Navigating Financial Aid for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A FAFSA Screening Tool for High School Counselors

This FAFSA screening tool is intended to help counselors and other school staff identify if students are experiencing homelessness or in foster care before they fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Follow these steps and ask your students these questions to identify if they are independent students, meaning they do not need to include their parental information on the FAFSA.

1. At any time since you turned 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court?

   This means that you were removed from your home and placed in the care of a resource or foster parent, group home, residential treatment center, or relative caregiver through a court order.

   **IF YES**, you will qualify as an independent student. **END QUESTIONS HERE.**

   *Note for Counselors: If the student has experienced foster care after their 13th birthday and has also experienced homelessness, it is recommended that they select the option above before answering the questions about homelessness. To learn more about completing the FAFSA with foster youth, see [John Burton Advocates for Youth website](https://www.johnburton.org).*

   **IF NO**, move to question #2.

2. Does someone other than your parent or stepparent have legal guardianship of you, as determined by a court in your legal state of residence?

   This means that you have a legal guardian who is not your parent or stepparent. It is important to note that the guardianship must have been granted through the court.

   **IF YES**, you will qualify as an independent student. **END QUESTIONS HERE.**

   *Note for Counselors: Neither legal guardians nor foster parents (resource parents) are considered parents when completing the FAFSA. If the student is in a legal guardianship, they can qualify for independent status.*

   **IF NO**, move to question #3.
3. **Do you live in any of the following situations?**

- Staying with other people temporarily due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (i.e., “couch surfing”)
- Staying in an emergency or transitional shelter
- Staying in a motel, campground, car, park, abandoned building, etc.
- Staying in substandard housing (e.g., inadequate sanitation, infestation of vermin or pests, lack of water/heating, etc.)
- Self-supporting and at risk of being homeless*

For more examples of homelessness, see [here](#).

*“Self-supporting” is defined as a student who is paying for his or her own living expenses, including housing. “At risk of being homeless” is defined as when a student’s housing may cease to be fixed, regular, and adequate. For example, a student who is being evicted and has been unable to find fixed, regular, and adequate housing.*

**IF NO, END QUESTIONS HERE.** The student does not meet the criteria for homelessness for the purposes of independent status on the FAFSA financial aid applications.

**IF YES, move to question #4.**

4. **Are you living with a parent or guardian?**

**IF YES,** you are considered an accompanied youth. You will fill out the FAFSA as directed and answer “no” to the homeless questions on the FAFSA. You will need to include parental information on the FAFSA. You should still reach out to the institutions you are interested in to see if there are resources, services, and scholarships for homeless youth. END QUESTIONS HERE.

**IF NO,** you are considered an unaccompanied youth. You meet the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness and should be connected to appropriate and available resources. You will qualify as an independent student. Move to question #5.

5. **Do you know your McKinney-Vento liaison?**

**IF YES,** you should request a letter from the liaison verifying you are an unaccompanied homeless youth. A copy of this letter should be sent to you and the institutions to which you are applying.

**IF NO,** counselors should identify the student as unaccompanied homeless and send the referral to the McKinney-Vento/homeless liaison. Explain the McKinney-Vento program
to the student, including the services and supports for which they are entitled. Connect the student with the McKinney-Vento liaison and ensure the student receives the homeless determination letter for the FAFSA. For more information on resources for homeless students or to identify the local homeless liaison, visit this page.

If you are working with a student who does not have experience with foster care or homelessness but they still cannot provide parental information, the student might be a “provisionally independent student,” which will allow them to submit a FAFSA without parental information. The student should reach out to the financial aid office, explain their situation, and ask for the documentation that the institution needs to make a determination of provisional independence. Remember unaccompanied homeless youth and foster youth determinations are different and distinct from provisional independent student status and should not be conflated.

For more information about helping students experiencing homelessness fill out the FAFSA, see SchoolHouse Connection's FAFSA page here.