House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies

Written Testimony for the Record

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SchoolHouse Connection is a national organization promoting success for children and youth experiencing homelessness, birth through higher education. This testimony supports two requests: 1) $85 million for the McKinney-Vento Act Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education; and 2) $165 million for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) programs, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

**Student homelessness is at record levels.** Public schools reported 1.2 million homeless children and youth, preK-12, in the 2014-2015 school year. This is a 3.5% increase over three years, and a 34% increase since the recession ended in the summer of 2009. Thirty-five states reported an increase in their homeless student populations between 2012 and 2014; twenty-one states experienced growth of 10% or more. Homelessness among unaccompanied homeless youth (youth experiencing homelessness on their own, apart from their families) saw the most marked increase, increasing by 21% over three years, to reach 95,032 students.
Federal EHCY appropriations have not kept up with the growth in student homelessness or with the increased school responsibilities for homelessness under ESSA, described below.

Federal per-pupil spending on students experiencing homelessness has declined by $17.78 since the end of the recession in 2009, and by $6.07 just between fiscal years 2012 and 2015. Overall federal funding to support students experiencing homelessness remained at roughly the same level between fiscal years 2012 and 2015, despite significant increases in student homelessness over that time.

**Homelessness creates unique barriers to enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school.** In a life filled with trauma, loss, and deprivation, school can be a place of safety, structure, and the opportunity to escape poverty as adults. Yet homeless children and youth face unique barriers to education, including: being unable to meet enrollment requirements (including proof of residency and school and health records); high mobility resulting in lack of continuity and absenteeism; lack of transportation; lack of supplies and clothing; poor health, fatigue, and hunger; mental health issues; and, for unaccompanied homeless youth, lack of a parent or guardian. These barriers are compounded by lack of awareness of homelessness by schools, as well as lack of training and time for school personnel to provide identification, outreach, and services.

When the barriers created by homelessness are not addressed, homeless children and youth often are unable to attend, or even enroll in, school, which prevents them from obtaining the education that is their best hope for a healthy, productive life. A recent study of youth who had been homeless in middle or high school found that 42% dropped out of school at least once; 60% said it was hard to stay in school while they were homeless. Half said they had to change schools during their homelessness, and many did so multiple times. 62% of them said the
The process was difficult to navigate.

The impact of homelessness on education is profound: homelessness is associated with an **87% increased likelihood of dropping out of school**. States that disaggregate graduation and dropout rates of homeless youth have found **higher drop-out rates** and lower graduation rates compared to housed, poor youth.

Recently reauthorized and strengthened by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth Act program (EHCY) provides access, stability, and support for success. The EHCY program directs state and local educational agencies to remove barriers to the identification, enrollment, attendance and success of homeless children and youth. ESSA’s amendments to the EHCY program provide important protections for homeless students, including the right to stay in the same school, if it is in the student’s best interest, and receive transportation; immediate enrollment, even if the student lacks required documentation or has missed application or enrollment deadlines; full or partial credit for coursework completed at a previous school; and assistance in obtaining verification necessary for completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). ESSA also extends school stability rights to preschool children.

ESSA also requires that the local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaison (which every LEA must designate) be able to carry out ten specific duties; participate in professional development; and collaborate with community agencies. The LEA liaison position is critical because children and youth experiencing homelessness often have no support system outside of school. Indeed, most cannot access even basic services such as emergency shelter: in the 2014-2015 school year, **only 14% of identified homeless students were staying in shelters**. For
unaccompanied homeless youth, the lack of services is even more severe. The liaison may be the only adult looking out for their well-being and advocating for their basic needs and educational support.

**In ESSA, Congress recognized the need to increase funding for the EHCY program by increasing the authorized funding level from $70 million to $85 million – a 20% increase, and the largest increase, percentage-wise, for any program reauthorized by ESSA.** The growth in student homelessness, coupled with schools’ increased responsibilities in this area, led Congress to raise the authorized funding level for the EHCY program significantly. At the local level, EHCY subgrant funds are used for outreach and identification, enrollment assistance, transportation, school records transfer, immunization referrals, tutoring, counseling, school supplies, professional development for educators and community organizations, and referrals for community services. Although the grants to LEAs are small, they provide important supplemental and targeted resources that are used to leverage additional public and private resources. For example, LEA liaisons who are afforded more time to focus on homelessness because their positions are supported by the EHCY grant often are able to obtain donations, grants, and in-kind support from faith-based organizations, local foundations, and other community sources. Increasingly, EHCY-supported liaisons are leading efforts in their communities to partner with housing agencies and create housing programs, to stabilize the lives of children and youth experiencing homelessness. These inter-agency activities and public-private initiatives, which are facilitated by EHCY grants, lead to higher graduation rates for students experiencing homelessness, and therefore assist schools in meeting their goals.

At the state level, state educational agencies (SEAs) use EHCY funds to support LEAs through professional development, technical assistance, data collection, and collaboration with other
agencies. The state-level support for all LEAs is especially important in light of the fact that fewer than one in four LEAs nationwide receive EHCY subgrants, due to the low funding level.

In sum, no other education program does what the EHCY program does. The EHCY program is singular in its specific focus on school access and stability for the poorest of our students--children and youth without homes. Without its protections and services, children and youth experiencing homelessness would be unable to enroll and participate in any educational program. They would be unable to take part in opportunities provided to all other students or be connected to essential community services. In bolstering EHCY’s protections and authorized funding level through ESSA, Congress expressed strong bi-partisan backing to support this federal program, which provides equity and access to some of the nation’s most vulnerable children and youth.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program is another life-saving program that merits increased funding. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, runaway/homeless status and unstable housing are among the top five risk factors for human trafficking. A recent study found that 41% of runaway youth are preyed upon by sex traffickers. Resources directed to child and youth homelessness programs are critical for preventing trafficking. Currently, the needs of homeless youth overwhelm the capacity of existing shelter and transitional housing facilities. As a result, thousands of youth are turned away every year. Through the excellent work of local street outreach, shelter, and transitional living programs, RHYA helps homeless youth with safety, employment, personal savings, and family preservation. An increase in RHYA funding would result directly in more youth being safe and moving out of homelessness.