

# COVID-19 AND HOMELESSNESS: STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS AND EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

[Updated March 13, 2020]

Public elementary and secondary schools identified and enrolled [over 1.5 million children and youth experiencing homelessness in the 2017-2018](#) school year. For most of these students, school is their only safety net, offering food, education, health and mental health services, caring adults, and a safe place to be during the day. Additionally, an estimated [1.4 million children under age six experience homelessness](#).

**Schools and early childhood programs offer stability and safety. When schools and early learning programs close, or move to online learning, the health, safety, and well-being of homeless children and youth are jeopardized.**

- According to [federal education data](#), approximately 12% of homeless children and youth were staying in shelters when they were first identified as homeless by schools. Shelters are often crowded, with little privacy, and limited ability for families or youth to self-isolate.
- More than 80% of homeless children and youth were staying with other people temporarily, or in motels, when they were first identified as homeless by schools, because shelters are not available or have restrictions on family composition or on unaccompanied minors, or because parents and youth are afraid of shelter conditions and/or child welfare involvement.
- Most families and youth experiencing homelessness in these situations will neither be able to self-quarantine, nor will they have a stable place to recover should they fall ill.
- Children and youth experiencing homelessness are already at high risk of trafficking, predation, and harm; these risks increase when they have no safe, stable place to go during the school day.
- In [many states](#), unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness cannot consent to their own routine medical care.
- Regardless of whether they are staying in shelters, motels, with other people, or in unsheltered situations, many families and youth experiencing homelessness will not have access to wifi or technology necessary for online learning, or a stable place in which to learn.

## **Strategies for Safety, Services, and Learning**

All early learning, school, and community COVID-19 responses should proactively and intentionally incorporate outreach to homeless families and unaccompanied youth, including

those who are staying in “hidden” homeless situations. These families and youth are unlikely to benefit from services, initiatives, or educational programming predicated on a stable and safe home environment, consistent internet access, or on reliable transportation.

### **Identification and Services in School and Early Childhood Programs**

Under federal law, local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to designate a liaison with specific responsibilities for identifying homeless students and connecting them to school and community resources. Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and federally-funded child care programs, also are required to identify and provide outreach to families experiencing homelessness. LEAs and early childhood programs should:

- Support staff in providing outreach to families and youth currently identified as homeless, to monitor their needs and living situations during times of school closure or virtual learning, and to assist them in accessing services.
- Make additional efforts to proactively identify families and youth who are experiencing homelessness, but who are not yet known to the LEA or early childhood program, including through sensitively-worded housing screening questions and communications to all families.

### **Ensuring Safety and Basic Needs Outside of School and Early Childhood Programs**

- In coordination with public and private agencies, including faith-based organizations, identify safe and stable housing options for families and youth who need them. Some families and youth who are staying with other people in unstable and/or dangerous situations may be better able to self-quarantine and/or recover in motel settings; explore the use of vouchers for safe motels.
- Help families and youth experiencing homelessness identify safe options for quarantining, and how to access food and other services, before schools or early learning programs close.
- Increase early childhood, school, and community-based organization staffing , with appropriate safety precautions, to reach homeless families and youth where they are staying. Families and youth experiencing homelessness are unlikely to have transportation resources to travel to locations where food, medicines, or other supports are provided. Visits to support physical and mental wellness, provide hygiene supplies, deliver food and other necessities, and provide educational check-ins are essential.
- Work with community partners to identify sites (schools, libraries, etc.) that can remain open for accessing food, health care, and other services for families and youth who can travel to a central location. Offer transportation assistance to those sites.
- Provide pre-paid cell phones to unaccompanied youth and to families who may have no other means of communication. Be sure the phones have both calling minutes and unlimited high-speed data, so students can use them to access online assignments.
- Deliver items necessary for proper hygiene (soap, sanitizer, etc.), clean clothing and diapers to families and youth where they are, as well as have those supplies, and laundry facilities, available in central locations.

- Disseminate information on COVID-19 prevention, symptoms, care, and testing in a variety of ways and locations, in order to reach highly mobile and homeless families and youth.
- Support counselors with extra hours and access to basic needs supplies, as essential school staff who can maintain relationships with children and youth while schools are closed, and monitor safety/well-being.
- Provide information to youth and families on how to recognize, avoid, and report trafficking and other predatory behavior.

### **Access to Learning**

- Review and implement the requirements of [the McKinney-Vento Act](#), including the requirements for states and LEAs to review and revise policies that act as barriers to identification, enrollment, and retention in school and school activities.
- Provide mobile hotspots and laptops/tablets to shelters, motels, and directly to families and youth who are staying with other people.
- Be flexible with deadlines and participation requirements, accommodating students who are highly mobile and/or cannot participate in online learning opportunities due to homeless living situations.
- Remove barriers that may be caused by guardianship requirements, allowing unaccompanied youth to participate fully in classes and school activities.

### **Addressing Mental Health Needs**

- People who have lived through major natural disasters are comparing coronavirus to a hurricane, tornado, or fire. The mental health stressors, for children, families, and professionals, are very similar. In the immediate aftermath of this kind of public emergency, as well as over the following months and even years, children, youth, parents, and professionals can suffer from anxiety, fear, and other emotional consequences of trauma. Connecting students, families, and professionals to mental health supports immediately can help ameliorate these effects and help students feel safe and ready to focus on school. The following resources may help.
- [Mental Health and Coping During COVID-19](#)
- [Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#)
- [Tornadoes, hurricanes and children](#)
- [Psychological First Aid for Schools](#)
  - [When Terrible Things Happen: For Students](#)

### **Resources**

- [CDC: Resources for K-12 Schools and Child Care Programs](#)
- [CDC: Interim Guidance for Homeless Shelters](#)
- [CDC: Resources for Community- and Faith-Based Leaders](#)
- [ED: COVID-19 \("Coronavirus"\) Information and Resources for Schools and School Personnel](#)
- Office of Head Start: The guidance from [ACF-HS-IM-19-01 General Disaster Recovery Flexibilities](#) can be applied to Head Start programs impacted by COVID-19