



## Quick Guide for Counseling Staff

### Working with Students Experiencing Homelessness

The legal definition of homelessness for public schools includes children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This definition specifically includes children and youth sharing the housing of others temporarily due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons; staying in motels or hotels due to lack of adequate alternatives; or staying in shelters, transitional housing, cars, and campgrounds.

Students may disclose information to a counselor/counseling staff about their living situation that indicates that they are experiencing homelessness. For example, they might mention staying with friends temporarily, moving frequently, or being uncertain of where they will stay. In addition to these signs, the school district liaison or other school staff may inform counselors that a student is experiencing homelessness. This quick guide provides practical tips and strategies for supporting students experiencing homelessness, helping meet their basic needs and planning for graduation.

#### **Step One: General triage/intake upon learning a student is experiencing homelessness**

Thank the student for speaking with you and let them know your number one priority is to help them if they want help. You can provide support, resources, and a safe space, and get things out of their way so they can focus on school.

Questions to Ask	Actions to Take
How are you? Given the circumstances, of course.	Listen.
Are there adults/18+ friends you have a good relationship with, i.e. feel comfortable talking to? Asking for help if you need it? Spending time with if you need support? At school and outside of school?	Listen and help the student brainstorm about the available adult support system, in school and out of school.
Where are you staying tonight? Is that a safe place for you?	If not, help the student brainstorm possible safe options. If needed, contact the school district's McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance, or connect with emergency housing resources you have developed.
Do you have a safe place to stay for a short-term plan?	If not, offer to help work on a plan.
Do you have a safe place to stay for a long-term plan?	If not, offer to meet again the next day (or soon), to help develop a plan.
Do you have transportation to school? School Bus - do you have your bus pass and know your pick-up time? City Bus - do you have vouchers/a pass? Car - do you need help with a parking pass? Friend/adult - is this consistent and reliable? Do you have to pay them? Cab - has this been set up by school/agency?	Help the student with any transportation needs. Ask the school district's McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.

Are you working?	If yes, offer to assist with clothes, hygiene, transportation or other work-related needs. If not, wait to determine whether assistance getting a job is appropriate for the student.
Do you need a city bus pass? (If public transportation exists in your area.)	Help the student get a bus pass. Ask the school district's McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Do you have a cell phone?	Help the student get a cell phone. Ask the school district's McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Where are you eating? Are you currently receiving free lunch here at school? What about SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)?	The student is automatically eligible for free school meals due to homelessness. Connect with school nutrition to get free meals started immediately. Assist with SNAP application.
We have basic hygiene items for students (i.e. soap, deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrush, socks, underwear, etc.). Would you like any?	Help the student with these needs. Find out how students can do laundry at school. Ask the school district's McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Do you need any school supplies or a backpack?	Help the student with these needs. Ask the school district's McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Do you have your books/homework? (Unfortunately, these often get left behind in transitions due to homelessness.)	If not, email student's teachers, advocate for exemptions, extended time, reissuing of work, etc. Also take care of any fine/obligations associated with lost textbooks and/or library books.
Do you want me to share any information with your teachers? If so, how little, how much?	Follow the student's instructions regarding sharing this information with teachers.
Do you take any medications? If yes, do you have your medication?	Work with the school nurse and other health partners to help the student get medication refilled, insurance, resources, etc.
Do you have documents you need (birth certificate, state ID, school ID, etc.)?	If not, start the process of obtaining copies from vital records, public offices, and the school.

Also connect the student with clothing and food resources. Be sure clothes are the right size, and that food items meet the student's needs. (For example, if they do not have a refrigerator or cooking area, foods must be non-perishable and ready-to-eat.) Provide space at school for the student to store personal items, and bags for taking hygiene, food and clothing items, as needed, in a discrete manner.

## **Step Two: Getting to Graduation**

- Ensure as complete and accurate transcript as possible - award partial credit as applicable for credits earned due to transitions/homelessness (i.e. 0.25 credit for a class even if student left half way through a semester at another school and that school did not grant credit).
- Utilize credit recovery options as needed to provide student the opportunity to earn all credits in a given semester and/or recover missing credits (i.e. online platforms, contract work, credit for completion options, etc.).
- If student is in junior or senior year and transferred from a district that required fewer credits for graduation, petition for credits to make sure student is on track for graduation in the new district.
- Establish, at minimum, quarterly meetings re: graduation progress. Make sure student has copies of documents both physical and electronic (to a non-school email address) in case they switch schools. This helps them stay on track regardless of where they attend school.
- If student does not have adequate space/resources to complete homework outside of school, consider building a "study hall" period into the student's schedule if applicable, or make arrangements for coming early or staying later (ensuring transportation is not a barrier).
- Facilitate connections to tutor(s), AVID, mentoring or other academic support programs as needed.
- If available, provide technology resources for student if needed (i.e. laptop, chromebook, ipad, etc.)

- Provide fee waivers for ACT, SAT, college applications, etc.
- Write letters of recommendation for the student and provide copies for future use.
- Provide [scholarship](#) information/resources (all opportunities, but point out those specifically for youth experiencing homelessness)
- If student is an unaccompanied senior and filling out the FAFSA for post-secondary opportunities, make sure to provide the student with the appropriate documentation re: verification of unaccompanied homeless status. Also provide guidance when the student fills out the FAFSA; or, if you don't feel comfortable with this task, reach out to a local community college financial aid office, as they usually have employees who will meet with students for free regardless of where they plan to attend school and help them with the FAFSA process.
- If applicable, work closely with district special education staff to assist with all areas related to special education. Help students understand their rights with regard to their disability (including surrogate parents) and attend IEP meetings to support the student.

### **Important Points to Remember**

- Your “solution” may not be what the student wants. This is the student’s journey - meet them where they are, provide options, and support the student in their decisions (as long as they are safe of course).
- “Homelessness” comes in many forms - don’t quantify the student’s experience based on your ideas of what homelessness looks like. Regardless of the physical living situation, students experiencing homelessness may have disruptions, inconsistencies, losses, etc. that are very different than their peers who do not experience homelessness.
- Be present and LISTEN to the student. Listen more, talk less - validate and make sure the student feels seen, cared about, and valued.
- Seek understanding of trauma and adolescent/young adult development.
- Practice grace AND accountability. Don’t act as if the student’s situation is a pass for low standards. This is an opportunity to help the student learn how to effectively handle adversity which is truly a LIFE SKILL.

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