



Identifying Homeless Youth on Their Own

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Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth run away from their homes each year.¹ During the 2005-2006 school year, the 28 school divisions in Virginia that receive McKinney-Vento subgrants enrolled 228 homeless youth who were on their own. Since these data account for only one-fifth of Virginia's school divisions and do not include homeless youth who were not enrolled in school, the total number of unaccompanied homeless youth in Virginia is much greater. Various studies and the experiences of liaisons across the country have demonstrated that the vast majority of youth on their own left home either because their parents forced them to leave or because they were fleeing severe dysfunction at home, including circumstances that put their safety and well-being at risk.²

Unaccompanied youth must fend for themselves, without the support or protection of parents or guardians. They must meet their own basic needs for shelter, food, clothing, personal hygiene, and physical and mental health care. They make important decisions without adult guidance. Yet, despite these responsibilities and pressures, unaccompanied youth continue to recognize the importance of an education.³ In fact, in many cases they value school more than housed youth, recognizing all too well that school is their only hope for a brighter future.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act) also recognizes that education is critical for homeless children and youth. The McKinney-Vento Act requires that schools provide students experiencing homelessness with school access and support their academic success. For youth to receive these rights and services, they must be identified as meeting the legal definition of homeless. Therefore, the McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to identify children and youth who are homeless, including those who are unaccompanied.

Identifying unaccompanied youth can be challenging. Often, young people are hesitant to discuss their situation, fearing the involvement of social services or law enforcement. They may feel loyalty to their parents. Due to the demands of providing for their basic needs, many unaccompanied youth drop out of school and can be difficult for educators to find.

Despite these challenges, school divisions have developed successful strategies to identify unaccompanied homeless youth. Successful strategies include four basic steps:

1. Understanding the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of unaccompanied homeless youth;
2. Establishing procedures to identify unaccompanied homeless youth in every school in the school division;
3. Establishing procedures to identify unaccompanied homeless youth through collaboration with the community; and
4. Building trust with youth and providing responsive services in a supportive environment.

This brief provides basic information and strategies for each step to support school divisions in their efforts to identify unaccompanied homeless youth.

Understanding the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of unaccompanied homeless youth

To be eligible for McKinney-Vento Act services, a youth must meet the legal definition of homeless. The same definition of homelessness applies to unaccompanied youth as to all children and youth: lacking a nighttime residence that is fixed, regular, and adequate. Some common living situations of unaccompanied homeless youth include:

Sharing the housing of friends or relatives (sometimes known as "couch-surfing")

In these cases, the student is staying with someone who is not a parent or guardian. The student has no legal right to be in that home and can be asked to leave at any time. Often, the youth is sleeping on a couch, in a garage, or in another temporary situation. It may not be clear how long the youth will remain in the home, but the intention is not for the living situation to be permanent.

A youth sleeping in a friend's garage reported eating rice every night. When the liaison asked why he only ate rice, the youth responded, "Because if I only eat a little, they'll let me stay longer."

Living in an emergency shelter or transitional living program

Although there is a dire shortage of shelter for youth on their own, some youth are able to find space in emergency or transitional shelters. Many emergency shelters require youth to leave after two or three weeks, which exacerbates youth's challenges in attending and remaining in school.

The Project HOPE-VA Web site has more information about the McKinney-Vento Act. Also see HOPE Publications for more resources about the needs of youth on their own: www.wm.edu/hope

Living in a park, campground, abandoned building, bus station, or other public place

Unfortunately, many youth are unable to find a place to stay with friends or in a shelter. They are forced to sleep in public places, putting themselves at grave risk of violence and illness.

An unaccompanied high school senior living in a cardboard refrigerator box maintained perfect attendance and graduated with a 3.84 grade point average. The school provided him access to showers, the school nurse, free breakfast and lunch, space in the library to study after school, and a mentor.

A more complete definition of homeless based on McKinney-Vento appears on page 4 of this document. Any youth meeting that definition is eligible for the rights and services provided by the McKinney-Vento Act. However, homeless youth who are also unaccompanied have certain additional rights, most notably the right to receive direct support from the liaison in choosing and enrolling in school and the right to appeal McKinney-Vento Act disputes on their own behalf. To be considered unaccompanied, a youth must not be in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. In other words, the youth must not be staying with a parent or guardian.

It is important to note that immigration status is irrelevant in determining McKinney-Vento Act eligibility, the application of other education laws, or access to public school in general. In fact, schools are prohibited from inquiring about a student's immigration status. If a youth is homeless, he or she is entitled to the protections of the McKinney-Vento Act, regardless of immigration status.

The National Center for Homeless Education has developed a step-by-step guide to help homeless education liaisons determine McKinney-Vento Act eligibility. The guide, called Determining Eligibility for Rights and Services under the McKinney-Vento Act, is available at www.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf.

If there is a question about whether a youth is eligible for McKinney-Vento Act services, the school should always enroll the youth in school immediately and follow up by contacting the liaison for support. Refusing to enroll a homeless youth in school violates the McKinney-Vento Act and Virginia state law.⁴ Similarly, if there is concern that a youth may have been reported missing, the school should enroll the student immediately. The liaison will be able to assist in verifying that the youth has not been reported missing, by contacting the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (www.missingkids.com; 1-800-THE-LOST). Virginia law also requires schools to mark the records of students reported missing, so previous school records will help identify missing children.⁵

Establishing identification procedures on every school campus in the school division

Many of the same procedures school divisions use to identify all homeless children and youth are good strategies for identifying unaccompanied youth, such as:

- Providing ongoing professional development for school administrators, registrars, secretaries, counselors, and teachers on indicators of homelessness, including among unaccompanied youth.
- Identifying a homeless coordinator on each school campus to work in collaboration with the school division homeless liaison.
- Avoiding the word “homeless” in conversations with youth, as the stigma associated with the word may lead youth to insist they are not homeless, although their living situation fits the McKinney-Vento Act's definition.
- Respecting youth's privacy by talking about their living situation in a private space where other students and faculty members cannot overhear the conversation.
- Placing posters, flyers, brochures, and other information about the McKinney-Vento Act in schools, in youth-friendly language.

In addition, some variations on these strategies can make them more effective for identifying unaccompanied youth, such as:

- School staff should inquire about homelessness any time a youth enrolls in school without a parent or guardian, since unaccompanied youth are, by definition, separated from their parents.
- Liaisons should include truancy officers and school security officers in professional development about indicators of homelessness among youth and the McKinney-Vento Act.
- Some high schools have surveyed students to gather information about the number of unaccompanied youth in the school and to provide all students with information about the McKinney-Vento Act. Youth can be an excellent source of information about the extent of homelessness in their school.

If staff and students throughout the school division work cooperatively with the homeless liaison to identify and support unaccompanied youth, more youth will receive the services they need to which they are entitled.

Establishing identification procedures through collaboration with community agencies

While identification strategies in schools are critical, many unaccompanied youth have left school due to the daily demands of survival on their own. To identify and serve these youth, school divisions must collaborate with community agencies. The McKinney-Vento Act and Virginia law also require such

collaboration.³ Important community partners include:

- Youth shelters, transitional housing, and independent living programs
- Street outreach programs
- Youth drop-in centers
- Law enforcement
- Child welfare
- Public health clinics
- Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender support programs
- Social services
- Pregnant and parenting teen programs
- Immigrant and refugee support centers
- Legal services
- Soup kitchens and food banks

School divisions should provide training for community agencies on the McKinney-Vento Act and school services, as well as learning about other services available to unaccompanied youth in the community. Community partners should display posters and flyers about education rights, explain this information to their school-age clients, and assist youth to enroll and succeed in school. In turn, homeless liaisons should refer students to community agencies that can help meet their needs.

In addition to sharing information and referrals, school divisions and community agencies should coordinate identification and outreach activities. For example:

- Develop joint flyers or brochures that describe both the services available at school and those provided by other community programs.
- Include basic McKinney-Vento Act information in the brochures of community services agencies.

Some liaisons offer youth-serving agencies tours of high schools in the school division, and ask them for tours of their facilities. Having been on each other's turf increases the understanding of each agency's services and procedures and enhances collaboration.

- Develop and distribute wallet cards for youth with phone numbers for key community agencies, including the homeless liaison. To support youth in meeting their basic needs, ask a local business to donate coupons for a free sandwich, drink, or shower to attach to the wallet card.

Homeless liaisons often seek donations to pay for yearbooks, caps and gowns, school pictures, and prom dresses and tuxedos for graduating seniors who are homeless.

Building trust and providing responsive services in a supportive environment

Perhaps the most effective strategy for identifying unaccompanied homeless youth is to build trust with youth by providing consistent, responsive services in a supportive environment. Word travels quickly among unaccompanied youth regarding what agencies are truly helpful. If your school division is able to enroll youth immediately, welcome them into the school with respect, and provide responsive services, more youth will come.

Some strategies to build trust with youth include:

- Assign each unaccompanied youth a specific adult contact in the school upon enrollment. Any adult who is sensitive to the needs and challenges of unaccompanied youth can be a mentor to help orient the youth to the school and provide both support and accountability.
- Avoid casting judgment on unaccompanied youth. Although we may not agree with their decisions, it is important to remember they are surviving in circumstances most of us cannot imagine, without the guidance and support of a parent.

A high school home economics teacher routinely lets unaccompanied youth use the school's laundry facilities before school.

- Always be honest and direct with youth. If a youth asks a question you cannot answer, tell her you do not know but will try to find an answer.
- Talk with youth to identify their immediate needs and help them access support for their needs where you can provide quick assistance. (For example: immediate school meals; access to school showers; clothing; a visit to the school nurse, counselor and/or social worker; a parenting class for a teen mother; etc.). This will help build trust and engage the youth in school.
- Adopt policies to ensure that youth can begin earning some credits immediately, regardless of when they enroll in school. It is not realistic to expect to engage youth in school if they are not able to earn any credits.
- Talk with youth about their strengths and interests and quickly involve them in corresponding classes and activities.
- Make sure unaccompanied youth can access extracurricular activities quickly. Extracurricular activities can forge a connection with the school community that keeps youth engaged and attending.

By studying the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of unaccompanied homeless youth, establishing procedures to identify youth in schools and the community, and providing responsive services in a supportive environment, school divisions can increase the school enrollment and success of youth on their own.

As of 2007, Virginia has federally-funded emergency shelters for homeless youth in Richmond, Virginia Beach, Charlottesville, Roanoke, and Dunn Loring, as well as two transitional living programs for up to 18 months: Family Lifeline in Richmond and the Alternative House in Dunn Loring. For the most current information regarding Virginia programs funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, refer to the Administration for Children and Families Web site: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/youthdivision/programs/locate/va.htm

DEFINITION OF HOMELESS

Anyone who, *due to a lack of housing*, lives:

- In emergency or transitional shelters;
- In motels, hotels, trailer parks, campgrounds, abandoned in hospitals, awaiting foster care placement;
- In cars, parks, public places, bus or train stations, abandoned buildings;
- Doubled up with relatives or friends,
- In these conditions and is a child or youth not in the physical custody of an adult (unaccompanied youth*),
- In these conditions and is a migratory child or youth.

To determine homelessness, consider the *permanence and adequacy* of the living situation.

* Unaccompanied youth - a youth without fixed, regular, and adequate housing who are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This would include runaways living in homeless situations and those denied housing by their families (sometimes referred to throwaway children and youth).

Project HOPE-Virginia is Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The College of William and Mary administers the program for the Virginia Department of Education. Funding is authorized under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, Title X, Part C of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (P.L. 107-110). The purpose of Project HOPE-Virginia is to ensure the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school.

Endnotes

¹ Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. (2002). *Runaway / throwaway children: National estimates and characteristics. National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Greene, J. (1995). *Youth with runaway, throwaway, and homeless experiences: Prevalence, drug use, and other at-risk behaviors*. Washington, DC: Research Triangle Institute. National Runaway Switchboard, <http://www.1800runaway.org/>.

² Robertson, M. J. & Toro, P. A. (1999). *Homeless youth: Research, intervention, and policy*. In US Department of Housing and Urban Development. (n.d.). *Practical Lessons: The 1998 national symposium on homelessness research*. Washington DC: Author. Retrieved July 13, 2007, from US Department of Health and Human Services Web site: <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/3-Youth.htm>. MacLean, M. G., Embry, L. E. & Cauce, A. M. (1999). Homeless adolescents' paths to separation from family: Comparison of family characteristics, psychological adjustment, and victimization. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(2), 179-187.

³ Moore, J. (2006). *Unaccompanied and homeless youth: Review of literature (1995-2005)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Homeless Education. Retrieved July 18, 2007, from http://www.serve.org/nche/products_list.php#uy_lit_review. Levin, R. L. (2005). *Wherever I can lay my head: Homeless youth on homelessness*. Chicago: Center for Impact Research. Retrieved July 18, 2007, from <http://www.impactresearch.org/documents/homelessyouthreport.pdf>.

⁴ Virginia Code §22.1-3.

⁵ Virginia Code §22.1-288.1.

Additional Resources

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth www.naehcy.org

National grassroots membership association, serving as the voice and the social conscience for the education of children and youth in homeless situations

National Center for Homeless Education www.serve.org/nche
Federal clearinghouse for the education of homeless children and youth

National Network for Youth www.nn4youth.org
Advocacy organization for runaway and homeless youth

National Runaway Switchboard
1-800-621-4000 www.1800runaway.org/
National support center for runaway youth and their families

Project HOPE-Virginia

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