

on the Record

# Ensuring Education for Homeless Children

*The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was passed in 1987, ensuring educational rights and protections for children and youth experiencing homelessness in the United States. In addition to establishing the right to attend school for children who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence — no matter where they live or how long they have lived there — the legislation requires that schools in the country provide services for those children, including free transportation and meals. UNCENSORED recently asked professionals who implement or monitor the McKinney-Vento Act at the national, state, and local level to weigh in on the effectiveness of these initiatives.*



**Barbara Duffield (National)** is the policy director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. NAEHCY is a national grassroots membership association that serves as the voice and social conscience for the education of children and youth in homeless situations. Ms. Duffield is also a founding and continuing advisory committee member for the LeTendre Education Fund for Homeless Children, which provides scholarships for homeless and formerly homeless young people pursuing post-secondary education.



**Melissa Holcombe (Local)** is the homeless liaison and a school social worker in Catoosa County, Georgia, a rural area 100 miles outside of Atlanta. Dr. Holcombe has worked for the Department of Family and Children Services in foster care and supervision of child protective services. Currently, she serves on several boards and committees, including the Teen Dating Violence Task Force, the Citizens for Literacy board, the Domestic Violence Task Force, and the Family Collaborative.



**Patricia Popp (State)** is the state coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth program at Project HOPE Virginia, and a clinical associate professor for the Curriculum and Instruction Department at The College of William and Mary. Ms. Popp is a past president of the Virginia Council for Learning Disabilities and past president of NAEHCY, and currently serves as chair for the LeTendre Education Fund for Homeless Children for NAEHCY.



**Debra Manteghi (Local)** has worked as the program manager and district homeless education liaison for Akron Public Schools in Ohio since 1998. She is also a part-time instructor at the University of Akron School of Family and Consumer Sciences and a licensed social worker in Ohio. Ms. Manteghi has experience in early childhood issues, youth services, and child welfare.

**UNCENSORED: What McKinney-Vento-funded programs have you seen or administered that have been exemplary in assisting homeless children?**

**Manteghi:** For ten years, the PACT [Performing Arts Can Teach] Akron program has been an educational and collaborative program for students and families who find themselves in homeless situations. The program started as a pilot partnership between Project RISE in the Akron Public Schools and Barberton Magical Theater. Today, PACT is the core program for Project

RISE due to its capability to meet the educational, social, and cognitive needs of the students and families served. Students receive a supplementary book and study guide that go along with the performance [in which they participate]. Pre- and post-activities are provided by RISE teachers to enrich learning opportunities. In the past, at least two performances were dinner theaters, with the meal served by First United Methodist Church members. Last year, approximately 500 students and their families, out of the more than 900 students identified as experiencing homelessness,

benefited from the opportunity to participate in PACT's theater programming.

**Holcombe:** Tutoring programs for homeless and unaccompanied youth have the biggest impact, individually, on students. The one-on-one contact students receive can be the turning point between barely making it and actually succeeding.

**Popp:** As the state coordinator in Virginia, I monitor local programs every year for compliance. There are many unsung heroes that do their work in

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exemplary ways. One of my favorite stories was visiting a liaison in a rather rural community that did not have a McKinney-Vento subgrant. This liaison “adopted” a family living in a motel as her special project for the year. The family had lost their home as the result of medical problems, and the motel was a dangerous place. The liaison searched diligently for an affordable apartment, contacted the landlord to request he consider this family despite their credit record, used her connections with local churches to pull together the deposit, and worked with the family on budgeting to make sure the home could be sustained. That was several years ago, and the family is still stable and the children have been successful in school. This liaison went far above the list of responsibilities in the law, but she is not alone. Such events occur every day.

## **UNCENSORED: How do today’s educational services for homeless children compare to the educational services offered a few years ago?**

**Popp:** I have been involved with the program since the mid-1990s and the natural and economic disasters in the last six or seven years have brought much greater attention to the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program. More people understand that we have young people without stable housing, and our schools are more sensitive to the educational challenges these children face. The conversation has changed from, “We don’t have any children who are homeless,” to, “What do we need to do for these children?” Furthermore, the question is becoming, “What else can we do for these children?”

**Duffield:** [Today] there is a greater focus on services for distinct subpopulations of children and youth experiencing homelessness. For example, there are more efforts to serve unaccompanied homeless youth and young children. There are also new initiatives to continue to serve homeless youth as they transition into college.

**Holcombe:** In Georgia, educational services for homeless children and youth have become more widespread. Many of the school systems that receive funding have placed a school social worker in the role of homeless liaison. Also, with the economic situation of the last several years, homelessness has come into the public eye.

**Manteghi:** Professional and community responsiveness appear to improve each year. The Homeless Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act has undoubtedly brought greater attention and accountability to HUD-funded programs within the community that provide services to homeless families.

## **UNCENSORED: Is there anything about the Act that you would change?**

**Duffield:** The McKinney-Vento Act has helped communities make great strides over the past nine years, but it is in need of revision. Liaisons need more capacity and training to accomplish their duties; school districts need more funding to meet the transportation mandates; the law’s provisions on preschool children must be strengthened; and an additional focus on academic success is required.

**Popp:** Further clarity regarding work with preschool-age children, and how EHCY works with other education programs, would be helpful. Consequences for non-compliance are not very clear or particularly strong. This seems to lead to more litigation, which creates adversarial tensions, restricting the kind of relationships and collaboration we need.

**Holcombe:** All school systems must designate a homeless liaison for their system. The guidelines for this are vague, at best: “appropriate staff person, who may also be a coordinator for other Federal programs.” Most school systems in Georgia that have successful homeless programs have school social workers as their designated homeless liaison. A social worker’s unique role in the school system perfectly aligns with the expectations of service to homeless and unaccompanied youth. Therefore, requiring that the homeless liaison be a school social worker would be a natural evolution of the law.

**Manteghi:** Funding for McKinney-Vento mandates, especially transportation, needs to be increased.

## **UNCENSORED: What would you like to see accomplished at the local, state, and federal levels in regards to homeless education that has not been done before?**

**Duffield:** Education must become a higher priority in local, state, and federal efforts to address homelessness. Too often, homelessness is viewed primarily, or even exclusively, as a housing problem. Homelessness is a housing problem, but in order to afford and maintain even the least expensive housing, people need jobs, and in order to obtain jobs that pay enough to afford housing, people need education.

**Holcombe:** All across the United States, there are school systems that still report having no homeless families. There appears to be no accountability for these systems. The homeless families are there; one just has to look. Stricter accountability for school systems to not only report the number of homeless families, but also to report on efforts to identify and serve those families, should be put into place.

**Manteghi:** Although much progress has been made since the initial enactment of McKinney-Vento, there is still much work to be done in gaining full district integration, as well as holding districts that do not receive subgrants accountable. Such measures may be in place but may not be enforced. Along those lines, the same is true for the well-intentioned HEARTH Act. More accountability measures need to be in place, at all levels, to be sure that the components relevant to homeless children and youth are followed.

## **UNCENSORED: Is there anything else you would like to share about the McKinney-Vento Act or its implementation?**

**Holcombe:** The rate of homelessness is increasing and is affecting not only the poor, but also the middle class. The duration of homelessness is longer now than when I first became a social worker 16 years ago. The McKinney-Vento Act is one of the most positive programs within the school system. Providing educational stability for homeless and unaccompanied students shows that the focus is on student success, as it should be. When the laws and subsequent programs are implemented correctly, the outcome is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but a mindset that every child, every situation, is different. But the goal is the same: Give every child the best chance at success that they can possibly have.

**Manteghi:** I am more and more inspired by the democratic process that occurred in the enactment process, as well as the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act, on behalf of those affected by homelessness. Further, it is impressive, the far-reaching developments that are occurring as a result of the McKinney-Vento enactment, especially in the economic climate we are now living in. Countless students have been helped as a result of this implementation. Without it, many of these students would not have fared as well and unquestionably would be even more likely to repeat the cycles of poverty and homelessness they are impacted by. Many of these students are walking proudly across the stage at graduation not only in high school but also at institutions of higher education. ■

## **UNCENSORED would like to thank the contributors for providing their personal snapshots.**