



National Center for Homeless Education  
Supporting the Education of Children and  
Youth Experiencing Homelessness  
[www.serve.org/nche](http://www.serve.org/nche)



BEST PRACTICES IN INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION BRIEF SERIES  
**Supporting School Success for Homeless Children of  
Veterans and Military Service Members**

### INTRODUCTION

According to research (Fargo et al, 2012) and federal data (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2015), veterans<sup>1</sup> experience homelessness at a higher rate than non-veterans. Many veterans experience homelessness as individuals, while others experience homelessness with their families (2015), which may include school-age children.

This brief provides educators and service providers with needed information about the educational rights of and supports available to children and youth experiencing homelessness, including homeless children of veterans and military service members, under Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance. The brief also provides an overview of federal programs that target services specifically to the families of veterans with school-age children. Briefs on additional topics pertaining to the education and well-being of children and youth experiencing homelessness can be downloaded at <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>.

<sup>1</sup> Federal law defines the *veteran* as “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable” [38 U.S.C. §101(2)].

### **McKinney-Vento Definition of *Homeless*** **42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)**

The term “homeless children and youth”—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes —
  - i. children and youths 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 the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
  - ii. children and youths who have 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...
  - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
  - iv. migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

## HOMELESSNESS AMONG VETERANS AND SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

According to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) data:

- On a single night in January 2014, 49,933 veterans were homeless in the United States, representing about 8.6 percent of homeless people (2015, p. 5-3).
- An estimated 131,697 veterans used an emergency shelter or transitional housing program at some time between October 1, 2013, and September 30, 2014 (p. 5-7).
- While veterans make up only 9.5 percent of the U.S. adult population, they make up 11.4 percent of the adult homeless population (p. 5-7).
- In 2014, 128,882 veterans experienced sheltered homelessness as individuals, while 4,006 veterans experienced sheltered homelessness as part of a family (in a household with at least one child present) (p. 5-11).

According to U.S. Department of Education (ED) data:

- U.S. public schools enrolled 1,301,239 students experiencing homelessness in public preschool and K-12 programs during the 2013-2014 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2015).

At the time of the release of this publication, there are no known national-level data sets that provide specific information about the number of veterans with school-age children experiencing homelessness; however, given the prevalence of homelessness among veterans in general, the increase in homelessness among female veterans (HUD, 2015, p. 5-8), the increase in homelessness among veterans of child-bearing age (p. 5-8), and the identification of 5,301 veterans experiencing homelessness as part of a family, it is reasonable to conclude that there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of school-age children of veterans experiencing homelessness each year.

## EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

For children, the experience of homelessness often is accompanied by residential instability (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014, p. 9); living in unsafe housing or neighborhoods (p. 9); the witnessing of interpersonal violence (p. 9); and a loss of community, routine, and sense of security (p. 10). As a result, children experiencing homelessness often struggle in school, manifesting learning disabilities and acute emotional and mental health issues (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005, p. 2), repeating grades, and dropping out of school at much higher rates than nonhomeless children (Child Trends, 2015, p. 2).

In addition to the above difficulties, homeless children of veterans may experience additional struggles. Research documents the higher prevalence of mental health conditions, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and traumatic brain injury (TBI), among veterans (Sogomonyan & Cooper, 2010). For example, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (Gradus, n.d.), the lifetime prevalence of PTSD among adult Americans in general was estimated at 6.8% (n.d.). By contrast,

## PREVENTING AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is an independent government agency within the federal executive branch that consists of 19 member agencies, including the U.S. Departments of Education and Veteran Affairs. In its *Opening Doors Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, as amended in 2015, USICH reaffirms the federal government's goal to prevent and end veteran homelessness in 2015, chronic homelessness in 2017, and family and youth homelessness in 2020. Visit <http://usich.gov/> for more information about *Opening Doors* and the efforts of federal agencies to help meet the goals outlined therein.

the estimated lifetime prevalence of PTSD was 10.1% among Gulf War veterans and 13.8% among veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (n.d.).

Despite the best efforts of parents struggling with a mental health condition, the symptoms they experience may cause them to come across as distant, irritable, or displeased, causing their children to question their interest in or love for them (n.d.). While this perception among children represents a misunderstanding of the symptoms the parent is manifesting, the effects on the child can be harmful, nonetheless. Children of veterans with mental health conditions may experience secondary trauma, take on adult responsibilities in an attempt to “rescue” the parent, or become withdrawn (n.d.). As a result, these children are at higher risk for behavioral, academic, and interpersonal problems (n.d.).

## THE MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT

### Background

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, originally signed into law in 1987, is the primary federal legislative response to the issue of homelessness within the United States. The Act authorizes a range of services to people experiencing homelessness, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, job training, health care, and education. **Subtitle VII-B of the Act** (42 U.S.C. §§ 11431-11435, hereafter referred to as *The McKinney-Vento Act*)

- authorizes the federal **Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program**,
- establishes the definition of *homeless* used by schools,
- ensures that children and youth experiencing homelessness have equal and immediate access to a free and appropriate public education, and
- provides educational support to promote school success.

### EHCY Program Funding and Personnel

Each year, Congress appropriates funding for the federal EHCY Program. Each state receives an allocation of the federal EHCY appropriation proportional to its allocation of the federal Title I, Part A<sup>2</sup> appropriation. States may reserve a portion of their EHCY allocation to conduct activities required of each state, including:

- providing services to homeless children that enable them to enroll in, attend, and succeed in school, including public preschool programs [42 U.S.C. § 11432(d)(2)];
- designating a State Coordinator for Homeless Education (hereafter, *State Coordinator*),<sup>3</sup> who oversees the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act within the state [42 U.S.C. § 11432(d)(3)];
- preparing and carrying out a state homeless education plan [42 U.S.C. § 11432(d)(4)]; and
- developing and implementing professional development activities for school personnel to increase their awareness of and ability to respond to the needs of homeless children and youth [42 U.S.C. § 11432(d)(5)].

Each state must distribute the remainder of its state EHCY allocation to local educational agencies (LEAs, commonly referred to as *school districts*) through a competitive subgrant process. LEAs are awarded subgrant funding based on their demonstrated need and the quality of their subgrant application [42 U.S.C. § 11433(c)]. School districts receiving subgrant funds may use these funds in keeping with the authorized activities listed in the McKinney-Vento Act [42 U.S.C. § 11433(d)]. It is important to note that all school districts, whether or not they receive

<sup>2</sup> Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended, provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Federal funds currently are allocated through four statutory formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state. Visit <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html> for more information.

<sup>3</sup> Visit [http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state\\_resources.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php) for a complete list of contact information for State Coordinators for Homeless Education.

subgrant funding, must comply with the requirements of the Act, including appointing a local homeless education liaison (hereafter, *local liaison*) to oversee the implementation of the Act within the district. To access the contact information of the local liaison in your school district, contact the district's main switchboard or your State Coordinator. See the *Eligibility* and *Rights and Services* sections below for more information about LEA-level implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act.

## Eligibility

According to the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” are considered homeless [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)]. In addition to this guiding phrase, the statutory definition of *homeless children and youths* lists a number of nighttime living arrangements that qualify as homeless due to not meeting the fixed, regular, and adequate standard. It is worth noting that the definition used by U.S. public schools is broader than some concepts of homelessness. The definition, for instance, includes children and youth who are “sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(B)(i)]. McKinney-Vento eligibility also extends to unaccompanied children and youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>4</sup> See the [McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless](#) sidebar on page 1 for the full text of the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of *homeless children and youths*.

Each child's McKinney-Vento eligibility should be decided on a case-by-case basis, considering the unique circumstances surrounding each child's living arrangement. According to the statute, local liaisons are responsible for ensuring that homeless children and youth are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies [42

<sup>4</sup> The term *unaccompanied* is defined as “not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(6)]. It is important to note that for an unaccompanied child or youth to be eligible for McKinney-Vento rights and services, his or her primary nighttime residence must meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homeless.

U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A)(i)); as such, educators and service providers who are working with a child or youth who they believe may qualify as homeless should contact the school district's local liaison. Download NCHE's *Determining Eligibility for Rights and Services Under the McKinney-Vento Act* brief at <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php> for more information about determining McKinney-Vento eligibility.

## Rights and Services

The McKinney-Vento Act provides rights and services to children and youth experiencing homelessness that are designed to address the unique barriers and challenges faced by these students. McKinney-Vento eligible children and youth are entitled to

- have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education that is provided to other students [42 U.S.C. § 11431(1)];
- enroll<sup>5</sup> in school immediately, even if lacking documents normally required for enrollment [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(C)];
- enroll in the local school<sup>6</sup> or continue attending the school of origin,<sup>7</sup> if feasible,<sup>8</sup> according to the best interest of the child or youth [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(A)];
- dispute school selection or enrollment decisions made by the school district that are contrary to the wishes of the child's or youth's parent or guardian, or the wishes of the unaccompanied homeless youth [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(E)];
- receive transportation to and from the school of origin, if requested [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)

<sup>5</sup> The term *enroll* is defined as “attending classes and participating fully in school activities” [42 U.S.C. § 11434a(1)].

<sup>6</sup> The term *local school* is defined as “any public school that nonhomeless students who live in the attendance area in which the child or youth is actually living are eligible to attend” [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(A)(ii)].

<sup>7</sup> The term *school of origin* is defined as “the school that the child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled” [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(G)].

<sup>8</sup> The concept of feasibility, as explained in U.S. Department of Education Non-Regulatory Guidance, is a student-centered, individualized consideration that focuses on the best educational interest of each student. See question G-4 at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/homeless/guidance.pdf> for more information.



(1)(J)(iii)]; and

- receive educational services comparable to those provided to other students, according to each child’s or youth’s needs [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(4)].

Other federal statutes entitle McKinney-Vento eligible children and youth to additional supports, including

- categorical eligibility for services under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Act, as amended<sup>9</sup> (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, question M-1);
- free school meals through streamlined direct certification process under the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Child Nutrition Programs<sup>10</sup> [7 C.F.R. § 245.6(b)(2)];
- the appointment of a surrogate or temporary surrogate parent, if needed, for unaccompanied homeless youth needing special education services<sup>11</sup> (34 C.F.R. § 300.519); and
- independent student status on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for unaccompanied homeless youth<sup>12</sup> [20 U.S.C. § 1087vv(d)(1)(H)]

### OTHER SUPPORTS FOR VETERANS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND THEIR FAMILIES

#### U.S. Department of Education

Following are initiatives administered by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) that target services specifically to military families and

<sup>9</sup> Download NCHE’s *Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness under Title I, Part A* brief at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/titlei.pdf> for more information.

<sup>10</sup> Download NCHE’s *Access to Food for Homeless and Highly Mobile Students* brief at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/nutrition.pdf> for more information.

<sup>11</sup> Download NCHE’s *Supporting Homeless Students with Disabilities: Implementing IDEA* brief at [http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/idea\\_qa.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/idea_qa.pdf) for more information.

<sup>12</sup> Visit <http://www.naehcy.org/higher-ed/fed-aid5> for more information about independent student status for unaccompanied homeless youth.

veterans. Please note that this list is not intended to be comprehensive; additional services and supports may be available and can be learned about by contacting 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327).

#### Military Families and Veterans Web Portal

The ED website includes a portal focused specifically on military families and veterans. This portal links to more information about a variety of supports for veterans, service members, and their families, including

- the *8 Keys to Veterans’ Success* initiative, which provides assistance to veterans pursuing higher education;
- expanded access to mental health, substance abuse, and suicide prevention services;
- accommodations regarding student absences related to “block leave”; and
- the *Specialized Training of Military Parents* (STOMP) project, dedicated to serving military parents of children with special needs.

Visit <https://www.ed.gov/veterans-and-military-families> for more information.

#### The Office of Impact Aid Programs

Many school districts include within their boundaries parcels of land, including military bases, that are owned by the federal government or that have been removed from the local tax rolls by the federal government. These school districts face the challenge of needing to provide

#### INQUIRING ABOUT VETERAN STATUS IN SCHOOLS

To ensure that families experiencing homelessness receive all available and needed services and supports, NCHE recommends that local liaisons ask parents of homeless children if they are veterans. Asking specifically about veteran status will enable local liaisons to make referrals, as appropriate, to other agencies that may provide valuable assistance.

a quality education to the children living within their bounds and meeting the requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended, while sometimes operating with less local revenue than is available to other school districts, because the federal property is exempt from local property taxes. Since 1950, Congress has provided financial assistance to these local school districts through the Impact Aid Program. Most Impact Aid funds are considered general aid to the recipient school districts and may be used in whatever manner they choose in accordance with local and state requirements. Common uses for impact aid funds include covering the salaries of teachers and teacher aides; purchasing textbooks, computers, and other equipment; and providing after-school programs, remedial tutoring, advanced placement classes, and special enrichment programs.

It is worth noting that many communities with the highest concentration of veterans also contain the nation's largest military installations, suggesting that many veterans remain in the communities where they were stationed (Stamm, McGill, and Bell, 2014). As such, children of both active military and veterans may benefit from supports provided through ED's Impact Aid Program. Visit <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oes/impactaid/index.html> for more information. To find out if your community receives Impact Aid funding, contact your State Educational Agency representative at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oes/impactaid/searl.html>.

## U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Following are programs administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that target services specifically to veterans experiencing homelessness. Please note that this list is not intended to be comprehensive; additional services and supports may be available and can be learned about by contacting 1-877-4AID-VET (1-877-424-3838).

### HUD Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program

The HUD Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) is a joint program administered by HUD and the VA, wherein HUD provides rental assistance in the form of housing choice vouchers and the VA provides case management and clinical services. The HUD-VASH Program serves eligible homeless veterans who are single or with a family. Veterans who are appropriate candidates for this program must need case management services in order to obtain and sustain independent community housing; this includes veterans who have a serious mental illness, substance use disorder history, or physical disability. The HUD-VASH program uses the definition of *homeless* established by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 (42 U.S.C. § 11301).<sup>13</sup> Visit [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/public\\_indian\\_housing/programs/hcv/vash](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/vash) for more information about the HUD-VASH Program. Contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (see below) at 1-877-4AID VET (1-877-424-3838) to learn about HUD-VASH Program resources in your area.

### National Call Center for Homeless Veterans

The VA operates a National Call Center for Homeless Veterans hotline to ensure that homeless veterans or veterans at-risk of homelessness have free, round-the-clock access to trained counselors. The hotline is intended to assist homeless veterans and their families; VA Medical Centers; federal, state, and local partners; community agencies; service providers; and others in the community. Call 1-877-4AID VET (1-877-424-3838) to be connected with a trained VA staff member or visit <http://www.va.gov/homeless/nationalcallcenter.asp> for more information.

When contacting the call center, veterans can expect to

- be connected with a trained VA responder;

<sup>13</sup> See 42 U.S.C. § 11302 at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2010-title42/pdf/USCODE-2010-title42-chap119-subchapI-sec11302.pdf> for the definition of *homeless* used by HUD-VASH Programs.

- be asked a few questions to understand their needs better;
- be connected with the Homeless Program point of contact at the nearest VA facility;
- receive assistance with housing, health care, employment, and other issues; and
- be asked to provide contact information so the responder can follow up, if needed.

### Regional Benefit Offices

The VA provides a number of benefits to U.S. veterans. In addition, benefits may be available to uniformed servicemembers; or the spouse, child, or parent of a deceased or disabled veteran or servicemember. Some of the benefits provided by the VA include

- disability compensation,
- pension,
- education and training,
- employment assistance,
- life insurance,
- home loans,
- health care, and
- dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC).

VA benefits are administered through Regional Benefit Offices. Visit <http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/offices.asp> to locate the nearest office. Visit [http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/benefits\\_summary\\_materials.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/benefits_summary_materials.asp) for more information about VA benefits.

### Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program

The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program provides services to very low-income veteran families who are currently in or transitioning to permanent housing. SSVF is designed to rapidly re-house veteran families experiencing homelessness and prevent homelessness for those at imminent risk due to a housing crisis. Funds are granted to private non-

profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that assist families by providing a range of supportive services designed to promote housing stability. SSVF grantees provide eligible families with outreach, case management, and assistance in obtaining VA and other benefits, which may include services such as

- health care,
- daily living,
- personal financial planning,
- transportation,
- fiduciary and payee,
- legal,
- child care, and
- housing counseling.

To learn if there is an SSVF provider in your community, visit <http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp> and look for the list of current fiscal year (FY) SSVF providers, or call the VA's National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 1-877-4AIDVET (1-877-424-3838).

### VA Public Awareness Resources

The VA provides a variety of public awareness materials designed to assist interested parties in understanding VA services, and encourage partnerships for the expansion of employment and housing for homeless veterans and their families. Resources include toolkits, brochures, fact sheets, posters, awareness videos, and ready-to-use social media content and web banners. Visit [http://www.va.gov/homeless/get\\_involved.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/get_involved.asp) for more information.

### STRATEGIES FOR SERVING VETERANS WITH CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

By working together, educators and providers of services to military families experiencing homelessness can ensure that both the parents and their children receive a full range of supports to meet their needs.

## Establish Contact

A crucial first step to working together is reaching out to your educational or service provider counterpart to establish contact and begin building a professional relationship. As mentioned, local liaisons serve as the key homeless education contact within their school districts. To find out who the local liaison for a particular school district is, service providers may contact the district's main switchboard or their State Coordinator at [http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state\\_resources.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php). Also mentioned previously, the VA operates a National Call Center for Homeless Veterans hotline to ensure that homeless veterans or veterans at-risk of homelessness have free, round-the-clock access to trained counselors. To find out who the local VA contact is in your community, contact the National Call Center at 1-877-4AIDVET (1-877-424-3838).

After establishing contact, local liaisons and local VA personnel should discuss what steps to take should they identify veteran families experiencing homelessness in need of educational supports or VA benefits.

## Become Familiar with Available Services

Local liaisons and local VA personnel can serve their clients better if they are more familiar with each other's services. Educators and service providers also should provide each other with informational materials about their programs to share with clients. School districts may have materials specific to their homeless education program available for distribution; or service providers can access NCHE awareness materials, including educational rights posters, NCHE brochures, parent brochures, and parent pack pocket folders, at <http://center.serve.org/nche/products.php>. As previously noted, a variety of VA awareness materials can be downloaded at [http://www.va.gov/homeless/get\\_involved.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/get_involved.asp).

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**This brief was developed by:**

**National Center for Homeless Education**

800-308-2145 (Toll-free Helpline)

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

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at [http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state\\_resources.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php).



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).

**Local Contact Information:**