

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program

Confirming Eligibility for McKinney-Vento Services: Do's and Don'ts for Local Liaisons

Under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, schools must identify children and youth in homeless situations and provide appropriate services. One such service is immediate enrollment in school, even when students lack paperwork normally required for enrollment, such as school records, proof of guardianship, a birth certificate, immunization or other health records, and proof of residence. In complying with the immediate enrollment mandate, some school districts may be concerned that families or youth may claim falsely to be homeless in order to gain access to services for which they are not eligible or to gain enrollment in a school outside of their local attendance area.

Due to the stigma associated with homelessness, the vast majority of students seeking eligibility for services under McKinney-Vento does so in good faith and with good reason. If a question arises about a student's eligibility, schools may wish to confirm the details of the student's living situation. All such efforts must be grounded in sensitivity and respect, keeping the academic well-being and best interest of the student in the forefront. Using invasive or threatening techniques to confirm a student's eligibility can humiliate families and youth and may place an already tenuous temporary living arrangement in jeopardy. This may destabilize the family or youth further and may create a barrier to the student's enrollment, thereby violating the McKinney-Vento Act. Additionally, employing these techniques may violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Use the following checklists to guide you in confirming McKinney-Vento eligibility. Instruct school personnel with questions about a student's eligibility to enroll the student immediately and contact you for further information. If you are in need of guidance, contact your State Coordinator for Homeless Education. **Delaying the enrollment of a homeless student violates federal law and may place the student in danger.**

DO...

Do conduct ongoing awareness activities in the school district

- Provide annual awareness and sensitivity training to all school staff, including administrators, counselors, social workers, teachers, secretaries, registrars, nurses, bus drivers, security staff, attendance officers, and federal programs staff.
- Train bus drivers on the McKinney-Vento Act and ask them to notify you if a student identified as eligible for McKinney-Vento services does not appear to be living near the bus pick-up location.
- Develop relationships with shelters, transitional housing organizations, and local discount motels/hotels to assist in identifying homeless students and/or confirming a student's living arrangement.

Do put good policies and procedures in place

- ✓ Implement the usage of a district-wide enrollment questionnaire that incorporates informative, yet non-invasive, questions to help enrollment staff determine eligibility.
- ✓ Have parents, youth, or caregivers sign enrollment forms indicating that McKinney-Vento services are offered based on information they have provided about their living situation. The forms should explain the consequences for providing false information.
- ✓ Having school officials visit the place where the student is staying can be threatening to homeless families and youth, who may fear discrimination or negative social service intervention, and to host families, who may be putting their own housing at risk by sheltering others. When these visits are necessary due to doubts about McKinney-Vento eligibility, send school or school district staff members who are trained on the McKinney-Vento Act and homelessness. It is important for visitors to talk to families and youth about why they are visiting, ensure them that information will be kept confidential, and conduct only the minimal investigation necessary to verify the living situation.
- ✓ Homeless verification can be handled in such a way that it **does not violate** privacy or **jeopardize** housing arrangements. It is up to the local liaison, enrollment staff, and/or other school personnel to be **sensitive** and **discreet**.
- ✓ Collaborate with local homeless education liaisons from nearby school districts to identify children and youth in homeless situations and confirm eligibility. Contact the student's prior school to determine if the student was identified as homeless there.
- ✓ Install Caller ID on your phone, so that you can verify when parents or youth are calling from a motel.
- ✓ Consult the State Department of Revenue to determine if an address given as temporary was the family's registered address the previous year.
- ✓ Collaborate with your State Coordinator for Homeless Education for technical assistance and support in ensuring immediate enrollment.
- ✓ Keeping it positive and supportive instead of invasive and threatening is essential.

Do talk with parents and youth

- Talk with parents and youth about their living situation, focusing on basic questions such as, “Why did you leave your last residence?” or “Where did you sleep last night?” Let them know you are asking questions of a personal nature to determine if they are eligible for additional services. Avoid using the word “homeless” in initial conversations due to the associated stigma; instead, use terminology such as “in a temporary living arrangement”.
- Share information about McKinney-Vento services, rights, and definitions when a parent or youth cannot provide proof of residency, guardianship, or other documentation, or when they display other possible indicators of homelessness.
- Work with parents, youth, and caregivers to determine if they are able to provide any documents that could confirm their living situation. Keep in mind that the McKinney-Vento Act prohibits schools from requiring documents for school enrollment.
- Talk to runaway youth about their home situation with care and sensitivity. Understand that although youth may hesitate to admit it, their home may be an unhealthy or dangerous environment.

DON'T...

Don't threaten or harass parents or students, violate their privacy, or jeopardize their housing

- ❖ Don't contact landlords or housing agencies about a student or family. Such contacts may violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the McKinney-Vento Act and may jeopardize already tenuous housing situations. In addition, these contacts generally do not provide useful information.
- ❖ Don't conduct invasive surveillance of students or families, such as following them, observing them from outside their residences, or talking to neighbors about their living situation. The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to eliminate barriers to enrollment and attendance; acts that may threaten or intimidate create barriers that can frighten parents and students away from school. School staff trained on issues of homelessness and the McKinney-Vento Act can conduct respectful home visits, when necessary.
- ❖ Don't use police officers to conduct home visits.
- ❖ Don't pose barriers to enrollment
- ❖ Don't require documents like eviction notices, utility bills, occupancy permits, or notarized letters from host families. The McKinney-Vento Act prohibits schools from requiring documents for school enrollment.
- ❖ Don't force caregivers to obtain legal custody or guardianship to enroll youth. The McKinney-Vento Act requires school districts to have procedures to enroll unaccompanied youth immediately; legal custody or guardianship cannot be prerequisites. Furthermore, custody and guardianship have important legal consequences far beyond education and are not appropriate for many caregiver relationships.
- ❖ Don't force people into shelters or onto the streets as a prerequisite for McKinney-Vento services.
- ❖ In sum, a school district's attempts to verify a student's eligibility for McKinney-Vento services must be governed by respect, sensitivity, and reasonable limits. **When in doubt, the district must always enroll the student immediately and should seek support from the local liaison or State Coordinator for Homeless Education.**

Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act.

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