



Strategies for Supporting Immigrant and Migrant Students Experiencing Homelessness

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With an increase in students arriving to the U.S. from other countries, many local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaisons have questions about eligibility for services under the McKinney-Vento Act, as well as strategies for best serving these students.

This resource provides an overview of the rights of immigrant, migrant, and undocumented children and youth; strategies and best practices for supporting immigrant and migrant children, youth, and families; and ideas for using American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funds to serve these populations.

Important Terminology

- Immigrant: A person who moves to a country and plans to stay permanently.
- Migrant: Someone who moves because the student or family are involved in seasonal agricultural or fishing work.
- Refugees: People who have fled their home country due to fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, and are not in the U.S. while they are going through the initial immigration process.
 - Asylees: Refugees who are in the U.S. when going through the initial immigration process.
- Parolees: People who receive temporary legal status to enter the U.S. due to urgent humanitarian or significant public benefit reasons. Typically, they are not eligible for the same kinds of services as a refugee.
- Unaccompanied (alien) minors: Youth under age 18 who come to the U.S. without an accompanying parent or guardian. The term “unaccompanied” in this context refers to their immigration status, not their McKinney-Vento status.
 - Unaccompanied homeless youth as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act are children and youth who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and are also not under the care of a parent or legal guardian.

Educational Rights of Undocumented Children and Youth

- Children and youth living in the United States have the right to attend and participate fully in public schools, regardless of their immigration status.
- Schools and LEA-administered preschool programs cannot ask about a student’s or family’s immigration status, or take other actions that could discourage students from seeking enrollment.

- Schools and LEA-administered preschool programs cannot require Social Security numbers or immigration or citizenship documentation.
- Schools and LEA-administered preschool programs cannot contact ICE or other law enforcement officials about a student's or family's immigration status.
- For all McKinney-Vento eligible students, regardless of immigration status, schools must address barriers to full participation in school activities, including transportation.
 - Career and Technical Education (CTE) services may require Social Security numbers or employment authorization if required for an employment or internship opportunity.
 - Foreign travel as part of an activity is not advisable for undocumented students, as their ability to reenter the U.S. is not guaranteed.

The McKinney-Vento Act covers children and youth who are:

- Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- Staying in motels, campgrounds, or trailer parks due to lack of an adequate alternative;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Sleeping in cars, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus stations, or similar settings; and
- Migratory children living in any of the above situations.

McKinney-Vento Act Eligibility of Immigrant and Migrant Children and Youth

Many immigrant students and families experience homelessness upon arrival to the United States. Often, they are fleeing violence or natural disasters in other countries. Initially, they may stay with family or acquaintances due to the loss of their housing and/or economic hardship; these living situations typically meet the definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act. Many families who receive resettlement services upon arrival cannot sustain housing when that support ends in a few weeks or months.

- As with all McKinney-Vento eligibility determinations, each situation should be evaluated individually, considering whether or not the student has a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.
- Both immigrant and migrant children and youth are eligible for all McKinney-Vento services, including free school meals, if they lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Immigration or documentation status does not affect McKinney-Vento eligibility.
- The right to public education for immigrant children, including undocumented children, extends to preschool programs run by LEAs and/or state agencies. Families may enroll their children in Head Start and Early Head Start programs regardless of their immigration status.

Strategies and Best Practices to Support Immigrant and Migrant Children and Youth

- **Identify Immigrant Families Experiencing Homelessness:** Families may be more open to being identified under the McKinney-Vento Act if the terminology used is more culturally-responsive. Consider asking questions such as:
 - How would you describe your living situation?

- What is your current housing situation?
- Was your plan to live with family members or are you staying with family temporarily while you look for other housing?

Provide private spaces for youth or families to meet with staff and confidentially share living situations. It is also important to recognize that there may be cultural implications when families are staying in the homes of people to whom they are related. While multigenerational families may be a cultural norm, homeless liaisons must evaluate each situation individually. To help distinguish between shared multigenerational housing and homelessness, use identification questions such as:

- Who is included on the lease?
 - Who is contributing to household costs?
 - Does everyone have adequate space to sleep?
 - Is the long-term plan for both families to continue to live together to share expenses?
 - Are any members of the household looking for their own place to live?
 - Was one family already living in the space and another family moved in?
- **Collaborate across Programs to Provide Wrap-around Services:** Collaboration across programs (McKinney-Vento, Migrant Education, Translation and Interpretation Services, English as a Second Language Services, etc.) streamlines programming for both school staff and families. Consider a “one-stop-shop” for families to access services in one place. Additionally, developing cross-trainings for programs is an important strategy for helping staff know the qualifications for other programs and make referrals. Consider collaborative training so that school staff learn about all programs that are available to families, and how they intersect.
 - In Metro Nashville Public Schools, approximately 30% of their identified students experiencing homelessness are a result of referrals from their Title III English Learner program. MNPS offers joint professional development sessions for both the McKinney-Vento and Title III English Learner programs so that staff can learn about immigrant, migrant, and refugee students, as well as signs of homelessness.
 - **Provide Families with Information and Support They Can Access:** Once identified, liaisons should ensure that students and families receive information and support. This could include the following practices:
 - Hang posters and provide brochures or other literature in the languages spoken in the community.
 - National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE): [Translations of Homeless Education Materials](#)
 - SchoolHouse Connection: [Resources in Dari/Farsi](#)
 - SchoolHouse Connection: [Information in Spanish/Información en Español](#)
 - Washington State: [Posters and Brochures](#) in Cambodian, Hmong, Korean, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Ukrainian, Vietnamese

- Hire bilingual or multilingual staff in enrollment or front offices.
 - Provide families with district resources in their native language, such as information on reporting attendance, bus route times and pick up locations, etc.
 - Provide families with the contact information of bilingual staff at school and at community-based organizations, such as food pantries and housing providers.
 - Provide school supplies for enrollment or office staff to hand out to students.
 - Work with bilingual or multilingual staff to provide school building tours at the time of enrollment. Consider inviting a current student to assist with the tour, acting as a student ambassador and friendly face.
- **Remove Barriers for Immigrant Children, Youth, and Families:** Since language can often be a major barrier for immigrant students, LEAs should provide translation services, including translations of key documents, and ensure documents are written at an accessible reading level. Children, youth, and families also may speak indigenous languages as a primary language, or lack literacy skills in their native languages, so it is important to offer translation services beyond written documents. For example, consider verbally interviewing families for more information on their housing status, instead of requiring the completion of a housing questionnaire. Make sure information about McKinney-Vento and other rights is provided in a way that is understandable, rather than simply handing out a brochure.
 - New Philadelphia City Schools (OH) utilizes a Spanish-speaking interpreter to enroll students in school. Recognizing that students and families may speak Spanish as a second language and speak an indigenous language as a first language, the interpreter provides both a translated housing questionnaire and a verbal explanation of the questionnaire. During the verbal interview with the family, the interpreter is able to explain the meaning of doubled up and the McKinney-Vento Act and remove the literacy roadblocks to identifying students.
- **Build Relationships with Community Partners** Relationships with community partners are crucial, and it is the responsibility of the homeless liaison to refer families experiencing homelessness to community resources. Homeless liaisons should build partnerships with services that are accessible to students and families, regardless of immigrant status. Some national organizations with local affiliates include:
 - [National Immigration Law Center](#)
 - [Mexican American Legal Defense Fund \(MALDEF\)](#)
 - [UNIDOS US](#)
 - [Catholic Legal Immigration Network \(CLINIC\)](#)
 - [Immigration Advocates Network](#)

Strategies for Supporting Immigrant and Migrant Youth who are Unaccompanied

- **Building trust is essential:** Be aware that services for families may be off-putting or inaccessible to students who do not have a legal guardian. There is also a very real fear of being reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) or Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE). Tools to help school staff build trust with unaccompanied immigrant youth include:

- Colorín Colorado: [How to Build Relationships with Immigrant Families](#)
- Colorín Colorado: [How Immigration Status Affects Students, Families, & Schools](#)
- Colorín Colorado: [Helping Students Heal Through Love and Trust: A Social Worker's Perspective on Serving Immigrant Youth](#)
- **Identification:** Unaccompanied youth may be placed with “sponsors” through the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Having a sponsor does not affect identification under the McKinney-Vento Act. Sponsors do not have legal responsibility for youth, and if the living arrangement with a sponsor is not fixed, regular, and adequate, the student will be eligible for McKinney-Vento protections. In addition, sponsor arrangements often fall apart over time, leading to more instability, displacement, vulnerability, and trauma.
- **Accommodate unique circumstances:** Many unaccompanied youth are playing dual roles: attending school to complete their education, while also trying to provide for their family in their country of origin. Many unaccompanied youth work long hours at their jobs in order to remain living with their sponsors, send money to their families, and pay off debts incurred when immigrating to the U.S..
 - In New Philadelphia City Schools, Ohio, the district acknowledges and honors both education and work responsibilities by working with students to arrange their schedules in such a way that if students commit to regular attendance, they can end their school day early to go to work.

Consider the Unique needs of Migrant Families Experiencing Homelessness:

- Train migrant recruiters on the McKinney-Vento Act, including basic understanding of eligibility.
- Establish a clear process for migrant educators to make referrals to the homeless liaison.
 - Greeley-Evans School District 6 works closely with the state’s regional education offices or BOCES. The BOCES offices house Migrant Advocates who are responsible for identifying migrant students. School district staff partner with the Advocates to share information on families who may not have stable addresses. The district utilizes a Student Information System in which they are able to track students identified as both migrant and McKinney-Vento. The key to collaboration is the referrals made between district staff and BOCES advocates.
- For states with summer-only migrant programs, work with program staff or family liaisons to help transition students to sending states, including referring to the homeless liaison in the sending district.
- When working with migrant families experiencing homelessness who have young children (ages birth - six), [check to see if there is a Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program nearby](#). These programs are available in 38 states and are designed to ensure migrant families have access to high-quality child care while they are working. Children experiencing homelessness are also prioritized for enrollment in Head Start.
 - [The Head Start Program Performance Standards and Homelessness](#)

Higher Education Opportunities for Undocumented Youth:

(Please note that states are frequently updating and changing in-state tuition and financial aid information for undocumented youth. Please make sure to check this information your state)

- Undocumented youth can apply to public colleges and universities in every state, except Alabama and South Carolina.
- Youth with legal immigration status can apply for federal aid, even if their parents are undocumented, but undocumented youth are not eligible for federal financial aid.
- A number of states offer in-state tuition and/or state financial aid to undocumented students. [See what your state offers.](#)

Use American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) Funds to Support Immigrant and Migrant Children & Youth Experiencing Homelessness

The American Rescue Plan Act provided \$800 million in funding specifically dedicated to support the identification, enrollment, and school participation of children and youth experiencing homelessness, including through wrap-around services. These funds can be used to support immigrant and migrant students experiencing homelessness. For example, LEAs can contract with community-based organizations (CBOs) that already provide services to immigrant or migrant families and have connections to the community. ARP-HCY also funds can be used to hire staff to increase LEA capacity to serve immigrant and migrant families. For example:

- Middletown, RI used ARP-HCY funds to hire a Family Services Coordinator to support multilingual families and contracts with Boys and Girls Clubs to provide wraparound services.
- New Philadelphia, OH used ARP-HCY funds to purchase bikes to support attendance of immigrant students within the LEA's walk zone.
- Grand Island, NE used ARP-HCY funds to hire a bilingual parent liaison to support families in the district's Early Learning Center access summer resources.
- Monte del Sol, NM used ARP-HCY funds to hire a bilingual benefits navigator to help families navigate housing in their native language.

For more ideas about how to use ARP-HCY, take a look at SchoolHouse Connection's [Allowable and Strategic Uses of ARP-HCY Funds](#) and our [ARP-HCY spotlights](#).

Additional Resources:

- SchoolHouse Connection: [Immigrant Students: How Schools Can Help](#)
- Sesame Street In Communities: [Supporting Families Resettling in the U.S.](#)
- Colorín Colorado: [Guides and Toolkits](#)
- National Immigration Law Center: [Basic Facts about In-State Tuition for Undocumented Immigrants](#)