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Highly Mobile Children and Youth with Disabilities: Policies and Practices in Five States

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INTRODUCTION

The term “highly mobile children and youth” is used to describe a broad population of individuals ages 6-21, who share the condition of having moved six or more times during their school years (Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003). The circumstances leading to their high mobility vary greatly and include conditions such as poverty, changes in family structure, lack of adequate affordable accommodations, abandonment, incapacity of the parent, family military assignment and reassignment and other factors. High mobility of children, youth and families is not a new issue for schools and other service systems. Over the past 100 years varied sub-groups of the United States’ population have become highly mobile. Children and youth experiencing homelessness comprise one of the most highly mobile groups of students and they qualify for special protections and services under federal laws that address the homeless population, especially the McKinney-Vento Act.

This document’s primary focus is on a subset of the population of mobile children—infants, preschoolers, children and youth with disabilities and their families who are highly mobile. First, a background section provides information about policies and practices developed for mobile children at the federal level under the McKinney-Vento Program. The second section is an analysis of interviews with five state directors of special education and their corresponding McKinney-Vento program coordinators regarding how states are addressing the needs of mobile children with disabilities.¹ This report was completed by Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education Directors (NASDSE) as part of its

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cooperative agreement with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education.²

BACKGROUND

The magnitude of the problem of mobile children is suggested by statistics gathered as part of the 2000 U.S. Census and a U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report (1994):

- Fifteen to 18% of school-aged children changed residence from the previous year.
- Nearly 12 million children changed their place of residence from 1999 to 2000.
- Poor families move 50% to 100% more often than non-poor families.
- Five hundred thousand children attended more than three schools between first and third grade.
- Approximately 30% of children in low-income families change schools annually versus 8% of children in families well above poverty level.
- The turnover rate for students in urban schools ranged between 40% and 80% each year.
- Frequent school changes have been correlated with lower academic achievement (Popp, 2004).

The issues of mobile children were brought to the public's attention and reinforced by the natural disasters occurring in 2005. Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma caused the uprooting of children and their families from the United States Gulf Coast region on a wide scale. More than 300,000 children were left homeless in the wake of these hurricanes.

Homeless children and youth represent a critical component of the population of mobile children. Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 USC 11431 et seq.) authorized the McKinney-Vento Program for homeless children and youth at the U.S. Department of Education that is administered under the Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.³ The Program, originally authorized in 1987 and, most recently, reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is designed to address the problems that homeless children and youth face in enrolling, attending and succeeding in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The McKinney-Vento Act provides funds to states and requires specific activities by them to assist homeless children and their families. States receive formula grants for program administration to support the responsibilities of a state coordinator for homeless education and to award competitive subgrants to local educational agencies (LEAs) on the basis of need. However, every LEA, whether or not it receives a McKinney-Vento subgrant, must designate a local liaison for homeless children and youth to ensure that homeless children and youth are

² Project Forum published a document entitled *Homelessness and Students with Disabilities: Educational Rights and Challenges* in January 2004. It is available at www.projectforum.org

³ For further details about the McKinney Vento Program, see <http://www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html>

identified, enrolled in, and have a full opportunity to succeed in schools in the LEA and receive educational services for which they are eligible.

Other requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act include the following:

- LEAs must make school placement determinations on the basis of the “best interest” of the child or youth. In determining what is a child or youth’s best interest, an LEA must, to the extent feasible, keep a homeless child or youth in the school of origin, unless doing so is contrary to the wishes of the child or youth’s parent or guardian.
- A state and its LEAs must adopt policies and practices to ensure that transportation is provided, at the request of the parent or guardian (or in the case of the unaccompanied youth, the local homeless education liaison), to and from the school of origin.
- Homeless children and youth can enroll in school immediately, even if regularly required documents, such as birth certificates or medical records, are missing. Schools cannot require proof of residency that might prevent or delay school enrollment.
- A school or state is prohibited from segregating a homeless child or youth in a separate school, or in a separate program within a school, based on the child or youth’s status as homeless.

The U.S. Department of Education issued a guidance document on the enrollment of homeless children and youth in schools through a posting in the Federal Register on March 8, 2002. It clarifies state and LEA responsibilities regarding enrollment and includes examples of successful or promising enrollment practices.

Among the most vulnerable members of the homeless and highly mobile population are those children and youth who qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE (n.d.) described the areas of vulnerability in their policy brief as follows:

- Not being identified as needing special education services.
- Difficulty with diagnosis due to mobility and other stressors.
- Lack of timely assessment, diagnosis, or service provision.
- Lack of continuity of services due to school transfers.
- Lack of timely or efficient records transfer when enrolling in a new school.
- Lack of an available parent or surrogate to represent the child or unaccompanied youth.

Homeless children are specifically mentioned in the 2004 amendments to IDEA. Under the Child Find requirement, IDEA provides that states must include homeless children in their plans to locate and evaluate all children “who are in need of special education and related services” [§612(a)(3)]. Requirements to follow the McKinney-Vento Act also appear under the General Supervision section [§612(a)(11)(A)(iii)] and mandated membership on the State Advisory Panel [§612(a)(21)(B)(v)].

The remainder of this document summarizes and analyzes information provided through interviews held jointly with state special education officials and state coordinators for the education of homeless

children and youth concerning their services to mobile children, including their implementation of the McKinney-Vento law.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this analysis were obtained through telephone interviews. Project Forum staff developed a protocol to guide the discussion in the interviews and provided a copy to the interviewees prior to the call. Interviews were conducted during the period June-August 2006 with individuals from the following five states—Florida, Louisiana, Maine, Oregon and Virginia. These states were chosen because of recognized policies, their ongoing refinement of their child/student databases, their reported large highly mobile populations and their recent experiences with natural disasters. Interviews were summarized and entered into Atlas.ti, a software program used for coding and analysis of qualitative data. Other relevant information was obtained from the materials listed in the reference section at the end of this document.

RESULTS OF STATE INTERVIEWS

Causes of Mobility

Interviewees consistently mentioned factors that contribute to mobility for children and youth that were consistent with causes listed in the literature on this topic. They include:

- poverty;
- lack of affordable housing;
- low paying/seasonable jobs (migrant workers);
- natural disasters (notably the hurricanes of 2005);
- domestic violence and substance abuse (these conditions often are not apparent in rural/sparsely settled areas);
 - military reassignments and base closures; and
 - unstable foster care.

Locating Mobile Children and Youth

State officials mentioned a variety of strategies they use to locate mobile children. For example, in *Florida*, homeless liaisons go into neighborhoods with social workers, contact churches, put up posters in places such as local businesses and doctors' offices and contact women's groups to find people who are homeless. Individuals or families found eligible under the McKinney-Vento Program are enrolled immediately and are then provided access to benefits, such as the free lunch program, for at least the remainder of that school year. The strongest mechanism in *Florida* for locating pre-school children is the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS), a statewide network of centers (<http://www.paec.org/fdlrsweb/index.htm>) that provides diagnostic and learning resources and Child Find services to school districts and other entities in the state. Homeless young children are given priority if there is a waiting list for a program.

In *Oregon*, the State Coordinator for Education for Homeless Children and Youth advised that she provides training and tools to aid school district liaisons in outreach and enrollment. Programs for unaccompanied youths emphasize outreach and options to assist youths in returning to school for a diploma or work toward a Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED). Collaboration with the foster care system in *Oregon* has resulted in a new law that incorporates McKinney-Vento requirements into the foster system: Children in foster care can continue in their school of origin despite foster placement changes that might be out of the assigned geographical area for that school. The Department of Human Services is responsible for the cost of transportation in these cases.

Louisiana respondents said that, as a result of the hurricanes of 2005, they have been able to have a homeless indicator added to their database and it has been instrumental in identifying homeless children and seeing that they get the services they need. The state also has a special program called LA-4 that targets pre-schoolers from low income families.

In *Maine*, each school district tracks its own school-age children and they also combine data from the shelter count to identify homeless children. Children who attend school unions (districts structures in Maine that serve multiple towns/cities) can pick their own high school and some concern was expressed about the possibility that children are lost in this transition.

Virginia interviewees identified the most significant factors for identification as word of mouth, local school system staff, liaisons' activities and homeless shelters for identifying homeless children who are below school age.

Number of Mobile Children and Costs for Services

Discussions with the states represented in this analysis emphasized that many factors contribute to the problem of accurately counting the number of mobile children in a state during any given period. Larger cities in some states report as high as 50% to 60% turnover of students in schools in a given year and sudden changes can be triggered by natural disasters. Each state reports the number of homeless children identified under the McKinney-Vento Program, but that does not cover the full cohort of children that could be considered mobile. National estimates of mobility among school-age children reported above in the Background section provide some indication of incidence, but the actual figures for a specific location are not usually available because these data are not tracked.

Similarly, it was difficult for states to provide a figure that would reflect the total cost of services for mobile children. Federal funds are provided to states under the McKinney-Vento Program and the Migrant Education Program and under programs organized by the military to assist children and families. One interviewee also mentioned that in-kind services are provided by both public and private agencies. Thus, specific figures could not be quoted by the states because there is no consistency in what would be included in the total cost for educational services to mobile children nor are such data tracked in any of the states interviewed.

Features of State Programs Under the McKinney-Vento Act

As described above, the McKinney-Vento Program funds a coordinator in every state. A portion of the funds available to states under the McKinney-Vento Act is used for subgrants to LEAs. Although

every LEA is required to comply with the law and identify an LEA liaison for homelessness, no state has sufficient funds to make a grant to every LEA. For example, *Oregon* is able to provide subgrants to 44 of its 197 LEAs. States are involved in data collection and monitoring for compliance more extensively for LEAs with subgrants than for those without them.

A variety of strategies to support and strengthen services to homeless children were reported by the state officials who were interviewed. They particularly stressed the importance of professional development. For example, the *Oregon* coordinator described her role in providing information on the McKinney-Vento Program at statewide conferences for various state and local officials as well as web-based surveys and the use of listservs for LEA liaisons. All interviewees made reference to ongoing local training sessions. *Louisiana* officials described the importance of strong state-level coordination on every level related to school-age children, especially in the face of natural disasters such as the effects of the hurricanes of 2005 with which the state continues to deal.

States perform ‘desk monitoring’ of LEAs under the McKinney-Vento Program for document review and some also perform onsite monitoring visits to ensure compliance. Monitoring under their special education program and the state complaint system also provides mechanisms for checking on local McKinney-Vento programs. *Oregon* includes Child Find requirements for children who are homeless or who move frequently within its statewide special education monitoring system and related training. *Maine* also intends to incorporate language related to the homeless program into its revised state regulations for special education to conform with the changes in IDEA 2004 regulations.

The interviewees also stressed the importance of adequate data collection systems. *Florida* officials emphasized the value of their well developed statewide database on students as a support in their efforts to serve homeless and other mobile children. Every child has a unique student identifier with added coding for the LEA. The database includes a code for homeless and other data elements that would reflect mobility, e.g., multiple schools attended within a year, changes of address, etc. *Oregon* has a state-level student database, but homelessness is not one of the fields. Instead, every school district reports an annual count of homeless students through a secure web application. Each *Oregon* student has a secure student identification (SSID) number that can be used to track students reported in student level collections. In *Maine*, homeless children can be matched only through the special education database, but the state database is being expanded. *Virginia* is developing a tracking system for special education that will flag children who are migrant and/or homeless. It is now possible in that state to identify students as homeless, migrant, and those with disabilities and, while all homeless children cannot be identified, homelessness has been flagged since 2003.

Virginia has developed an extensive project known as Project HOPE-Virginia to address homeless issues. Funding is authorized under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act and the College of William and Mary administers the program for the Virginia Department of Education, fulfilling the responsibilities of the office of the state coordinator. The resources available on the website (<http://www.wm.edu/hope>) include general information, a set of policy briefs and other documents, including the *Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit* produced by Project HOPE-VA for a national audience and used as the basis for a state-specific toolkit.

Tracking Outcomes Data

There is no formal tracking of outcomes for mobile children on a statewide or national basis. Academic outcomes in math and reading are reported for homeless children in LEAs that receive subgrants under the McKinney-Vento Program. *Oregon* officials said that LEA subgrantees send reading and math achievement data to the state for analysis at the state level. Local liaisons are responsible for tracking and reporting student progress. These data can show how students are progressing or moving to the next grade. Other states report more limited efforts to provide specific achievement data for homeless children.

Challenges

State officials mentioned that the problems most commonly complicating the provision of successful services to mobile children were the lack of affordable housing and limited employment opportunities. One interviewee said it is not always a lack of both—there is often a mismatch between the availability of affordable housing and jobs in an area. Other issues mentioned in discussing challenges to serving this population included the following:

- Record transfer is an issue that often poses barriers to timely and appropriate services. Delays can be caused by a variety of factors such as loss of records in transfers or parents' not having copies of their child's individualized education program (IEP) when they transition to a new school.
- Registration at a new school has posed problems because of strict documentation requirements at some schools. Mobile parents often do not have the necessary copies of birth certificates or other family documents. Residency is also an issue that might be raised in the enrollment process and pose a barrier to acceptance into the school.
- Graduation can be a problem given the variation among districts and states especially given the current movement toward standards-based graduation requirements. One interviewee said that there are still local officials who claim, "If you didn't go to my high school for four years, you're not going to get my diploma!"
- Transportation issues for this population include covering the costs as well as coping with distances and inadequate services.
- Children placed in a foster home are not always considered homeless—only children awaiting foster care are eligible for McKinney-Vento services even if the placement is only temporary. This limits the amount of help that can be provided under some programs. However, coverage for foster children is a complex issue. Since federal guidance allows states to determine which children should be considered homeless, some states allow all children in foster care to be McKinney-eligible and some states have extended some protections to all their foster children.
- Training and outreach need to be continued and expanded at the state and district levels, especially for school secretaries who often handle enrollment and special education personnel who are not always included in training on mobile children.
- Coordination at the state level is a continuing need. Strategies such as interagency agreements and involvement of regional service centers can provide essential support for outreach and service delivery.

- Unaccompanied youth⁴ are one of the special problems that are posed by teenagers who are homeless. They are especially difficult to identify, place in appropriate homes and get involved in returning to school.
- More research is also needed to identify effective strategies for addressing service delivery for mobile children and documenting the consequences of ignoring their needs.
- There is an ongoing need to raise awareness about issues related to mobile children.

One respondent also noted that, for children covered under McKinney-Vento, some of these challenges are less prevalent or intense than occurs for their highly mobile peers without such protection.

Policy Recommendations

Interviewees offered the following recommendations for action in policy development that could support improved services for mobile and homeless children:

- Support the development of more affordable housing.
- Streamline and coordinate the intersection of laws that impact this population.
- Expand interagency agreements for cooperation at state and local levels.
- Track post-school outcomes for all students, not only students with disabilities, especially in employment and housing.
- Increase services for migrant populations.
- Clarify funding responsibilities for all aspects of services these children need.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This report has focused on the state of services to mobile children in five states and particularly on services to children with disabilities in those states. A highly complex picture emerged from the interviews. State staff members contributed a wealth of information on, and insights into, the causes and effects of high mobility as well as the steps being taken to address them. However at this time, there is no coordinated infrastructure for serving the highly mobile population in the educational system.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act model offers perhaps the best direction for next steps to take with its funding and requirements for local liaisons, outreach, monitoring and the stipulation that children must be maintained in their school of origin. More research on the implementation of this federal law and its integration with state policies and requirements could provide direction to more effective ways to serve these children and youth and counteract the effects of mobility and homelessness through school-based strategies.

⁴ Unaccompanied youth include young people who have run away from home, been thrown out of their homes, and/or been abandoned by parents or guardians. For further details on this population, see http://www.nlchp.org/FA_Education/UY%20Brief%2012-05.pdf.

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