



TIP SHEET 2:

Identifying Youth Experiencing Homelessness and Talking with Youth and Families about Homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that provides important educational rights and services to children and youth experiencing homelessness from grades preK to twelve.¹ Youth who come into contact with the juvenile justice system—even those placed in the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) system—may have been experiencing homelessness prior to their involvement with DJJ, and are therefore eligible for services. If a young person is identified as experiencing homelessness prior to or during their time in a DJJ placement, they may be eligible for services that can be critical to their school success and aid a young person’s re-entry from a juvenile justice placement into the community.

Nationally youth homelessness is on the rise and youth with juvenile system involvement are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness than their non-system involved peers. The McKinney-Vento Act defines “homeless children and youths” as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The term includes children and youths who are:

- sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as “doubled-up”);
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- living in emergency or transitional shelters; or abandoned in hospitals;
- 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;
- Children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, or similar settings;

¹ 42 U.S.C. § 11431 et seq.

- Substandard housing (including homes without working heat, water, or utilities) , and
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.²

If a youth lacks fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and is not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, they are considered an **unaccompanied youth**.³

Given the stigma and fear youth and families may feel about being Identified as experiencing homelessness, your skill in talking with young people and families can aid in correct identification and successful connection with services. Below are tips to help DJJ personnel accurately identify youth experiencing homelessness in a way that is respectful and protects their confidentiality.

- Explain to youth and families the reason for asking about their housing status and that it is to connect them with services and supports under the McKinney-Vento Act. Remember that the youth may not share a lot of information about their living situation because of fear or lack of trust. You do not need to know all of the reasons the youth left home, but rather listen to determine if the youth lacks fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.
- Assure youth and families that this information will be kept confidential and only be used to access services.
- Explain the comprehensive definition of homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act to youth and families. For example, they may not be aware that the definition of homelessness includes being doubled up and/or couch surfing.
- Use person centered language so youth do not feel like their housing status is their whole identity. For example, you can use the terms youth or families “experiencing homelessness”, “in transition” or “experiencing housing instability” rather than a “homeless youth or family.”
- Provide ongoing opportunities for youth to identify themselves as experiencing homelessness. As noted above, youth who have experienced homelessness may be reluctant to identify themselves because they are embarrassed or fear there will be

² See 42 U.S.C. §11434a(2) for the full definition of “homeless children and youths.” We have provided some examples in the parenthese to aid with identification.

³ 42 U.S.C. 11434a(6).

negative or punitive consequences. As you build a trusting relationship with youth over time, they may be more willing to share their circumstances; revisiting the issue can result in accurate identification.

- Train other staff to understand homelessness under McKinney-Vento in case the youth shares information with someone else. That staff member can then make a referral to the liaison for identification.
- In addition to asking youth specifically about the circumstances included in the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness described above, ask open ended questions to understand their living circumstances prior to entering a DJJ placement:
 - “Where did you usually sleep before you entered DJJ placement?”
 - “Before entering DJJ placement, did you have a safe and stable place to stay?”
 - “Before you entered DJJ placement, what place would you consider home?”