

School Counselor Quick Guide

Working with Students Experiencing Homelessness



The legal definition of homelessness for public schools includes children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This definition specifically includes children and youth sharing the housing of others temporarily due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons; staying in motels or hotels due to lack of adequate alternatives; or staying in shelters, transitional housing, cars, and campgrounds.

Students may disclose information to a school counselor about their living situation that indicates that they are experiencing homelessness. For example, they might mention staying with friends temporarily, moving frequently, or being uncertain of where they will stay. In addition to these signs, the county level liaison or other school staff may inform school counselors that a student is experiencing homelessness. This quick guide provides practical tips and strategies for supporting students experiencing homelessness, helping meet their basic needs, and planning for graduation.

Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness: Action Steps

1. Thank the student for speaking with you and let them know your number one priority is to help them if they want help.
2. Share available resources, supports, and provide a safe space to relieve their mental strain so they can focus on school.

Questions to Ask	Actions to Take
How are you? Given the circumstances, of course.	Listen.
Are there adults/18+ friends you have a good relationship with, i.e. feel comfortable talking to? Asking for help if you need it? Spending time with if you need support? At school and outside of school?	Listen and help the student brainstorm about the available adult support system, in school and out of school.
Where are you staying tonight? Is that a safe place for you?	If not, help the student brainstorm possible safe options. If needed, contact the county McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance, or connect with emergency housing resources.
Do you have a safe place to stay for a short-term plan?	If not, offer to help work on a plan.
Do you have a safe place to stay for a long-term plan?	If not, offer to meet again the next day (or soon), to help develop a plan. Document on your calendar.
Do you have transportation to school? School Bus: <i>Do you know your pick-up time?</i> City Bus: <i>Do you have vouchers/a pass?</i> Car: <i>Do you need help with a parking pass?</i> Friend/adult: <i>Is this consistent, safe, and reliable?</i> Other means of transportation: <i>Has this been set up by school/agency?</i>	Help the student with any transportation needs. Ask the county McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.

Questions to Ask	Actions to Take
Are you working? If so, how many hours are you working each week?	If yes, offer to assist with clothes, hygiene, transportation or other work-related needs. If not, wait to determine whether assistance getting a job is appropriate for the student.
Do you need a city bus pass? (If public transportation exists in your area.)	Help the student get a bus pass. Ask the county McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Do you have a cell phone? If so, who is financing it?	Help the student get a cell phone. Ask the county McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Where are you eating? Are you currently receiving free lunch here at school? What about SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)?	The student is automatically eligible for free school meals due to homelessness. Connect with school nutrition to get free meals started immediately. Assist with SNAP application.
We have basic hygiene items for students (i.e. soap, deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrush, socks, underwear, etc.). Would you like any?	Help the student with these needs. Find out how students can do laundry at school. Ask the county McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Do you need any school supplies or a backpack?	Help the student with these needs. Ask the county McKinney-Vento liaison for assistance as needed.
Do you have your books/homework? (Unfortunately, these often get left behind in transitions due to homelessness.) Do you have your school or county issued device?	If not, email student's teachers, advocate for exemptions, extended time, reissuing of work, etc. Also take care of any fines/obligations associated with lost textbooks and/or library books.
Do you want me to share any information with your teachers? If so, how little, how much?	Follow the student's instructions regarding sharing this information with teachers.
Do you take any medications? If yes, do you have your medication?	Work with the school nurse and other health partners to help the student get medication refilled, insurance, resources, etc.
Do you have documents you need (birth certificate, state ID, school ID, etc.)?	If not, start the process of obtaining copies from vital records, public offices, and the school.

Important Points to Remember

- » **This is the student's journey.** Meet them where they are, provide options, and support the student in their decisions (if they are safe, of course).
- » **"Homelessness" comes in many forms.** Don't quantify the student's experience based on your ideas of what homelessness looks like. Regardless of the physical living situation, students experiencing homelessness may have disruptions, inconsistencies, losses, etc. that are very different than their peers who do not experience homelessness.
- » **Be present and listen to the student.** Listen more, talk less — validate and make sure the student feels seen, cared about, and valued. Seek understanding of trauma and adolescent/young adult development.
- » **Practice grace and accountability.** Don't act as if the student's situation is a pass for low standards. This is an opportunity to help the student learn how to effectively handle adversity, which is truly a life skill.



Connect the student with clothing and food resources. Be sure clothing is the right size, and that food items meet the student's needs. For example, if they do not have a refrigerator or cooking area, food must be non-perishable and ready-to-eat. If possible, provide space at school for the student to store personal items and bags for taking hygiene, food, and clothing items, as needed, in a discreet manner.

Best Practices for Ensuring Graduation

- ▶ Ensure the transcript is complete, accurate, and up to date.
- ▶ Utilize credit recovery options as needed to provide students the opportunity to recover credits in a given semester or school year (refer to Policy 2510 for more information on credit recovery).
- ▶ A student who transfers into a West Virginia school from another state or county public school with different graduation requirements may not be able to complete the requirements for graduation. In such cases, the student's credits shall be evaluated by the county superintendent or designee in the receiving county to determine if one or more county and/or state requirements can be substituted with an equivalent course. Any courses requiring a waiver must be reviewed and approved by the State Superintendent of Schools or designee (refer to Policy 2510).
- ▶ Establish regular meetings to assess and monitor graduation progress. Make sure the student has copies of documents (both physical and electronic) in case they transfer schools and/or counties.
- ▶ Maintain a relationship with your local homeless liaison and community partners to ensure that you can connect students with resources needed to support academic success, including tutoring services, school supplies, food, clothing, technology, mental health supports, etc.
- ▶ Provide fee waivers for ACT, SAT, and college applications.
- ▶ Provide graduation attire (cap/gown)
- ▶ Provide scholarship information/resources (all opportunities, but point out those specifically for youth experiencing homelessness).
- ▶ If student is an unaccompanied senior and filling out the FAFSA for post-secondary opportunities, make sure to provide the student with the appropriate documentation that verifies their homeless status. Also, provide guidance when the student fills out the FAFSA; or if you don't feel comfortable with this task, reach out to the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission to schedule financial aid nights and FAFSA workshops.
- ▶ If applicable, work closely with the county special education staff to assist with all areas related to special education. Help students and families understand their rights regarding their disability and attend IEP meetings to support the student as needed.
- ▶ School counselors can guide students through the NCAA Clearinghouse process by helping them understand eligibility requirements for college athletes and assist with the WV Promise Scholarship application by providing information on academic criteria and deadlines, thereby facilitating their pursuit of higher education and athletic opportunities.



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