

# School as a Safety Net: Connecting Displaced Children with Educational and Support Services

A Handbook for Relief Agency Staff and Volunteers



Connecting Schools and  
Displaced Students Series  
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The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) operates a national resource center with research and information enabling communities to address the needs of children and their families and of unaccompanied youth in homeless situations.

NCHE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is housed at the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Phone: 800-308-2145 Website: <https://nche.ed.gov>

For additional information and resources on providing assistance for schools serving students affected by disasters, visit <https://nche.ed.gov/disaster-preparation-and-response/>

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## The Landscape



This handbook is designed to help relief agency staff members and volunteers understand how to coordinate services with local schools after a disaster. Students who are considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act need access to comprehensive support in the weeks and months following a disaster such as a hurricane, tornado, flood, mudslide, fire, or earthquake. After their lives have been disrupted by disasters, going back to school helps students find the structure, normalcy, and routine that is essential to their health and well-being. Mental health experts consider returning to school to be a critical step in the healing process after experiencing a disaster.

The McKinney-Vento Act protects the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness. It provides legal protections so children and youth in homeless situations can enroll in, attend, and succeed in school and preschool programs. This law typically covers students who have lost their housing due to disasters.

## The Landscape

School services complement the services of relief agencies by providing a team of caring, nurturing professionals, who attend to a spectrum of needs:

- Every school district has a local homeless education liaison (hereafter called the “local liaison”). This person, who may also be called the McKinney-Vento project coordinator or the McKinney-Vento liaison, is a “first responder” in the case of a disaster, specializing in the school enrollment of children displaced from their homes. Liaisons also ensure that students’ needs are evaluated and that they are placed in appropriate programs.
- Schools employ nurses, counselors, and other medical and mental health professionals who specialize in caring for children and youth.
- Special education staff members ensure that children with special needs receive appropriate services.
- Students experiencing homelessness are automatically eligible for free school meals.
- Schools can provide these students with clothing, shoes, school uniforms, books, backpacks, and school supplies.
- Schools can support parents by: orienting them to the local community; connecting them with local resources; referring them to parental involvement programs; and caring for students during and after school hours so parents can concentrate on finding housing, jobs, food, and other needed services.

## The Landscape

In the wake of disasters, families can find resources and support and relief through school enrollment.

Such efforts to support parents can be the key to children and parents feeling invested in the school. After a family moved to the district following a disaster, one local liaison discovered that the student's mother did not speak English. After having lost everything in the storm, the mother was overjoyed when offered free English classes on her child's campus through a partnership between the district's English Learner (EL) and Adult Education programs.

A local liaison reported that extracurricular activities were critical in making new students feel at home and invested in school. One father reported that his son (a senior) enrolled in school and absolutely loved it. He attended the Friday night football games which was something he did not even do when he was in his previous school.



## Who is Homeless?

### **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 similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;*
  - 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).*



## Connecting Displaced Students With School It's Easier Than You Think!

Any student who is living in a shelter, motel (due to lack of adequate accommodations), temporary or inadequate trailer, or is staying temporarily with relatives or friends because they lost housing, or is living in any other situation described in the McKinney-Vento Act has educational rights under the Act.

**Q: *Does every school district have a staff member who specializes in enrolling displaced children in school?***

Yes. They're called local liaisons, and they are mandated by the McKinney-Vento Act. Every state also has a state coordinator for homeless education who oversees local district homeless education programs and coordinates state-level activities.

**Q: *How can we get in touch with the local liaison in our school district?***

For each state's website, go to <https://nche.ed.gov/data/> and click on the state. The state coordinator contact information is listed along with a link to the state education agency which is required to post the contact information for all local liaisons on its website. You may also call your district's central office or contact the National Center for Homeless Education at (800) 308-2145 or [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

### **How can students enroll in school when they don't have a fixed address?**

The McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless as lacking a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” and states that homeless students must be enrolled in school immediately, without a fixed address and without any documents proving their address.

### **How can homeless students enroll in and begin attending school, when they don't have school records?**

The McKinney-Vento Act also states that eligible students must be enrolled in school immediately, without any school records. The new school must contact prior schools to obtain those records. If records are not available, the new school can administer basic assessments, interview the student and parents, and contact previous teachers and counselors to determine the appropriate classes and services for the student.

### **How can homeless students enroll in school when they don't have immunization or other health records?**

The McKinney-Vento Act states that eligible students must be enrolled in and begin attending school immediately, without immunization or other medical records. The new school must work with the parent to obtain those records, or, if necessary, to obtain immunizations. Since most school-aged children displaced by disasters were attending school prior to the disaster, it is likely that they have already been immunized in accordance with the requirements of their home state.



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

Relief agencies can help support immediate enrollment by: helping schools and parents obtain school and medical records; assisting with any needed immunizations; giving schools documentation for any immunizations you provide; and supplying schools with information when immunizations are unnecessary (for example, sharing CDC and Health Department bulletins and information about what relief agencies do to prevent outbreaks and promote good health in shelters).



### ***Will students have to change schools every time they move?***

After disasters, families tend to move frequently. Changing schools with each move would damage students' emotional security and academic success. For this reason, the McKinney-Vento Act states that eligible students can continue attending the same school even if they move out of that school's attendance area. This school is called their "school of origin", and they can remain there the entire time they are homeless. Later, when students move into permanent housing, they can still finish the school year in their school of origin. The only limit on this important right is that remaining in the school of origin must be in the student's best interest.

Schools, families, and relief agencies must work together to make the school of origin provision a success. To be able to make good decisions about school placement, schools and families need as much advance information as possible about issues such as openings and closures of shelters and other temporary locations, limits on vouchers for motels and temporary apartments, and the most likely locations of long-term housing.

## Connecting Displaced Students With School

Best interest decisions are student-centered and individualized and should consider factors including those related to the impact of mobility on achievement, education, health, and safety of students, giving priority to the request of the parent or guardian or (in the case of an unaccompanied youth) the youth. **For more information**, please see NCHE's brief *Guiding the Discussion on School Selection* at: [https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/sch\\_sel\\_checklist.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/sch_sel_checklist.pdf).



### ***How will the students get to school if they stay in their school of origin?***

The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to provide or arrange transportation to and from the school of origin when a parent, guardian, or youth requests it. This transportation can take many forms, including school buses, public transportation, fuel reimbursement for parents or youth with cars, or other appropriate arrangements.



Providing transportation to large numbers of students displaced by major disasters can pose logistical and financial challenges for school districts. Most districts have experts in transportation logistics, but proactive coordination and clear, timely communication with relief agencies are critical. Agencies should help schools arrange transportation, strategizing together and pooling resources where possible.

It is essential that relief agencies give schools as much advance notice as possible about temporary housing closures, expiration of housing vouchers, and other changes in temporary housing. Such information is critical for planning transportation and making sure students don't miss school.

## Connecting Displaced Students With School

**Q** *Does the law apply to students who are staying temporarily with family or friends?*

Yes. In addition to children and youth staying in shelters, the McKinney-Vento Act also applies specifically to those who are staying temporarily with family or friends due to a lack of housing.

**Q** *Do these rules apply to students who have been displaced and are in other living situations?*

Yes. The McKinney-Vento Act also applies specifically to children and youth who are staying in motels, campgrounds, temporary or inadequate trailers, and public spaces like parks or bus stations due to a lack of housing.

**Q** *Do these rules apply to young people who have been separated from their parents?*

Yes. Youth living in homeless situations without a parent or guardian are covered by the McKinney-Vento Act, regardless of the reason for the family's separation. Unaccompanied youth have the right to enroll in school immediately, without the signature of a parent or guardian.



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

### **How can unaccompanied homeless youth enroll in school without a parent or guardian?**

Schools have developed different strategies to enroll unaccompanied homeless youth, including allowing them to enroll themselves, having the local liaison enroll them, allowing non-guardian adult caregivers to enroll them, or allowing appropriate staff from other agencies (shelters, child welfare, etc.) to enroll them. Whatever the method, youth on their own have the right to enroll in school immediately. More information about the rights of unaccompanied youth and suggestions on how to support them are available at <https://nche.ed.gov/unaccompanied-youth/>.

*After enrolling two unaccompanied homeless youth who had gotten separated from their parents during a storm, one liaison said, “Without the McKinney-Vento Act, it would have been impossible for them to register in school.”*

### **How can we connect very young children with school?**

The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools to enroll homeless children in public preschool programs, including Head Start. Head Start provides medical and mental health services to children and their families, and many Head Start agencies have special procedures and programs to facilitate the enrollment of homeless children. The local school or mental health agency should have information about available preschool programs. You can also visit <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/center-locator> to find local Head Start programs.



## Connecting Displaced Students With School

Most communities also have programs for infants and toddlers who are too young for preschool. For example, Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (“Part C”) is a program that serves children ages 0 to 3 who have or are at risk for developmental delays, particularly those in homeless situations. Part C provides a broad spectrum of medical and mental health services for the entire family. Relief agencies can help their clients receive these services by inviting the local Part C team into temporary housing to do child development screenings. To find out about Part C resources in a community, contact the local school or the state Part C Coordinator (contact information is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/monitor/state-contact-list.html>).

### **Can special needs students also be enrolled in school immediately?**

Yes. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which is the federal law governing special education services, requires schools to identify, enroll, and serve children with special needs in homeless situations. More information is available at [https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/nav\\_idea\\_mv.pdf](https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/nav_idea_mv.pdf).



## The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act *Essential Information*

Did you know?...

- Every school district has a local liaison who specializes in enrolling displaced children in school.
- The McKinney-Vento Act generally covers displaced children and youth living in shelters, motels, temporary or inadequate trailers, doubled-up with friends or relatives due to loss of housing, and many other homeless situations.
- Students must be enrolled in school immediately even without school records, immunization records, or a guardian.
- Students can remain in the same school despite moving among temporary and/or inadequate accommodations as long as it is in their best interest.
- Students have the right to receive transportation to and from their school of origin.
- Students must also have access to appropriate public preschool programs and to special education services.

School District Contact Information



National Center for Homeless Education  
Toll-free Help Line: 800-308-2145  
<https://nche.ed.gov>

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

Staff from relief agencies have noted that pre-existing relationships in affected communities were the key to providing efficient and effective services during and after disasters. Establishing working relationships, memoranda of understanding, and communication protocols before a disaster strikes are essential response and recovery strategies. Agencies can use these same strategies to ensure that displaced children are connected quickly with schools and other resources.

### ***Communicate***

Schools and relief agencies agree that inadequate communication between the agencies and the schools is a significant barrier to getting displaced students into school and keeping them there. Communicating early and often will help ease everyone's burden, as schools, agencies, and displaced families help each other to meet the needs.



#### **Communication Tips**



- On the state and local level, make schools an integral part of disaster planning prior to emergencies, emergency response team and update meetings during emergencies, and long-term recovery planning after emergencies.
- Before the next hurricane or fire season, have regional agency officers meet with the state coordinators for homeless education in their regions (virtually or in person), and local agency officers with local liaisons. Contact information for state coordinators is available by clicking on your state at <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>
- Establish a system to quickly and reliably communicate with local liaisons.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

### Inform

Relief agencies should capitalize on opportunities to share their unique perspective on and experience working with families, youth, and schools.

For serving families and youth:

- Train your staff about the McKinney-Vento Act or conduct joint trainings with the local liaison. Share related information with the parents and youth you serve.
- Help parents understand why it's important for their children to return to school as soon as possible.



### Informing Tips



- Does your agency design the containers for the food and water you distribute? If so, how about mentioning school on the wrapper? For example: “Did you know your children can attend school in this community right now, even without school records or a legal address? Ask an aid worker for more information.”
- Posters, flyers, and word of mouth are great ways to share information. Posters and other resources are available at no charge at <https://nche.ed.gov/resources/>.
- Invite local liaisons and school administrators to your agency, so you can get to know each other. Having an established rapport with schools will put both agencies in a better position to help parents and students feel comfortable there.



## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

For collaborating with schools:

- Share with schools any information you have about gang issues, cultural or language challenges, parent concerns, and other relevant issues; this will help schools better serve children and families.
- Provide schools with logistical support and training to help them manage large influxes of donations and/or volunteers.
- Help schools gather appropriate emergency contact information for displaced families.

### Learn

Get to know your local schools. Find out about all the services they offer. These services may include specific resources available to displaced



children; medical and mental health care; food; clothing; support for parents; school locations and attendance boundaries; which schools in the community are over or under capacity; where there are closed schools that could be reopened if necessary; and which schools are best equipped with mental health personnel, supplies, and administrative staff. This information is invaluable when making decisions about where to place trailers and shelters, what hotels to use, and where students should enroll in school.

### Share

Sharing basic information about the families and youth you serve is essential to help schools ensure that displaced students can enroll in school and receive all the services for which they are eligible. Schools must identify children before they can serve them, and your agency's assistance with this is valuable and appreciated.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?



### Sharing Tip



To share information with schools while still complying with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and other federal regulations, many shelters have incorporated a release of information into their standard intake forms to allow shelter staff to share with local liaisons the names and ages of school-aged children and youth staying in the shelter or receiving services.

### **Support**

Schools can provide critical mental health and medical support to students and families. Help schools be more effective by sharing your expertise in supporting disaster victims, providing sensitivity trainings to school mental health teams, and supporting the school staff as they cope with their own feelings of stress and grief.



### Sharing Tip



Families who are staying with family or friends in the wake of a disaster face specific stressors. Valued relationships can become strained or even destroyed when squeezing multiple families into a space designed for one, coping with hostile landlords, and trying to make financial ends meet. Relief agencies can provide important mental health support to these families and their hosts to prolong the living arrangement and prevent the influx of even more families into shelters.

### **Coordinate**

Inform schools immediately regarding shelter closures, expiration of hotel and apartment vouchers, and other changes in temporary housing. To enroll students in the right school and keep them there, schools need as much advance information as possible.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

To the extent feasible, coordinate closures and moves with the schools considering issues of transportation, the school calendar, and important school events like final exams and standardized testing.



### Coordination Tip



Designate one local staff member to be your agency's contact with the schools to develop relationships with homeless education staff prior to emergencies; maintain contact with the schools during emergencies; and get to know the law, the local schools, local liaisons, enrollment procedures, and school administrators.

## ***Cooperate***

Work with local liaisons to make school enrollment and attendance as streamlined as possible.



### Coordination Tip



Allow the school district to conduct enrollment onsite at your agency or shelter facilities, or have your staff complete school enrollment documents as part of your standard intake process and forward them to the local liaison. Schools may also want to access your facilities to provide after-school and other activities. For example, after disasters, many public schools seek centralized locations to conduct onsite enrollment, special education evaluations, and orientation activities for students and parents.

## How Can Relief Agencies Help?

### ***Plan for the Future***

Some displaced students and families will not be able to return home, and the local schools will be educating and serving these families for months and years to come. Many of them will experience homelessness again as relief agency services end and they struggle to get back on their feet. Before closing down your agency's operations, and as part of your recovery efforts, give the schools, families, and youth a chance to benefit from your knowledge and experience as they confront short- and long-term planning issues (9 months, 1 year, 3 years, 5 years out).



## Connecting Displaced Students with Educational and Support Services Checklist

- **Communicate:** Prior to disaster striking, meet with local liaisons in your service area or the state coordinator for homeless education. Implement a fast and reliable system for communicating with schools during an emergency.
- **Inform:** Make McKinney-Vento and school enrollment information available to parents through posters and brochures.
- **Learn:** Find out where all schools are located in the community and what services they offer.
- **Share:** Establish a procedure for sharing information with schools; for example, develop a form for parents to sign during intake to allow information sharing.
- **Support:** Reach out to provide needed services to families in precarious, temporary living situations.
- **Coordinate:** Designate a local staff member to be your agency's contact with the schools.
- **Cooperate:** Work with the local liaison to determine how your agency can facilitate school enrollment.
- **Plan for the Future:** Work with schools on long-term plans for disaster recovery.

School District Contact Information



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## Resources from the National Center for Homeless Education

NCHE resources may be found on the NCHE website at <https://nche.ed.gov>.

Resources include:

- Posters
- Brochures
- Parent Pack Pocket Folders
- Briefs
- Publications
- Web-based Trainings
- Homeless Education Listserv
- Disaster Preparation and Recovery Handbooks



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