Flexing the Flexibility of ARP-HCY: #5 Transition from High School to Postsecondary Education

Some form of postsecondary education is increasingly necessary to obtain employment that pays enough to afford housing and maintain stability. Higher education is thus a critical factor in ending the cycle of homelessness and improving the health and overall well-being of youth experiencing homelessness.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaisons are required to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth are informed of their status as independent students for college financial aid and obtain assistance to receive verification for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Additionally, state McKinney-Vento plans must describe how homeless youth will receive assistance from school counselors to improve their readiness for college.

The pandemic greatly impacted many students’ abilities to pursue a postsecondary education due to the disruption in learning and academic preparedness, disengagement and loss of communication during virtual learning, and the youth mental health crisis. According to a recent national report, the number of unaccompanied homeless youth FAFSA determinations declined by about 10% during the 2020-2021 school year. Meanwhile, the number of FAFSA applicants who requested a homeless youth FAFSA determination, but did not receive it by the end of the financial aid award cycle, has steadily increased. This disparity highlights the increased need for assisting youth experiencing homelessness with the FAFSA to help them pursue postsecondary education.

Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) explains that ARP-HCY funds supplement the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program and that all allowable EHCY uses apply to these funds. ED has approved using ARP-HCY funds for FAFSA support and other activities to ensure college readiness and transition. As with all ARP-HCY funds, it is recommended that the LEA first use community resources to meet these needs, if such resources are reasonably available.

🔗 Strategies

School districts have used the following strategies to help students transition from high school to postsecondary education:

- Add capacity through extra hours for staff or through contracts with community-based organizations (e.g. graduation coaches, FAFSA mentors, transition coordinators,
counselors) to help students complete the FAFSA, apply to colleges, and develop a plan for life after high school graduation

- Pay college students to mentor and provide peer support to current high school students
- Use funds to bring students on a tour to local colleges in the area
- Provide laptops and wifi hotspots prior to high school graduation to allow students to complete high school while also applying for scholarships, FAFSA, and college
- Participate in training to stay up-to-date on new FAFSA changes and the implications for homeless youth for the 2024-2025 school year

🔗 Sample Forms/Procedures

- Inform Students about the FAFSA Email Template
- Sample Form Letters to Determine Independent Student Status of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth for the FAFSA

💡 Local Spotlights: Using ARP-HCY to Help with the Transition from High School to Postsecondary

**Postsecondary Transition Coordinator: Cincinnati Public Schools: Cincinnati, OH**

Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) is using ARP-HCY funds to support the position of a Postsecondary Transition Coordinator who will work with students still in high school and help connect them to supports in their first year after graduation. CPS has contracted with a community-based organization to hire the position. The Coordinator will also provide support to students who experienced homelessness previously in their school career and help connect them to other supports in school.

**Student Navigators: North Thurston Public Schools: Lacey, WA**

North Thurston Public Schools (NTPS) used ARP-HCY funds to hire a student navigator for the Family and Youth Resource (FYR) Center, a comprehensive support center for 700 students and their families experiencing homelessness, and is a one-stop shop for connecting with support staff. The student navigators support students experiencing homelessness through activities such as completing the FAFSA, transitioning to higher education or postsecondary plans, obtaining birth certificates, advocating with teachers, and providing support toward graduation. The student navigators have helped to increase the graduation rate of students experiencing homelessness to 84%, surpassing the state graduation rate for all students.

**FAFSA Mentors: Frederick County: Frederick, MD**

Frederick County used ARP-HCY funds to create a FAFSA Mentor Program. This new initiative pairs mentors with seniors experiencing homelessness in an effort to provide support to complete the FAFSA, create a postsecondary plan, and strengthen organizational skills. The
mentors will help students with questions, assist with the FAFSA, and ensure students know they are eligible for the Maryland tuition waiver. This document outlines the FAFSA Mentor Program and job description.

❄ Additional Resources

- Tips for Helping Homeless Youth Succeed in College | Transitioning from High School to College
- SchoolHouse Connection FAFSA Page

REMINDER: ARP-HCY funds may be used for “any expenses necessary to facilitate the identification, enrollment, retention, or educational success of homeless children and youth in order to enable homeless children and youth to attend school and participate fully in school activities.” Broad categories included in ED guidance include:

- Providing wrap-around services (which could be provided in collaboration with and/or through contracts with community-based organizations, and could include academic supports, trauma-informed care, social-emotional support, and mental health services);
- Purchasing needed supplies (e.g., personal protective equipment, eyeglasses, school supplies, personal care items);
- Providing transportation to enable children and youth to attend school and participate fully in school activities;
- Purchasing cell phones or other technological devices for unaccompanied, homeless children and youth to enable such children and youth to attend school and fully participate in school activities;
- Providing access to reliable, high-speed internet for students through the purchase of internet-connected devices/equipment, mobile hotspots, wireless service plans, or installation of Community Wi-Fi Hotspots (e.g., at homeless shelters), especially in underserved communities;
- Paying for short-term, temporary housing (e.g., a few days in a motel) when such emergency housing is the only reasonable option for COVID-safe temporary housing and when necessary to enable the homeless children and youth to attend school and participate fully in school activities (including summer school); and
- Providing store cards/prepaid debit cards to purchase materials necessary for students to participate fully in school activities.”

In addition, LEAs may use funds for any of the sixteen uses permitted by the McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. 11433(d)).
Series: Flexing the Flexibility of ARP-HCY Funding

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