



National Center for Homeless Education  
Supporting the Education of Children and  
Youth Experiencing Homelessness  
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## BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION BRIEF SERIES

# Students Living with Caregivers: Tips for Local Liaisons and School Personnel

## INTRODUCTION

Each year, thousands of students stay with someone who serves as a caregiver, instead of living with a parent or legal guardian. The caregiver may be a relative, friend, school employee, or other individual. Some caregivers provide little to no support for youth staying with them, while others, especially with younger children, often assume more responsibility – even obtaining legal guardianship in some cases. While some caregiver living situations are considered permanent housing, others may result in students meeting the definition of *homeless children and youths* and thus being eligible for services under Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (hereafter referred to as *the McKinney-Vento Act*) [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)], which is the primary federal law addressing the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Students who are homeless and who are staying with caregivers instead of parents or legal guardians face a variety of risks and challenges. This brief explores caregiver living situations and offers strategies that local homeless education liaisons (hereafter referred to as *local liaisons*) and school staff can implement to ensure that these students and their caregiver families receive appropriate services.

### Who is homeless?

#### Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (as reauthorized by Title X, Part C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
  2. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
  3. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...
  4. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
  5. migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

## BACKGROUND

Over the past several decades, the structure of American households has changed dramatically. Children are now living in increasingly diverse arrangements, as the percentage of children residing with two biological married parents has steadily declined and the percentage of those staying with someone other than a parent has increased. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), nearly three million children live in households without a biological parent. Well over half of these children reside with grandparents, and the rest are split nearly evenly between other relatives and non-relatives. In some cases, the children may alternate among the homes of various family members and friends. The result is a diverse population of children that varies according to what brought about the living arrangement, how long the arrangement lasts, and the relationship between the child and the caregiver.

There are multiple reasons for children to live apart from their parents. These could include, but are not limited to, changes in our overall society such as rates of substance abuse, teen parenting, economic crises, domestic violence, and large-scale disasters. Although there are various reasons why children move away from their parents, Vandivere, Yrausquin, Allen, Malm, & McKlindon (2012) say most fall into one of the following broad categories (p. 13):

- The parents pose a danger to children due to domestic violence, mental illness, substance abuse, or dysfunction.
- The parents are unavailable as a result of military deployment, illness, incarceration, deportation, or death.
- The parents lack resources to care for children because of teen pregnancy, economic crisis, family homelessness, or the child's health or mental health needs.

## UNDERSTANDING THE RISKS TO CHILDREN LIVING APART FROM PARENTS

Children living with caregivers face substantial and unique risks related to their living situation. The majority of these children experience multiple caregiver changes, making this a very mobile population (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Multiple moves not only can cause ongoing negative effects, but those effects can escalate over time (Sun & Li, 2011). A sudden change in caregivers, household makeup, and expectations can compound a child's stress. This is especially true when adding a child to an existing household places both the child and the host family at risk for eviction due to occupancy limits or lease restrictions.

Parental inconsistency, abuse, or neglect prior to moving in with a caregiver can affect how children view themselves, often causing them to suffer from low self-esteem, behavior problems, depression, anger, or anxiety (Edwards & Taub, 2009; Shearin, 2007; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999). The negative factors predating a move, coupled with separation from parents, friends, and familiar environments, put children at risk for negative health and behavioral outcomes (Shearin, 2007; Vandivere et al., 2012). For example, research shows a link between living with caregivers and experiencing greater health care needs, such as needs arising from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), behavioral and developmental problems, and other issues (Bramlett & Blumberg, 2007; Conway & Li, 2012). It is unclear whether the link between living with caregivers and having special health care needs is a causal relationship, since both living away from parents and having special health care needs involve challenges.

When children feel that life is chaotic and out of control, their negative emotions may exacerbate transition difficulties and lead to serious negative consequences for their development (Gleeson & Seryak, 2010). This can become a cycle as children carry development issues into their next caregiver relationship. Also, living apart from

both biological parents has long been related to reduced school engagement in students (Baviera, 2011; Conway & Li, 2011) and decreased educational attainment (Biblarz & Raftery, 1999; Heard, 2007). As a result, students living with caregivers may need additional services in school and beyond. Fortunately, receiving appropriate services and establishing a positive relationship with a caregiver can put children back on the right track to mental and emotional health (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).

### DETERMINING THE ELIGIBILITY OF STUDENTS LIVING WITH CAREGIVERS FOR MCKINNEY-VENTO SERVICES

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, local liaisons must ensure that homeless children and youth, defined as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, are identified by school personnel and receive the educational services for which they are eligible [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)]. Thus, when a child moves away from a parent or legal guardian and begins living with a caregiver, the local liaison in the local educational agency (LEA) (or the front office or enrollment staff trained and assigned to the task by the local liaison) should determine if the student is eligible for McKinney-Vento services. Not every student who lives with a caregiver will qualify for McKinney-Vento services.<sup>1</sup> Rather, eligibility determinations under these circumstances should be made on a case-by-case basis depending on whether the child's living arrangement with the caregiver is fixed, regular, and adequate.

To determine the McKinney-Vento eligibility of students living with caregivers, local liaisons and enrollment staff should consider

- the nature of the relationship between the child and caregiver, including factors

<sup>1</sup> For more information about determining McKinney-Vento eligibility and understanding the McKinney-Vento definition of *homeless*, download NCHES's brief, *Determining Eligibility for Rights and Services under the McKinney-Vento Act*, at [http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det\\_elig.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf).

such as the type, quality, and length of the relationship;

- the length of time the child is expected to stay with the caregiver;
- where the child would be if not staying with this caregiver;
- whether the living situation is adequate to meet the child's physical and psychological needs; and
- what prompted the child's move. For instance:
  - » If the move was to escape an unsafe or unstable situation, or if the child was abandoned, it is likely that the child would be eligible for McKinney-Vento services.
  - » If the parent and caregiver mutually agreed in advance that the caregiver would house and care for the child for a specified period, it is unlikely that the child would qualify for McKinney-Vento services.
  - » If the parent continues to provide support for the child and remains involved in the child's care while the student resides in a temporary

### DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY FOR MCKINNEY-VENTO SERVICES

If the living situation was precipitated by a crisis, the student is staying with the caregiver on a short-term basis, or the living arrangement is inadequate for meeting the student's needs, the student may qualify for services because his or her housing is unlikely to be fixed, regular, and adequate. On the other hand, if the student has not lost housing but has simply relocated, all involved parties agreed in advance that the child would stay with the caregiver on a long-term basis, and the living arrangement is adequate for meeting the student's needs, the student likely would not qualify for services.

arrangement designed to meet an educational goal, it is unlikely that the child would qualify for McKinney-Vento services. This may occur when a parent allows a child to stay with someone else in order to finish the semester or school year in the same school after the rest of the family makes a planned move, such as when a parent takes a new job in a different area.

It is important to distinguish between the terms *homeless* and *unaccompanied youth* as defined in the McKinney-Vento Act (see sidebar). Students who meet the homeless criteria and also do not live with a parent or guardian are considered “unaccompanied homeless youth” (UHY) because they are “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)]. Some important considerations include:

- Although the McKinney-Vento Act uses the term *youth*, there is no program-specific age limit for eligibility. So long as an UHY meets a state’s age criteria for public education, he or she can receive McKinney-Vento educational services.
- It is possible that the caregiver family could still be considered homeless. It is also possible for a parent or guardian to be permanently housed while the child living

### UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH

An unaccompanied youth must also fit the definition of *homeless* in the McKinney-Vento Act to receive assistance under the provisions in the law.

**Homeless:** lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(a)].

**Unaccompanied:** not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)].

For more information, download NCHE's brief, *Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Students*, at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/youth>.

with a caregiver is homeless, and vice versa.

- A youth may be homeless but not unaccompanied, as well as unaccompanied but not homeless.
- An UHY can be eligible for McKinney-Vento services regardless of whether the student was asked to leave the home or chose to leave.
- State and local policies govern when youth living apart from their parents or legal guardians should be reported to authorities.<sup>2</sup>

### ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS STUDENTS

The McKinney-Vento Act mandates that states develop strategies to address problems resulting from delays in enrollment of homeless children and youth caused by lack of documentation or guardianship issues [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(H)(iii-iv)]. The Act further requires LEAs to immediately enroll all homeless children and youth (including all UHY whether or not they are living with caregivers) in schools, even if they lack records normally required for enrollment [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(C)(i)]. Moreover, both state educational agencies (SEAs) and LEAs must review and revise any policies that may act as barriers to the enrollment of homeless children and youth, with specific consideration given to issues concerning school records and other documentation as well as guardianship [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(7)].

Despite the above requirements, caregivers sometimes encounter difficulty when attempting to enroll a student for whom they do not have legal guardianship, school records, or other documents typically required for enrollment. For example, in some cases, caregivers have been

<sup>2</sup> For reporting requirements related to youth living apart from parents, consult state and local laws and policies. For more information, contact your State Coordinator for Homeless Education (contact information is available at [http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state\\_resources.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php)), or download the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty's *Alone without a Home: A State-By-State Review of Laws Affecting Unaccompanied Youth* at [http://www.nlchp.org/Alone\\_Without\\_A\\_Home](http://www.nlchp.org/Alone_Without_A_Home).

told that they must obtain legal guardianship in order to enroll the student. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, however, a school may not condition enrollment of UHY on receiving proof of legal guardianship from a caregiver, nor require caregivers to become legal guardians after enrollment.<sup>3</sup> Seeking guardianship has legal ramifications for parents and caregivers that extend far beyond the scope of educational decision-making.

LEAs should have policies and processes in place to enroll and serve UHY living with caregivers. Schools often utilize caregiver forms as a tool to enroll unaccompanied students. Although the form is not a legal document, it establishes the school's expectations of caregivers and requests their contact information. Some SEAs require districts to use caregiver forms provided by the state. In other states, LEAs have created their own caregiver forms.<sup>4</sup> To facilitate an effective enrollment process, schools should consider using a caregiver form that addresses the following:

- where and with whom the student is staying;
- if the student can self-enroll, or if the caregiver, local liaison, or other school personnel should enroll the student instead;
- who may make school or class placement decisions and schedule changes;
- who has signing authority for such things as school absences, and participation in extracurricular activities and field trips; and
- with whom records will be shared and in what manner in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 C.F.R. §

<sup>3</sup> For more information about McKinney-Vento Act requirements to remove enrollment barriers for unaccompanied homeless youth, see 42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(H)(iv), 42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(C)(i), and 42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(7).

<sup>4</sup> For links to sample forms, materials, and policies, visit [http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc\\_youth.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc_youth.php).

99)<sup>5</sup> and in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. § 1401 et seq.; 34 C.F.R. § 300; 34 C.F.R. § 303) if the student is identified as a child with a disability under Parts B and C of the IDEA.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the special vulnerability of UHY, the McKinney-Vento Act includes special provisions for serving students who meet the definitions of both homeless and unaccompanied. For students living with caregivers, it is important that the local liaison determine the extent to which the caregiver wants to be involved in educational decisions, and for students who are capable of making their own decisions, the extent to which the student wants the caregiver to participate. To ensure that UHY receive all the educational rights and services to which they are entitled, local liaisons are charged with certain duties specifically related to assisting them. These duties include

- assisting UHY in school placement or enrollment decisions, with consideration given to the views of the UHY [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(B)(iii)];
- providing UHY notice of appeal rights if a dispute arises regarding their enrollment or school placement [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(B)(iii)];
- ensuring that UHY enroll in school

<sup>5</sup> The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 C.F.R. § 99) affords parents the right to access their children's education records. FERPA defines *parent* to include a natural parent, a guardian, or an individual acting as a parent in the absence of a parent or a guardian. When a student turns 18 or enters a postsecondary institution at any age, he or she is an *eligible student* and the rights previously afforded the parents transfer to the student. FERPA also permits an elementary and secondary school to provide students, who are not eligible students, rights in addition to those given to their parents, as long as doing so does not supersede the rights of parents under FERPA. For example, schools may use their judgment in determining whether an unaccompanied minor is responsible enough to exercise certain privileges, such as inspecting and reviewing education records and providing consent for disclosure [34 C.F.R. § 99.5(b)]. For more information about FERPA, visit <http://www.ed.gov/fpco> or <http://center.serve.org/nche/legis/ferpa.php>.

<sup>6</sup> IDEA also contains confidentiality provisions in 20 U.S.C. § 1417(c), 20 U.S.C. § 1439(a)(2), 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.610-300.626 (Part B) and 34 C.F.R. §§ 303.401-303.417 (Part C), which provide parents the right to inspect and review their child's early intervention or special education records, as appropriate.

immediately while disputes are resolved [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(E)(iv)]; and

- informing UHY of the right to receive transportation to and from the school of origin and assisting them in accessing such transportation [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(1)(vii)].

## ADDRESSING DISCIPLINE ISSUES

Just as children may require help adjusting to new caregivers, adults who accept responsibility for the care of children other than their own also may need assistance. The caregiver may benefit from information about providing appropriate care to address disruptive behaviors that result from the children's prior negative experiences or change in living arrangements. Researchers have found that students without parental advocates receive much harsher school disciplinary penalties (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Bavier, 2011), making it imperative that schools and caregivers work together to resolve discipline or behavior issues before they cause serious disruption to a student's education. There are additional provisions in IDEA to address discipline issues.<sup>7</sup> School district strategies to ensure discipline is fair and likely to be effective may include

- reviewing discipline records for individual schools to identify patterns in punishments that could indicate an unfair bias against students without parental advocates;
- considering the student's situation and consulting with the school behavior response

<sup>7</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 et seq.) and its implementing regulations (34 C.F.R. § 300), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) (29 U.S.C. § 794) and its implementing regulations (34 C.F.R. § 104) provide protections to children with disabilities and their parents in disciplinary situations. See 20 U.S.C. § 1415(k) and 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.530-300.536 (IDEA), and 34 C.F.R. § 104.4 and 34 C.F.R. § 104.35 (Section 504 regulations). See also, *Dear Colleague Letter on the Nondiscriminatory Administration of Discipline* (2014, pp. 3-4), available at <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.pdf> and other non-regulatory guidance at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/landing.jhtml?src=pn>. For more information on serving homeless students with disabilities, see <http://center.serve.org/nche/legis/idea.php>.

team to assign discipline corresponding to the behavior and likely to result in more appropriate behavior in the future;

- assigning an advocate for the student, remembering to consult the caregiver and student about the decision;
- ensuring that prior to taking disciplinary action, school personnel consider issues related to a student's homelessness as well as the McKinney-Vento requirement to "ensure that homeless children and youths are not stigmatized... on the basis of their status as homeless" [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(g)(1)(J)(i)]. This may be especially relevant when students accumulate absences and tardies related to a change of caregivers;
- determining the key contact – caregiver, student, or parent – with whom to address truancy and other behavioral issues;
- providing information to school personnel regarding how trauma can impact student behavior and how to mitigate the effects of trauma in the school environment by providing trauma-informed care;<sup>8</sup>
- working with community agencies to provide mentoring or other support for caregivers; and
- referring caregivers to parenting classes that focus on the needs of blended families.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about trauma-informed care, download *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services* from the National Center on Family Homelessness at <http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/90.pdf>.

## AN INDIVIDUALIZED PLAN

Some schools and LEAs create a personalized education plan that lays out an academic path toward meeting statewide academic standards and appoint an advocate or mentor to help the student stay on track academically.

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES LIVING WITH CAREGIVERS

Part B of the IDEA (20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.) is the federal law that provides assistance to states and through them to LEAs, to help in providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible students with disabilities, as defined in the IDEA, including those experiencing homelessness.<sup>9</sup> FAPE includes, among other components, the provision of special education and related services, at no cost to parents, in conformity with an individualized education program (IEP) developed in accordance with 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.320-300.324. IDEA provides a number of rights and protections to students with disabilities and their parents so that parents have a meaningful opportunity to participate in educational decisions regarding their children. Among these are the right of parents to receive written notice from schools fully explaining their procedural safeguards at least annually and the right of parents to receive prior written notice a reasonable time before the school either proposes or refuses to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of their child or the provision of FAPE to their child.

According to the IDEA, a parent includes a biological or adoptive parent; a foster parent (unless a foster parent is prohibited under state law from serving as a parent); a guardian (but not the state if the child is a ward of the state); a person acting in the place of a biological or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare; or a surrogate parent appointed in accordance with 34 C.F.R. § 300.519 or section 639(a)(5) of IDEA (34 C.F.R. § 300.613).

If more than one person described in the IDEA definition of *parent* is qualified to act as the child's parent, a biological or adoptive parent who wishes to act as the child's parent is presumed to be the child's parent under

<sup>9</sup> For more information about IDEA, visit <http://center.serve.org/nche/legis/idea.php>.

IDEA, unless that individual does not have legal authority to make educational decisions for the child. If the child is not living with the parent, it may be prudent, if the parent agrees, to include the caregiver in any case conference or similar meetings even though the caregiver is not the educational decision-maker. Before implementing this practice, schools should consult with the IDEA coordinator and FERPA point of contact regarding the definition of parent and requirements for the release of information about a student to ensure the practice aligns with the laws.<sup>10</sup>

An LEA must ensure that the rights of a child with a disability are protected by assigning a surrogate parent in the following circumstances: the parent cannot be identified; the public agency, after reasonable efforts, cannot locate the parent; or the child is a ward of the state under the laws of that state. Unaccompanied homeless youth, as defined in the McKinney-Vento Act, must be appointed a surrogate parent if any of the above circumstances are true. The SEA and LEA must make reasonable efforts to appoint a surrogate parent within 30 days of determining the need (34 C.F.R. § 300.519(h); 34 C.F.R. § 300.201). In the meantime, a temporary surrogate parent can be appointed [34 C.F.R. § 300.519(f)]. Although a surrogate parent cannot be an employee of the SEA, LEA, or any other agency involved in the education or care of the student, the temporary surrogate is not subject to such prohibitions. Therefore, a local liaison or another school staff member, as well as a service agency staff member, can serve as a temporary surrogate parent until a surrogate parent is appointed. Once a student reaches the age of majority, educational decision-making rights may transfer to the student (unless the student has been declared to be incompetent under state law), allowing the student to make his or her own educational decisions [34 C.F.R.

<sup>10</sup> FERPA generally requires parental consent for disclosure of personally identifiable information in education records. However, disclosures without parental consent may occur under certain circumstances. The Uninterrupted Scholars Act (USA), Pub. L. 112-278 amended FERPA in 2013 and contains exceptions to FERPA's prior consent requirements for children in foster care. The USA can be downloaded at <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/s3472/text>.

## REFERRING TO SOCIAL SERVICES

Based on their individual circumstances, children living without their parents may need extensive support. The needs of these children often are not fully met either because caregivers are estranged from the children's parents or because the caregivers' own circumstances limit their ability to provide or access the necessary support (Kelley & Whitley, 2003). Since most children staying with adults other than their parents have no child welfare involvement, their caregivers are often unaware of available social services for these vulnerable children (Hynes & Dunifon, 2007; Main, Macomber, & Geen, 2006).

It can be very challenging to deal with children who have had traumatic experiences such as being separated from a parent, but linking caregivers to supportive services can serve as a buffer to help protect children against adverse developmental outcomes (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005). Even the perception that caregiver support is available and accessible lowers the effects of stress and fosters the well-being of students (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Therefore, to be effective advocates, local liaisons and other school personnel who work directly with children and families should familiarize themselves with existing services in the school and community, along with eligibility criteria and application procedures to receive those services. Understanding state minor consent laws and knowing about health care resources for students living without parents or guardians will result in referring families and youth to more appropriate services, as will determining if the state gives special rights to grandparents and other family members serving as caregivers.

The following resources can help local liaisons and school personnel create a process to refer caregivers and students for housing, food, and health services.

- Children and caregiver families who are

U.S. citizens or lawfully present immigrants may qualify for free or low-cost health insurance coverage through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Use the insurance and coverage finder at <https://www.healthcare.gov/> to learn more about your state Medicaid program. For information on CHIP, visit <http://www.insurekidsnow.gov/> and select *Learn About Programs in Your State* or call 1-877 KIDS NOW (1-877-543-7669).

- Many children in non-parental care are eligible for financial assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs for low-income families. Direct families to apply for TANF at the local or county welfare office. Visit <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/tanf> for more information.
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides assistance for supplemental food, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women. The program also assists infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk. To apply, caregivers should contact the state or local WIC agency. Visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/women-infants-and-children-wic> to access state agency contact information.
- The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program pays benefits to disabled adults and children who have limited income and resources, and to adults age 65 and older without disabilities who meet the financial criteria. Applicants should contact their local Social Security office. Visit <http://www.ssa.gov/pgm/ssi.htm> for more information.
- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps, provides benefits for use at grocery stores, certain retail stores, and some restaurants. No one may be denied benefits because they do not have an address or a photo ID. There are no age restrictions or

guardianship requirements, so UHY are eligible. To find the local SNAP office, call 1-800-221-5689. For more information, visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/10-steps-help-you-fill-your-grocery-bag-through-snap> or download *Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/Food Stamps) for Unaccompanied Youth* at <http://naehcy.org/toolkit-high-school-counselors>.

- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) pays for meals and snacks for eligible children enrolled at participating child care centers, family child care homes, homeless shelters, and after-school programs. Find state agency contacts at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/contacts/statedirectory.htm>.
- NCHE's brief, *Access to Food for Homeless and Highly Mobile Students*, available for downloading at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/nutrition.pdf>, contains information to ensure that students can access food both inside and outside of school.

## TRANSITIONING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

UHY, including those staying with caregivers, are considered independent students for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). An independent student can apply for federal financial aid without a parent's signature; and the amount of aid is based solely on the student's income and assets. The following are strategies to assist students and caregivers with the transition to higher education:

- Compile and share information about transitioning to higher education.<sup>11</sup>
- For information on helping youth access, pay for, and succeed in college, consult *College Access and Success for Students*

<sup>11</sup> For a sample handbook, download St. Louis Public Schools' *Students-In-Transition: Education After High School Handbook* at <http://www.slps.org/cms/lib03/MO01001157/Centricity/Domain/74/Education%20after%20High%20School%20Handbook%20March%20Edition.pdf>.

*Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers*, available at <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/he-toolkit>.

- Inform students and caregivers about the types of documentation that financial aid staff may need, and ways they can provide the documentation. Create a standard procedure to provide documentation for all UHY who are high school seniors. As a part of the procedure, download and complete *Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Documentation of Independent Student Status for the FAFSA* (available at [http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/faa\\_det\\_tool.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/faa_det_tool.pdf)) for each UHY to provide to financial aid administrators.
- Include information about students living with caregivers when working with postsecondary institutions, including any networks in your state that ensure services are available for homeless students transitioning to postsecondary education.<sup>12</sup>
- Work with school counselors in your district to ensure that dropout prevention and graduation plans address the unique needs of homeless students living with caregivers and include support for transitioning to postsecondary education.
- Host a seminar for caregivers, who may not be familiar with how to support youth transitioning to postsecondary settings, or who may be unfamiliar with the changes in financial aid and other policies that have occurred since they helped their own children with the transition.
- Help students and caregivers identify a plan for housing and meals during school holidays and breaks before the student leaves for postsecondary pursuits. This will

<sup>12</sup> The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEH CY) is working with a number of states to establish higher education networks that collaborate to identify and address barriers to higher education access, retention, and success for youth experiencing homelessness. For more information, visit <http://www.naehcy.org/legislation-and-policy/state-he-networks>.

help determine the level of involvement the student and caregiver wish to have with each other after the student has started postsecondary education.

- Include caregivers in any parent nights that focus on helping students prepare for life after high school graduation, and facilitate discussions about the expectations of caregivers for the students.

## CONCLUSION

Students living apart from their parents are a heterogeneous population. Each student's living arrangement must be considered on a case-by-case basis to determine whether it meets the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless. The success of each caregiver arrangement is dependent on many variables, including, but not limited to, the catalyst that prompted the disruption of the family's living situation, the type of situation the student moved into, the caregiver's capability, and the student-caregiver relationship. Local liaisons and school personnel play a key role in ensuring that the school provides or refers the family to appropriate services. When students living with caregivers receive the necessary supports, they are far more likely to be successful both inside and outside the classroom.

## REFERENCES

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**This brief was developed by:**

**National Center for Homeless Education**

800-308-2145 (Toll-free Helpline)

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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. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at [http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state\\_resources.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php).



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).

**Local Contact Information:**