



# *School Social Workers: A Necessary Link to School Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness*

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## *School Social Workers Create Collaboration!*

American public schools have had school social workers or visiting teachers since the early 1900's. As today's families face increasing levels of economic and social stress, school social workers remain a vital link uniting home, school, and community to support children and youth in their academic and social success. One of the primary causes of such stress is the increasing impact of homelessness on children (Webb, 1996). It is not unusual for a child who is homeless to move multiple times during a school year. Such mobility can result not only in the need to adapt to a new living space, but also to a new classroom, teacher, and classmates, leading to delays and "gaps" in their academic progress. Homeless students with special needs may not receive services in a timely manner due to a lack of coordinated school records, including Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). Despite these challenges, for many children, school is a respite from the daily pressures that come with being homeless and the one place where they can receive daily direct intervention and support from adults.

This information brief offers concrete suggestions that school social workers may find helpful when assisting a family who is experiencing homelessness arises.



## *What roles do school social workers fulfill in assisting homeless families and their children in schools?*

School social workers are involved in providing services to all students. They are expected to provide direct services to students such as casework, group work, classroom presentations, crisis intervention, consultations, home visits, and referrals to community agencies. Many assist in attendance cases, a common problem for students experiencing homelessness. In addition, they serve on teams providing assessment for special education. This information brief speaks to the common responsibilities of school social workers. Depending on the locality, case load, and individual expertise, school social worker responsibilities may differ.

As a part of a schoolwide educational team, school social workers collaborate with school administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, psychologists, nurses, and related service personnel to better help them understand and interpret the factors that affect students' abilities and maximize the students' school experience.

For the student who is homeless, the factors impacting school success are more complex and can hinder a student's learning. This presents an opportunity for the school social worker to collaborate with a variety of people and coordinate the resources needed to meet the needs of homeless students (Thompson & Rudolph, 2000). Many opportunities for intervention in the lives of students experiencing homelessness can be initiated or coordinated with the assistance of a school social worker.

## Opportunities for School Social Workers Supporting Students and Families Experiencing Homelessness

There is no easy solution or “quick fix” to the problems of homelessness and its effects on children. Children who are homeless come to school with a plethora of issues and needs. No two homeless students will be the same. Each student’s situation must be addressed on an individual basis (Strawser, Markos, Yamaguchi, & Higgins, 2000). By serving as a proactive leader in addressing these needs, the school social worker can be integral in making school a place for achieving success and a safe, stable oasis in a life filled with uncertainty and stress. School social workers may:

- Develop and maintain a relationship with the school division’s liaison for children and youth who are homeless. This individual can help facilitates enrollment, assessment, and placement of homeless students. A liaison exists for every school division in Virginia. A listing of the liaisons may be found on the Project HOPE website at <http://www.wm.edu/education/HOPE/virginia/edcontacts/contacts.html>
- Educate your faculty and team members about homelessness and its impact on children in school.
- Advocate for homeless students by facilitating enrollment in needed remedial, gifted, or special education programs.
- Educate parents experiencing homelessness of their children’s educational rights, including the right to remain in the school of origin and have transportation provided if it is preferred by the parents and feasible.
- Educate schools on the impact that homelessness has on attendance and achievement.
- Become familiar with low-cost and public assistance motels in your school’s neighborhood. Make personal contacts with the desk staff and leave information about the schools including registration materials.
- Assess and refer children and youth who are suspected to be experiencing homelessness to school administrators.
- Establish relationships with community groups that can provide direct assistance to homeless families (e.g., local continuums of care, Lions Club, Rotary Club, civic groups, faith communities, and church outreach personnel and volunteers).
- Form a partnership with business leaders to assist with emergency funds for school field trips, special school events that require ticket purchase, school and band uniforms, musical instrument purchases, school supplies, and eyeglasses. For example, eyeglasses can usually be obtained through the Lion’s Club (which typically involves a referral process).
- Identify contacts in your local Child Protective Services division, Juvenile and Domestic Courts, Probation Department, and Social Services office that you can call immediately to access services for a child or family experiencing homelessness.
- Collaborate with community services and school guidance counselors to “wrap” services around the student.
- Be familiar with local affordable housing opportunities and assist families in investigating options for housing.
- Assist parents in locating and organizing their children’s school records.
- Document homeless students.
- Visit local shelters and build relationships with shelter staff.
- Assist families in gaining access to local clothing closets and food pantries.
- Develop attendance plans to include in interventions to assist families experiencing homelessness.



## Homeless Children... Who are they?

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act (Section 725) defines homeless children and youth as:

- Children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes children and youth who:
  - are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
  - are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
  - are living in emergency or transitional shelters;
  - are abandoned in hospitals; or
  - are awaiting foster care placement.
- Children and youth with a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.
- The term unaccompanied youth includes a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This would include runaways living in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing and children or youth denied housing by their families (sometimes referred to as “throwaway” children and youth), and school-age unwed mothers, living in homes for unwed mothers, who have no other housing available.

In determining whether or not a child or youth is homeless, consider the *relative permanence of the living arrangements*. Determinations of homelessness should be made on a case-by-case basis.

## What are signs that may indicate that a student is homeless?

- Chronic hunger and tiredness
- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Poor grooming and personal hygiene, clothing that draws attention
- Consistent lack of preparation for school (e.g., coming in without books, supplies, completed homework or signed papers)
- Extremes in behavior: (e.g., withdrawal, extreme shyness, nervousness, aggression, or anger)
- Resistance to parting with personal possessions (e.g., putting a coat in a locker or closet or leaving a favorite toy unattended)

**There are an estimated 17,000 children in Virginia experiencing homelessness. There are over a million of us in the country.**

*Statistic from the Homeless Child Estimate for Virginia(1999-2000). The children and youth ranged in age from birth to high school age. A copy of the Estimate may be found on the Project HOPE website.*

### References

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- Thompson, C. L. & Rudolph, L. B. (2000). *Counseling children* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Australia: Wadsworth.
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## **The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act (P.L. 107-110)**

Congress enacted the *Stewart B. McKinney Homelessness Assistance Act* in 1987. It was revised and reauthorized in 1990. In 1994, it was further amended and incorporated into the *Improving America's Schools Act (IASA)* of 1994. With its reauthorization as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, the homeless education component was renamed McKinney-Vento.

### **Key Provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act**

It is the policy of Congress that-

- Each state educational agency shall ensure that each child of a homeless individual and each homeless youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as provided to other children and youth.
- In any State that has compulsory residency requirements or other laws, regulations, practices, or policies that may act as barriers to the enrollment, attendance, or success in school of homeless children and youth (e.g., requiring immunization records, guardianship, or birth certificates), the State will review and revise such laws, regulations, practices, or policies to remove identified barriers.
- Homelessness is not sufficient reason to separate students from the mainstream school environment.
- Homeless children and youth should have access to the education and other services needed to ensure they will meet the same challenging State student academic standards to which all students are held.

[Section 721]

### **Helpful Organizations for School Social Workers**

#### **The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE)**

<http://www.serve.org/nche>

#### **The National Association of Social Workers**

<http://www.naswdc.org>

#### **The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)**

<http://www.sswaa.org>

### **Project HOPE**

#### **Virginia Department of Education**

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#### **Local Homeless Education Liaison:**