



Episode 16 – “Introducing The Bridge Project in PA: Online Mental Health Services for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness” Transcript

Matt Butensky:

In this episode of I Will Be Your Voice, we're talking about The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania, part of Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program. The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania facilitates free access to mental health services for McKinney-Vento Act-eligible children in grades K to 12. In our episode, we're speaking with eLuma and Move Forward, our two online teletherapy providers that will be participating in The Bridge Project. We hope you enjoy this episode.

Welcome to the I will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope podcast. My name is Matt Butensky, project manager with the Center for Schools and Communities, and we're so excited to have this special episode of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast to talk about a new project in Pennsylvania called The Bridge Project, and also to talk more broadly about the world of online mental health therapy, specifically tailored for K to 12 children and youth and those experiencing homelessness. So, our guests today are experts in teletherapy and have really been making significant strides in providing mental health supports through digital platforms. So, I wanted to get started today and dive right into The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania and welcome our guests today. Chris and Leslie and Valerie, welcome to the podcast.

Chris Niemeyer:

Thanks, Matt.

Leslie Cole:

Thanks for having us.

Matt Butensky:

Great to have you. So, I know that there are three of you participating on the podcast today, so I wanted to give each of you just a moment to introduce yourself and your organization that we are so proud to be partnering with with The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania. And then we'll kind of dive deeper into our project and mental health therapy for children and youth. So, Chris and Leslie, do you want to get us started with your organization?

Leslie Cole:

Sure. I'll share a little bit about eLuma. First, I'll just introduce myself. My name is Leslie Cole. I'm the Director of School Solutions here at eLuma, and really that role just resonates with what our mission and our vision is at eLuma, and that is to ensure that all students are able to reach their full potential. The way that eLuma does that is we partner with our K through 12 school districts, and we're there to support and address in the way of interventions and needs surrounding both general education students with their mental health and also special education students with any related services that they might need.

Matt Butensky:

Chris, thanks Leslie.

Chris Niemeyer:

Thank you. Yeah, thank you Matt, and thank you Leslie for being a part of this project. My name is Chris Niemeyer. I am the director of school partnerships. And what that means is I have the amazing opportunity to speak with school districts, not only in a region of the Great Lakes region, but also across the country when we have opportunities to, whether it be conferences or on-site visits, and really listen and understand some of the challenges that school districts are facing around not only the related services and the capacity to provide speech and OT and having the number of folks doing that, but also on the mental health side, really addressing some of the conversations that have seemed to evolved over the past few years and really looking at strategic opportunities to address those challenges.

I, myself, I live in Iowa. I'm a lifelong EdTech advocate who comes from a family of educators. Throughout my family, there are a lot of different, I guess, roles that folks have played in education. I've worked with schools in a variety of those roles from implementing digital tools in classrooms to rolling out large-scale initiatives. But really my focus has been listening, understanding, and helping to solve some interesting challenges over the last 20-plus years. And I joined eLuma with that common mission to really ensure all students achieve their potential. So, thank you for allowing us to be a part of this Bridge Project, and we look forward to the conversation.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you, Chris. Great to have you and Leslie here from eLuma. And now I want to pass it to Valerie from Move Forward.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Hi. Hi, my name's Valerie McNicholl. I am a licensed clinical social worker, and I am the Chief Operating Officer at Move Forward Counseling. We are an outpatient private practice therapy organization in Pennsylvania. We have about 60 therapists that have a wide range of specialties and interests and backgrounds, and we provide services to people all across the state of Pennsylvania.

Matt Butensky:

Thanks, Valerie. So, we wanted to start off by introducing our two teletherapy providers for The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania. So, Move Forward and eLuma. And just to give a little bit more context and background, so The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania is part of our Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program to provide online mental health services for children and youth experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania. And we're going to talk more about what that project looks like, and the referral process, and what opportunities it provides students this coming school year. But before we get to that, we do want to do some context setting. I'm not a teletherapy expert, and just thinking about how that shift occurred from traditional in-person counseling to teletherapy, and if either of you can talk a little bit more about that kind of shift from traditional in-person to teletherapy and what kind of opportunities that provides school districts in particular and then children and youth and families.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Yeah, I mean I can speak from Move Forward perspective. Us as an organization started out as the traditional therapy practice where we saw people in person. And then COVID provided us with an excellent opportunity to realize that we could also provide services across the state to Pennsylvanians. So, our teletherapy services really provide a lot of opportunities to folks that otherwise couldn't access in-person counseling. So, particularly in more rural counties or places that families that don't have transportation or those types of things, also provides opportunities for kids where parents may be overwhelmed with all of the other things that they have going on, and transporting a child to therapy may not be something that's a possibility for a lot of families. So, teletherapy really provides a lot of opportunities, a lot of access to families that didn't otherwise have it.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Did you want to comment on that, Leslie or Chris, about teletherapy and your organization's offering of that?

Leslie Cole:

Absolutely. So, we have actually been supporting via teletherapy since 2012. So, our company was established pre-COVID and really working to provide that high quality level of virtual therapy. We started with related services, as I mentioned, things like speech and language pathology, occupational therapy, school psych evaluations. And as the need as we've seen throughout the nation has increased, we as a company really wanted to be able to support those mental health needs across the nation. So, as Valerie said, the need is there and the accessibility to be able to deliver those services in a virtual setting when oftentimes the access in students' communities isn't there or the wait lists are so long, that's how we really are able to support those students, is being that accessible key partner in building capacity within that school.

Chris Niemeyer:

And just to piggyback on that, thinking about the challenge districts face with capacity, with the amount of staff and providers internally that it takes to service the caseloads that have increased over time, especially these last few years, what we found is actually thinking about it from a hybrid perspective, not supplanting or taking away from the folks that are doing in-person services, but actually supporting those teams by coming in and providing yet another option virtually to increase the capacity to serve more students in a way that maybe hadn't been traditionally thought of. And as Valerie mentioned, the concept of COVID enabled a lot of districts to realize, "Okay, this is a viable option to increase the opportunity to serve more students and take care of some of the compliance needs with regard to IEP or just provide more opportunities for those students who like to lean into the technology in a way that maybe we haven't seen in the past." So, it does provide that additional opportunity to support more students.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm not surprised that you mentioned COVID as sort of the tipping point. We've seen that in so many areas from medical services to, of course, online therapy like we're talking about, but just the tipping point of COVID to provide things differently. So, thanks for sharing about that. If we're wondering, and Valerie, if you want to take this first because Move Forward offers both in-person and online. Are there differences from traditional in-person therapy that we see in online teletherapy, or can the client expect similar relationships and a similar experience? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Yeah, sure. I think it's very similar. I think different modalities work for different people, but those that are doing telehealth really do experience the same kind of relationship with their therapist. The treatment modalities that we use can be done both in-person and via telehealth, and people experience the same kind of positive outcomes. So, it really is an individual preference, but there's not really a big difference between receiving it in-person versus via telehealth.

Matt Butensky:

Gotcha. Thanks for sharing that. What specific services will your organizations be offering under The Bridge Project to students experiencing homelessness, and how might they be tailored to meet their needs? So, Leslie, I know you talked a little bit about the variety of services that eLuma offers, but what can we expect from The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania?

Leslie Cole:

Yeah, absolutely. The student population that we'll be supporting with The Bridge Project, they are at high risk for what we call those adverse childhood experiences. Housing instability, one of those risks. And being able to support those students in building skills like resiliency and having someone that's there consistently to support them as they're going through some of these challenges, supporting their mental health, supporting their sense of self and wellbeing, those are some of the pieces that our providers will be able to support those students with.

Chris Niemeyer:

And if you don't mind, Matt, I'd like to kind of, no pun intended, bridge what Leslie and Valerie were saying with some of the differences in how virtual can support students in any a unique fashion. Believe it or not, maybe not all students want to be identified even receiving therapy services. Technology provides an avenue that many students are familiar with, and whether homeless or not, doesn't dismiss the idea that students lean into the technology. And virtual therapy can work really well for many, obviously not all. Not all students wanted to experience that type of service, but the technology provides a flexible, and scalable, and really a, what's the right word, Leslie, without being seen?

Leslie Cole:

Yeah, a sense of-

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Anonymity.

Chris Niemeyer:

Thank you, yeah.

Leslie Cole:

... anonymity [inaudible 00:13:20].

Chris Niemeyer:

Sense of anonymity. Yeah, I just couldn't pull it out. So, kind of that anonymous way of receiving the support that they might not want everybody else to know that they're receiving, and not be seen walking down the hall to go into an office to the therapist or to the provider or to the social worker. This gives them their space in a place that's safe, in a place that's designed for open, honest communication. That provides that layer of support that we believe we can offer virtually.

Matt Butensky:

Those are really great points. I'm glad you brought that up. Great to share that. So, can you walk us through, and any of you can really take this because the process is similar regardless of which provider is providing the online service, can you walk us through the referral process? How might a student access these online mental health therapy sessions from either of your organizations with The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

So, I can speak from Move Forward's perspective for The Bridge program. For us, the point of contact in the school district is the homeless liaison. So, either a student, a family member,

another concerned person can speak with the homeless liaison about making a referral. A referral can be made for our organization either on our website, by calling the company, by faxing, whatever means of communication is most helpful for that particular person. We get some very general demographic information, and then they get scheduled to meet with a therapist. So, it's really simple, and we have immediate availability. So, depending on the availability of the student, we can meet with someone really quickly.

Chris Niemeyer:

And from the perspective of eLuma, very, very similar with one caveat. Our website landing page that is a link from The Bridge site is the avenue by which a homeless liaison will make a referral of a student who's been identified within the McKinney-Vento. And then that referral process just unfolds naturally. It goes to our provider, our provider makes contact with the student and/or family, and works through the process, and then we move forward with scheduling.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And just to talk a little bit more about that, so all of the online sessions will be over Zoom for both of you, is that correct?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

That's correct for Move Forward, yes. We use the HIPAA-compliant version of Zoom.

Matt Butensky:

Okay.

Chris Niemeyer:

And eLuma, yep. Very similar.

Matt Butensky:

Gotcha. So, everything is over Zoom. So, there's obviously audio and video capability with the Zoom, so that can be employed during the session as well as other features that Zoom might be able to provide. But speaking about technology because this is online-based, we wanted to talk about challenges around technology. We are working with students that are experiencing homelessness. So, do you anticipate any challenges that those families might have with accessing technology, or how do you plan to remove those technological barriers for students participating in these therapy services? And this could be related to The Bridge Project, or it could be related to your experience working with schools outside of The Bridge Project.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Yeah, one of the great things about The Bridge Project is that it's really designed around the idea that the student can access therapy while they're in school. So, some of those challenges that the family may have in terms of access to Wi-Fi or access to technology devices is not the same barrier as it could be in other situations because The Bridge program was developed around that idea. That being said, we do also have availability. If a student does not want to access services in school, they can also access them after school if that's more convenient for them. But the challenges with technology for this particular population are really addressed by The Bridge program, which is great.

Leslie Cole:

And I would just add that that is where eLuma really shines in our partnership with schools. Schools have a lot to offer with regard to technology nowadays for students. And having that accessibility is very helpful in that partnership, especially when we're talking about things like virtual teletherapy. So, that just reinforces the partnership because we know that it's not just the provider or the clinician, the therapist that's going to be there supporting the student, it's also the school, and that partnership is vital for the success of the student.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, definitely. One of the positives from COVID is we have seen schools really trying to catch up to make sure that students do have access to devices during the school day, at home, and even internet access and making sure students are equipped with that. So, I think we've seen that digital divide shrink a little bit, which is a positive. I was queuing up an answer for myself, which is that part of, on our end with the ECYH Program, we are offering a limited number of service-equipped cell phone devices that we're going to be rolling out in the coming weeks. And so participants of The Bridge Project, if their school cannot accommodate a technology device, we do have a limited number of devices that we can deploy to students that are also participating in The Bridge Project, that they would be able to connect to these services, and the device would be preloaded with Zoom and trying to make that connection really simple. So, look out for that information about this. We're calling it Connecting People To Resources, so about our cell phone deployment and service plan. So, thanks for talking about that.

Thinking a little bit more about impact and outcomes, can you share any successes or positive outcomes that your organizations have really seen? And you can go anecdotal, or I have a feeling Chris is a data person maybe, or we can talk about that at a different time, but I could see there's probably a lot of data to support the benefits of the services that you're providing, or can you just share anecdotally some stories that you've seen in the work that you're doing?

Leslie Cole:

Matt, I'll jump in here with some data, and then I know Chris has some maybe more success stories with some of our students, and then some parents really appreciating the success of their students as well. But really when we think about virtual therapy, I think it's important to note that the comparison and the outcomes statistically, very similar. So, the advantages of having that virtual therapy, we could actually eLuma completed a survey looking to see how do you feel about the outcomes from the services being delivered. And just jumping to some numbers, 81.5% of the respondents that were engaged in that virtual therapy, they felt that the virtual

setting was equal to or better than in-person therapy. I think that speaks volumes about just the reliability and the comfortability and the success that can come from that virtual delivery. And Chris, I'll turn it to you to maybe share a individual success story or a family success story as well.

Chris Niemeyer:

Yeah. And the data indicates that it is a personal story each time. So, as students lean into the opportunity of what virtual therapy can provide, we spoke about it jokingly earlier about the anonymity, being able to open up and share things that you might not share in-person. Really, you think about what that breakthrough in anxiety or what the emotional labeling or regulation might've been in specific areas that the student might have been correlated to in the past. And it gives them maybe an opportunity to... And we hear this from providers when they're speaking with their students and talking about how drastically different the students feel when they're able to have that personal relationship, albeit virtual, with somebody who is consistent, who does show up, who has no preconditioned understanding of who this person is other than, "I've got a student on the other end, and I'm here to support." So, that ability to step into a space that's comfortable, that's safe, that's in a familiar format, technology, online, digital, those are all areas that we hear consistently that, again, it's not for all, but many students express their comfort in that space.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

I just want to mention too, and I am sure this is true of eLuma as well, but one of the other pieces of it is that we do use evidence-based practices. So, the interventions that we use in therapy with students, also adults and families that we work with are all empirically based. So, they've been studied, they've been shown to be effective for the particular problems that people are bringing to therapy. So, we're using techniques that have been studied and shown to be effective.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you. Yeah, and in all of your responses, you were really pointing to the reason why we're doing this. A lot of our listeners have undergone trauma-informed training and know about ACEs and then also positive childhood experiences. But quite evidently, we know that this population of youth have experienced different adverse childhood experiences. And until we address those and we provide wraparound services like mental health supports, we really won't see effective change academically in the classroom. So, it's not really a hard sell for a lot of our listeners to understand the importance of why we're kind of going down this path of offering online mental health therapy for children and youth experiencing homelessness, but I did want to just highlight that all of your responses were alluding to that importance there. So, thanks for sharing some of that.

And now a short message about the 2024 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference coming this October 16th through 18th in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Well, it's that time of year again where we are preparing for our annual Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference, and I could not be more happy to bring in my colleague Taylor Teichman, who is leading the coordinating efforts for this year's conference to talk a little bit about what you can

expect this October in Pennsylvania. So, I'm going to turn it over to Taylor Teichman to tell us more about this year's conference and give us all the details. Hey, Taylor.

Taylor Teichman:

Hey, Matt. Thanks for having me. I'm very excited to be with you and be able to share with everyone what we have coming up this fall with our Paving the Way conference. It is hard to believe that we are here again, but again, very excited. Paving the Way this year will be in the King of Prussia area, so we're excited to be visiting the eastern side of the state. We'll be at the Alloy there in King of Prussia. And some of the content areas that we are looking forward to with this year's conference is really honing in on some foundational core competencies. We're looking at bringing in some sessions around program and service sustainability, student connection and belonging, always having some space for some educator staff wellbeing, as well, and also some sessions to bring in some exploration around how we can expand our outreach and collaboration with others.

Some of our keynotes that we have that we're very excited to have joining us, we have Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown. That name may sound familiar to some folks listening. She's been with us for over a year, almost two years I think, as part of our Restorative Practice Series. And so now she will be bringing some of that flavor and some of that healing goodness to our conference attendees in the form of a keynote address. We'll have the ever-energetic and passionate Mr. Keith Brown. He'll be our opening keynote speaker. He'll be sharing some practical strategies and tools with us that are really designed to foster meaningful connections and ignite the potential in every student. And then we'll also have Mr. Rodney Walker joining us. He'll be sharing his personal story with us regarding some of the trauma that he has experienced and the mentorship program that really played a pivotal role in his healing and success. So, we're looking forward to bringing those inspiring individuals into our space as keynotes this year.

We also have some really exciting sessions and exhibitors and organizations joining us this year like Urban Institute. We have True Colors United coming to be with us. Youth Communication will be with us, the Ali Forney Center. We have Princeton University in the house, and we'll also have Milton Hershey School joining, and we will have therapy dogs. So, who can beat having therapy dogs at the conference? So, they were with us last year. They were a big hit. So, we're very grateful that they'll be joining us again this year. So, those are just some of the key highlights and key aspects of the conference that we are looking forward to. And again, that'll be October 16th through the 18th, so we hope folks will join us. Registration is free, so yeah.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. Yeah, and we are excited to be welcoming back some of our regular presenters too, along with all of those new session speakers that you shared, like the American Bar Association and Schoolhouse Connection will be coming to Pennsylvania as well, along with Education Law Center. And of course, we know that at our conference, we always take time to recognize Homelessness Awareness Week for children and youth experiencing homelessness. So, we're planning on having activities including our Wear Red Day at this year's conference as well. So, we're super excited about this year's Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference. Taylor, thank you for stopping by the I Will Be Your Voice podcast to share more about this year's conference.

Taylor Teichman:

Thank you for having me. I should also note as well that we will have our advocate award ceremony again this year. So, as we were sharing some of those activities, we will also be having space again to honor a variety of advocates across the state and a special ceremony for those folks.

Matt Butensky:

Yes, absolutely, an important component of our annual conference. And with us, I'm sure we have a few extra tricks of our sleeves coming at this year's conference, so make sure to attend. Registration is now open. As Taylor shared, it is no cost to attend, so make plans to attend. Book your room, and we hope to see you October 16th through 18th in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania at the 2024 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference. We'll see you soon.

Taylor Teichman:

Yay. We'll see you there. Thanks, Matt.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you.

I did want to talk a little bit about any trends that you're seeing, any common issues that you see among the children and youth that your organizations work with, whether that be just, again, maybe since COVID, or Valerie, your move from in-person to hybrid to both online therapy as well. So, any type of trends or common issues that might be interesting or enlightening for the listeners of the podcast?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Some of the trends that I think we are seeing and we're seeing across the nation is an increase in anxiety for our younger people. That seems to be the most significant thing that we're seeing. And whether that has a relationship to COVID and the pandemic and the things that happened during that time or not, we don't know 100%, but definitely anxiety seems to be much more prevalent than it has in the past for the younger population in particular. I do think, too, one of the other kind of interesting trends, and this may be a little more anecdotal, is that for the younger people now, therapy is also more acceptable. Their stigma still exists, and so that may not be the case in every environment or for every child. But I know I have a 15-year-old, and he's totally comfortable with going to therapy, and his friends go to therapy and they talk about it, and it's okay, which in terms of trends, that's a great trend to see.

Chris Niemeyer:

Matt, and it's a great question, trends not only relating to the reasons we're providing opportunities for support in a virtual setting, but also from the school district's perspective. One

of the trends that I have found fascinating over the last several years has been an increase in outreach from districts trying to solve the challenge of capacity, trying to solve the challenge of we've got more students who are "identified as needing support", speaking to what Valerie was just mentioning. But not only that, but districts are challenged with what's called MTSS, multi-tier system of support. And when they're trying to address all students needs in a tier one, meaning universal, all students need access to certain opportunities instead of waiting for that tier two or that mild to medium level of need to the tier three of, we've got to do something now, what's been interesting is districts looking for additional opportunities to support more students, and that's a challenge on a people front, not enough people to support enough students. So, they're looking for that. What else can we do? And leaning to virtual has been one way, it's not the only way, but one way that helps address that challenge by producing additional people to participate in a team that can work through the challenges that districts face regarding supporting many more students. Leslie, do you want to add to that?

Leslie Cole:

Yeah, I would just add, and not to turn it back to some of the challenges, but one of the things that we've noticed across school districts across the nation is that the increase in absenteeism. And then when students are present on campus, there's an increase in their behavioral needs as well. So, really being able to support them has become increasingly difficult with the limited resources of providers in the school. We also see that teachers might not have the training that they need to be able to best support this new wave of students that are coming through. And Valerie, you mentioned maybe it's the pandemic that is causing some of that anxiety. I'd also toss in their social media, the aspect of being able to compare yourself to all this perfect that is out there, "perfect", really does increase the need for students to understand themselves and to be content with who they are and own that in the best way possible. And we think about the complexity of the developmental age of students in school, and they all deserve that level of support, and schools need support in supporting those students.

Chris Niemeyer:

And not to belabor this, but just to think about going back to one of your other questions, Matt, on how the concept of virtual support and technology combined can offer alternatives and thinking about the additional options that districts have to help identify those students who could truly benefit from. So, when we think about universal support, we also think about are there ways to screen universally and identify more students who maybe we didn't think needed support. But all of a sudden technology offers a way that we can identify, and then by virtual, we're able to help augment the traditional approach of in-person by servicing more students. So, it is really this partnership, this teamwork approach that there's not any one way, but working together, we can do more, if that makes sense.

Matt Butensky:

Definitely. And that's what we're doing. We do that in all the areas of our work. We find that building capacity and partnerships and collaboration is really, really, really key. So, thank you. I did want to talk a little bit about the role of parents and guardians. We talked about how many of The Bridge Project services can occur during the school day. So, this school's homeless liaison will help to ensure that they can access their appointments and have a space for that, or it can

be coordinated in evenings when they're not in school. However, I did just want to talk a little bit about the role of parents or guardians in the teletherapy process and how do you involve them in their child's participation in this program or in other therapy programs that occur online?

Leslie Cole:

So, I just want to start by saying parents can be one of the biggest advocates for our partnerships with schools. We know that oftentimes, as I've mentioned, the capacity of the school might be limited. And having that parental involvement in advocating for further support for students on that holistic level is really something that's necessary sometimes to move the needle. So, I just wanted to mention that and Valerie, I'll pass it to you a little bit more for parent involvement.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Yeah, sure. For a lot of our kids, their parents or guardians are their primary support, and so we really want to include that person or those people as much as possible. In therapy, again, that's something we partner with the kid. So, every kid is different and every parental relationship is different, so that's going to look different for different kids. But we do know that kids are most likely to be successful in the long term if their parents are a part of their support system and therefore part of the therapy situation. The other thing I would mention in Pennsylvania, the age of consent is 14. So, after the age of 14 or 14 and above, children can consent to their own treatment. So, if there is a situation where parental, where the child maybe doesn't want their parents involved, for some reason, kids that are age 14 and above can engage in therapy even without their parent being involved. That being said, when those types of situations do happen, ultimately our goal would be to work with the kid to try to involve the parent even in those situations. But to start, that might be something that the child might be willing to engage in where they might not if they had to talk to mom or dad or grandma first.

Matt Butensky:

Gotcha. And we have talked about how in some scenarios it might be appropriate for family members to participate in a online session, and that is possible under this project depending on of course, the child and on a case by case basis. With that, thinking about the role of parents, we've talked a bit about the role of schools already, and some of you really focus in your day-to-day work about school partnerships. But can you talk a little bit more about how a student participating in receiving, they're referred to The Bridge Project, they're taking these sessions. How might you collaborate on the child's journey through these sessions with the school throughout the process?

Leslie Cole:

Sure. So, that's a big piece of the school partnership that we do at eLuma, and really that collaborative effort to make sure that the student is being successful from implementation with our customer success partners. We're really tailoring those solutions and designing deployment of our services in a way that's going to best meet not only the individual student, but also work within the confines of the school, whether it's adapting to the schedule or finding that space, and

really cultivating that partnership to ensure that not only the mental health needs are addressed by the student, but ultimately that leads to further success academically with the student as well.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

I think the other piece I just want to mention too, completely agree with everything Leslie just said, but the other piece to that as well is that there may be some things. I think it's also important to mention that there's confidentiality. So, the child where we are still partnering with the school, there may be some things that we're working on in therapy that the school environment may not know the details about. And so it's just an important piece for both the staff and the students to be aware of that. Even though we are partnering with the school, what they tell us is still confidential and should not impact their school environment in a negative way.

Matt Butensky:

Gotcha. Thank you. If we have homeless liaisons that are considering making referrals... And a lot of our homeless liaisons will be having conversations with the children that they identify as experiencing homelessness about the availability of The Bridge Project. So, with that, I wanted to ask, what advice do you think the homeless liaison could share to a parent or guardian to consider if The Bridge Project services, so online teletherapy, could be a good fit for their student, what should they consider? Any advice around that?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

I think just really simply, it's another support person for their child, that it's just another healthy person in that child's life, and it's an opportunity to address not just things related to homelessness, but everything that is stressing for that child.

Chris Niemeyer:

I'll start, and then I know Leslie has much more of a holistic view of this, but from my perspective in talking with district leaders across the country, it's really about recognizing the need of the child and what the child brings to the table. A lot of kiddos need that in-person, need the hug, need the physical, but some don't. And so when we think about does it make sense for that particular student or group of students, and they do lean into the technology side, they do lean into the screen, they do lean into building relationships virtually, then by all means, it's a great fit. Again, it's by the child's nature that they will ultimately advocate for themselves, but when they have the adults around them to help advocate and they recognize those specific needs or tendencies, I think sometimes it just lends itself naturally. But Leslie, do you want to take it from there and go further?

Leslie Cole:

Yeah, just a little bit on engagement. That's another common thread that we hear throughout the nation about our students' engagement in their education, their engagement in school. If we want them engaged in anything with meaning and purpose, they have to have their voices be heard. They can speak for themselves, and sometimes they don't know what's best for

themselves and they need some help to get there, but their voice should always be included in these decisions, and they'll be able to advocate for that if we give them the opportunity to.

Matt Butensky:

I also think it's great. Participating in these sessions does give youth their voice through just participating in a session and really does help to self-advocate for themselves. We see that a lot around the education of youth that are experiencing homelessness, that unfortunately, sometimes self-advocacy is really important so that they get the education services that they need and deserve. And so gaining those tools in sessions as well with you is just, again, something else to really put in into their toolkit or their backpack. So, thanks for sharing more about that.

I wanted to also ask if they're interested, and I can share more about this too, as kind of the coordinator of the project, but if they're interested in getting started with The Bridge Project, what should they do? What should a homeless liaison do? What should a family do? How do they get started with accessing these services?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

So, as I mentioned before, the homeless liaison is the key person in the school. So, if there's a child or family member or a loved one of a student that would like to get a student involved, it would be going to the homeless liaison and talking about The Bridge program, and that person is the one that would be directly making the referral.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. Any other comments from eLuma now? You shared that earlier as well.

Chris Niemeyer:

Yeah, Matt, as you share out information with the liaisons, there's the website. I would advocate for going to the website, learning a little bit more about the project itself. Some wonderful initiatives in addition to The Bridge Project are identified on the page, but really taking it to the next level is pretty simple. It's identifying where your location is based on a county, and then it automatically goes to either Move Forward or eLuma, and the process unfolds seamlessly from there. So, step one, advocate as a homeless liaison for identifying the students who could benefit from these services. Step two, go to the website, identify where you are. Step three, make the referral. Let's get the kids some support that could benefit them. So, as I advocate for all regions to simply lean into The Bridge Project, lean into making it not a scary thing by going and making a referral. Once you do it once, it'll be easy to do it twice, and then we've got a seamless process going.

Matt Butensky:

Yes, the first step is the hardest, but it's not actually hard because it is a simple referral process. And Chris, as you shared, on our website, we've created a series of flyers and tools that if you

are a homeless liaison or you work in a shelter or you work with another community organization that serves McKinney-Vento Act-eligible children and youth, you can easily grab those resources from our website, print out a couple copies, and then share those with parents or with other people that you work with so that they know about the availability of The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania this school year.

Before we close out, I wanted to pass it to each of you just to see if you had any final thoughts, any interesting information that you would like our listeners to know about your organizations or something that we just didn't cover today that you'd really like to share?

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

I guess I just wanted to say that we're really looking forward to getting more involved with the school districts and working with The Bridge Project. We're just really excited to be involved.

Leslie Cole:

I'll echo what Valerie said. It's an excellent opportunity for our students to have this level of support and to start working and moving towards more of, as you mentioned earlier, wraparound services. That's when we're really going to be able to support our students both inside of school and outside of school for their holistic wellbeing. So, it's a wonderful opportunity, and I look forward to the support that these students will be getting.

Chris Niemeyer:

From a personal perspective, I just want to say thank you to the state of Pennsylvania for recognizing that this is not a taboo subject. This is an opportunity to really provide layers and layers of support for a variety of students. This being one subset of student population, but quite frankly, all students can experience success in identifying ways that they can advocate, learn, participate, and be a part of something. And I think that's what The Bridge Project's all about. It's not just bridging resources to a district that they might not have had. It is bridging a methodology. It's bridging the potential. It's bridging the bigger opportunity to do more with the resources that are available and tailoring it to a subset of students, absolutely. But really providing an opportunity to advocate for the whole student in general.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And of course, we are talking about The Bridge Project and how, in theory, it is available to every school district and charter school and cyber charter school in Pennsylvania for their students experiencing homelessness this school year. But both of your organizations offer services outside of The Bridge Project as well. So, they would be able to reach out to your organizations and get more information about how they could serve other students that might not qualify for the McKinney-Vento Act, but of course, still need online therapy supports or, Move Forward, your in-person supports as well.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Yes, definitely.

Chris Niemeyer:

Thank you for mentioning that, Matt. Absolutely. We are here, able to support, provide services, obviously with a focus in supporting The Bridge Project, but if there are opportunities that we can help support the districts in other capacities, by all means our contact information will be shared by you, I'm sure, and we can certainly go from there.

Matt Butensky:

Great. Well, it was really a pleasure to have each of you here today, Chris, Leslie, and Valerie. We really thank you for joining us. As you all shared, this is an exciting opportunity and really demonstrates the power of partnerships, school and community partnerships around mental health services. And we're really pleased to be able to offer this service this school year for the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program and all of our McKinney-Vento-eligible students here in Pennsylvania. So, thank you for joining us for this episode of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. All of your work is very important, and we're grateful for all of the work you do with eLuma and Move Forward. Thanks for coming.

Valerie McNicholl, LCSW:

Thank you.

Chris Niemeyer:

Thank you, Matt.

Leslie Cole:

Bye, now.

Matt Butensky:

You can find more information about The Bridge Project in Pennsylvania at ecyhpennsylvania.center-school.org. To our listeners, thank you for tuning in today. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe, rate, and review our podcast. Until next time, take care and stay well. We'll see you again.