

HELPING HOMELESS YOUTH SUCCEED IN COLLEGE: STRATEGIES FOR HOUSING ON AND OFF CAMPUS

[Updated October 2019]

Youth homelessness is a widespread problem, including on college campuses. A national survey from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that 3.5 million (1 in 10) young adults between the ages of 18-25 experienced homelessness over a twelve-month period. According to follow-up interviews, 29% of the young adults who experienced homelessness were enrolled in college or another educational program at the time that they experienced homelessness. In addition, [Hope Center on College, Community, and Justice](#) found that 14% of students at four-year institutions and 18% of students at two-year institutions were homeless.

Obtaining financial aid is an important step in accessing higher education, and students experiencing homeless face significant barriers at this critical juncture. Not only do they lack consistent access to a safe place to rest, cook, and study, but they also more commonly experience [higher rates of depression and anxiety](#) that can impede their ability to engage in the often stressful financial aid application process. Higher education offers a lasting solution to poverty and can help youth avoid future episodes of homelessness.

Stable housing is a critical support for homeless youth to be successful in their pursuit of higher education, but housing options on college campuses vary between institutions. Some schools may have live-in requirements, while other schools, typically community colleges, provide no housing at all. Federal housing programs provide minimal support due to restrictions for college students and shortages in subsidized housing. Student housing can offer some reprieve; however, it is not necessarily less expensive than off-campus options. Even when student housing is cheaper than off-campus housing, the supply of student housing often does not meet demand.

Colleges around the country have been addressing these housing needs through their Residential Life and Housing offices and by partnering with community agencies. This tip sheet provides a snapshot of current strategies and considerations for practice and policy.

Housing During Academic Breaks

Many schools close for weeks at a time during academic breaks, which commonly occur at fall break, winter, spring break, and summer. During these breaks, students for whom returning “home” is not an option lose access to residence halls, academic buildings, dining halls, and more. The stress of seeking a place to stay and the dangers of homelessness during breaks are serious impediments to academic success. Strategies to provide housing during academic breaks include:

- Plan ahead for particularly vulnerable students. Students whose families are homeless, are homeless and on their own, or are from foster care, are particularly vulnerable to these housing problems. Schools can be proactive and identify these students by partnering with Admissions, Financial Aid, EOP, EOPS, Disabled Youth Services, Foster Youth Programs, and programs for undocumented or migrant family students to work with students in advance to develop a plan for housing during these break



closures. For example, the California State University and California Community College systems include a question in their application where students can self-identify that they are homeless. From this information, schools can provide outreach to students in advance, connect them to resources, and also find programs for which they may be eligible.

- Keep residence halls open during breaks. [Rowan University](#) adopted this strategy and includes the weekly usage fee in their room and board cost. While other campuses may charge a fee for individual students who want to stay during breaks, this fee might be paid by a department or office if a student is employed and needs to be on campus during this time.
- Partner with hotels and consider buying out a few rooms for students. [Georgetown University](#) has a hotel on campus and provides housing for students in need over winter break.
- Utilize the campus community and request that local faculty, staff, and alumni host students. [Sacramento State's Host a Hornet](#) matches interested alumni with students for dinner a few times a month. Neighborhood churches have also opened their homes to students who are homeless or hungry.
- Because most dining halls close during breaks, ensure students have food over breaks by donating food, providing food in common area kitchens, or coordinating faculty, staff, and alumni to provide meals. Another example is to use meal sharing like at [CSU, Long Beach's Feed A Need program](#).
- During the summer, help homeless students maintain their housing by providing on-campus jobs that pay for their summer housing. A few institutions allow students to stay in their rooms all year if they are part of a specific program like the [Guardian Scholars Program](#) at San Diego State University.

Emergency Housing

Emergencies can cause homelessness and prevent students from staying in school. Emergencies might include facilities problems, family problems, medical issues, conduct concerns, and roommate conflicts.

- Establish an emergency housing program. College's Residential Living and Housing can keep a few rooms and spaces available as temporary housing for individuals facing emergency housing problems, as well as students experiencing homelessness. Sacramento State has a robust [emergency housing program](#) that provides short-term housing assistance to students for up to 30 days in the residence halls. This time period allows students and the crisis manager to plan and arrange for long-term housing. Students may also receive a meal plan that provides two meals a day.
- Offer emergency aid to provide grants or loans that can help students pay utility bills, rent, or a motel room as temporary shelter during breaks. For more information about emergency aid, see [here](#).

Community Partnerships

Partnerships with community agencies are an important way to build housing options for homeless students.

- Seek out community nonprofits and shelters that have expertise in serving youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. For example, [Jovenes College Success Initiative](#) provides a rental subsidy and case management to youth who are homeless and attend local community colleges.
- Partner with volunteers in the community who open their homes to students. Depaul University's partnership with the [Dax Program](#) matches volunteers for a host-home option where students can stay for a 12 week period. Since the host-home program began, they have expanded to provide housing to current Depaul students by paying a small fee.



- Create College Housing Plans to successfully place students in housing environments that support higher education. Read how [Dorm Room Dreamz](#) did this to address college homelessness in Louisiana.
- Consider cooperative living like at the [Southern Scholarship Foundation](#) in Florida, where students with similar backgrounds live together to cook, clean, and manage a household budget while housing is provided for free.

Other Strategies

- Create a multi-disciplinary homeless task force on campus to help facilitate referrals between staff on campus and streamline service coordination. Task forces can include a wide variety of staff who assist students experiencing homelessness (e.g. Financial Aid, EOPS, Health Services, Admissions, Social Work, Academic Counseling, Disabled Student Services). The [Economic Crisis Response Team](#) at San Diego State University offers short and long-term aid quickly and without stigmatization.
- Create and disseminate a list of local resources, including campus, nonprofit, and government resources like at [Ventura Community College](#). Include this list in marketing materials for incoming and current students experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and/or financial challenges.

Current and Pending Laws & Policies

Some states have laws that provide priority housing to youth experiencing homelessness and those who have been in foster care. In addition to priority housing, in some states, higher education homeless liaisons work with students to provide housing over break periods. We describe some of these laws below.

- [California AB 801](#) - Each postsecondary educational institution must designate a staff member to serve as the homeless and foster student liaison, responsible for informing students about financial aid and other assistance available to them, such as housing.
- [California SB 85](#) - This law aims to reduce homelessness and hunger across all three California public higher education systems. Signed into law in June 2017, the bill allocated \$7.5 million in support of Hunger-Free College Campuses. Each system was awarded \$2.5 million to expand the fight against student hunger, raise awareness of services currently offered, and develop practices and procedures to provide further assistance to students in need.
- [California AB 1228](#) - Requires state university campuses and asks community colleges and University of California campuses to give former foster youth and current/former homeless youth priority access to student housing, especially student housing that is available year-round (at no additional cost). The law also requests that each campus create a housing plan for these student groups to ensure they can access housing all year, even during academic breaks.
- [California AB 74](#) - In the 2019-20 State Budget, \$19 million was allocated annually to California's three public post-secondary institutions for support Rapid Rehousing programs to assist homeless college students. Campuses must use this funding to establish partnerships with organizations that have expertise in helping people experiencing homelessness and provide wrap-around services and rental subsidies for students.
- [Louisiana HB 906](#) - Each public postsecondary education institution in the state must designate a homeless and foster student liaison within its financial aid office. The liaisons are responsible for applying federal financial aid rules related to youth experiencing homelessness (or who have experienced homelessness at any time over the six years prior to enrollment) and youth who were in foster care for at least six months between ages 16 and 18.



- Nevada [AB 461](#) (2019) - This legislation creates a Liaison for Post-Secondary Education for Homeless Pupils in the Nevada System of Higher Education. The Liaison will establish a plan for housing students experiencing homelessness when campus housing is not available.
- Tennessee [HB 1000](#) / SB 763 - Each post-secondary institution in the state that offers housing resources must develop a plan to provide students experiencing homelessness access to housing resources during and between academic terms. The plan must include granting students experiencing homelessness first priority in housing placement and placing those students in housing that remains open the most days of the year.
- Higher Education Access and Success for Foster and Homeless Youth Act (HEASHFY) (S.789/H.R.1724) - This bipartisan federal bill requires institutions of higher education to develop a housing plan for homeless and foster students to access campus housing resources during and between academic term. Please urge your members of Congress to sign on as co-sponsors of HEASHFY by taking action [here](#).

To see other tip sheets on higher education from SchoolHouse Connection, click [here](#).