504 plans were finally out into place.

- **Challenges Facing Families with Infant Children:** Older siblings of families with an infant child often have issues with school attendance, particularly in the winter months, when many parents are hesitant to take their infant children out in the cold weather and have no one else to bring their older children to school. As a result, school-aged siblings often stay home on cold days. **To address these issues:** AM teams encourage and assist parents to get help from members of their social support networks, to either watch the infant or take the older children to school. AM teams are advocating for extending onsite drop-off childcare hours at shelters, so that an infant can be cared for while the parent escorts school-aged children to school.
- **Other Childcare Issues.** Even one family member's illness can easily cause all children in a homeless family to be absent from school, particularly if they require a parent to get them there. With DHS rules prohibiting parents from leaving children unattended at shelters, if a single parent needs to stay at the shelter to care for a sick child, he or she cannot take the child's siblings to school. Shelters do not provide childcare services for sick children, and the AM teams have seen older teenage children miss school to stay in the shelter and take care of siblings, when a younger child is sick, or when he or she is not yet attending school and the parent needs to work. **To address these issues:** the AM teams are problem-solving individual childcare challenges, and advocating for changes in shelter childcare policies.
- **Initial Transition to Shelter and Children's Presence at Social Service Appointments:** When first applying to DHS for shelter, homeless families must bring all children to the DHS Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center in the Bronx for interviews and processing. While the DHS policy was revised in November 2016 to require the entire family appear only for the first application interview, many homeless parents continue to bring their children to all appointments. These may occur over two or more days, when a family is given a "conditional placement" while their homeless status is investigated. **To address these issues:** AM teams counsel families about the PATH policy, and about the importance of children continuing to attend school during the conditional placement period and when parents must attend other social service appointments. The teams help the families to arrange ways to get the children to and from school while parents attend appointments. In addition, during the pandemic, DHS has implemented a system of virtual interviews over the internet that eliminates the need for children to be present at any interviews.
- **Long-Distance and Local Transportation Challenges:** Getting to school is a significant barrier for homeless students who have moved far from their home neighborhoods, but remain enrolled in their schools of origin. Many of the attendance problems at the beginning of the first AM school year were related to city-provided busing for children in shelters. Getting to school is also an issue for some younger students who attend schools close to the shelters. If no one in the household is willing or able to walk the child to school, that child will often not go. Parents can ask another shelter resident to walk their child to school, but this requires completing and signing a permission form. **To address these issues:** the AM teams invited OPT staff to attendance education fairs at the shelters where they were able to solve some transportation issues there on site. For the remaining cases, AM teams shared busing routes and pickup times with parents and helped them keep to the schedules. Family Assistants and Client Care Coordinators also helped families contact the DOE Office of Pupil Transportation (OPT) and private bus companies to report and resolve student pickup and dropoff issues. To walk children to local schools, the AM teams are asking all sheltered families with children in local schools to sign permission forms in advance, allowing a neighbor in the shelter to walk their child to school when necessary. They have also worked with families to allow middle school children to bring their younger siblings with them to local schools.

## 7. EARLY OBSERVATIONS AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the first year of Attendance Matters, the AM teams learned critical lessons about what works, both to improve attendance, and to address other issues facing homeless families and children. They also identified several barriers to program success that could be eliminated or mitigated by changes in policy. These findings relate both specifically to the AM program, and to systemic issues affecting both DHS and DOE.

### THE VALUE OF SPECIFIC AM COMPONENTS

The AM program experience suggest that many of the components of the AM program may have value:

- Holding weekly meetings between shelter and DOE staff to review attendance data helps to elevate attendance as an important goal, provides a forum for organizing and coordinating interagency efforts to get children to school, and could be integrated into the routines of all shelters serving families with school-aged children.
- Reviewing attendance data as a team allows shelters and schools to identify families likely to benefit from additional clinical support.
- Shelter staff families when given access to additional DOE information, like IEP records, teacher assessments and grade reports.
- Training staff together not only educates staff, but also helps to strengthen teams; logistical challenges can be overcome by offering trainings multiple times on-site at shelters.
- Access to flexible funding, allows teams to hold events to inform and celebrate the families and children in the program, as well as to respond rapidly to on-the-ground emergencies (like arranging backup transportation, doing laundry, or buying food).

### STAFFING RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the biggest challenges to implementing the Attendance Matters program have been related to staffing, both at the shelters and at the Department of Education. The pilot experience suggests the following recommendations could improve school attendance and other outcomes:

1. **Preserve and expand on-site clinical staff at shelters:** The licensed social workers in the shelter provider's Client Care Coordinator positions play a critical role in the AM program, responding to residents' behavioral health issues, as well as environmental challenges unique to living in shelter that can have significant impacts on children's mental and physical development. Currently funded through the ThriveNYC initiative, these positions should be baselined in the DHS model family shelter budget. In addition, the 1:25 staff to family ratio of the Client Care Coordinator program should be adjusted downward for larger shelters and for shelters serving larger families, both of which present a higher incidence of clinical challenges. Ideally, these positions should be supported by an expansion of additional, more specialized full- and part-time clinical staff, including psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists).
2. **Investigate and improve shelter staff retention:** The first year of Attendance Matters saw frequent staff vacancies at many of the shelters, particularly of Client Care Coordinators, as providers struggled to hire and retain qualified staff, especially at isolated and larger shelters serving more challenging populations. Lack of staff often had a negative impact on AM program performance and other shelter outcomes. DHS should investigate this issue and identify causes of hiring difficulties and short staff tenures, and institute measures to improve staff retention at shelters (including allowing providers to pay salary premiums for difficult postings).

3. **Hire more bilingual DOE and shelter staff:** Many shelters do not have enough – or sometimes any – staff members who speak languages other than English, making communications with families who speak other languages difficult, at best. Bilingual staff members are challenging to find and recruit. The city should incentivize shelter providers to hire more bilingual staff (including allowing higher salaries), with an emphasis on Spanish speakers. Similarly, hiring more bilingual Family Assistants, Community Coordinators and Bridging The Gap social workers at DOE will also improve engagement of families with limited proficiency in English.
4. **Permit lower DHS Client Care Coordinator staff-to-client ratios to account for family size:** The 1:25 staff-to-client ratio for the DHS-contracted Client Care Coordinator position is adequate for most family shelters. But shelters with large unit sizes that serve larger families with more children should be permitted a ratio of one Client Care Coordinator for every twenty families.
5. **Make more DOE staff available to shelter residents during summer months:** Most DOE employees do not work in the summer months. But summer brings an increase in newly homeless families, and parents in shelter must often spend the summer trying to get school situations settled before school begins in the Fall. DOE has begun to expand its staff presence in the shelter system during the summer months, and should build on these promising efforts to avoid enrollment and transportation problems early in the school year.
6. **Post additional DOE STH staff at larger shelters:** DOE has recently done much to increase its Students in Temporary Housing staff, by creating 107 new, year-round Community Coordinator positions in shelters, and 100 Bridging The Gap social workers at schools with high numbers of homeless students. However, homeless students living in shelters attend every school in the city, including many without Bridging The Gap social workers. More importantly, DOE staff posted at schools cannot assist homeless students who don't show up at the front door. We believe DOE will achieve even better outcomes by further expanding staff on site at larger shelters with more than 150 units that have many children attending many different schools.
7. **Expand DOE presence and role at PATH:** Newly homeless families must apply for shelter at the DHS Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) Center, which will determine their eligibility for homeless services, then assign and transport them to shelter. Homeless children often miss school in the first days after shelter placement, particularly when the family is placed on a conditional basis while their eligibility is being determined. DOE has one staff member at PATH and has plans to add another. DOE should ensure that there is enough around-the-clock staff presence with access to DOE systems in order to provide a mandatory check-in on attendance, enrollment and transportation issues for each family who enters PATH. Doing so can help families greatly minimize the disruptions during the first days of shelter placement.

## PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to addressing the staffing issues above, the AM experience identified additional policy changes that would help improve the school attendance of homeless children:

1. **Continue efforts to ensure homeless families' connection to healthcare services:** The AM experience found that shelter residents in a pilot shelter with an on-site clinic benefited from the easy access to developmental screening, routine health support and immunizations, as well as mental health resources, such as services provided by psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and therapists. DHS should continue working to ensure that families are connected to healthcare services by developing linkages with community services.
2. **Distribute 30-day MetroCards to homeless families:** DOE offers one-day and sometimes weekly MetroCards to shelter residents when school-provided transportation is not available, and it is actively considering issuing cards for longer time periods. DOE should allow its workers to provide all families free

MetroCards with extended 30-day terms. Not having to ask or apply for a MetroCard at the time of the transit emergency could substantially improve school attendance for some families, by allowing parents to easily use the subway to transport children to school when problems arise with other transportation, or even when it makes sense to do so on a regular basis.

3. **Create protocols for walking to nearby schools:** Even families who choose to send their children to a nearby school face attendance challenges. When administrative appointments or other obligations prevent a parent from walking their child to school, there are few alternatives: shelter staff is not permitted to escort children off-site, and other shelter parents must have written permission to perform this task. While safety concerns and sheltered families' attendance at multiple schools complicate attempts to address this challenge, DHS, regulators and providers should work together to develop a standard protocol to help children get to school in these instances.
4. **Make on-site childcare more flexible:** When a parent has to stay home to care for a child, whether because they are ill or for other reasons, siblings are often absent because the parent cannot take them to school. DHS and providers should work together to facilitate more flexible childcare arrangements that make it easier for parents to have a child cared for while they take older siblings to school.



## 8. NEXT STEPS

With the Attendance Matters initiative now concluding the second year of its two-year pilot, Gateway Housing will take next steps to: complete the independent evaluation; disseminate findings from the pilot; and modify the program model to facilitate continuation and replication of the program.

### YEAR 2 IMPLEMENTATION

In the second year of the Attendance Matters pilot, the continual adjustments of the first school year gave way to a more consistent program operation at the program shelter sites. Most shelter and school programs became fully staffed. Team members were trained, developed specific expertise and collaborated more closely. As a result, the teams felt they became more effective at addressing the full range of issues related to homeless students' school attendance.

The expansion in Year 2 to a sixth, very large shelter operated by a provider new to Attendance Matters encountered many of the same startup challenges faced by the other sites in Year 1, but with the prior year's experience, the AM management team was better able to anticipate, quickly identify and respond to these issues.

The initiative continued to offer a variety of trainings to Attendance Matters team members in the second year of the pilot. Advocates For Children of New York continued to provide trainings on navigating the DOE system, both as an introduction to the many new AM team members, and as a refresher to team members who have attended previous AFC trainings. Advocates for Children also offered information sessions about school-related issues directly to sheltered families. New trainings in service responses to trauma by the Child Study Center at the NYU School of Medicine proved popular with shelter staff and were offered again to both shelter provider and DOE staff.

One focus of the second year of the AM pilot was improving the engagement of older, high school-age children into the program. Another was integrating into the AM teams new staff recently hired by DOE to address the needs of homeless children. According to DOE, 100 new Community Coordinators "connect families to DHS services, case-workers and DOE shelter-based Family Assistants to enhance coordination between schools and shelters," a job description similar to that of the role of the Attendance Matters Leader. Gateway and Attendance Matters staff continue to work with DOE and providers to assist replication of aspects of the Attendance Matters program and to ensure new staff is deployed effectively.

### INDEPENDENT EVALUATION

After months of observing and conducting fidelity assessments on the Attendance Matters pilot, the independent evaluation of the initiative is under way. To measure program outcomes, the independent evaluators from UPenn, Marist College and Rutgers University are reviewing and analyzing first-year attendance data recently delivered by DOE. They are assisted by the New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI), which also collects data from multiple agencies and sources to compare against the DOE and DHS data. The independent evaluation will publish its report on the first year of the AM pilot in the Fall of 2020, with a report on the second year of the pilot following a year after that.

### DISSEMINATION

The Attendance Matters initiative is now focused on disseminating what has been learned. To this end, Gateway Housing has published this implementation report, and the independent evaluation of the first year of implementation will soon be concluded. In addition, Gateway Housing and its partners will continue to present on Attendance Matters Finally, Gateway Housing will publicize the experience and lessons learned from the Attendance Matters pilot experiment in various media.

Finally, Gateway Housing worked with DOE's nonprofit contractor New Visions for Public Schools on the design of a new attendance tracking database tool, based in large part on the experience of the Attendance Matters initiative. During the design process, Gateway Housing met repeatedly with New Visions, and allowed New Visions staff to sit in on AM team meetings, to see firsthand how the AM teams read and use attendance data. Later in 2020, DOE and DHS will pilot the new tracking tool at select shelters.

## REPLICATION

Equally important, in anticipation that the independent evaluation will confirm the improvements the teams are seeing in the pilot, Gateway Housing is working to facilitate the continuation and replication of the Attendance Matters program throughout the New York City DHS shelter system after the conclusion of the pilot. To this end, the New York Community Trust worked with the Attendance Matters shelter providers to develop and fund continuing efforts aimed at helping students living in shelter and their parents, to build on the initiative and to manage remote learning in response to the pandemic. Gateway Housing is also modifying the AM program model to make replication possible without the philanthropic support and additional resources that were necessary to launch the AM pilot. Gateway Housing has developed a detailed job description of the AM Leader role, in order to make it easier to assign the position's many tasks and responsibilities to other members of the AM team. As currently envisioned, this adapted AM model will require the shelter provider's Director of Social Services and Client Care Coordinators, as well as DOE Community Coordinators and Family Assistants, to take on more active leadership roles on the AM teams.

In addition to working with DHS, Gateway Housing has begun to work with providers and the New York City Administration for Children's Services to adapt the Attendance Matters program for use in Foster Care Prevention programs. This adaptation has great promise, as "educational neglect" (most often related to school absences) is a primary reason that families and their children are placed in foster care prevention.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Every day, the Gateway Housing Attendance Matters program pilot made a difference in the lives of homeless children and their families. In some instances, the teams quickly solved administrative issues or transportation problems, in others, they used a coordinated team approach to go beyond just getting kids to school, to address deep-seated familial and behavioral health challenges.

The experience of the Betts<sup>d</sup> family shows how the Attendance Matters program model may start with improving attendance, but often ends up doing much more. The team meeting's data review showed how rarely Kenny and Nikola Betts attended elementary school. The shelter's case managers and the DOE Family Assistants immediately got to work arranging bus transportation and wake-up calls in the morning, but the children continued to miss more days of school than they attended. The team responded by recalibrating its strategy. The Family Assistant brought the shelter's Client Care Coordinator and the school's Bridging The Gap social worker to meet with Naomi, the children's mother. In a long, emotional meeting, the trained clinicians showed Naomi that both children were in danger of being held back a grade if she didn't do more to get them to school, not just most days, but every day. Ongoing counseling and support from the team helped her learn to manage her time better, so that laundry got done, the children got to bed earlier, and the family was up and dressed in time for the bus each morning. Since the AM team's intervention, the Betts children have not missed a day of school, and are regularly honored at the Attendance Matters celebrations at the shelter.

Experiences of families like the Betts have convinced Gateway Housing and its government and nonprofit partners that the pragmatic but relatively modest Attendance Matters intervention provides real value to homeless children who face challenges getting to school. The preliminary implementation experiences shared in this report supports the practitioners' belief, and there is optimism that the independent evaluation will confirm it.

The AM teams' work helped homeless families and children overcome transportation issues, resolve bureaucratic impediments, secure more appropriate special education services, and improve coordination between DOE and shelter providers. The teams have secured needed mental health support for parents, and helped mothers with infant children support their older children's education.

And by calling staff's attention to the importance of school attendance, and coordinating the different services, agencies and staff working on education issues for homeless families into a cohesive whole, the AM program shows promise increasing attendance rates, perhaps improving homeless children's education outcomes.

The Attendance Matters initiative has also helped to identify a number of significant systemic barriers faced by homeless children and their families, both in attending school and in negotiating challenges while residing in shelter. Policy changes by city government can realize even greater improvements in school attendance rates and other life outcomes for homeless children. The Attendance Matters interagency workgroup provides another innovation that can facilitate necessary changes to further improve school attendance rates and other education outcomes.

Gateway Housing looks forward to seeing the results of the independent evaluation of the Attendance Matters program pilot. Regardless of the results of the evaluation, AM program model components can be – and in some cases already are being – replicated by DOE and DHS providers to allow the 45,000 New York City children who live in shelter over the course of a year to achieve attendance rates that match their housed peers, and so improve their educational opportunities and life outcomes.

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<sup>d</sup> Names have been changed.

**Glossary of Terms, Abbreviations and Acronyms**

ACE – Adverse Childhood Event

BTG – Bridging The Gap (DOE social workers serving vulnerable students)

DHS – New York City Department of Homeless Services

DOE – New York City Department of Education

DSS – New York City Department of Social Services

HRA – New York City Human Resources Administration

HUD – U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

IEP – Individual Education Program (for students with special needs)

ISAHC – Improving School Attendance for Homeless Children

LCSW – Licensed Clinical Social Worker

LMSW – Licensed Master Social Worker

MI – Motivational Interviewing

STH – Students in Temporary Housing

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## END NOTES

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