



Illinois State Board of Education

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Supporting Homeless Students During the 2020-21 School Year Guidance for Schools and Districts Last Updated: July 23, 2020

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Act (*42 U.S.C. § 11301*) ensures that each child or youth experiencing homelessness has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education as is provided to other children and youth. Students who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services are those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The definition also includes those students who share the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; live in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; live in emergency or transitional shelters, on the street, or in a car; or live in similar substandard arrangements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread job loss, health complications, and unstable housing leaving many more families and children homeless or at risk of homelessness. Some temporary eviction prevention measures have been put in place statewide, but those measures are time-bound and can expire at any time if not renewed by state or federal action. This may result in a dramatically increased number of evictions in the state. As a result, more students are expected to be eligible for McKinney-Vento services during the 2020-21 school year.

This guidance document is designed for administrators and school staff to support students experiencing homelessness during the 2020-21 school year. Many of the responsibilities and duties outlined in this document are unchanged from pre-COVID times but take on heightened urgency as homelessness and housing instability are further exacerbated by COVID-19 realities.

It is imperative that school districts access adequate funding to address new barriers and increases in homelessness created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We encourage school districts to consider ways they can expand the amount and uses of the Title I, Part A homeless set-aside funds and target Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act relief funding to students experiencing homelessness.

I. LIAISON DUTIES

Illinois is a regional state that is divided into seven distinct areas with designated lead area liaisons, subgrant area liaisons, and district liaisons to support students eligible for McKinney-Vento services.

- <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/IL-Map-with-Contacts.pdf> (map and contact information for lead area liaisons)
- <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Subgrant-Liaison-Contact-List.pdf> (list of subgrant liaisons)
- <http://webprod1.isbe.net/HomelessChildLiaison/default.aspx> (list of school district liaisons)

School districts statewide need to access and implement policies, procedures, and structures to make sure McKinney-Vento liaisons have adequate capacity to fulfill their duties, including identifying, enrolling, and supporting students experiencing homelessness and connecting them to needed services during the 2020-21 school year. Careful consideration should be given to select a district official who has the capacity to fulfill all liaison duties. Members of the leadership team in some districts should not be considered due to their limited bandwidth.

- Liaisons should have a clear plan and timeline to train **all** school staff on rights of students eligible for McKinney-Vento services prior to the start of the school year and throughout the school year. Districts should include trainings on strategies to sensitively address trauma that students experiencing homelessness face in their plans for start-of-school training. See also Section VII of this guidance document on Trauma.
 - Here is a link to back-to-school training resources from SchoolHouse Connections: <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/back-to-school-training-resources/>.
- CARES Act funding; Title I, Part A funding; and McKinney-Vento funding must be used to support homeless students and to increase liaison capacity to assist them. Districts are also encouraged to use local district funds or funding from community partners for these purposes.
- Each school should designate a point person to connect homeless students to the district liaisons and assist with identification and enrollment.

II. IDENTIFYING STUDENTS

School districts should have a plan in place to make sure liaisons are sensitively identifying students who experienced homelessness in the prior school year as well as those who have become homeless recently because of job loss, health crisis, eviction, or other reasons. Families who became homeless during the period of school closures during the 2019-20 school year may not have yet been identified.

- Liaisons and other school staff should be reaching out to students and families eligible for McKinney-Vento services or those who may have become eligible during the pandemic prior to the start of the school year in various ways, including, but not limited to, phone calls, emails, mail, school district websites and social media accounts, and appropriate and safe in-person visits that comply with all applicable public health guidelines.
- Liaisons should inform students and families orally and in writing prior to the start of the school year and when school starts about the rights and resources for students eligible for McKinney-Vento services, including, but not limited to, the right to:
 - Stay in the school the youth or child was last enrolled or the school attended when the child was last permanently housed (**school of origin**);
 - Immediately enroll in school even without documents normally required, such as birth certificates, immunization records, and transcripts;

- Be given priority for preschool enrollment;
 - Get free school meals and fee waivers for school fees;
 - Receive transportation to and from the school of origin if lack of transportation creates a barrier to accessing school;
 - Access tutoring; and
 - Receive help with distance learning, including access to Wi-Fi, computing devices, and school meals, if students are taught remotely for any part of the school year.
- Schools should consistently update contact information of McKinney-Vento families and students. Schools may need to transition between fully remote, blended remote, and in-person instruction during the 2020-21 school year in response to changing COVID-19 realities, so schools must be prepared to contact families and students to inform them and stay connected with them during any changes to school schedules or methods of instruction.
 - The school should collect multiple methods of up-to-date contact information for families and students. This includes current address, phone numbers (including cell and alternate phone numbers), email address, and emergency contact information. Schools should reach out to families and students to update this information monthly.
 - Here is a link to a sample checklist for keeping in touch with McKinney-Vento eligible families from SchoolHouse Connections:
<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/keeping-in-touch-during-school-closures/>.
- Registration and enrollment provide key opportunities for McKinney-Vento identification. Schools should adopt sensitive and discreet protocol for identifying students and families during these processes and asking them about lack of supplies or other barriers to learning.
 - Registration information should include trauma-informed questions regarding a student’s living situation; that information should be shared with the liaison for follow-up with the student and family. See <https://nche.ed.gov/homeless-liaison-toolkit/> for a McKinney-Vento Toolkit for liaisons that includes housing question samples for families eligible for McKinney-Vento services.
 - A best practice is for a questionnaire, survey, or form to be provided to all families in the district sharing information about McKinney-Vento services and eligibility. Any such form should give a student or family a way to request McKinney-Vento services.
 - Students and families may be uncomfortable sharing information about substandard living arrangements in the heavily trafficked front office areas where school registration and enrollment is typically handled. Schools should provide a private space for any discussions of a family’s living situation.
- Students and families are often unaware that their living situation makes them eligible for McKinney-Vento services and may not be familiar with the McKinney-Vento program. It is not the obligation of the student or family to self-identify as experiencing

homelessness. School districts should affirmatively and sensitively identify those situations using the following (non-exhaustive) list of strategies:

- Information about homelessness, McKinney-Vento eligibility, and services should be included in all school or district outreach or communication efforts, including, but not limited to, food pickup or delivery, mailing of learning packets, back-to-school communications or events, emails or other communications to all parents/students, school/district automated calling systems, the school/district website, and traditional or social media communications.
 - Information on McKinney-Vento eligibility, services, and how to access services should be distributed widely to community partners and service providers. School/districts should provide notice on the rights of McKinney-Vento students via posters and outreach materials distributed in community places where families and youth in homeless situations are likely to go, such as shelters, low-cost motels, campgrounds, laundromats, libraries, grocery stores, soup kitchens, food pantries, public aid offices, social service agencies, and youth shelters or drop-in programs.
 - Notice of the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness should be prominently displayed in all school buildings and the district offices.
 - Outreach materials should be provided in the native languages of families and students in the community.
- Liaisons should identify McKinney-Vento eligible families with preschool age children and assist them with enrollment in preschool programming.
 - Liaisons should also identify McKinney-Vento eligible families with young children who may qualify for birth to 3 early education and prevention initiatives and connect them with those programs.

III. ENROLLMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic does not change the mandate that schools enroll McKinney-Vento students immediately [42 USC 11432(g)(3)(C)], regardless of a school's remote learning status. Even during periods where in-person instruction is suspended, school is often the safest and most stable part of life for a child experiencing homelessness. During this unprecedented crisis, every effort must be made to identify and enroll homeless students without delay.

- School districts should provide registrars and other enrollment personnel adequate training on McKinney-Vento eligibility and services prior to the start of the school year and throughout the school year.
- Schools must ensure that students experiencing homelessness are enrolled immediately, even without documentation that would normally be required.
 - Here is a link to a brief from the National Center for Homeless Education on enrollment tools for school districts: https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/det_elig.pdf.

- Enrollment systems need to be accessible and understandable to parents and youth experiencing homelessness and include information about the rights of families and students experiencing homelessness.
 - Online enrollment systems should provide a way for homeless parents and students to enroll without typically required documents, such as proof of residency, health records, or guardianship.
 - Here is a link to a checklist from SchoolHouse Connections on removing barriers to online enrollment systems for homeless students:
<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/removing-barriers-to-online-enrollment/>.
- Registrars and other enrollment personnel should make an automatic referral to the McKinney-Vento liaison if it is indicated that a family or child may be experiencing housing instability.

IV. ACADEMIC CONSIDERATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has erected barriers to learning for all students, but has uniquely impacted students experiencing homelessness. As modifications are made to the educational program, especially as to delivery of instruction, districts must consider what special accommodations may be needed to ensure that homeless students have equitable access to all learning opportunities.

12th-Graders

- Schools should provide specific outreach to students in Grade 12 experiencing homelessness to make sure they are on track to graduate and to address concerns regarding credit or college accessibility.
 - Here are some helpful tips to assist 12th-graders who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services with applying for financial aid:
<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/the-fafsa-four-things-you-can-do-to-help-homeless-and-foster-youth/>.

Distance Learning

- [Public Act 101-0643](#) allows school districts to use Remote Learning Days and Blended Remote Learning Days as needed during a gubernatorial disaster proclamation. It is essential that McKinney-Vento students have equitable access to tools to succeed in these different environments.
- Districts should prioritize students experiencing homelessness when distributing computing devices and access to Wi-Fi.
 - Students experiencing homelessness should be provided with free computers or computing devices and Wi-Fi to ensure they can successfully access distance learning or a hybrid learning experience next school year.

- Transportation should be provided to families who cannot pick up devices, or the devices should be mailed or delivered to families.
- Schools should have a point person to reach out to families eligible for McKinney-Vento services to ask if there are barriers to accessing distance learning materials or succeeding academically during the 2020-21 school year.
- Students experiencing homelessness may lack proper space to focus and complete assignments during remote learning.
 - Students eligible for McKinney-Vento services should be prioritized for access to in-classroom learning opportunities.
 - Schools should work with community providers, such as libraries and Boys and Girls Clubs, to see if there are ways to safely provide space for homeless students to be able to do work in an environment that is conducive to learning. Schools should provide and promote either in-person or virtual tutoring to homeless students who are struggling academically.

V. FOOD

Schools should continue to provide food to eligible students and families during the 2020-21 school year, even if they are implementing a fully remote or blended remote learning program.

- When the new school year begins, school districts will return to participating in the National School Lunch Program. This means schools will need to make adjustments in providing and tracking meals. Schools will need to follow the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program meal pattern requirements and will also need to track and claim the students in the proper income category (free/reduced/and paid) and school they attend. That said, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has provided several flexibilities for school year 2020-21 to support access to nutritious meals while minimizing potential exposure to the coronavirus. These flexibilities are important tools for supporting students and families who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services and addressing food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis. Additional information can be found at <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/School-Nutrition-Programs.aspx>. Some of the key waivers include the following:
 - [Nationwide Waiver to Allow Non-Congregate Feeding in the Child Nutrition Programs](#);
 - [Nationwide Waiver to Allow Meal Service Time Flexibility in the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program](#);
 - [Nationwide Waivers to Allow Parents and Guardians to Pick Up Meals for Children](#); and
 - [Nationwide Waiver to Allow Meal Pattern Flexibility in the Child Nutrition Programs](#).

- Schools should deliver food or provide transportation to families who cannot access food at designated distribution locations.
- Schools should inform students and families experiencing homelessness of federal nutrition supports through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and assist families and students with access to those programs.
 - Illinois students receiving free or reduced-price school lunch qualified for Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), a program that provided additional nutritional assistance to such households while in-person learning was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - This benefit was only available during months where in-person learning would have ordinarily taken place, but families can still apply for P-EBT through July 31, 2020, if they should have received it but did not.
 - To do so, visit the [Illinois Application for Benefits \(ABE\)](https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/jsp/access/Home.jsp) website at <https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/jsp/access/Home.jsp> or call 1-800-843-6154 (1-866-324-5553 TTY).
 - As of June 2020, SNAP benefits can be used to order food online. Currently, online ordering is limited to Walmart and Amazon.
 - Families and students experiencing homelessness in most cases qualify for expedited five-day processing for SNAP benefits.

VI. ACCESS TO PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

The Illinois Department of Public Health has issued guidelines regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements in all public and private schools that serve students in Grades K through 12. See [Part 3 Joint Transition Guidance](#) and supplemental [FAQ Document](#). Several funding sources are available to help schools purchase required PPE and critical health supplies.

PPE is necessary in the current environment to fully access the educational program of the school. Schools and districts therefore have an obligation under McKinney-Vento to ensure that students experiencing homelessness have access to any needed PPE to fully participate in all instructional or other school activities.

- Schools should not use punitive measures for students who don't have the means or stability to follow safety requirements. Students experiencing homelessness may not have resources to access needed PPE to safely engage in classroom learning and follow federal and state safety guidelines. Further, homeless students often live in transient situations where they are constantly moving around, and it may be challenging for them to keep track of masks or to wash cloth masks. School personnel – especially personnel responsible for enforcing student discipline – should be trained to respond to instances of noncompliance by students experiencing homelessness by immediately providing those students with the necessary resources that keep everyone safe.
- Students experiencing homelessness should be supplied resources, such as face coverings, hand sanitizer, book bags, and other school materials, that will be crucial to keeping them safe and prepared in the classroom.

- Transportation should be provided to families who cannot pick up supplies, or the supplies should be mailed or delivered to families.
- Title I, Part A homeless set-aside funds and CARES Act relief funds can be used to purchase PPE and critical health supplies for students experiencing homelessness.
- Districts should take steps to ensure McKinney-Vento students have equitable access to all school activities, whether online or in person. This may require that the district provide students experiencing homelessness with extra PPE and health supplies.

VII. TRAUMA

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a traumatic experience and may have compounded existing traumas for students experiencing homelessness. There are several recommendations for schools to take a trauma-informed approach during the COVID-19 crisis.

- It is important that school districts screen students for trauma when school restarts, either in person or online.
 - Here are links to helpful trauma screening tools: <https://istss.org/clinical-resources/assessing-trauma/ucla-ptsd-assessment-tools> and <https://traumascreens.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Youth-Self-Report.pdf>.
- Trainings for staff and teachers should include strategies to sensitively address trauma that students experiencing homelessness face, which was exacerbated by COVID-19 and the resulting disconnection from school communities during school closures.
 - The following links provide online training resources:
 - <https://www.nctsn.org/>
 - <https://www.acesaware.org/>
 - [Leading Trauma Informed School Systems Change - Before, During & After Pandemic Times](#)
 - This is an upcoming webinar provided by Southeast MHTTC
 - The link also includes other resources on mental health and trauma
 - Crisis Readiness, Response, and Recovery Webinar Series provided by Pacific Southwest MHTTC
 - [Principles of Commemoration and Memorialization](#) (Part 1)
 - [Supporting Grieving Students: How to be both grief-sensitive and trauma-informed](#) (Part 2)
 - [Starting a New School Year: Sustaining Recovery from a School Crisis During Periods of Transition](#) (Part 3)
 - [Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package](#)
 - The Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package offers school and district administrators and staff a framework and roadmap for adopting a trauma-sensitive approach school- or district-wide
 - [Treatment and Services Adaptation Center](#)
 - Components of a trauma-informed school
 - Mental Health America

- [Back to School: Understanding Trauma](#)
 - Includes a youth-focused [mental health screening tool](#)
- Here is a link to reviews of trauma trainings and programs with positive outcomes. Many offer free tools and other online training resources: <https://nche.ed.gov/trauma/>.
- Some other important trauma-informed measures that schools should consider include the following:
 - Provide curriculum that addresses the trauma that students experiencing homelessness face, which was exacerbated by COVID-19, and disconnection from school during school closures.
 - Provide curriculum for mental health education provided to all students with the goal of building a trauma-informed, supportive school environment. Providing a baseline level of education for all students can foster a supportive community for those students who have experienced trauma, particularly students experiencing homelessness.
 - Have one-on-one discussions with parents, students, and teachers about the transition back to the classroom or blended learning program and what supports students may need.
 - Invite school social workers, counselors, nurses, and community mental health professionals to talk and support students either virtually or in classrooms.
 - Have positive and supportive policies that do not focus on punitive measures to support students who may have a difficult time transitioning back to in classroom learning.
 - Here is a link from SchoolHouse Connections on positive school discipline practices: <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/positive-school-discipline-practices-for-students-experiencing-homelessness/>.

VIII. CONSIDERATIONS BEYOND THE SCHOOL

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the emotional, financial, and physical health of our communities. It is more important now than ever that schools serve in the role of community hub and align delivery systems to ensure that the needs of students and families are holistically addressed.

Community Collaboration

- Liaisons should make sure they have up-to-date information on what resources are available in their community.
 - It will be even more crucial leading into the 2020-21 school year that liaisons build partnerships with community agencies that provide food, health care, mental health care, shelter, rental assistance and housing to families or youth.
 - Here is the link to a list of all the Homeless Prevention Providers in Illinois: <https://www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=110583>.

- There should be a clear referral system for liaisons to connect with families and help them navigate how to access community resources.

Public Benefits

- Liaisons should assist families and students experiencing homelessness with accessing public benefits.
 - Students and their families can apply for SNAP (nutritional assistance), Medicaid (free medical assistance), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (cash benefits for certain qualifying parents and caretaker relatives) at any time by visiting [ABE](https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/jsp/access/Home.jsp) at <https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/jsp/access/Home.jsp>.
 - Once there is a public benefits case open with the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), the case can be managed on ABE (e.g., uploading supporting income documents and completing mid-point eligibility verification questionnaires).
 - When assisting with an application for benefits, be sure to specify with IDHS that the household is experiencing homelessness.
- Students and families experiencing homelessness can contact the Law Project for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless at 1-800-940-1119 if they believe they were wrongly denied benefits.
- Liaisons can find helpful information about public benefits at [HelpHub](http://helphub.povertylaw.org/home.html?returnUrl=%2findex.html) (<http://helphub.povertylaw.org/home.html?returnUrl=%2findex.html>), where Illinois public benefits experts answer questions and help providers trouble-shoot.

Health Care

- Liaisons should assess if students eligible for McKinney-Vento services have health insurance and assist them with accessing health insurance.
 - In addition to assisting students with the medical insurance applications for Medicaid through [ABE](https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/jsp/access/Home.jsp) at <https://abe.illinois.gov/abe/access/jsp/access/Home.jsp>, liaisons should assist or connect McKinney-Vento students with community organizations to help with choosing a Managed Care Organization to administer their health coverage.
 - For more information, go to [Health Choice Illinois](https://ssa-ileb.maximus.com/ILSelfService/resources/portal/index.html#clients/login_public/pick_members) (https://ssa-ileb.maximus.com/ILSelfService/resources/portal/index.html#clients/login_public/pick_members).

For further questions, please contact the COVID-19 team at covid19@isbe.net.