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Memorandum

Date: 2/5/2007

To: National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth,
National Center on Homeless Education,
National Law Center Homelessness and Poverty

From: M. Joycelyn Elders, MD

RE: Statement on Immunization Records

In November 2006, I had the privilege to speak before the annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. Participants expressed concern that one of the chief barriers to immediate enrollment for homeless children occurs when homeless children arrive at school to enroll without their immunization records. This creates an unnecessary and harmful delay for children who have the greatest need for school enrollment and continuity.

For years, the federal McKinney-Vento Act has required schools to allow homeless children and youth to attend school while their immunization status is ascertained and while immunization and other health records and screenings are obtained. I would like to reinforce the importance and logic of this provision of the law, from my perspective as a healthcare professional and former Surgeon General of the United States.

Often homeless students cannot produce school records upon enrollment, due to the instability of their living situations. Therefore, the McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to enroll homeless students immediately while contacting and waiting for the former school to obtain records. The Act also requires school districts to work with parents to obtain immunization and other medical records and to arrange necessary immunizations or screenings. In the meantime, the student is to be attending school.

Most homeless students who are enrolling in school have been enrolled in school previously, received basic healthcare services, therefore have received all required immunizations and health screenings. For the few students who have not been immunized, school nurses and McKinney-Vento staff should work together to start the immunization process. Meanwhile, these students and the community are protected by the same natural public health controls that protect students who refuse immunizations for medical or religious reason (herd immunity). As a result, the McKinney-Vento Act's attendance requirements do not present a significant health risk to the student body or school community.

From a public health perspective, there is no reason for these children to be denied access to school. The healthcare schools provide is a critical resource for the overall good health of students and families, particularly those experiencing extreme poverty and homelessness. Not only does attending school allow children to work toward their educational goals, it also gives them access to school nurses, who are the backbone of healthcare services for young people in our country.

It is imperative that homeless children and youth across the country do not miss valuable school time due to paperwork requirements. I support policies and laws, such as the McKinney-Vento Act, that welcome children into school without delay, where they can access school nurses, healthcare service, eat nutritious lunches, study, play and learn. Schools are critical in ensuring the health of our youth who live in extreme poverty and increasing their chance to become healthy, happy adults.

MJE

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