



A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Federal funding to support students experiencing homelessness	2
What are CBOs?	4
Collaborating with CBOs	5
Benefits of collaborating with CBOs	5
Establishing a formal collaboration with CBOs	7
Considerations for informal vs. formal agreements with CBOs	8
Example from the field	10
Valdosta, Georgia, and the South Georgia Partnership to End Homelessness	10
Conclusion	11
References	11
Appendix A: Common contracting language	13

This National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) guide:

- highlights how collaborating, informally or formally (through contracts or other agreements), with community-based organizations can be an effective strategy for program implementation;
- describes effective strategies for collaborating with community-based organizations at the state and local levels; and
- highlights examples of local education agencies (LEAs) that are contracting with community-based organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Federal funding to support students experiencing homelessness

In the 2023–2024 school year, approximately 1.5 million children and youth experiencing homelessness (CYEH) were enrolled in public schools in the United States (NCHE, 2025). CYEH face many challenges due to high mobility, poverty, and trauma resulting from homelessness that can impact their education. Federal funding provides the opportunity for educational agencies to collaborate with community-based organizations (CBOs) to support the holistic needs of CYEH.

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (hereafter *the McKinney-Vento Act*) is a federal law that addresses the educational needs of CYEH. The McKinney-Vento Act authorizes the Education of Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) program, which outlines the rights and services¹ that CYEH are entitled to under the program to remove barriers and ensure they can fully participate in school. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) allocated over \$129 million to states and territories in fiscal year 2025 through EHCY funding allocations under the McKinney-Vento Act, based on each state and territory's proportion of the federal Title I, Part A allocation.² States, in turn, subgrant the funds (hereafter referred to as *McKinney-Vento subgrant funds*) competitively to local education agencies (LEAs) to support EHCY program implementation.³ Most states reserve up to 25% of their

¹ See NCHE's [The Educational Rights of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: What Service Providers Need to Know](#) for more information on the rights and services for children and youth experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act.

² Under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, federal funds are allocated to states based on a formula. For more information, visit the U.S. Department of Education's [Title I, Part A: Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies](#) webpage.

³ Visit NCHE's [McKinney-Vento Subgrant Authorized Activities webpage](#) for a list of allowable uses of funds outlined in the McKinney-Vento Act. Visit NCHE's [McKinney-Vento Subgrants webpage](#) for resources on McKinney-Vento subgrants.

annual state EHCY allocation to be used for state-level activities. Minimally funded states, as defined in the McKinney-Vento Act, may reserve up to 50% of their annual state EHCY allocation for this purpose (McKinney-Vento Act section 722(e)(1)).⁴

CYEH often require support beyond what the education system has the capacity to provide, and that may be outside of the allowable uses for McKinney-Vento subgrant funds. LEAs must coordinate and collaborate with CBOs that provide non-educational wraparound supports, such as access to housing, food, medical and mental health care, childcare, and other basic necessities. The McKinney-Vento Act (section 722(g)(5)) requires coordination with local social service agencies to support the identification of CYEH and more comprehensively address their needs. The [U.S. Department of Education's Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program: Non-Regulatory Guidance](#) (ED, 2018, pp. 36-40) states that both the office of the state coordinator located within each state educational agency (SEA) and the local liaison in each LEA have a duty to coordinate and collaborate with social service providers and develop interagency partnerships on behalf of the McKinney-Vento program.

McKinney-Vento subgrant funds may be used to support coordination between schools and agencies that provide services to CYEH, including outreach services to students residing in temporary living arrangements, such as shelters and hotels/motels. McKinney-Vento subgrant funds are used to enhance support for CYEH by ensuring access to the same challenging state academic standards as their peers. LEAs may use McKinney-Vento subgrant funds to cover a range of activities, including academic support, transportation assistance, specialized supports, and other authorized activities, such as professional development.⁵ NCHE's [Use-of-Funds Tip Sheet for Serving Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness with Education for Homeless Children and Youth \(EHCY\) Program Funds](#) is a valuable resource to support educational administrators and LEAs in making decisions regarding allowable uses of funds.

What are CBOs?

Although the McKinney-Vento Act does not define *community-based organizations*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines a CBO as “a public or private nonprofit organization of demonstrated effectiveness that—(A) is representative of a community or significant segments of a community; and (B) provides educational or related services to individuals in the community” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act section 7801(5)). A CBO differs from a state or local agency that resides in “the executive branch of a State, municipality, or other political subdivision of a

⁴ Visit section D, “State Uses of Funds,” of the [Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance](#) for information on what activities can be supported using the state-level allocation.

⁵ Visit NCHE's [McKinney-Vento Subgrant Authorized Activities webpage](#) for information on what activities can be supported using the subgrant funds.

State, or an agency or department...” (Political Activity of Certain State and Local Employees, 2024).

CBOs encompass a wide variety of service providers, educational institutions, civic organizations, clinics, associations, coalitions, and other organizations. Many direct federal grantees for targeted and prioritized homeless assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are CBOs. These include nonprofit organizations that are the lead agency for the state or local continuum of care (CoC), the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) basic center program (BCP), street outreach program (SOP), transitional living program (TLP), and Head Start projects.⁶

Collaborating with CBOs helps SEAs and LEAs meet the academic and non-academic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Such collaborations can be formal (e.g., through contractual agreements or memoranda of agreement) or informal (e.g., through casual partnership activities). For example, CBOs can enhance the ability of school staff to identify CYEH and provide wraparound services as well as other educationally related support services to improve student outcomes, attendance, and retention.

COLLABORATING WITH CBOS

Benefits of collaborating with CBOs

Many students show up to school facing challenges that are not school-related, such as homelessness, unmet basic needs, and lack of access to medical care (Hill, 2020). Schools have the opportunity to help address these challenges; however, their approach can be strengthened by relying on a community network—including CBOs as well as parent volunteers, private donors, local businesses, medical centers, libraries, local police departments, and social services—to address the non-academic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Collaborating with CBOs offers multiple benefits, as explored below.



Many CBOs have the experience, expertise, and capacity to provide wraparound services beyond what schools can or are funded to provide. Wraparound services address students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs to supplement schools’ efforts in addressing the academic needs of students (Yu, 2022). The goal of a wraparound service is to improve outcomes for students through collaboration with various systems to provide students with individualized supports (Hill, 2020).

⁶ ED has clarified that faith-based organizations can be considered CBOs under EHCY but may not discriminate against a beneficiary based on religious beliefs (34 C.F.R. § 76.52(e)). See the U.S. Department of Education’s [EHCY & ARP-HCY Monitoring and Uses of Funds](#) presentation for additional requirements for faith-based organizations serving as CBOs.

Example in Practice

The Barrow County School System in Georgia contracts with The Social Empowerment Center (a mental health and social service agency) to provide services that the school system itself cannot provide to students. Through this collaboration, the Center offers behavioral health services, system navigation, and other support services to CYEH and their families. The Center also provides summer enrichment programs for students and parents during a time when the school system does not offer programming. The Barrow County School System chose to contract with this CBO because it had a long history of demonstrating a vested interest in the community and because the school system and the CBO had already been collaborating informally. Regularly revisiting and re-evaluating agreements and processes has created a smooth contractual partnership that supports students and their families experiencing homelessness in Barrow County.



Collaboration across systems provides a pathway to prevention and intervention for students experiencing homelessness. Youth and young adult homelessness can only be sustainably addressed through collaboration across all systems of care. Collaborating and maintaining a relationship with CBOs broadens the types of supports schools provide and creates sustainable interventions (Samuels et al., 2019).



Collaboration is necessary to support the capacity of liaisons and other staff who work with students experiencing homelessness to identify such students, refer them to wraparound services, and provide other educationally related support services.⁷



Collaborating with CBOs is particularly necessary to support students experiencing homelessness because CBOs have the experience and expertise to address the unique needs of the populations they serve. For example, collaborating with CBOs that specifically work with unaccompanied homeless youth or other subpopulations of students experiencing homelessness opens communication between the CBO and the LEA. Furthermore, such collaboration can improve the identification of students experiencing homelessness and increase referrals to academic and non-academic supports.

Example in Practice

Browning Public Schools (BPS), located in the heart of the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana, includes nine schools and over 2,000 students, with 98% of the student population being members of the reservation. BPS partners with two local programs that address the mental health needs of students and families. BPS refers students and families to Native Connections, a local nonprofit organization that supports the native community in identifying and addressing the behavioral health needs

of youth. Additionally, BPS identifies and refers at-risk youth to Culture & Hope, an organization that provides programming focused on suicide prevention and reductions in substance misuse, as well as mental health support to students in the LEA and surrounding communities. Students who participate in Culture & Hope’s program attend cultural camps that build community through activities as well as provide resources and support.



CBOs are especially well-positioned to identify students experiencing homelessness because they are often the first place that students disclose their housing status. Students may not trust leaders and adults in their school buildings and may be reluctant to disclose their homeless status to them out of fear that their situation will worsen (DiPierro et al., 2022).

Establishing a formal collaboration with CBOs

Collaborations with CBOs can be formal or informal. While informal collaborations may allow for one-off or unstructured partnerships, establishing a formal collaboration may strengthen the relationship by defining shared goals, routines, and responsibilities for each partner. One method for formal collaboration with CBOs is through contracting. **A contract is a formal agreement between two parties that involves the provision of activities or services for a fee or payment.** According to the Uniform Guidance, a *contract* “means, for the purpose of Federal financial assistance, a legal instrument by which a recipient or subrecipient purchases property or services needed to carry out the project or program under a Federal award” (Uniform Administrative Requirements, 2013). See Appendix A for a list of common contracting terms and links to the Uniform Guidance (rules and requirements for Federal awards).

Entering into a contract or other formal agreement, such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or memorandum of agreement (MOA) with a CBO, may be particularly useful to support students experiencing homelessness because it may be an efficient and effective way for the SEA or LEA to connect students to wraparound services that educational agencies are otherwise unable to provide. A contract provides the opportunity to:

- **Establish and formalize a shared, clear vision for school-community collaboration.** Each partner enters the collaboration with its own vision and goals. A contract can formally capture each party’s expectations for the collaboration to ensure each organization’s needs are met.
- **Establish clear responsibilities.** A written and formal agreement ensures that each party understands its obligations and responsibilities to the partnership and the other partner.

⁷ According to a survey of 504 McKinney-Vento liaisons, 90% reported that aside from being the homeless liaison for their school district, they work in another official capacity in the district. 89% of liaisons reported that they spend half of their time or less engaging in the responsibilities of a homeless liaison (Ingram et al., 2017).

Examples of responsibilities include identifying leaders at each organization who will be responsible for the work, establishing how the partners will collaborate, and identifying processes to support the collaboration.

- **Establish financial obligations.** Contracts clearly indicate which funds will be used to support the collaboration, how the funds will be spent, and who will pay which amount.

The following section provides rationale and suggestions for collaborating with CBOs through formal or informal structures.

Considerations for informal vs. formal agreements with CBOs

Whether collaborating informally or formally, the partnership between educational agencies and CBOs should be strategic. The first step is identifying prospective CBOs for partnership. This should be a thoughtful process to ensure the partnership is appropriately and effectively meeting the needs of students, families, educators, and the community. Specifically, SEAs and LEAs should consider:

- which services CBOs provide;
- the CBO's experience and expertise in addressing identified needs;
- whether the CBO's staff is locally based, understands the local context, and is already engaged in the community;
- whether there are alternative CBOs that provide the same services and are better equipped to serve the target populations; and
- the quality of how CBOs evaluate their impact.⁸

Below are guiding principles for deciding between informal or formal partnerships with CBOs, as well as additional considerations specific to establishing a formal agreement with a CBO. These principles are not meant to be exhaustive; however, they provide information to support decision-making and planning. SEAs and LEAs should reflect on these considerations in light of their state and/or local context.



Identifying the need:

- **Conduct a needs assessment:** Collaborations with CBOs should focus on student needs. Use data to conduct a needs assessment to identify specific needs, populations, and services to target when collaborating or contracting with a CBO. NCHE's [Local Education Agency Informal Needs Assessment](#) can help SEAs and LEAs

⁸ Visit page 7 of the [United Way's Co-Location Toolkit](#) for additional information on co-location, guidance, and tips on co-locating services to improve access to community-based resources.

in conducting an informal needs assessment. In addition, SEAs and LEAs should determine which CBOs in the community can provide the services identified in the needs assessment. To expedite this process, begin with your organization's preferred vendor list, if one exists. If one doesn't exist, create an asset map to identify CBOs in the community (see the [Sample Community Asset Map](#)).

- **Consider capacity:** SEAs and LEAs should consider their existing capacity to meet student needs and how CBOs can help address any service gaps through collaboration or contracting.
- **Contracting considerations:** SEAs and LEAs should reflect on whether program funds can be used to provide specific services. To learn more about allowable uses of funds, see NCHE's [Use-of-Funds Tip Sheet for Serving Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness with Education for Homeless Children & Youth ECHY Program Funds](#).



Understanding organizational context:

- **Policies, procedures, and requirements:** Local liaisons should meet with relevant organizational departments, leaders, or staff to learn the specific policies, procedures, and requirements for collaborating with CBOs, as outlined by the SEA or LEA.
- **Contracting considerations:** An SEA or LEA should ensure all agency requirements are met. An SEA or LEA should also consider whether its agency's policies, procedures, and requirements specific to procurement will impact its desired timeline for providing services to eligible students.



Engaging the community:

- **Community collaboration:** SEAs and LEAs should engage students, families, educators, and other community members in identifying CBOs they believe can appropriately and effectively provide services to students. SEAs and LEAs should also engage these community collaborators when designing the collaboration with a CBO and throughout implementation.
- **Contracting considerations:** Community members should have a say in how funds are being spent when an SEA or LEA is contracting with a CBO.



Ensuring accessibility:

- **Accessibility implications:** SEAs and LEAs should be intentional in how and why they select a CBO as a partner. Considerations include a CBO's experience, expertise, and evidence of effectiveness in providing services and working with target student

populations. Additionally, SEAs and LEAs should evaluate the CBO's capacity to provide services in a manner that will effectively reach the targeted population.

- **Contracting considerations:** Conducting audits can be a helpful tool in assessing who is applying for and being awarded contracts by an SEA or LEA, as well as evaluating an SEA's or LEA's policies, programs, and practices for barriers that limit access to supports. For more information on audits that can be tailored to an LEA's needs, consult the [Homeless & Housing Resource Center's Guide to Resource Mapping and Accessing Community Needs](#).

EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD

Collaborating with a CBO can be a time-intensive process that requires staff capacity for the educational agency and the CBO. However, having an established relationship with a CBO can provide much-needed services to homeless children, youth, and families to better address barriers that the school or LEA is unable to meet. The following example from Valdosta, Georgia, highlights how an LEA is collaborating with a CBO and the steps both partners are taking to maintain the partnership.

Valdosta, Georgia, and the South Georgia Partnership to End Homelessness

The Valdosta City School District in southern Georgia is a Title I, Part A LEA.⁹ The LEA has close to 8,200 students, 95% of whom are eligible for free or reduced lunch.¹⁰ This past year, the LEA identified more than 300 students as experiencing homelessness. The Valdosta City School District has the third-highest mobility rate¹¹ in Georgia.

The LEA has had a formal partnership utilizing an MOU with the South Georgia Partnership to End Homelessness (SGPEH). This organization takes referrals from the district to connect families to services that include rapid rehousing, food and clothing resources, and job training. Once the LEA makes the referral, SGPEH works with the family to develop an action plan addressing their needs and reports back to the LEA.

The Valdosta City School District identified several actions to facilitate its collaboration with SGPEH:

- **The LEA and SGPEH maintain open and constant communication.** The LEA and SGPEH work closely together, hold frequent meetings, and have built a relationship in which they can

⁹ The purpose of Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is to provide all children with fair, equitable, and high-quality education to close achievement gaps by meeting the educational needs of children in schools with high levels of poverty. For more information, visit NCHE's [Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) webpage.

¹⁰ To view data on the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch by LEAs in the state of Georgia for the fiscal year 2025, visit [Fiscal Year 2024 Free and Reduced Lunch Schools Data - All Schools](#).

¹¹ Mobility rate is defined as the percentage of all students who are transferring into or out of a school within a school year (Rennie Center Education Research and Policy, n.d.).

contact each other when needed. They communicate almost daily to ensure that students and families receive the resources and support they need. Ongoing communication positively affects the work and helps build sustainability.

- **The LEA and SGPEH are committed to being collaborative partners with the broader community.** The local liaison and leadership at SGPEH sit on several local committees and initiatives together in Valdosta. These connections keep them informed about the community's needs as well as increase their visibility and commitment to serving students experiencing homelessness and their families.

Through this collaboration, SGPEH and Valdosta have served over 500 families since December 2022 by providing them with supportive services, including temporary or permanent housing and case management. The number of families served has increased drastically in the last two years, given that two hurricanes have impacted the area. To help bridge the gap in funding shortages, the Valdosta City Schools Foundation donates funds to help families address emergency needs.

CONCLUSION

Collaborating with CBOs is an effective way to provide wraparound supports and other services that the school or LEA does not offer to students experiencing homelessness. Although the process can be challenging to navigate, in part because it is specific to an educational agency's unique processes and context, strategic collaboration with CBOs can expand the impact of state or local programming for students experiencing homelessness. NCHCE encourages state coordinators, local liaisons, and others to apply the information that is shared here in their own work, with a focus on:

- understanding their school community and how collaborating with a CBO can support meeting the specific needs of students experiencing homelessness,
- understanding their agency's contracting processes as well as having good communication and guidance from the contracts office to make the process as smooth as possible,
- considering CBO commitments to equity and their capacity to serve underserved student populations when identifying and selecting CBOs,
- keeping a running list of vendors as a record for future use, and
- monitoring progress and addressing challenges early to ensure success and continuous improvement.

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APPENDIX A: COMMON CONTRACTING LANGUAGE

The language SEAs and LEAs use in contracting with CBOs can vary across agencies depending on local context and agency-specific processes and requirements. The list below includes common terminology used in contracting. These definitions should be checked against any specific terminology or concepts that an individual SEA or LEA uses.

Contracting: To make a binding agreement for the supply of goods or services at a fixed price between two or more parties ([Merriam-Webster](#), n.d.).

Subgrants: According to the U.S. Department of Education, a subgrant is “an award of financial assistance to a recipient to support the accomplishment of a public purpose,” as specified in [2 C.F.R. § 200.330\(a\)](#) of the Uniform Guidance.

Purchasing: The activity of buying supplies for a company or organization ([Cambridge Dictionary](#), n.d.).

Scope of work: A description of the work activities, deliverables, and/or timeline that a vendor must execute as part of delivering specific commodities or in the performance of contractual services ([Law Insider](#), n.d.).

Direct cost: Direct costs are those costs that can be identified specifically with a particular final cost objective, such as a federal award or other internally or externally funded activity, or that can be directly assigned to such activities relatively easily with a high degree of accuracy ([2 C.F.R. 200.413 Direct Costs](#)). Examples of direct costs include employee travel, salaries, and employee fringe benefits, as well as equipment, materials, or supplies for use on a specific grant or contract.

Indirect cost: Indirect costs are those that cannot be identified with a particular cost objective but have been incurred for common or joint objectives ([2 C.F.R. 200.414 Indirect Costs](#)). Examples of indirect costs include office overhead such as rent and utilities, maintenance of plant services, and expenditures related to fiscal operations.

Deliverable: Something that can be provided or achieved as a result of a process ([Cambridge Dictionary](#), n.d.).

Uniform Guidance: An authoritative set of rules and requirements for federal awards that synthesizes and supersedes guidance from earlier Office of Management and Budget (OMB) circulars. This guidance aims to reduce the administrative burden on award recipients while also guarding against the risk of waste and misuse of federal funds. Among other things, the OMB’s Uniform Guidance:

- removes previous guidance that is conflicting and establishes standard language;
- directs the focus of audits on areas that have been identified as at risk for waste, fraud, and abuse;

- lays the groundwork for federal agencies to standardize the processing of data; and
- clarifies and updates cost reporting guidelines for award recipients

([Office of Management and Budget, 2014](#)).

The Uniform Guidance contains definitions and essential information about procurement and contracting. For example, see:

- [2 C.F.R. 200](#). Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards. Part [200.317 Procurements by States and Indian Tribes](#). "A State educational agency may use the grant funds remaining after the State educational agency distributes subgrants under paragraph (1) to conduct activities under subsection (f) directly or through grants or contracts" ([McKinney-Vento Act Section 722 Grants for State and local activities for the education of homeless children and youths](#)).

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The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is the technical assistance (TA) center for the U.S. Department of Education’s Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) Program. NCHE provides training and technical assistance to state coordinators, local liaisons, community partners, parents, students, and other stakeholders to support the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness.

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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 oversee the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your state coordinator is, visit the [NCHE website](http://nche.ed.gov).

For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact the NCHE helpline at 305-306-8495 or NCHE.help@safalpartners.com.

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