



National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
www.serve.org/nche



BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION BRIEF SERIES

Local Homeless Liaisons for School Districts: Making the Right Selection and Supporting their Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Homeless children and youth experience many challenges in enrolling and attending school and achieving educational success. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (reauthorized under Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and subsequently referred to as the McKinney-Vento Act in this brief) ensures rights and services for homeless children and youth that remove barriers to their education.

School districts or local educational agencies (LEAs) are responsible for identifying homeless children and youth and linking them with educational and other services. The McKinney-Vento Act requires every school district to appoint a local homeless liaison [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(J)(ii)]. A local liaison who has the skills and capacity to carry out the position is key to ensuring that homeless children and youth receive all protections and services necessary for them to succeed in school.

This brief will assist school district administrators in

1. Understanding key qualifications necessary for a local liaison to carry out the many and complex responsibilities of the position;
2. Selecting a local liaison who has the experience, knowledge, skills, and attitude to perform effectively in the position; and
3. Ensuring the local liaison has the time, authority, and support to carry out his or her responsibilities.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISON

Every LEA, whether or not it has a McKinney-Vento subgrant, is required to carry out the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act. LEAs must appoint a local liaison who will ensure that

- Homeless children and youth are identified by school personnel and through coordination with other agencies;
- Homeless children and youth enroll in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, schools in the LEA;

SERVICES PROVIDED BY LOCAL LIAISONS

In a 2012 survey, local liaisons reported spending the most time identifying eligible homeless children and youth (66 percent), ensuring that homeless children and youth and their families receive services (47 percent), and coordinating transportation services (37 percent).

Nearly all local liaisons reported providing school supplies to homeless children and youth and their families (91 percent), and 78 percent reported helping coordinate the efforts between schools and agencies that provided services to homeless children and youth. (Coleman, 2015)

- Homeless families, children, and youth receive educational services for which they are eligible, including Head Start and preschool programs administered by the LEA, and referrals to health care, dental, mental health, and other appropriate services;
- The parents or guardians of homeless children and youth are informed of the educational and related opportunities available to their children and are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children;
- Public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youth is disseminated where they receive services, such as schools, family shelters, and soup kitchens;
- Enrollment disputes are mediated according to the McKinney-Vento Act; and
- The parents and guardians of homeless children and youth, and all unaccompanied homeless youth, are fully informed of all transportation services, including transportation to the school of origin, and are assisted in accessing transportation to and from the school of origin. [42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(6)(A)]

The *Non-Regulatory Guidance* (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, F-2) lists the following activities that local liaisons must conduct:

- Assisting homeless children and youth with enrolling in school and accessing school services;
- Helping homeless children and youth obtain immunization or medical records;
- Informing parents, school personnel, and others of the rights of homeless children and youth;
- Working with school staff to make sure that homeless children and youth are immediately enrolled in school pending resolution of disputes that might arise over school enrollment or placement;

- Helping to coordinate transportation services for homeless children and youth; and,
- Collaborating and coordinating with the State Coordinator and with community and school personnel responsible for providing education and related support services to homeless children and youth.

The local liaison position requires someone with a high level of commitment, energy, intelligence, and experience in working with at-risk students. Following are considerations for selecting an effective local liaison.

EXPERIENCE

Educational institutions are complex systems with a myriad of procedures, policies, and priorities. The local liaison should have experience working within the state or school district educational system in order to minimize the learning curve for understanding how the McKinney-Vento program operates in the broader educational system. The individual considered for the position should also have experience in program coordination and in working with parents, children, and youth who are facing difficult circumstances.

KNOWLEDGE

The local liaison should understand the challenges faced by impoverished and homeless children, youth, and families, as well as the rights and services provided to homeless children and youth through the McKinney-Vento Act and other federal and state laws and programs. The local liaison must have a clear understanding of the requirements of the position and the state educational agency (SEA) and LEA systems in which these requirements will be enacted, including the budgeting system and state student data collection system. The local liaison should also be aware of SEA and LEA policies, or other state and local policies, that impact homeless children and youth. For example, an understanding of reporting requirements for runaway youth and minor medical consent laws is critical for serving unaccompanied homeless youth.¹ In addition, an effective local liaison is familiar with community resources in order to arrange services efficiently for needy students and their families.

SKILLS

The local liaison position requires a considerable set of professional skills. Clear oral and written communication is central to the work. The local liaison will need to provide leadership and guidance to administrators and staff in the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act in the form of professional development and technical assistance with case-specific situations. The local liaison will also need to exercise skill and good judgment in diffusing disagreements and resolving disputes between homeless parents or guardians and school staff over enrollment or other perceived barriers to a homeless child's education. Administrators should make potential

¹ For information on state laws impacting unaccompanied youth, see the publication by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty entitled *Alone without a Home: A State-by-State Review of Laws Affecting Unaccompanied Youth*: http://www.nlchp.org/Alone_Without_A_Home. Local liaisons should also consult with their State Coordinator to determine the most up-to-date state laws and policies.

local liaisons aware that the job will at times be stressful, and explore with a candidate his or her ability to remain calm and focused while resolving issues and exercising self-care to avoid burnout.

Developing and maintaining collaborative relationships with community agencies are important skills to ensure that homeless children and youth are linked to services that are beyond what the school or LEA provides. And finally, managing multiple tasks and keeping clear records are additional critical skills.

ATTITUDE

Many LEAs across the nation report that the one factor that makes the difference between a strong and weak homeless education program is having a local liaison who is passionate about ensuring that homeless children and youth are able to succeed in school. These local liaisons will work long hours and do what it takes to build trust with the children, youth, and families; navigate complex systems to get services in place; and inspire others to go above and beyond to benefit children and youth. They are not only administrators; they are coordinators, champions, and mentors, as well.

In evaluating the appropriateness of someone being considered for the position, administrators should determine the individual's perspectives

EFFECTIVE COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION EFFORTS

Local liaisons surveyed in 2012 indicated that the coordination and collaboration efforts that most improved services were those focused on building programmatic linkages among organizations (40 percent), identifying barriers that impede access to school (36 percent), and reviewing district policies or regulations that affect homeless populations (36 percent). (Coleman, 2015)

on children and youth who are homeless, impoverished, or otherwise at risk. It is critical for the individual to believe that

- At-risk children need and deserve support to succeed;
- Decisions related to homeless children should be child-centered and focused on removing their educational barriers;
- Services for those most vulnerable should go above and beyond those for other children and youth when necessary; and
- Compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act and other laws that offer rights and services for homeless children and youth is paramount.

See [Appendix A](#) for a checklist of qualifications for a local liaison. The checklist may be used as a tool to assist in determining if the individual under consideration is appropriate for the position.

ROLE GROUPS TO CONSIDER FOR THE POSITION OF LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISON

The local liaison must be an employee of the school district. The position is frequently assigned to an existing staff person or administrator.

Administrators may select from a variety of role groups but should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each. [Appendix B](#) lists the types of role groups to consider for the local liaison, including the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

Good practice suggests reviewing carefully the current responsibilities of the person under consideration for the position to ensure that person will have sufficient time, experience, and authority to carry out all local liaison responsibilities and will not have any conflicts of interest in identifying and serving homeless students. The LEA administrator should take steps to address any deficits or disadvantages for

someone in a particular role group considered for the position.

A PROCESS FOR DESIGNATING A LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISON

While in most cases, the local liaison position is assigned to an existing administrator or staff member, in some cases, an LEA will hire someone for the position. Regardless of how the position is filled, the LEA should have a formal process to consider and document the appropriateness of the candidate. LEAs are encouraged to develop a job description that includes qualifications, required duties, and time allocated to the position. [Appendix C](#) is a sample job description.

LEA administrators should not merely assign someone to carry out the position of the local liaison, especially if that person already has a full plate. The local liaison position should be considered a professional administrative position, and the person who fills the position should have the appropriate qualifications, time, and desire to carry out the required responsibilities.

SUPPORT FOR LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISONS

An informal survey of large LEAs in North Carolina indicated that most expand the capacity of local liaisons by assigning time for addressing the needs of homeless children and youth to other staff, such as social workers, transportation coordinators, and student services personnel. Some of these staff members are school-based points of contacts to assist homeless liaisons as needed. One liaison states, “Even with small numbers, one homeless liaison cannot identify and form relationships with students without some type of support system in the schools.”

CREATING THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

While getting the right person for the position of local liaison is essential, ensuring that person is able to work under conditions in which he or she can be effective is equally critical.

Time

One of the most common complaints among local liaisons is that they do not have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities to serve homeless children and youth. Administrators should review the legal requirements for the position along with the number of homeless children and youth the school district typically serves in a year, and allocate time for the position to ensure that the local liaison can do his or her job effectively. Administrators may wish to discuss the time allocation with former local liaisons in the LEA, liaisons from other LEAs, or the homeless State Coordinator to determine what is realistic.

Authority

Local liaisons often state that they do not have the authority they need to enforce the law. When school or district staff members are resistant, local liaisons need to know that the administration will support them and hold others accountable for compliance.

Training and Technical Assistance

A wealth of knowledge exists to assist local liaisons with understanding the responsibilities of their position and implementing policies and services for homeless children and youth.

The State Coordinator for homeless education is a key resource for local liaisons. The State Coordinator provides trainings and updates on laws and policies. In addition, the State Coordinator provides assistance with case-specific situations to help local liaisons understand nuances of the law and effective ways to address challenges in the LEA with serving homeless children and youth. The State Coordinator will also inform local liaisons of

state-specific policies and practices related to serving homeless children and youth. When an administrator appoints a new local liaison, he or she should contact the State Coordinator to ensure that the liaison is added to the state's local liaison contact list to receive communications related to the education for homeless children and youth program. State Coordinator contact information can be found at http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) provides the following resources and supports for local liaisons:

- *Homeless Liaison Toolkit*, which provides legislative requirements and implementation strategies for a wide range of topics, including enrollment, school selection, transportation, and coordination (http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/liaison_toolkit.php);
- Monthly webinars offered free of charge (<http://center.serve.org/nche/web/group.php>);
- Briefs on key legislative mandates, cross-program coordination, and effective practice (<http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/briefs.php>), including a brief specifically targeting new local liaisons, “Local Homeless Liaisons – Important Information for New Liaisons” (<http://www.serve.org/nche/briefs/new-liaisons.pdf>); and
- Helpline support (phone: 800-308-2145 or email: homeless@serve.org) to assist local liaisons in understanding the law and processing difficult situations.

Administrators should encourage local liaisons to contact their State Coordinator for homeless education, attend all trainings offered by the SEA's education for homeless children and youth program, as well as make them aware of resources from NCHE. In addition, administrators should support local liaisons in attending the annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (<http://www.naehcy.org/>

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS OF LOCAL LIAISONS

In a 2012 survey, local liaisons most often reported needing state technical assistance to help them better understand the legal requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act (56 percent); the legal responsibilities of the local liaison (55 percent); and how to collect, use, and report data on homeless students (44 percent). (Coleman, 2015)

conference/conference), the only conference that focuses on the educational needs of homeless children and youth.

Administrators should also provide support to enable local liaisons to manage self-care and avoid burnout. The repeated experience of secondary trauma through the crises of the families and students they encounter can potentially impact the ability of a local liaison to function effectively or remain in the position.²

Connection to Other Programs

Many programs in the LEA serve homeless children and youth, such as pupil transportation, child nutrition, preschool, Title I, Title III, migrant education, and special education. Administrators should encourage all program coordinators, including the local liaison, to coordinate services for homeless students. Periodic cross-program meetings and joint trainings are effective ways to ensure that the needs of homeless students are considered in all programs.

² The National Center for Trauma Informed Care (SAMHSA) provides a number of resources to assist service providers in working with individuals and families in crisis situations (www.samhsa.gov/nctic); a Self-Care Starter Kit (University of Buffalo) includes a number of tools and resources to assist care providers with addressing their needs (<http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html>).

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS FOR SELECTING AND SUPPORTING LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISONS

LEA administrators in every school district must appoint a local liaison to implement the McKinney-Vento Act. A qualified and committed local liaison will ensure that homeless children and youth are identified and provided the services they need to be successful in school. The recommendations below are a helpful guide in selecting the right person to carry out the responsibilities of the local liaison position.

1. LEA administrators should be familiar with all the requirements of the local liaison position as specified in the McKinney-Vento Act.
2. The local liaison should have the appropriate experience, knowledge, skills, and attitude for the position.
3. A local liaison who is passionate about serving homeless children and youth is key in implementing the program successfully.
4. The LEA should have a formal process for selecting the best candidate for the local liaison position.
5. LEA administrators are responsible for ensuring that the local liaison has sufficient time allocated to carry out the duties and authority to enforce the law.
6. The homeless State Coordinator is a key contact to assist the local liaison in understanding the role and carrying out the duties of the position.
7. NCHE provides a wealth of resources, including a *Homeless Liaison Toolkit*, to enable local liaisons to implement the McKinney-Vento Act.

REFERENCES

Coleman, S. et. al. (2015). *State and District Implementation of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development Policy and Program Studies Service. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports.html#homeless>

Title X, Part C, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. 20 USC 6301. (McKinney-Vento Act). Retrieved from <http://center.serve.org/nche/legis/mv.php>

U. S. Department of Education. (2004). *Education for Homeless Children and Youth program non-regulatory guidance*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/homeless/guidance.pdf>

APPENDIX A. QUALIFICATIONS CHECKLIST FOR LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISONS

Rate the applicant for the local homeless liaison position on each of the following items from 5-0, with 5 being well qualified to 0 being not qualified. Total possible points: 135

Rating	Experience
	Program coordination
	Working with at-risk students
	Working in the school system as a teacher, administrator, counselor, or social worker
	Working with parents
	Cross-program or cross-agency collaboration
	Knowledge
	Homelessness and its challenges for families, children, and youth
	McKinney-Vento Act
	State specific laws and policies that impact homeless children and youth
	Responsibilities of the local liaison and LEA
	LEA and federal education programs that serve homeless children and youth
	Community resources for homeless children and families
	Contacts in other LEAs
	LEA budgeting system
	SEA and LEA data collection system
	Skills
	Communicating clearly orally and in writing
	Developing clear and logical procedures and protocols, related to homeless students' school enrollment, transportation, and referrals to services
	Establishing trust and communication with homeless children and families
	Demonstrating leadership in enforcing the law and communicating clear expectations for school and LEA staff and administrators
	Diffusing or resolving conflicts
	Organizing and managing multiple tasks
	Record keeping
	Training and professional development
	Initiating and maintaining collaborative relationships with LEA and community programs and services
	Attitudes and Values
	At-risk children need and deserve support to succeed
	Decisions should be child-centered, best interest determinations
	Services for those most vulnerable should go above and beyond those for other children and youth when necessary
	Homeless children and youth should be protected under the rights and services offered through the McKinney-Vento Act
	TOTAL

APPENDIX B. ROLE GROUPS TO CONSIDER FOR THE LOCAL HOMELESS LIAISON POSITION

Role Group	Advantages	Disadvantages
Federal programs administrator	Familiarity with other programs that serve homeless children and youth; understanding of how federal programs operate; administrative skills and authority; coordination across programs	May have other job responsibilities that limit time to serve homeless children and youth; may not have sufficient background in understanding homelessness
School social worker, school counselor; student support services, dropout prevention and/or at-risk services personnel	Background in dealing with families, children, and youth who are homeless or at-risk; familiarity with trauma-informed care	May lack the authority to enforce the law; may not have sufficient background in educational strategies
Educator	Background in academic strategies to increase school success of homeless students	May lack the authority to enforce the law; may not have sufficient background in homelessness or working with troubled families and students
Superintendent, assistant superintendent	Has authority to implement the law and change policies	Other job responsibilities could limit time needed to serve homeless students; may not have sufficient background in homelessness or working with troubled families and students; possible conflict of interest in identifying children who require significant LEA resources to be served
Pupil transportation director	Knows the policies, procedures, and strategies for arranging transportation for homeless students; has administrative skills	May lack sufficient background in working with homeless and at-risk students and linking them to educational and other services; may lack authority to enforce the law; possible conflict of interest in making school selection, best interest determinations that require significant pupil transportation coordination and/or funds
School secretary, support staff	May have direct experience and insight into working with at-risk children and families	May lack sufficient background in social work or education for identifying and addressing needs of at-risk students; may lack sufficient authority or standing to require professional staff and administrators to implement the law

Title I Specialist / McKinney-Vento Liaison

Location: Education Center

Employment Term: Full Time – 12 months

Qualifications:

- Master's Degree required in education or social work
- 5-7 years teaching / counseling experience
- 3 years of administrative responsibility preferred
- Previous experience working in a Title I program or school preferred
- Possession of, or ability to obtain, a valid state education or instruction specialist certification
- Strong oral, written and interpersonal communication skills
- Bi-lingual in Spanish preferred
- Familiarity with the SEA or LEA data collection system preferred

Responsibilities:

- Reviews and revises procedures and policies to ensure that homeless children and youth are enrolled in school and receive educational services
- Provides appropriate training and professional development relative to the education and support of homeless children
- Works collaboratively with schools and administrative offices to provide technical and compliance support related to the McKinney-Vento Act
- Works with parents and students experiencing homelessness to provide educational support
- Prepares and submits reports to the SEA
- Maintains records and documentation for LEA monitoring by the SEA education for homeless children and youth program
- Ensures that data on homeless students is submitted to the LEA/SEA
- Responds to and resolves difficult and sensitive inquiries and complaints regarding McKinney-Vento compliance issues
- Collaborates with community agencies providing services to homeless children and families, as needed
- Participates in professional development activities on an annual basis

This brief was developed by:

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Every state is required to have a coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth, and every school district is required to have a liaison for homeless students. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. For information on the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness in Texas and to obtain contact information for the liaison in your district, please contact:



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