



Tip Sheet for Colorado Higher Education Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) In Supporting Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Why your position as a SPOC at your college is so important.

Each year, more than a million young people in the United States experience homelessness; some of these young people, known as unaccompanied homeless youth, will face the challenges of homelessness while living on their own without the support of a caring adult. Unaccompanied homeless youth face the same struggles as other young people: trying to do well in school, “fit in”, and figure out what their future will look like. Without adult guidance and support, however, they will face these struggles while also working to provide for their own livelihood.

Many of these youth hope to attend college, but wonder how they will pay tuition without help from their parents, who will sign important paperwork on their behalf, how they will juggle long work hours and schoolwork, and where they will live during the school year or where they will stay when the dormitories close during holiday and summer breaks.

The **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act – Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act** is a federal law that provides additional support for this vulnerable population during their elementary, secondary and college education.

The Act defines an unaccompanied homeless youth as a youth whose living situation is not “fixed, regular, and adequate,” (homeless) and who is “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (unaccompanied). Additional information on the definition of homelessness and how to define unaccompanied homeless you can be found on the National Center for Homeless Education website at, http://nche.ed.gov/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf and in Chapter Five of the Application and Verification Guide, <https://ifap.ed.gov/fsahandbook/attachments/1617AVG.pdf>

Supporting these youth in obtaining a college education will enable them to break the cycle of poverty and move towards a brighter and more stable future. Institutions of higher education, in collaboration with public schools and community agencies, can play a critical role in supporting unaccompanied homeless youth in their post-secondary endeavors (from: *National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION Increasing Access to Higher Education for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Information for Colleges and Universities*).

What higher education SPOCs do.

The Single Point of Contact (SPOC) is designed to be a safe and supportive college administrator who is committed to helping unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) successfully navigate the college-going process. Single points of contact will implement a streamlined process to facilitate communication and quick referral among the following departments and services on their campus:

| | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Admissions | Financial Aid | Academic Advising |
| Veteran's Affairs | Remediation | Tutoring |
| Student Life | Housing | Counseling Center |
| Health Center | Talent Search | Upward Bound |
| Equal Opportunity Center | GEAR-UP | Learning Disabilities Services |
| Student Activities | Student Advocacy Groups | Life Skills |
| Financial Literacy | Mentoring Programs | Events and Recreation |



Higher Education Best Practices

- Be sensitive when talking to or referring to homeless students. The word ‘homeless’ may be offensive or embarrassing to some people. Consider substituting the terms for “homeless” with phrases such as: in transitional housing situation; living in a temporary situation; displaced.
- Unaccompanied homeless youth may need help obtaining housing, clothing, school supplies, meals, health care and mental health care. Provide a list of campus and community-based resources such as food and clothing banks and low-cost healthcare providers.
- Establish a food, clothing and school supplies bank on campus.
- Provide your name and contact number in case the youth needs assistance in the future.
- Place posters and brochures around campus with the definition of homeless and contact information for someone who can link homeless students with support services. A free poster, created jointly by NCHC and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) is available for downloading at: http://www.serve.org/nche/pr/he_poster.php
- Create awareness among faculty and staff about unaccompanied homeless youth and the challenges they face so they can help with identification and support.
- Plan housing for homeless students when dormitories close; ideas include leaving one residence hall open or establishing a list of “host homes” in the community.
- Establish a mentoring program or a peer support group for unaccompanied homeless youth.

FINANCIAL AID and the FAFSA

Applicants who are **between the ages of 21 and 24** and who are unaccompanied and homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless qualify for a homeless youth determination and will be considered **independent students** for the purpose of the FAFSA. This means that they do not need to include parental information or provide parent signatures. ([Dear College Letter GEN-15-16 page 3](#))

Setting the stage for determination of unaccompanied homeless youth status:

Acceptable documentation of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth determination, for the purpose of the FAFSA, can come from the following authorities:

1. high school district McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaison
2. the director (or designee) of an emergency shelter program funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
3. the director (or designee) of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program
4. college Financial Aid administrator ([GEN-15-16 Dear Colleague Letter, page 2](#))

Verification not required- You are not required to verify the answers to the homeless youth questions unless you have conflicting information. A documented phone call with, or a written statement from, one of the relevant authorities (mentioned above) is sufficient verification. ([AVG 2016-17, Chapter 5, page 126](#))

If the student does not have, and cannot get, documentation from any of the relevant authorities, the financial aid administrator must determine if he/she is an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless. The determination may be based on a documented interview with the student if there is no written documentation available. ([AVG 2016-17, Chapter 5, page 125](#)). Other sources/options that FAAs may consider using can be found on page 3 of the USDOE’s [Dear College Letter GEN-15-16](#).

- Create a process for determination that is sensitive to the unique needs of these youth.
 - Conduct the interview within the same day of their college/university visits if at all possible.
 - Do not interview the youth in front of others.



- Minimize using the word “homeless.” Instead, use words like “McKinney eligible” or “Instable, transitional or crises housing”
- If they do not have paperwork, work with them.
- Let them use items that may not be readily available to them, such as the phone or fax machine.
- When at all possible, use determination forms from other institutions, if they have made the determination in the same school year (i.e. other colleges; high school district homeless liaison; the director or designee of an emergency shelter program funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); the director or designee of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program).
- Contact the homeless education liaison at the school district, if this is appropriate. See “McKinney-Vento K-12 Statewide Liaison” list at: http://www.cde.state.co.us/DropoutPrevention/homeless_liaisons.htm

Definitions and Determinations:

Homeless: To be determined as homeless, the student must meet the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homeless. The Act defines “homeless youths” as “individuals who lack a *fixed, regular, and adequate* primary nighttime residence.” Lacking any one of these three conditions would make a youth eligible for homeless education programs. The law lists several situations as specific examples of homelessness. The list of examples included in the definition is not exclusive; rather, it is meant to address some of the more common situations of homelessness. These examples include:

- Sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason
- Living in motels, hotels, (inadequate) trailer parks, camping grounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters
- Abandoned in hospitals
- Living in a public or private place not designed for humans to live
- Living in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, etc.
- Living in the student dormitory if the student would otherwise be homeless.
- A student living in any of these situations and fleeing an abusive parent may be considered homeless even if the parent would provide support and a place to live.

See sample questions that you can ask students to help determine homeless status here:

http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/det_elig.pdf

Determining whether a particular youth fits the definition of homeless is a case-by-case analysis. The easiest way to make a determination of homelessness is to:

- (A) see if the student’s situation fits into one of the specific examples of homelessness listed in the law; and if not,
- (B) consider if the student is in another situation that would fit the definition of homelessness by not meeting the fixed, regular, and adequate standard.



Unaccompanied Youth: The McKinney-Vento Act defines unaccompanied youth as a youth “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian”. The student can be in legal custody of a parent or guardian, but **must be living apart from parents.**

- An unaccompanied youth may have periodic contact with his/her parents (or guardians) but they are not supported by them.
- There is no lower age limit for unaccompanied youth; the upper age limit (as with all McKinney-Vento eligible students) is your state’s upper age limit for public education (usually 21 years old).
- A youth can be eligible regardless of whether he/she was asked to leave the home or chose to leave; remember that sometimes there is “more than meets the eye” for youth’s home life situations.
- Here are sample questions you can ask to help determine if a youth is unaccompanied (not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian):
 - Do you live with your parents/guardians?
 - How often do you interact with your parents/guardians?
 - Do your parents/guardians financially support you in any way?
 - Do your parents/guardians help pay rent or other bills?
 - How long have you been on your own?
 - How are you supporting yourself?

A youth, for the purpose of an unaccompanied homeless youth determination, is defined as an individual who is 21 years old or younger or still enrolled in high school as of the date he signs the (FAFSA) application. **Students who don’t meet the definition of youth because they are older than 21 (and not yet 24) and who are unaccompanied and homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless qualify for a homeless youth determination and will be considered independent students for the purpose of the FAFSA.** ([Dear Colleague Letter GEN-15-16 page 3](#))

Having the determination conversation:

- Get the facts. What is the youth’s situation?
- Explain who you are to the student and why you are asking for the information:

“Hi, I am Mary. I am the Single Point of Contact for youth on their own who are in crisis housing situations. I need to ask you some questions to determine if you meet the criteria for ‘independent student’ status. Some of these questions may seem personal but I need to ask them to see if you qualify. I will not share your information with anyone else; unless I get first get your permission.”

- It is important to remember the student must be both homeless and unaccompanied for financial aid independent status purposes.
- Discuss with youth the process after successful determination and include a timeline for major steps. Is there anything they should be watching for? Any important points in the next part of the process that they should be prepping for?



RESOURCES

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth – this association website provides valuable information and handout for higher education administrators.

<http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/higher-ed>

The McKinney-Vento Act and Title & Part A, as Amended by ESSA of 2015 – The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was signed into law on 12/10/2015 and became effective 10/1/2016. Under the previous version of ESEA (the No Child Left Behind Act), the education of homeless children and youth was included in Title X, Part C. Under ESSA, homeless education is included in Title IX, Part A. <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/essa>

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Verification For the Purposes of Federal Financial Aid - this template provides local homeless education liaisons, HUD-funded shelter representatives, and RHYA-funded shelter representatives with a sample form for determining a student's status as an unaccompanied homeless youth for the purpose of applying for federal financial aid for higher education using the FAFSA.

Download the template: http://www.naehcy.org/dl/uy_fafsa_verif.doc

STATE AND NATIONAL PARTNERS

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) - For assistance with an issue related to the education of a child or youth experiencing homelessness
(800) 308-2145 or homeless@serve.org

Colorado Department of Education (CDE)

Mary Anne Hunter, Postsecondary Pathways Coordinator

Email: Hunter_Mary@cde.state.co.us

Phone: 303-866-6596

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)

<http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/higher-ed>

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP) www.nlchp.org Ph: (202)-638-2535