



The New FAFSA is Out on October 1: Three Things You Can Do to Help Homeless and Foster Youth

1. Let Youth Know About the FAFSA.

Youth under age 24 who are experiencing homelessness or foster care may assume that they cannot pursue higher education because of their financial status and lack of parental support. They are unlikely to know they have a special status on the FAFSA that allows them to apply for aid on their own. Let them know they can apply for financial aid without a parent's signature or financial information, and the importance of completing the FAFSA as early as possible.

- **K-12 Liaisons:** Under the McKinney-Vento Act, school district homeless liaisons are required to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth are informed of their status as independent students for the FAFSA and receive assistance to verify their homelessness. Liaisons should work with school counselors to inform all unaccompanied homeless youth that they can apply for financial aid as an independent student.
- **Child Welfare Case Managers:** Youth who were in foster care at any time after age 13 are considered independent students on the FAFSA. Case managers and others working with foster youth or former foster youth should let them know that they can apply for financial aid as an independent student.
- **Service Providers:** Organizations providing services to young people experiencing homelessness should let youth know that they can apply for financial aid and incorporate [education advocacy into their programming](#).
- **Financial Aid Administrators and Higher Education Liaisons:** Financial aid administrators (FAAs) and higher education liaisons should remind students who previously applied as independent students under the homelessness or foster care provisions to fill out the new FAFSA as soon as possible. Utilize all forms of communication, including email, text, phone calls, flyers, videos, tabling, and peer outreach.

Resource

The National Center on Homeless Education (NCHE) has produced [posters](#) in English and Spanish that can be placed in schools, shelters, and community locations inform unaccompanied homeless youth about the FAFSA.

2. Help Youth Complete the FAFSA.

Completing the FAFSA is challenging for many students due to its complexity and length. It may be especially difficult for youth who are in crisis and/or may not have supportive adults in their lives.

- **K-12 Homeless Liaisons, Service Providers, Child Welfare Agencies and Advocates:** Local universities and college access organizations often host FAFSA completion events where students can receive one-on-one assistance to fill out the FAFSA. Find out if there are local FAFSA completion events near your community through [NCAN's "Form Your Future"](#) (scroll to the bottom of the page and enter your state. If there are events in or near your community, let homeless and foster youth know and help them to attend. If there are no local events already planned, create one using [this toolkit](#) from NCAN.
- **Financial Aid Administrators:** Financial aid administrators can host open office hours for students to ask questions about completing the FAFSA. Times throughout the week should vary because of work and class schedules. Providing snacks for students may help them feel more comfortable and provide a more relaxing environment. Making Case Managers or Counselors available can reduce stress and provide additional support to students who may find it difficult to disclose sensitive information about their families and/or living situation.

3. Remove Documentation Barriers Related to the FAFSA.

Under the Higher Education Act, school district homeless liaisons, directors (or their designees) of Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) shelters, and financial aid administrators are authorized to verify an unaccompanied homeless youth's independent status. Nonetheless, unaccompanied homeless youth and foster youth may face barriers related to documentation of their homeless or foster status. These barriers can be particularly problematic for youth after their first year of college, when they may no longer be in contact with a school liaison, caseworker, or service provider. According to [federal guidance](#), if a student cannot obtain verification from authorized parties, a financial aid administrator **must** make this determination for the student based on legal definitions of unaccompanied and homeless.

- K-12 Liaisons, HUD and RHYA-funded service providers, case managers:
 - Use a sample form letter to determine the independent student status of unaccompanied homeless youth. We've updated [our sample letter](#) for the 2019-2020 FAFSA (downloadable as a Microsoft Word document). This letter may be edited as appropriate for your school district, institution of higher education, shelter, transitional living program, or street outreach program.
 - Maintain copies of determination letters in case students lose them due to frequent moves.
 - Inform unaccompanied homeless youth that liaisons and service providers can continue to make determinations of their status in subsequent years if they have enough information about their living situation; otherwise, youth will need to obtain a determination from the financial aid administrator at their school.
- Financial Aid Administrators:
 - Per [federal guidance](#), accept determination letters from K-12 liaisons, RHYA and HUD service providers, child welfare agencies and case manager, and others who are knowledgeable about a youth's situation.
 - If a youth does not have documentation of his or her homeless status, or if it is challenging for a youth to obtain documentation, conduct an interview using [this tool from NCHC](#). Per federal guidance, the determination process must focus on whether a youth is unaccompanied and homeless, or at risk of being homelessness, rather than the reasons for the applicant's homelessness.
 - Ease the financial aid process in subsequent years for unaccompanied homeless youth by continuing their independent student status, except if you have specific information that would indicate they are no longer unaccompanied and homeless or at risk of homelessness.