



# TIPS FOR HOMELESS HIGHER EDUCATION LIAISONS

[Updated January 2020]

Many institutions of higher education are designating liaisons for students experiencing homelessness. Similar to their counterparts in K-12 education, homeless higher education liaisons support students by connecting them to available resources on and off-campus, and removing barriers to their college retention and success. This tip sheet provides basic strategies for higher education liaisons.

## 1. Train faculty and staff to become aware of signs that any student on campus may be experiencing homelessness.

### What is homelessness?

- Sharing housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or campgrounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations
- Staying in an emergency or transitional shelter
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, or similar settings

### What are the signs of homelessness?

- Students staying late or sleeping on campus until buildings close like the library, student center, 24 hour study rooms, etc.
- Social behavioral changes like withdrawal, aggression, clinginess, difficulty with peer and/or adult relationships
- Lack of participation in class, poor attention span, or sudden decline in academic achievement
- Poor hygiene, unmet medical/dental needs, wearing the same clothes repeatedly, fatigue, sickness

## 2. Ensure that faculty, staff, and students are aware of your role as a homeless higher education liaison.

- Send an introductory email to all students informing them of your role and the resources the institution provides.
- Include contact information about the homeless higher education liaison during orientation and consistently during the school year.
- Host training for faculty and staff to learn more about homeless students on campus and how they can support them.
- Participate in Resident Assistant (RA) or other student leadership training to ensure that student leaders are aware of the homeless liaison's role.
- Encourage faculty members to include a note on their syllabus about the homeless liaison position and resources available on campus that address basic needs.



- Create a clear, accessible referral system where students, faculty, and staff can easily refer students to you.

### **3. Create a comfortable, relaxing office space for students. Students should feel safe and welcome.**

- Make confidentiality a priority. Don't require students to share specific details about the events that led to their lack of housing. Sharing these details may be emotionally difficult and are not necessary to provide assistance.
- Provide clear instructions on how to get to your office by providing a map or offer to meet students somewhere else on campus.
- Ask students what efforts they're already making to address their basic needs before offering advice.
- Help students make connections with additional resources on campus (housing, counseling, food pantry, etc.).
- Be compassionate, but direct, and make sure students know you have their best interest in mind.
- If available, offer snacks or other food to students. Food in your office might be the first meal students have eaten all day
- Build rapport with students and learn about their interests, major, school activities, etc.

### **4. Establish strong relationships with key partners on and off-campus.**

- Establish a relationship with K-12 McKinney-Vento liaisons to assist with the identification and transition of youth who are homeless entering from high school.
- Host annual trainings with specific key offices that interact with students experiencing homelessness.
- Consider having office-based liaisons or specific points of contact in key offices that have specialized training in homelessness.
- [Financial Aid](#)
  - While it is important to be mindful of and comply with privacy and Higher Education Act laws, partner with the financial aid office or admissions office to obtain aggregate data of students who indicated independent status on the FAFSA or their college application, and send them information on support programs or resources.
  - Work with financial aid to mitigate the challenges students experiencing homelessness face with the FAFSA determination process.
  - Remind students that they can fill out the FAFSA starting on October 1st and that you can provide assistance if needed.
- [Housing](#)
  - Partner with student housing to establish a temporary emergency housing plan, options, or a program. If your institution doesn't have residence halls, consider a host home program or partnering with local hotel/motels or community agencies.
  - Advocate for student housing to remain open during all academic breaks, including, winter, spring, and summer breaks. If this is not possible, work with students to come up with a housing plan for those times.
- The Community



- Assist students in applying for all federal, state, and local services, including public benefits like SNAP or Medicaid.
- Establish personal connections with shelters, non-profits, or other homeless services in the area that specialize in and are safe for youth and young adults. Some communities may have a committee of people that organize, meet monthly, and share resources and support.

**5. Routinely follow up with students to monitor their academic progress as well as their physical and emotional well-being.**

- Find out how each student prefers to communicate (texting, emailing, phone, etc.).
- Help students design a short-term and long-term plan with tangible outcomes and goals.
- Empower and challenge students to advocate for themselves and for changes at the institution that better support students experiencing homelessness.
- Schedule regular check-up meetings with students.

**6. Continue your own professional development and training by reading tips sheets and watching webinars hosted by:**

- [SchoolHouse Connection](#), [National Center for Homeless Education](#), or [John Burton Advocates for Youth](#).

**Resources:**

- [Youth Homelessness and Higher Education Overview](#)
- [Tip Sheets for Helping Homeless Youth Succeed in College](#)
- Archived Webinars:
  - [Learning from Higher Education Liaisons: Best Practices in Supporting Homeless College Students Pt 1](#)
  - [Learning from Higher Education Liaisons: Best Practices in Supporting Homeless College Students Pt 2](#)
  - [Paving the Way To and Through Higher Education: Learning from Indiana's Homeless Liaisons](#)