



School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

Students Experiencing Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MVA), the federal law originally passed in 1987, ensures certain rights to students who are experiencing homelessness, including immediate enrollment, enrollment without documentation, free lunch, and rights to remain in their school of origin. The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) believes that the supports, requirements, and best practices within ESSA are crucial to improving educational outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. SSWAA believes that more must be done to ensure compliance and hold states, districts, and schools accountable for implementing the requirements under MVA and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Additionally, there should be an increase in funding so that the rights of students experiencing homelessness can be adequately implemented.

According to the National Center for Homeless Education ([NCHE], 2016), public schools identified 1,263,323 students that were experiencing homelessness during the academic year of 2014-2015, which is nearly double the number in 2008. Duffield and Bridgeland (2017) reported that over 1.3 million students were experiencing homelessness in the 2015-2016 academic school year. These numbers are conservative since they do not take into account youth who are not attending school yet, youth who have dropped out of school, and youth and families who have not self-identified due to the social stigma surrounding homelessness (Belcher & DeForge, 2012; Johnstone, Jetten, Dingle, Parsell, & Walter, 2015). It takes time and relationship building to occur before many people feel safe telling school staff about their housing situation and asking for housing assistance.

Housing status intersects with class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability (Aviles de Bradley, 2015). Youth of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are disproportionately impacted by housing instability (Durso & Gates, 2012; Hallet & Skrla, 2017). Although youth live in various housing situations and have individual stories, the shared experience is one that lacks stability, predictability, and safety. Youth who are experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of abuse, using substances, contracting HIV, and having mental or physical health challenges such as depression, anxiety, asthma, and malnutrition (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Canfield, 2015). Physical and emotional health impacts a student's ability to attend and learn in school. Students who experience homelessness often have attendance challenges, which impact their learning. Research shows that students experiencing homelessness are more frequently absent and achieve lower scores on standardized tests than their low-income but housed peers (Stone & Uretsky, 2016). Historically these students have experienced and continue to experience challenges to enrollment, attendance, and success at school (Buckner, 2012; Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017; Stone & Uretsky, 2016). It is important to reduce barriers that students experiencing homelessness face in enrolling and attending school in order to prevent negative educational outcomes.

As of July 1, 2017, states, school districts, and schools must ensure that ESSA is implemented fully. ESSA strengthened the protections under MVA, by including Prekindergarten students, allowing students to earn partial credit towards graduation, allowing "feeder schools" as schools of origin and requiring local education agencies (LEA) to report graduation rates of students who qualify under MVA. The SSWAA encourages all school social workers to understand the provisions within ESSA that are designed to support the enrollment, attendance, and success of students experiencing homelessness so that they can advocate for students at a school and district level. Students who lack a "fixed, regular,

and adequate nighttime residence” are eligible for services and rights under MVA (42 U.S.C. §11434(A)(2)). This includes but is not limited to students and families who are living in shelters, hotels/motels, single room occupancies (SROs), or staying in places not meant for human habitation such as cars, abandoned buildings, or outdoor spaces. This also includes students and families who reside in apartments or homes with other families for economic reasons and do not have adequate space or utilities. This is often referred to as “doubling up,” which can be a “precursor to other forms of homelessness” (Hallet & Skrla, 2017, p. 33). Any student that meets the eligibility under MVA is entitled to rights and additional services in order to maintain school stability and attendance.

MVA requires each district to identify a homeless liaison who will receive professional development on the law, their responsibilities, and related topics. The liaison is also expected to provide professional development to staff throughout their district to identify students that are experiencing homelessness, reduce their barriers to education, and support their success. In light of their training in working with systems, school social workers are ideal in the role. Policies at the state, district, and school level must be reviewed to ensure that students are able to enroll, attend, and succeed. In order to reduce barriers to enrollment, MVA provides students experiencing homelessness the ability to immediately enroll without required documents such as immunization records and transcripts. Unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness and not residing with a caregiver or legal guardian can enroll themselves in school. In order to reduce barriers to attendance, MVA requires school districts to provide transportation for students and students have the right to remain in their school of origin regardless of where they move due to homelessness while they are homeless or until the end of the academic year. In order to promote school success, students are entitled to all academic and extracurricular programs and activities. The barriers of transportation and fees must be removed for students experiencing homelessness so they can access all programs that other students access. ESSA has added additional supports and rights to MVA. Students who transfer schools due to homelessness are entitled to the full and partial credits for work that they complete at each school. ESSA also requires districts and states to identify youth experiencing homelessness early and ensure they have access to and attend preschool.

Full implementation of McKinney-Vento throughout the country continues to face barriers such as a lack of adequate funding, lack of education and accountability of the law, and lack of communication within school districts and between districts and local service agencies (Wilkins, Mullins, Mahan, & Canfield, 2016). These barriers prevent full implementation and negatively impact the lives of students experiencing homelessness. The School Social Work Association of America supports ongoing efforts to protect and ensure these rights for all students that attend public schools (including charter schools), as well as any school that receives federal dollars.

Lack of awareness of laws protecting and providing rights to youth in transition is another barrier to youth experiencing homelessness accessing their education (National Network for Youth, n.d.). It is necessary to provide training and support to all staff (especially school secretaries) to better support students in transition and all students who have experienced trauma. School social workers, whether or not they are designated as McKinney Vento liaisons, should work with members of the school district to educate staff on how to identify students experiencing homelessness, their rights under MVA and ESSA, and resources that are available for the students to meet their physical, academic, and social emotional needs. School social workers should also advocate within their districts if all components of MVA are not being implemented with fidelity regardless of the financial or time constraints that the district and its employees encounter.

Finally, school social workers should identify local agencies that provide housing, food, clothing, physical, mental, and reproductive health and other services to youth and families that are experiencing homelessness. This is important for the coordination of supports for students and their families. Building relationships with partners at local agencies helps school social workers support the “warm hand off” of youth and families to shelters and specialized services. ESSA strengthens MVA and school social workers

should work with colleagues in and out of the school district to ensure full implementation in order to increase educational opportunities and success for students experiencing homelessness.

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