



# State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

Homeless Bulletin Series 01  
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## Indicators and Strategies for the Identification of Homeless Children and Youth

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires each school district to designate an appropriate staff person as the district's homeless liaison. The homeless liaison's responsibilities are to help identify, enroll, and ensure that homeless students receive the same educational support services that nonhomeless students receive.

Some families and unaccompanied youth do not want to be identified as being homeless, even if this means they will not receive services available under the McKinney-Vento Act. Do not record a student as being "homeless" if the parent/guardian or unaccompanied youth refuses educational services. Being homeless can be a very complex situation for families, their children, and unaccompanied youth. School personnel should comply with the wishes of homeless individuals who want their homeless status kept confidential and who choose not to participate in the district's homeless services.

### Confidential Information

A student's status of "homeless" must be kept confidential. This is true even if willingness to accept certain services available exclusively to homeless students may inadvertently identify them as homeless. The dignity and privacy rights of homeless families, their children, and unaccompanied youth must be respected.

The department suggests that either the district homeless liaison, or staff members knowledgeable about McKinney-Vento Act requirements, enroll students and discuss educational program options with homeless parents/guardians or unaccompanied youth. In enrollment interviews with families or unaccompanied youth who may be homeless, or at the time of identification, emphasis should be placed on the services available to students who are eligible under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. A district may wish to use a form signed by the parent/guardian or unaccompanied youth outlining their rights under the Act and listing all educational programs and services agreed upon. This form will be helpful for statistical and tracking purposes in the future. It is advisable for districts to maintain records supporting compliance with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. It should also be noted that in enrollment of undocumented immigrants, for both homeless and nonhomeless students, school staff may not ask for proof of citizenship. (See *Plyler v. Doe* [457 U.S. 202 (1982)].) U.S. citizenship is not a requirement for public school education. For additional information on education rights found in the *Plyler v. Doe* ruling, see <http://www.ncasboston.org/SOA/alert.htm>.

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### **Identification**

The homeless liaison, and other school staff, should consider the indicators and strategies below when identifying and assisting homeless children and youth.

1. Ask counselors, teachers, school secretaries, social workers, the school nurse, and other staff to work together to identify and assist homeless students and their families. For example, a change of address, change in attendance patterns, or a health concern might alert district staff to a homeless situation.

Homeless children share many of the same "characteristics" of children who live in poverty; it is important that staff be careful with assumptions and pre-judgments when inquiring about a student's living situation and/or conveying the information obtained.

#### **Mobility Indicators**

- lack of school records, including health records
- "losing" school supplies on a regular basis
- enrollment after the school year begins
- multiple school attendance history
- hesitancy about what address to use
- confusion about proof of residency in the school district
- frequent absences
- frequent tardiness
- coming to school without books or homework
- gaps in academic skills development
- inability or difficulty in contacting parents
- avoidance of class field trips
- avoidance of after-school programs

#### **Poverty Indicators**

- no school supplies
- wearing the same clothes to school on consecutive days
- poor hygiene
- fatigue (may fall asleep in class)

- unattended medical needs
- malnutrition/chronic hunger
- poor health, skin rashes
- respiratory problems, asthma
- poor organization/conceptual skills
- concern for safety of belongings
- inappropriate clothing based on weather

#### **Social Behavior Indicators**

- poor self-esteem
- short attention span
- difficulty or avoidance in making friends
- extreme shyness
- "old" beyond years
- developmental delays
- fear of abandonment
- difficulty trusting people
- immediate gratification of needs
- concern for safety
- aggression
- protective of parents
- clinging behavior
- anxiety late in the school day

Note: Some children experiencing homelessness may have additional needs based on disability, lack of English proficiency, or other factors. Schools must assess and serve these students as required by law.

2. To obtain referral information, the homeless liaison and school staff should develop an ongoing, active, and cooperative relationship with community agencies that work with both youth and homeless individuals and families. Such organizations may include homeless

and domestic abuse shelters, community food programs, local hotels and motels, Boys and Girls Clubs, law enforcement agencies, etc. Your district may need to develop or use an existing **release of information or agreement form** to allow community agencies to refer homeless families with school age children and youth to your school district and allow school staff to refer these students and families to community services. The homeless liaison is responsible under the McKinney-Vento Act to disseminate “public notice” of the educational rights of homeless children and youth to community organizations that serve the homeless. A cooperative agreement between districts and community agencies will help achieve compliance with this section of the Act as well as provide needed services for homeless families, children and youth.

3. Many homeless youth do not want to be identified by district staff or their peers as being without a home. Youth may not consider themselves to be homeless when living with friends, would be embarrassed if their peers know about their homeless situation, or don’t want school staff to intervene on their behalf. District staff should develop procedures to ensure greater confidentiality for these students, including the confidentiality of records for homeless youth. (See Homeless Bulletin Series 03: *Decisions About School Records and Privacy Rights*.)
4. Districts should consider including contact information for their homeless liaison on their websites and in school publications. School secretaries and receptionists should be aware of contact information for the homeless liaison.

### **Identification and Mandatory Reporting of Unaccompanied Youth Under Age 18**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines unaccompanied youth as “youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.” The McKinney-Vento Act requires school districts to immediately enroll unaccompanied students and provide them the same opportunity to participate in all educational programs that nonhomeless students have. The Wisconsin Constitution guarantees all children and youth under the age of 21 the right to a free public K-12 education.

Wis. Stats. 118.175: requires mandatory reports of unaccompanied youth under 18 years of age:

“If a pupil is a child who is without a parent or guardian, any school teacher, school administrator, school counselor or school social worker who knows that a child is without a parent or guardian shall report that fact as soon as possible to the county department under s. 46.22 or 46.23 or, in a county having a population of 500,000 or more, to the department of health and family services.”

A youth under 18 years of age is considered a minor. District homeless liaisons or other school staff need to keep the above mandatory reporting requirement in mind before discussing shelter arrangements with homeless students.

### **Sources**

Appreciation is extended to the following agencies for information used in the development of this document:

Madison Metropolitan School District  
National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) at SERVE and Project HOPE, The College of William and Mary, School of Education, Virginia.

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