



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF

# EDUCATION

## November is Homeless Awareness Month

OSSE's Homeless Education Program would like to spotlight the amazing homeless liaisons who support families and students experiencing homelessness in the District of Columbia, check out a few below.



### **Betsy Romero**

Director of Equity & Engagement

Lee Montessori Public Charter Schools

When supporting students and families experiencing homelessness, Betsy Romero believes in the importance of understanding the complexities and challenge of unstable housing and working with the students and families to find solutions that work best for them. Ms. Romero believes in "Following the Family," a term derived from "Follow the Child," one of the core tenets of Dr. Maria Montessori's eponymous education and pedagogy. Dr. Montessori describes this term as following the child in the classroom while allowing them

to experience and engage in activities that interest them and resisting the urge to lead the them. For Ms. Romero, "following the family" is the collective responsibility of the school to ensure their students and families are heard, seen, and receiving what they need to be successful. As a bilingual educator (English/Spanish), Ms. Romero has taken special interest in families experiencing homelessness whose first language is not English. In an effort to better support these families, Ms. Romero has begun learning Amharic, a language native to Ethiopia. Ms. Romero touted the work of her bilingual families, as they work to navigate English as a second language, unstable housing, and distance learning:

"I salute them for having to navigate distance learning in a language that is not [their own] and still [make] sure their children are able to connect with their teachers and learning. Student success is the interconnection of a school that cares, an engaged family, and a school system that puts students first."

OSSE salutes Ms. Romero and all the homeless liaisons who go above and beyond to ensure their students are receiving the best care and support from the educators who champion them.

**Nneka Jefferson**

Social Worker

Phelps ACE Senior High School

Since 2011, when Nneka Jefferson first entered District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), she has served as a school-based homeless liaison. She recalls a time when students paid for transportation to and from school and the burden it caused many families, and especially those experiencing homelessness. Due to McKinney-Vento funding received by DCPS during that time, schools were able to provide bus tokens and SmarTrip cards for DC families. DCPS school-based homeless liaisons would go to a designated site to pick up a monthly supply of transportation assistance for their schools. As shared by Ms. Jefferson:

“Imagine a small cubicle or conference space filled with homeless liaisons from around the city, coming in with their paperwork to request transportation assistance for the children at their school in need. It was a time not only to simply request transportation, but to ask about any other needs expressed by their families where an answer or resource was not readily available or known. “

Ms. Jefferson describes being a school-based homeless liaison as a very rewarding and challenging experience. Although they may not be able to completely solve and alleviate the impacts of children experiencing homelessness, homeless liaisons are able to provide support, guidance, and fill in many of the gaps affecting their educational experience. But still, Ms. Jefferson asserts:

“Children and families are complex, and come to [liaisons] from myriad circumstance and conditions that may need and require us to show up, be present, be resourceful, be bold, and be unrelenting in our pursuit for our families to have access to their basic life needs, and more if possible! Their needs sometimes [extend beyond] the scope of what [the] school system offers on paper. I’m sure I am not alone in sharing that sometimes, in order to respond to a student or family’s immediate and pressing needs, I have used my own personal resources to share with families, [such as] taking a child to their eye appointment; paying for [their] exam and glasses; picking up a child in the middle of the night, because I was called, and taking them to safety; begging the Office of the Deputy Mayor to make special considerations for a senior student to receive a laptop even though their attendance did not exactly match up to the criteria—because they were battling homelessness ... and we can go on and on. It is so important that families have a safe and trustworthy person to talk to and receive support from at the school. We do make a difference!”

Thank you to Ms. Jefferson and all the homeless liaisons who go above and beyond to support the families and students experiencing homelessness in the District of Columbia!



**Cortney Wiggins-Mayfield**

Family Support Coordinator

Early Childhood Academy Public Charter School

Whether in the physical classroom or participating in distance learning, Cortney Wiggins-Mayfield wants her students to know that they are all family, and they are in this together. Although her families are working virtually, she still strives to stay connected and provide them the services they need. To illustrate this point, Ms. Wiggins-Mayfield recalls the

experiences of one family at the Early Childhood Academy Public Charter School:

“While canvassing our neighborhood for prospective students, I spotted a young mother and daughter. I walked over, introduced myself, and started to describe our school program. The mother was intrigued and promised to call the following day. The next day, I received a call from the mother requesting directions to the school via Metro. Shortly after speaking, she was knocking at my office door. As I provided a tour of our facility, the mother divulged that she was in transition. I assured her that her daughter would be enrolled without difficulties.

Fast forwarding four years, this mother and daughter are still a part of the Early Childhood Academy family. With that being said, I continue to work closely with the mother to ensure their needs are met. Last year, she was laid off her job. During this time, I worked attentively to remove the barriers that the family experienced. Working alongside our food service team, we created meal bags from leftover breakfast, lunch, and snacks. We intentionally packed the bags heavily on Friday to guarantee food throughout the weekend. With the family utilizing public transportation to travel to and from school, I ensured the student had warm winter wear to protect her on those blustery mornings and afternoons. Observing the student’s toy selections in before care, I purposely filled her holiday gift bag with dolls, dishes, and a tea set. At the start of this current year school, the student was not participating in synchronous learning, due to their lack of internet. Early Childhood Academy provided the mother and daughter a private space to access the student’s virtual classroom using the school’s Wi-Fi connection until a hotspot was provided. Without a doubt, my relationship with this family has flourished. I am invested in their well-being; furthermore, as I am in all the families that I serve.”

Like most things, supporting the needs of students and families experiencing homelessness is complicated by the current health pandemic. Thank you to Ms. Wiggins-Mayfield, and all the homeless liaisons who go above and beyond to make sure their students are cared for in every way during this period of virtual learning. It is the collective work of all those involved that helps remove the barriers for all students experiencing homelessness so that they may thrive in education and beyond.