

Housing Agency and School District Collaborations to Serve Homeless and Highly Mobile Students



“Housing plays a central role in the lives of families; it is the largest single cost for most families, and its location determines a parent’s access to employment and a child’s access to education”¹. Lack of affordable housing is a principal cause of homelessness². A housing agency and school district that collaborate to offer affordable housing choices along with family services may reduce the frequency of family moves. This, in turn, allows children the opportunity to enjoy school stability—possibly for the first time in their lives. Increasingly, housing authorities and school districts are partnering to serve homeless and highly mobile children and families to accomplish these worthwhile goals. We examined a few of those projects in order to give housing agencies an idea of the results they could expect when they choose to participate in such a collaboration.

First, it is helpful to recognize the many challenges that children experiencing homelessness face. Unstable living situations increase the likelihood of experiencing physical and emotional health problems as well as learning difficulties. Frequent moves often leave children feeling like outsiders making it difficult for them to forge and maintain friendships. Their lives feel out of control, which frequently results in anxiety and depression. In addition, high mobility often impedes progress toward reaching their full educational potential, which can then trap them in a cycle of poverty.

Consider these facts about homeless children in the United States:

- In one year, 42% transferred schools at least once. Of these, 51% transferred twice or more³.
- 28% will attend three or more different schools in one year⁴.
- With each change in schools, it is estimated that a student is set back academically by an average of four to six months⁵.
- Many lack basic school supplies and a reasonable environment in which to do homework.
- Three quarters of older homeless youths drop out of school⁶.

Often, homeless children survive by discovering school to be an oasis in the midst of turmoil⁷. Education offers many critical life skills and is a strong predictor of the ability to overcome poverty and become independent. But being homeless impacts children and youth in a variety of ways that adversely affect their ability to enroll, attend, and succeed in school. Overcoming these barriers is one of the most promising means of breaking the cycle of homelessness and poverty.

Who is homeless?

(McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 – Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act – Sec 725)

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and*
- B. includes —*
 - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;*
 - ii. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...*
 - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and*
 - iv. migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).*

McKinney-Vento: Federal Homeless Education Legislation

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 USCS § 11301 et seq., directs states to ensure that children and youth in homeless situations (see definition on page 1) receive a free, appropriate public education and guarantees homeless children and youth the right to:

- *Enroll immediately in school, even if lacking paperwork normally required for enrollment*
- *Attend school in the school of origin⁸ (if this is requested by the parent and is feasible) or in the school in the attendance area where the family or youth is residing*
- *Receive transportation to and from the school of origin, if this is requested by the parent*
- *Receive services comparable to those received by housed schoolmates, including transportation and supplemental educational services*
- *Attend school along with children not experiencing homelessness; segregation based on a student's status as homeless is strictly prohibited.*

The McKinney-Vento Act also requires states to identify and eliminate barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school and mandates that each school district designate a local homeless education liaison. To serve homeless students, the liaison is directed to coordinate with community agencies to provide educational services; referrals to health care services, dental services, and mental health services; and other appropriate services.

The Cranston-Gonzales National Affordable Housing Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11432, reaffirmed the national commitment to provide decent, safe, and sanitary housing for all Americans by declaring, "State and local housing agencies are responsible for developing the comprehensive housing affordability strategy ...to minimize educational disruption for homeless children. The coordination should be designed to ensure that homeless children have access and reasonable proximity to available education and related support services and to raise the awareness of school personnel and service providers of the effects of short-term stays in a shelter and other challenges associated with homelessness."⁹

Collaboration Between Local Housing Agencies and School Districts

The need for collaboration between public housing authorities and school districts continues to be of national interest. In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Mayors recommended that school districts and public housing authorities work together to address the need for affordable housing in the United States. So, how can the collaborative work of housing agencies and school districts positively affect the lives of homeless children and youth? Several districts around the country have formed successful collaborations with housing agencies to support students covered under the McKinney-Vento Act.



Minneapolis (MN) It's All About the Kids Program

In Minneapolis, MN, a unique public/private collaboration called It's All About the Kids (Kids Collaborative) was created in 2001. It involves the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA), City of Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development Department (CPED), and Lutheran Social Service (LSS). Each partner plays a distinct role in the collaborative while keeping responsibilities within the bounds of their respective organization's mission in order to prevent any staff member or agency from experiencing an increased workload.

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MPS has played a role for a number of years in advocating for affordable housing within the city and the region. Elizabeth Hinz, the school district's local liaison, is the primary representative in this advocacy role. The Kids Collaborative is an extension of the district's advocacy in housing, demonstrating to the community the important link between meeting children's basic needs and their educational achievement. Ms. Hinz's counterpart, Jan Salisbury, steered the MPHA's role in the collaboration. According to her, once everyone realized what natural partners housing authorities and school districts are, they were amazed no one had thought of collaborating years before because "it makes so much sense and makes housing assistance so much more valuable."

A federal consent decree required that Minneapolis tenants using housing vouchers be dispersed throughout the city into "non-concentrated areas." Unfortunately, the areas that met this definition were exclusive and expensive with less than a 1% vacancy rate in the few existing rental units. Since people could not find available housing, vouchers were being returned to the housing agency unused. The partnership provided a way for clients to use the vouchers and for MPHA to comply with federal regulations.

The mission of the collaborative is to improve the educational success of children living in areas of concentrated poverty whose housing instability places them at high risk for poor school outcomes. It is based on the beliefs that:

- Stable housing contributes significantly to children's long-term educational success.
- Collaboration is key to the efficient integration of resources needed to achieve educational success for children and economic stability for their families.
- Access to supportive services is essential for families working to overcome significant challenges to housing and stability.

MPS staff members identify children whose families are living in unstable or inadequate housing in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. Families eligible to be served by the collaborative may be either highly mobile or staying in shelters. Using Section 8 subsidies from the MPHA, families are provided housing and assistance enabling them to access better-quality affordable housing in more stable neighborhoods within their children's elementary school attendance areas. CPED contributes funds to help with security deposits and gives grants to landlords to improve their properties in exchange for renting to these families. LSS provides support services, family service coordination, and landlord recruitment to help achieve housing stability as well as a liaison whom the landlords can contact if they have any problems with the tenants. This provides an opportunity to intervene early thereby preventing evictions.

Through this program 147 families, including 441 children and youth, have been successfully housed. Most are single-parent families with two-to-four children. Parents are from all racial and ethnic groups, but roughly two-thirds are African American. The average age of the parents is 35, and most children are elementary-school age. Participant families face significant barriers to housing stability including criminal history, multiple prior evictions, history of bankruptcy or poor credit, history of homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, and/or unemployment; but LSS counsels families on how to address these issues and present themselves positively to potential landlords.

Key outcomes of the program are that parents become more involved in their children's education because they live close to their schools, and children are able to play outside because they are in safe neighborhoods. Possibly, the most valuable result has been family stability—a priceless attribute in determining a child's educational future.



Victoria (TX) Independent School District and Housing Authority Collaboration

Due to relationships that developed while working together on the Victoria (TX) Homeless Coalition, leaders of the local housing authority offered the Victoria Independent School District (ISD) a 3,000 square-foot building to house KidzConnection, the district's McKinney-Vento program. According to local liaison, Gail Brocklebank, people go where they feel comfortable. Apparently she's right, as the building has become home not only to the district's homeless education project but also to local homeless coalition meetings, community meetings, an after-school homework center staffed with teachers and teachers' aides, and a clothes closet. It's where residents go when they need help dealing with issues such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, mental health interventions, and utility company meetings.

District-sponsored Family Nights, which were previously held at the school and attended by as few as two parents, are now held at KidzConnection and draw upwards of 150 people. Staff members also do a lot of pre- eviction work with families referred by the housing authority. There is an established group of assistance providers including churches, community groups, and foundations that help meet financial and other needs to keep families stable.

Debbie Gillespie, Director of the Victoria Housing Authority has nothing but good things to say about the results of collaborating with the homeless education staff. The authority's mission is to provide families safe housing and to improve their lives, which is where KidzConnection comes in. They don't just provide homework help, they also address issues like discipline and etiquette—things that the kids then take home and teach their parents. So not only are the lives of the students changed, their entire families are also affected.

Agency staff and parents are generally quite complimentary of each of these programs. Of course, any collaboration among systems that have not traditionally worked together will necessitate facing a variety of challenges. But, as KidzConnection has proved, the challenges can be overcome. Success is possible not only for the systems involved but for the children and families served.



Mesa County (CO) Next Step Housing Program

According to Cathy Haller, the local liaison for homeless education in the Mesa County (CO) School District (MCSD), 527 school children from 256 local families were identified as homeless during the 2004-2005 school year. (An additional eighty families have been identified this year.) Sixty-three percent of those families were living doubled up with one or more other families in overcrowded conditions. The school district has implemented programs to help stabilize these families and improve their children's ability to succeed in school; but family stability requires a stable home.

The Grand Junction (CO) Housing Authority (GJHA) currently manages the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which has around 1,200 households on its waiting lists. Low Income Housing Tax Credit properties primarily serve low- and moderate-income families whose incomes fall between 40% and 60% of the Area Median Family Income (AMFI). Homeless families in the greatest need generally have incomes below 30% of the AMFI, which put these units financially out of reach. In addition, a large percentage of

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the homeless families have enough income to support a home but not enough to cover the initial move-in costs. Many are living in hotels that allow them to pay weekly instead of monthly. But the trade-off for weekly payments is the exorbitant rates that are charged, which stamp out any hope of saving enough to cover move-in costs for more stable housing.

Recognizing the dilemma the GJHA, MCSD, Mesa County Department of Human Services (DHS), and Mesa County Workforce Center (MCWC) collaborated to create the Next Step Housing Program. They secured enough funding from the Colorado Division of Housing and in-kind services from various agencies to provide a safe, affordable living environment for two years for fifty formerly homeless families who are at or below 30% of the AMFI. Some of the focus areas include providing comprehensive case-management services and school-based assistance; improving children's attendance, academic performance, and graduation rates; and empowering participants to grow beyond the need for housing assistance. The first leases were written in April 2006.

The Voucher Program Supervisor of the Grand Junction Housing Authority, Lori Rosendahl, says she was amazed by how easy it was to create a true partnership among housing, educational, and social service agencies despite their differences in funding. Her biggest desire for the collaboration was to find ways to catch and redirect the most vulnerable kids before they become homeless adults. She believes that teaching these families and children the value of stability now will keep them from entering her program later.

State policy had to be changed to allow GJHA to use the broader McKinney-Vento definition of homeless (which includes those living doubled up with family or friends) rather than the more restrictive HUD definition. Using this definition uncovered many more homeless families than had previously been identified.

Partnering with a variety of agencies has offered families and children access to a broader array of services. For example, the local domestic violence shelter is now serving many families that were previously unaware of the assistance available to them. The MCWC provides a case manager who helps move families down the road toward permanent housing. Catholic Outreach, a transitional housing program, and a family shelter are also involved in the collaborative.

By viewing these situations from a completely different perspective—that of the children—the housing authority staff has learned that they sometimes must look past the parents and make decisions based on what's in the best interest of the children, the primary intent of the McKinney-Vento Act.

Endnotes

1. Swartz & Miller, 2002
2. National Coalition for the Homeless, 2005
3. Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003
4. National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999
5. Dr. Joy Rogers, 1991
6. Cauce, Paradise, Ginzler, Embry, Morgan, Lohr, et al., 2000
7. Slavin, 2001
8. The "school of origin" is defined as "the school that the child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled". See the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Sec 722 (g)(3)(G)
9. Cranston-Gonzalez National Affordable Housing Act, 1992

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Every state is required to have a coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, and every school district is required to have a liaison for homeless students. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the

McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your state coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at www.serve.org/nche.



For further information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE HelpLine at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.



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