

Identifying Students in Homeless Situations

Who is homeless? (Sec. 725)

The term “homeless children and youth”–

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence ...; and

(B) includes–

- (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
- (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings ...
- (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- (iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

This document was collaboratively developed by:

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEH CY)—512-475-8765—www.naehcy.org

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)—800-308-2145—www.serve.org/nche

National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH)—202-737-6444 ext. 18—www.nationalhomeless.org

National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP)—202-638-2535—www.nlchp.org

National Network for Youth (NN4Y)—202-783-7949—www.NN4Youth.org

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Subtitle B—Education for Homeless Children and Youth), reauthorized in January 2002, ensures educational rights and protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness. This brief explains the legislation and offers strategies for implementing it in a school district. Additional briefs on various topics in the law may be found on the websites of the organizations listed below.

Key Provisions

- Every school district must designate an appropriate staff person as a Local Educational Agency (LEA), otherwise known as school district, liaison for students in homeless situations. This person may also be a coordinator for other federal programs.
- LEA homeless liaisons must ensure that children and youth in homeless situations are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies.
- The state McKinney-Vento plan must describe procedures that the State Educational Agency (SEA) will use to identify homeless children and youth in the state and to assess their special needs.

(See Endnotes for the text of the law.)

Children and youth in homeless situations are difficult to identify for many reasons and often go unnoticed by school personnel. Students and parents may try to hide their situation because they are embarrassed by their homelessness. In addition, the fear of having children taken away often prevents families from informing school officials of their living circumstances. Unaccompanied youth may not report their homeless status for fear of being returned to unsafe family environments. Children and youth who are not enrolled in school and who are not living in shelters are even more invisible to schools and their communities. Finally, school personnel often do not understand the nature of homelessness, the poverty that causes it, or the breadth of the federal definition of homelessness (see “Who is Homeless?”).

Yet students must be identified as homeless if they are to receive the full protections of the McKinney-Vento Act, including the help they need to enroll, attend, and succeed in school. The law, therefore, requires all school districts, ensured by the LEA homeless liaison and in coordination with school personnel and other agencies, to identify students in homeless situations. Identifying students in homeless situations is also an important way to create greater awareness of homelessness in the school district and community.

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Strategies for Implementation

- Locate community service agencies, such as shelters, soup kitchens, food banks, transitional living programs, street outreach teams, drop-in centers, community action agencies (especially in rural areas, where there may be no shelters), welfare departments, housing departments, public health departments, and faith-based organizations. Set up meetings with them to begin to develop a relationship on issues such as the school enrollment process, transportation, and other student services.
- Contact managers of daily or weekly low-cost motels and campground managers and inform them of school enrollment assistance and other school services that are available. Leave written materials for them and for the families and youth who stay there, as well as contact information for the liaison.
- Become familiar with low-income neighborhoods, areas where young people who are out of school might congregate during the day, locations of public laundry facilities, Head Start centers, migrant housing developments, public housing complexes, and other areas. Develop relationships with people who operate services or programs in these areas and with the people who use the services.
- Provide outreach materials and posters at these and other facilities where there is a frequent influx of low-income families and youth in high-risk situations. Make sure that supplies of materials are always well-stocked and that the materials include information on educational rights, who is considered homeless, and a local phone number to call for school enrollment and other assistance. Posters for parents and for unaccompanied youth may be found on the NCHE website at www.serve.org/nche.
- Engage the local homeless task force, homeless coalition, and homeless assistance Continuum of Care as partners in the identification of students who are homeless. A directory of state and local homeless coalitions may be found at the National Coalition for the Homeless website at www.nationalhomeless.org/state.
- Compile addresses of shelters, motels, transitional living programs, and campgrounds frequently used by families and youth who are homeless, and provide these addresses to district registrars and school secretaries. Registrars and secretaries can help identify these students as homeless by the addresses they list and discreetly provide expedited enrollment and referrals to services they may need. School secretaries are often a good source of information for students who are “doubled-up” (living temporarily with another family) or who have made numerous school transfers.

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- Develop relationships with truancy officials and/or other attendance officers. Truant officers should learn how to recognize school absences that may be the result of homelessness. Provide officers with information so that they may discreetly refer students to appropriate services.
- Provide awareness activities at districtwide professional development training sessions. Invite staff from service agencies, as well as families and students who have experienced homelessness, to help conduct sensitivity training for school staff (registrars, secretaries, school counselors, school social workers, school nurses, teachers, bus drivers, administrators, etc.). Such activities should include training on how to spot possible indicators of homelessness, such as persistent fatigue, frequent absences, clothing that is dirty or worn repeatedly, inability to complete homework assignments, hoarding food, or sudden changes in behavior.
- Use creative techniques to identify unaccompanied youth in homeless situations while respecting their privacy and dignity, such as administering surveys to peers, using enrollment questionnaires, or providing specific outreach to areas where students who are out of school might congregate.
- Make special efforts to identify preschool children who are in homeless situations, including asking about the siblings of school-age children.
- Provide a districtwide residency questionnaire to all students upon enrollment. Questionnaires that may indicate homelessness should be sent to the homeless liaison for a final determination of homeless status and, if affirmative, lead to the provision of referrals and other assistance.
- Avoid using the word “homeless” in initial contacts with school personnel, families, or youth. For most people, the word “homeless” conjures up stereotypical images of adults, not children or youth in classrooms. School personnel may be unlikely to recognize students who are homeless initially but often respond affirmatively when asked if they know of students who are staying temporarily with relatives, are staying at campgrounds or in their car, are living at motels, are living with another family temporarily, or have moved several times in a year. Families and students who are homeless may not think of themselves as “homeless” because of the stigma. Therefore, outreach posters and materials placed in shelters, campgrounds, motels, and public housing projects should describe the symptoms of homelessness (for example, different kinds of living situations) rather than simply refer to a person’s “homeless” status.

Every state is required to have a coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, and every school district is required to have a liaison for homeless students. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your state coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at www.serve.org/nche.



For further information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE HelpLine at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.

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