For many high school students, the COVID-19 outbreak has created uncertainty about the prospects of pursuing higher education. According to a recent poll by the Art & Science Group, about 1 of every 6 four-year-college-bound students appears to be at the point of giving up on the idea of attending a college or university in the fall. In another recent survey, 69% of high school seniors surveyed foresee COVID-19 impacting their higher education financial situation and, therefore, their ability to pursue college.

For high school students experiencing homelessness, the impact of school closures is particularly devastating; it represents the loss of structure, safety, stability, and a place where basic needs were met. School closures also make it more difficult for youth experiencing homelessness and educators to stay in touch with each other, and to exchange documents and information necessary for college and financial aid applications.

The COVID-19 crisis requires McKinney-Vento liaisons and other educators to think creatively about how to carry out their responsibilities to help youth experiencing homelessness transition to higher education. **Below are five strategies to help keep the dream of a postsecondary education alive for youth experiencing homelessness, during and beyond these troubled times.**
1. Provide a FAFSA determination letter to every high school senior who was identified as an unaccompanied homeless before school closures, or who is identified as an unaccompanied homeless youth after school closures.

- Unaccompanied homeless youth are not living with, or supported by, a parent or guardian, and cannot obtain parental income information. Therefore, they are considered independent students under the Higher Education Act, and do not need to provide a parent’s signature or information about parents’ income on the Free Application For Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
- Under the McKinney-Vento Act, local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaisons are required to inform unaccompanied homeless youth of their status as independent students for the FAFSA, and help them obtain documentation. 42 U.S.C. §(g)(6) (A)(x)(III).
- Even if high school seniors are unsure of their plans at the moment, providing them with a determination of unaccompanied homeless youth status now will eliminate the burden of having to contact their high school later this year if they do decide to pursue postsecondary education.
- McKinney-Vento liaisons or their designees should prepare unaccompanied homeless youth determinations and send them directly to the student, as well as the student’s college financial aid office, by email, mail, or both. This sample letter template from SHC can be downloaded and customized.

California

“At the county level, we will continue to work with students one-on-one to complete, submit, and monitor their FAFSAs. In California, our programs have access to Webgrants, so we are able to monitor and identify any errors or incomplete FAFSAs. Our team continues to assist each student with their needs, including ongoing monitoring of email communications that students received from financial aid or the colleges”

- Pamela Hancock, Director of Fresno County Foster and Homeless Youth Education Services, California

1. Provide a FAFSA determination letter to every high school senior who was identified as an unaccompanied homeless before school closures, or who is identified as an unaccompanied homeless youth after school closures.
2. Assist unaccompanied homeless youth in obtaining access to Wi-Fi and devices necessary for college applications and for filing the FAFSA.

- With schools closed and students engaged in distance learning (whether optional or required), internet connectivity and electronic devices are essential for college applications and completing the FAFSA.
- Most districts are using regular district funds, or Title I Part A funds, to provide Wi-Fi or devices. Students experiencing homelessness should receive the same resources as other students before using the Title I, Part A homeless set-aside or McKinney-Vento subgrant funds to provide Wi-Fi or devices. However, if internet connections and devices are not available through other means, both McKinney-Vento and Title I, Part A may be used under certain circumstances (see our COVID-19 FAQ for more information on connectivity and access to technology).
3. **Assist school counselors to carry out their responsibilities to prepare youth experiencing homelessness for college.**

- Unaccompanied homeless youth are not living with, or supported by, a parent or guardian, and cannot obtain parental income information. Therefore, they are considered independent students under the Higher Education Act, and do not need to provide a parent’s signature or information about parents’ income on the Free Application For Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
- Under the McKinney-Vento Act, local educational agency (LEA) homeless liaisons are required to inform unaccompanied homeless youth of their status as independent students for the FAFSA, and help them obtain documentation. 42 U.S.C. §(g)(6) (A)(x)(III).
- Even if high school seniors are unsure of their plans at the moment, providing them with a determination of unaccompanied homeless youth status now will eliminate the burden of having to contact their high school later this year if they do decide to pursue postsecondary education.
- McKinney-Vento liaisons or their designees should prepare unaccompanied homeless youth determinations and send them directly to the student, as well as the student’s college financial aid office, by email, mail, or both. This sample letter template from SHC can be downloaded and customized.

"My focus this month is contacting my McKinney-Vento seniors about their college plans. Once I have their plan finalized, I will make sure they have a copy of the verification and send one to the school."

- Tonya Monnier, Social Worker/McKinney-Vento Liaison, Pike High School, Metropolitan School District of Pike Township
Assist unaccompanied homeless youth who return to seek help with subsequent-year verifications of their status for the FAFSA.

- Unaccompanied homeless youth status must be re-verified each year. It is generally the financial aid administrator’s responsibility to make verifications of unaccompanied homeless youth status once a youth is beyond their freshman year. This requirement presents obstacles to financial aid for many unaccompanied homeless youth in “normal” circumstances. Now that colleges are closed, these barriers are even greater, because the closing of their colleges means that youth who were identified as unaccompanied homeless youth in high school and are now in college may have great difficulties in obtaining determinations of their status from financial aid administrators. In these circumstances, it can be especially helpful for liaisons to continue to provide support to these youth.

Consider reaching out to unaccompanied homeless youth whom you verified in past years and re-familiarizing yourself with their situations.

- In its guidance to state and local educational agencies, the Department of Education states that “[a] local liaison may continue to provide verification of a youth’s status as either unaccompanied and homeless, or as self-supporting and at risk of being homeless, for federal student aid purposes for as long as the liaison has access to the information necessary to make such a determination for a particular youth.”
- In its guidance to financial aid administrators, ED states that “local liaisons may write subsequent-year letters of verification for unaccompanied homeless youth through age 23 for whom they have the necessary information to write such letters. This documentation is acceptable for verifying unaccompanied homelessness.”
- Consider reaching out to unaccompanied homeless youth whom you verified in past years and re-familiarizing yourself with their situations, so that you can help verify them as unaccompanied homeless youth for upcoming financial aid applications.
Reach out to the financial aid offices of local colleges to offer help and to share information about COVID-19 and other resources for youth experiencing homelessness.

- It can be helpful for colleges or universities to know that there is a local education professional they can turn to as a resource and who can assist in making determinations of unaccompanied homeless status.
- Providing information about any COVID-19 or other community initiatives for youth experiencing homelessness will help ensure that college youth have access to those resources.

**Related Resources**

- [COVID-19 Response for Youth Who Are Homeless or in Foster Care](#)
- [Sample form letter to determine the independent student status of unaccompanied homeless youth for the FAFSA](#)
- [I Want to Go to College: Now What? A Guide for Youth Who are or Were Homeless, or Are at Risk of Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- [The FAFSA: Four Things You Can Do to Help Homeless and Foster Youth](#)
- [Youth Homelessness and Higher Education: An Overview](#)

Thanks to our pro bono partner Mayer Brown LLP for their assistance in the preparation of this resource.