

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ States Build Support for Students Who Are Homeless

By Megan Blanco

During the 2019–20 school year, public schools identified 1.3 million students who were experiencing homelessness—2.5 percent of all those enrolled.¹ With the added \$800 million that Congress provided in 2021 through the American Rescue Plan’s Homeless Children and Youth program (ARP-HCY), many states have started or expanded initiatives to support these students.

Approximately \$200 million (ARP-Homeless 1) was allocated in April 2021. States received the remaining \$600 million in July (ARP-Homeless 2) and submitted plans for how the funds were to be used. By February 2022, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) had approved all state plans.² States must expend the funds by September 30, 2024.

States can retain up to 25 percent of their ARP-HCY funds for state-level activities and must distribute at least 75 percent of the total funds to local education agencies (LEAs). Many activities qualify: identifying homeless students, assessing needs, and providing wraparound services and assistance to help students attend and fully participate in school through partnerships with community-based organizations. Wyoming surveyed districts to garner input on how much of the state set-aside the state education agency (SEA) should retain and glean insights on challenges districts are facing that the SEA should use their set-aside to address.

Federal law requires that students experiencing homelessness have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including public preschool, as their housed peers. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, most recently reauthorized

by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, authorizes the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program that ED administers. Federal law requires states to have an EHCY program coordinator and districts to have a homeless education liaison.³ States receive funding through a formula grant; they then run competitions to identify districts that will receive EHCY subgrants.

Some states reported difficulty in identifying this student population due to a remote learning environment, lack of proper attendance records, and uncertainty about where the students were enrolled. “Many unaccompanied homeless youths depend on libraries or McDonald’s or other places where they can wash, rest, access the internet, and be safe when not in school,” Kentucky’s state plan noted. “With social distancing and many sheltering options unavailable, homeless youth have been extremely transient and difficult to find.”

STATE SPENDING PLANS

Taking heed of an April 2021 letter from ED urging quick dissemination of ARP-Homeless 1 funds, most states distributed funds to existing EHCY grantees who already had infrastructure and community relationships. For ARP-Homeless 2, however, many states engaged in robust outreach, with greater attention to equitable distribution. An emergency rule required SEAs to award ARP-Homeless 2 grants according to a formula that considered LEAs’ homeless student enrollment counts from 2018–19 or 2019–20 (whichever was higher) and their share of Title I in fiscal 2020. These funds will allow SEAs to support more districts. For example, Iowa reported that it anticipates 327 LEAs receiving ARP-Homeless 2 funds, compared with the 15 receiving EHCY funds.

Coordination. Washington, DC, is using its allocation to partially fund a special popula-

tions and programs recovery manager, who will oversee the ARP-HCY grant program. Georgia prioritized the appointment of local system navigators to establish community partnerships that are critical for delivering services that LEAs cannot. Florida is hiring regional navigators to address underidentification and ensure that homeless students receive services. After analysis revealed low identification rates among its Indian education schools, Maine coordinated with the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Indian Education to get program improvement and resource application information to those schools. North Carolina is hiring an early education systems navigator and a higher education systems navigator to meet the needs of children at key transition points. To ensure these positions are sustainable, the state will earmark funding in its ECHY program allocation moving forward.

Family and community outreach.

To ensure more families are aware of available services, Connecticut launched a campaign to leverage the reach of existing partners, agencies, and programs such as home visitation and summer meals. New Mexico and Ohio are investing in campaigns to decrease the stigma associated with seeking and receiving services. Florida is developing a statewide database to help families connect with services. Hawaii uses converted school buses and vans to connect parents with local school officials. While parents complete their student’s enrollment paperwork, children receive enrichment programming from partner agencies and volunteers. Louisiana is operating a mobile app to connect families with services. Massachusetts already required its EHCY grantees to maintain homeless education service coordination committees, which positioned grantees to identify needs and begin services quickly when ARP-Homeless 1 funding was awarded.

Staff training. Many states outlined plans to increase professional development of district staff, support peer connection (e.g., communities of practice, conferences), address the skills and knowledge gaps contributing to underidentification of students

experiencing homelessness, and create systems of coordination at the district and state levels for improved service delivery. Georgia's plan referenced the inexperience of its EHCY liaison workforce, with a third having a year or less in their roles.

Delaware's training seeks to improve how school staff talk about inadequate housing in culturally sensitive ways that encourage families and youth to share their stories. Idaho is developing mentoring partnerships between new ARP-Homeless 1 grantees and existing EHCY staff. New York is creating a technical assistance center, and California is creating three regional technical assistance centers to coordinate fund distribution, state-level data collection, and professional development. North Carolina will explore creating and covering costs for certification or add-on licensure for all district McKinney-Vento liaisons.

Service provision. DC transported unhoused students to summer enrichment programs in 2021, with slots reserved for students residing in emergency shelters. Georgia is coordinating with its Afterschool Network to implement summer programming for homeless students. Iowa and Minnesota are creating or expanding the Full-Service Community Schools Model. Louisiana is piloting a program with Harvard Innovation Lab to provide 24/7 access to mental health counseling and academic tutoring for approximately 10,000 homeless students. North Carolina is filling backpacks with items such as connectivity devices, food packets, and hygiene items.

Systems improvement. Florida will conduct a statewide evaluation on the effectiveness of services provided through ARP-HCY, identify trends in student achievement, and recommend program improvements. Kentucky is enhancing its statewide student information system so districts can better coordinate and continue services when students move between districts. Maryland, Nevada, Oregon, and South Carolina are conducting statewide comprehensive needs assessments. In South Carolina, a McKinney-Vento Advisory Council will review the needs assessment to guide program growth and improvement.

New Jersey has long aimed for continuous

improvement of its EHCY program. EHCY subgrantees in New Jersey must submit a regional needs assessment every three years. The state McKinney-Vento coordinator convenes a workgroup annually to review and analyze state data. New Jersey is developing a five-year strategic plan and a case management system so LEAs can better identify and track homeless students. With natural disasters disrupting learning and displacing students yearly, North Carolina is working with districts on a disaster plan manual that will help homeless liaisons identify and track homeless students, coordinate communications and transportation, and use data. Utah directs its ARP-HCY grant applicants to cite use of evidence-based curriculum or practices meeting ESSA criteria. It also requires applicants to specify measurable outcomes to reduce learning loss and better align the school day with afterschool programs.

QUESTIONS STATE BOARDS CAN ASK

State boards of education can make homeless students a priority at the board table and seek out their SEA's EHCY staff as advisors and collaborators. Staff can share data during a state board meeting, and members can ask questions to spur meaningful dialogue:

- How many homeless students are identified in the state, and what barriers exist in identifying and serving them?
- How is the SEA monitoring the impact of its federally funded interventions? What are the measures of success? What is the plan for evaluation?
- Are state investments likely to drive long-term improvements for homeless students? If not, how can we be more proactive?
- How accessible is our state's EHCY program coordinator to district liaisons, and do they need more staff to meet the demand of requests? Has the state considered a regional liaison model?
- What efforts were made to provide wraparound services to homeless students when the pandemic began? Reflecting on these actions, what lessons were learned?
- How does homeless student opportunity, achievement, and completion data compare

with those of housed students (e.g., enrollment in advancement coursework, participation in summer and afterschool programming, graduation rates, FAFSA completion)?

- What targeted outreach has informed and equipped homeless parents and families with the knowledge and supports needed to aid their child's learning?
- How does the SEA embed equity in the EHCY grant programs? For those LEAs who are not awarded funding, how does the SEA build their capacity for the next round of grant competitions, and how will the state support them in meeting the needs of their homeless students without additional funding?
- Does the SEA have a memorandum of understanding, data sharing agreement, or representation on an interagency coordinating council focused on supporting homeless students?

The influx of one-time federal funds to support young people experiencing homelessness puts the responsibility for wise uses to address the short- and long-term needs of this vulnerable population squarely in the hands of state leaders. While ARP focuses on ameliorating the effects of the pandemic, states can accrue a greater value if they emerge with stronger, better approaches to addressing the needs of these students over the long run.

Megan Blanco is NASBE's director of safe and healthy schools.

NOTES

1 National Center for Homeless Education, "Student Homelessness in America: School Years 2017–18 to 2019–20," (Greensboro, NC: University of North Carolina, 2021), <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Student-Homelessness-in-America-2021.pdf>. Although federal law makes reference to "homeless children and youth," many government agencies and advocates increasingly prefer "children and youth experiencing homelessness" to avoid potentially stigmatizing language.

2 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, "ARP-HCY State Plans," web page, last modified February 7, 2022, <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/american-rescue-plan/american-rescue-plan-elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-homeless-children-youth-arp-hcy/arp-hcy-state-plans/>.

3 A NASBE report noted improvements under ESSA that states were required to implement by the start of the 2016–17; the requirements are still in place. Ace Parsi and Barbara Duffield, "ESSA and Homeless Youth," *Policy Update* 23, no. 18 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, August 2016).