



MCKINNEY-VENTO REGION 1 COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Covering Bergen, Hunterdon, Passaic, Somerset,
Sussex and Warren Counties

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I. Introduction

The 2021-2022 New Jersey Department of Education's School Performance Report identified approximately 8,404 students experienced homelessness during the school year.¹ Based on the results of the 2023 Point in Time Count, which took place on January 24, 2023, there are approximately 2,479 children under the age of 18 experiencing homelessness on any given night in New Jersey.² Several studies suggest a correlation between homelessness and poor academic achievement across all metrics. Using various test metrics, academic studies found that children experiencing homelessness demonstrated poor math, reading and spelling skills as compared to their housed peers.³⁴ In 1987, the McKinney-Vento Act was established to address the educational barriers faced by school aged children who experience homelessness.

In the state of New Jersey, the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program is overseen by five (5) regional directors. In November 2022, the Bergen County Special Services School District, the McKinney-Vento Region I Director, identified a need to conduct an extensive community engagement and research report outlining not just the needs of the homeless students and families within the region, but best practices and strategic recommendations that the system should implement to improve the services provided to youth and families experiencing homelessness within the school systems.

The Region I Director contracted with Monarch Housing Associates to lead the community engagement efforts and develop the following report. To ensure this report was community led, a Region I McKinney-Vento Oversight Committee was established, and consisted of multiple stakeholders from throughout the region, including homeless service providers, the Regional Director, McKinney-Vento liaisons, School Administrators and most importantly, families with lived experience of homelessness and experience with the McKinney-Vento Education services. The role of the committee was to provide local context, determine best outreach methods, and ensure the report addressed the vision of the program.

The overall vision of the Region I McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program is to have a system that effectively identifies and serves all homeless youth and families within the region.

II. Background

The McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program

The McKinney-Vento Act was originally authorized in 1987 and reauthorized in 2015 by the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Act was designed to address the challenges school-aged

¹ New Jersey Department of Education (2023). 2021-2022 School Performance Report. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/2021-2022/state/detail/overview?lang=EN>

² Monarch Housing Associates (2023). New Jersey Point-in-Time Count of the Homeless Report.

³ Rafferty, Y., & Rollins, N. Learning in limbo: The educational deprivation of homeless children. New York, NY: Advocates for Children, ERIC Document Reproduction No. Ed 312 363, 1989.

⁴ Masten, A.S., Sesma Jr., A., Si-Asar, R., Lawrence, C., Mlotis, D., & Dionne, J.A. Education risks for children experiencing homelessness. *Journal of School Psychology*, 35, (1997): 27-46.

children face while experiencing homelessness. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) must ensure that each homeless youth has equal access to free, appropriate public education as well as access to educational and related services needed to enable them to meet the same academic standards as students who are not experiencing homelessness. SEAs are required to undertake steps, where necessary, to update policies, regulations and standard practices that create barriers to identification, enrollment, attendance, or success of students experiencing homelessness.⁵

When referring to students who are experiencing homelessness, this report is relying on the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education for the McKinney-Vento Program which is any “individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The term includes –

- Children and youth 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 youth 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 youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.”⁶

Responsibilities of State and Local Educational Agencies

The McKinney-Vento Act requires all State agencies to have an office responsible for overseeing the activities and requirements under the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program. Specifically, the McKinney-Vento Act requires that:

- Homeless students who move have the right to remain in their schools of origin (i.e., the school that student attended when permanently housed or in which the student was last enrolled), if that is in the student’s best interest;
- If it is in the student’s best interest to change schools, homeless students must be immediately enrolled in a new school, even if they do not have the records normally required for enrollment;
- Transportation must be provided to or from a student’s school of origin, at the request of a parent, guardian, or in the case of an unaccompanied youth, the local liaison;

⁵ U.S. Dept. of Education (2018). Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/07/160240ehcycguidanceupdated082718.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

- Homeless students must have access to all programs and services for which they are eligible, including special education services, preschool, school nutrition programs, language assistance for English learners, career and technical education, gifted and talented program, magnet schools, charter schools, summer learning, online learning, and before- and after-school care;
- Unaccompanied youth must be afforded special protections, including immediate enrollment in school without proof of guardianship; and
- Parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth have the right to dispute an eligibility, school selection, or enrollment decision.⁷
- Families are provided contact information for local support agencies to assist with needed services
- Efforts are made by SEAs and LEAs to eliminate any barrier to education in order for homeless students to have the same educational opportunities as their permanently housed peers

To implement these services, all Local Education Agencies must designate a local liaison to help ensure that homeless students are identified and have the opportunity to succeed in school.

New Jersey McKinney-Vento Program

In the State of New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Education is the responsible entity for the administration of the McKinney-Vento Education of Homeless Children and Youth program. All school districts within the State of New Jersey report directly to the State Department of Education regarding the number of homeless students that are identified and the services that are provided. All school districts must identify a local McKinney-Vento Liaison who is responsible for coordinating services for eligible youth and their families.

The State of New Jersey consists of 21 Counties, which have a total of 669 different school districts throughout, including 87 charter schools.⁸ Because of the scope of the McKinney-Vento program, and to assist in implementation, the Department of Education releases a grant opportunity annually between May and June that provides funding to establish 5 regional Local Education Agencies (LEAs). The State refers to NJ SMART numbers to determine the amount needed for each region and requires districts to consult with stakeholders, including McKinney-Vento Liaisons, who have information on students who may qualify for assistance. The five regions identified under this grant consist of the following Counties:

- Region I: Bergen, Hunterdon, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex and Warren Counties
- Region II: Essex, Hudson, Morris and Union Counties
- Region III: Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth and Ocean Counties
- Region IV: Atlantic, Burlington, Camden and Gloucester Counties

⁷ U.S. Dept of Education (2016). "Supporting the Success of Homeless Children and Youths – A fact sheet & tips for teachers, principals, school leaders, counselors, and other school staff".

⁸ New Jersey Department of Education (2023). 2021-2022 School Performance Report.
<https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/2021-2022/state/detail/overview?lang=EN>

- Region V: Cape May, Cumberland and Salem Counties

These LEAs are responsible for providing instructional services for school districts and homeless liaisons, assist in referrals to community-based organizations and help ensure eligible students are connected to the services they are entitled to.

III. McKinney-Vento Region I Overview

The focus of this plan is New Jersey’s McKinney-Vento Region I Program, covering Bergen, Hunterdon, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex, and Warren Counties. The following section describes defining features unique to Region I, in order to contextualize the full scope and challenges of McKinney-Vento implementation at the local level.

Landscape

Region I includes six Counties that cover the north and northwest part of New Jersey. Bergen County is the most populous county in New Jersey⁹ and holds the greatest number of school districts in Region I. Additionally, the Paterson Public School District, which is situated in Passaic County, ranks within the top 10 largest school districts in the state. The chart below provides the scope of each district that makes up Region I.

Region I District, Student, and Liaison Data ¹⁰¹¹				
County	Total Number of Students Enrolled in 2021-2022	Total Percentage of Enrolled Students Experiencing Homelessness in 2021-2022	Total Number of School Districts	Approximate Number of Homeless Liaisons in 2022-2023
Bergen	134,215	19.9%	80	88
Hunterdon	17,867	2.2%	27	31
Passaic	84,910	8.5%	29	40
Somerset	52,230	12.5%	21	23
Sussex	19,515	9.3%	27	31
Warren	15,524	13.2%	25	26
Total	324,261		209	239*

*Liaison list was based on the most recent list. School districts may have more than one liaison assigned to the role.

Bergen County schools had the highest percentage of student homelessness in Region I in the 2021-2022 school year, while Hunterdon and Somerset Counties have been recognized as

⁹ Ahmad, Manahil (2023). “These are the most and least populated counties in New Jersey”. <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/new-jersey/2023/10/11/nj-population-by-county-us-census/71133555007/>

¹⁰ New Jersey Department of Education (2023). 2021-2022 School Performance Report. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/2021-2022/state/detail/overview?lang=EN>

¹¹ New Jersey Department of Education. “New Jersey School Directory – New Jersey Homeless Liaisons”. <https://www.nj.gov/education/homeless/liaison.shtml>

Significant Areas of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Activity¹² – a factor that could be predictive of higher counts of student homelessness. Despite this, the U.S. Department of Education raised concerns that New Jersey school districts were under-counting and under-identifying the number of students experiencing homelessness during the 2021-2022 school year.

Factors that may be contributing to the undercount are detailed in the subsequent sections of this plan, though the socioeconomics of Region I may itself be an indicator of how homelessness is likely perceived by residents. Hunterdon, Somerset, Bergen, Sussex and Warren Counties all fall within the top ten highest median household income counties in the state,¹³ which is pertinent to understanding a family's decision to conceal their homeless status for fear of being stigmatized.

Region I Program Implementation

As identified earlier in the report, the State of NJ Department of Education provides funding to establish five regional local education agencies to help with the implementation and oversight of the McKinney-Vento Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program. The Region I regional education agency is led by the Bergen County Special Services School District, which houses the Region I Director position. The director is supported by one other staff member that also serves as the bilingual parent liaison.

The Region I Director provides instructional services for school districts and homeless liaisons, assists with referrals to community-based organizations and helps ensure eligible students are connected to the services they are entitled to. Specifically, these efforts include:

- In-depth countywide McKinney-Vento trainings – one training is conducted with each of the six counties that make up region I
- Regular “McKinney Vento 101” sessions which would allow for virtual one-on-one guidance for liaisons
- Monthly “Ask a Liaison” virtual sessions which have a particular area of focus to provide liaisons and school staff with best practices and guidance in the work
- Ongoing troubleshooting or technical assistance for all liaisons within the region to help with difficult or complicated cases

In addition to the ongoing work of the Region I Director, in 2021 the director leveraged American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY II) funds to hire additional program staff, including two temporary school homeless service navigators. The navigator staff were hired to help fill a gap seen by the regional team and were responsible for providing specific, intentional, and direct representation in the districts and serve as eyes and ears in the community. Navigators were able to provide enhanced training to liaisons

¹² Borjan, Marija et al. “New Jersey Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers: Enumeration and Access to Healthcare Study.” *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* 18, no.1 (2008):77-86.

¹³ Rotuno-Johnson, Michelle (2023). “These NJ Counties Have A Household Income Over \$100K.” <https://patch.com/new-jersey-/across-nj/these-nj-counties-have-household-income-over-100k>

and other school personnel such as trainings focused on trauma-informed care, working with migrant families, families where English is not their first language, families experiencing domestic violence, LGBTQ+, and unaccompanied youth. Navigators also provided weekly newsletters, resource guides and provided representation of the McKinney Vento services at different community events and meetings to ensure partners were aware of the services available through the McKinney-Vento program and who to reach out to if they have families or students in need of services. These service navigators were integral in the barrier and strategy recommendations included in this report.

IV. Region I Assessment of Needs

Methodology

To conduct a thorough needs assessment, the Region I Oversight Committee and Monarch Housing Associates relied on surveys and focus groups as the primary methods of data collection. Three types of surveys were developed to collect important information, barriers, and insights from key stakeholders:

1. *Family Survey*: The first survey was distributed to all families who had children enrolled in any of the school districts within the region during the 2022-2023 school year. The survey focused on identifying whether families were currently or had previous experiences of homelessness, and if so, what assistance they received through the McKinney-Vento Education Program and other providers. In total, 15,308 families responded to the survey, 1,434 of which were currently or had previously experienced homelessness. Responses were received from all Counties within the region:

County	Total Surveys Received	Total Households Reported Currently or Previously Experiencing Homelessness
Bergen County	6,502	503
Hunterdon County	700	58
Passaic County	3,538	344
Somerset County	1,838	170
Sussex County	1,728	175
Warren County	1,002	184
Total	15,308	1,434

2. *School Personnel*: The second survey was distributed to all school personnel, both those that were responsible for implementing the McKinney-Vento Education Program and those that were not. The survey focused on whether staff are aware of the services students are eligible for under the McKinney-Vento Program, who their local liaison is, training needs and the success they have had with the program. In total, 231 surveys were submitted, with representation from all Counties within the region:

County	School Personnel Surveys Received
Bergen County	129
Hunterdon County	15
Passaic County	18
Somerset County	44
Sussex County	12
Warren County	13
Total	231

3. *Service Providers:* The third survey was distributed through mailing lists to local services providers that primarily work with families, many of which are experiencing homelessness. The questions focused on their awareness of the McKinney-Vento Program, who their primary contact to the program is and the success they have had in working with the program. In total, 71 surveys were submitted, with representation from all Counties within the region:

County	Service Provider Surveys Received
Bergen County	10
Hunterdon County	11
Passaic County	13
Somerset County	3
Sussex County	24
Warren County	10
Total	71

While the surveys provided valuable information, there were some key pieces that needed to be evaluated at a more individual level. For this reason, focus groups were conducted separately with each stakeholder group. In total, focus groups were conducted with 10 families with lived experience, 5 school district homeless liaisons and 10 additional school personnel or service provider participants.

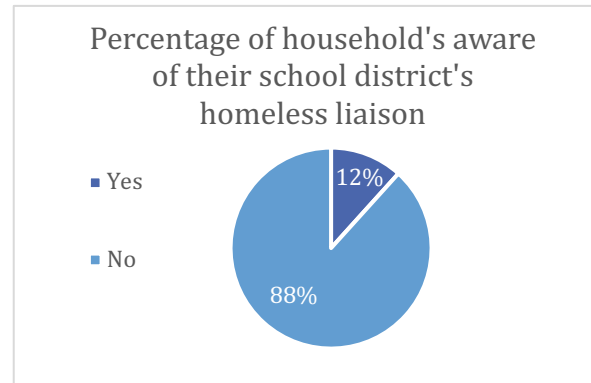
The information gathered through these surveys and focus groups, as well as feedback from the regional team and oversight committee is what informed the needs and recommendations throughout this report. The summary of results from the surveys are included in the report; full survey results can be seen in Appendix A.

System Needs and Barriers

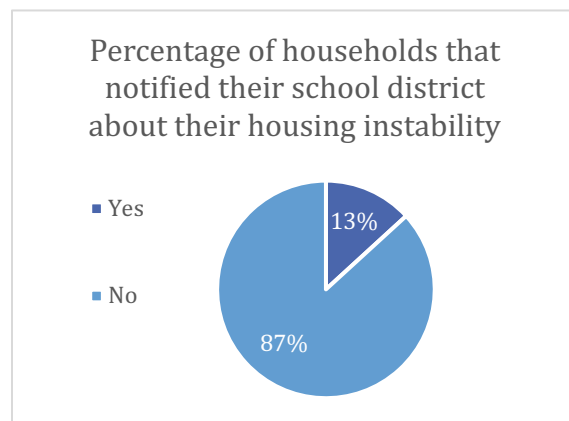
After completing the data collection process through the system surveys and focus groups, there were a number of clear barriers and needs that have the biggest impact on the utilization and effectiveness of Region I's McKinney-Vento programming. These overarching barriers and needs were consistent in surveys and focus groups throughout the region and through the different stakeholder groups.

Need 1: Improved awareness of resources among families experiencing homelessness

Of the 15,308 family households that responded to the survey, only 12% were aware their school district had a homeless liaison who would be able to assist with services if they were ever to experience homelessness. Of those households who were currently or had previously experienced homelessness, only 18% were aware of their district's liaison.



For households that had some experience with homelessness, they were asked whether the school district was aware of their housing instability. Of the 1,434 households who identified experiencing housing instability, only 13% reported this experience to their school district.



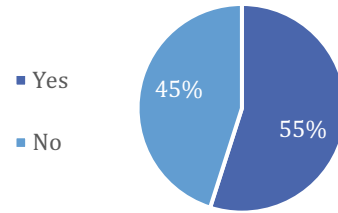
When asked why they did not share this information, 42% reported they did not believe the school would be able to help or did not see any benefit to sharing this information with the school. When asked if there was anything that would make families more comfortable in sharing this information, 35% identified that just knowing the school would be able to offer resources or guidance related to their housing situation would make them more likely to report. Additionally, 70% of households that had not experienced homelessness in the past reported

that they would let the school district know if they were to experience homelessness in the future now that they were aware of the resources.

These percentages demonstrate the number of households who may be eligible for McKinney-Vento Education programming, but are not accessing resources because they are unaware they exist. These results were emphasized by families who participated in focus groups who stated they had “never heard about McKinney-Vento Education resources while they were experiencing homelessness” and there is “a lot of confusion among parents about what and who McKinney-Vento can help.” One family reported that they were not made aware of the McKinney-Vento program and ended up finding out about the program by looking through the phone book for the Department of Education, who then connected her to services.

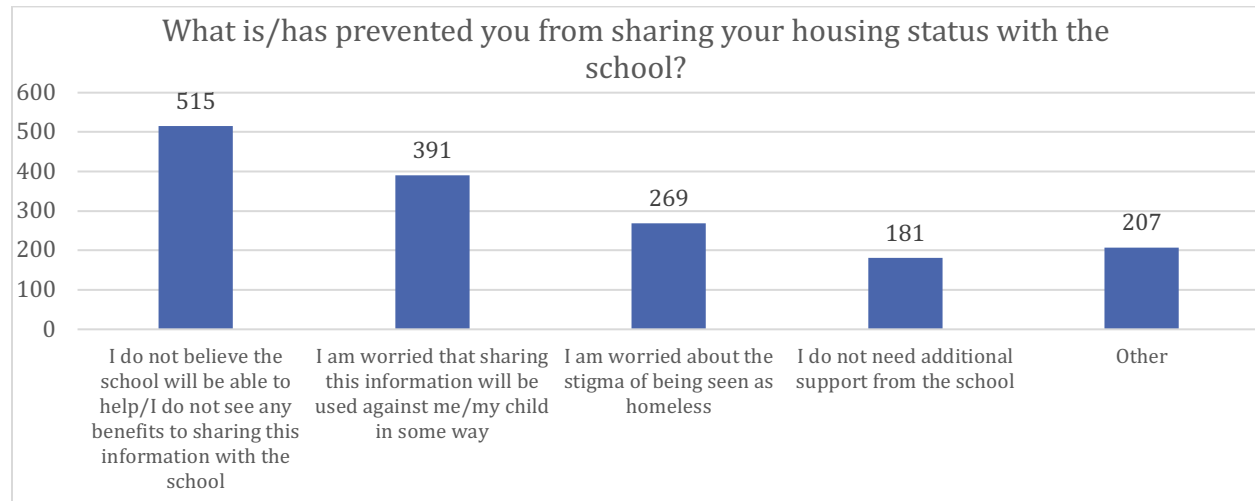
Unfortunately, this disconnect is even seen with families that are utilizing housing services in the community such as emergency shelter. When community service providers were asked, 73% reported knowing that families experiencing homelessness could be eligible for services tied to education, yet only 55% reported knowing that each school district had a homeless liaison to help families access services. This was also echoed through the provider focus groups with many reporting being unsure of whether they had worked with the school liaisons in the past or other school staff not connected with the McKinney-Vento Program. With 225 families being served in emergency shelter or transitional housing programs within Region I on any given night, if all providers are not aware of the resources to share with their clients, a large number of clients may be missing out on eligible services.¹⁴

Percentage of services providers who were aware of the school homeless liaison



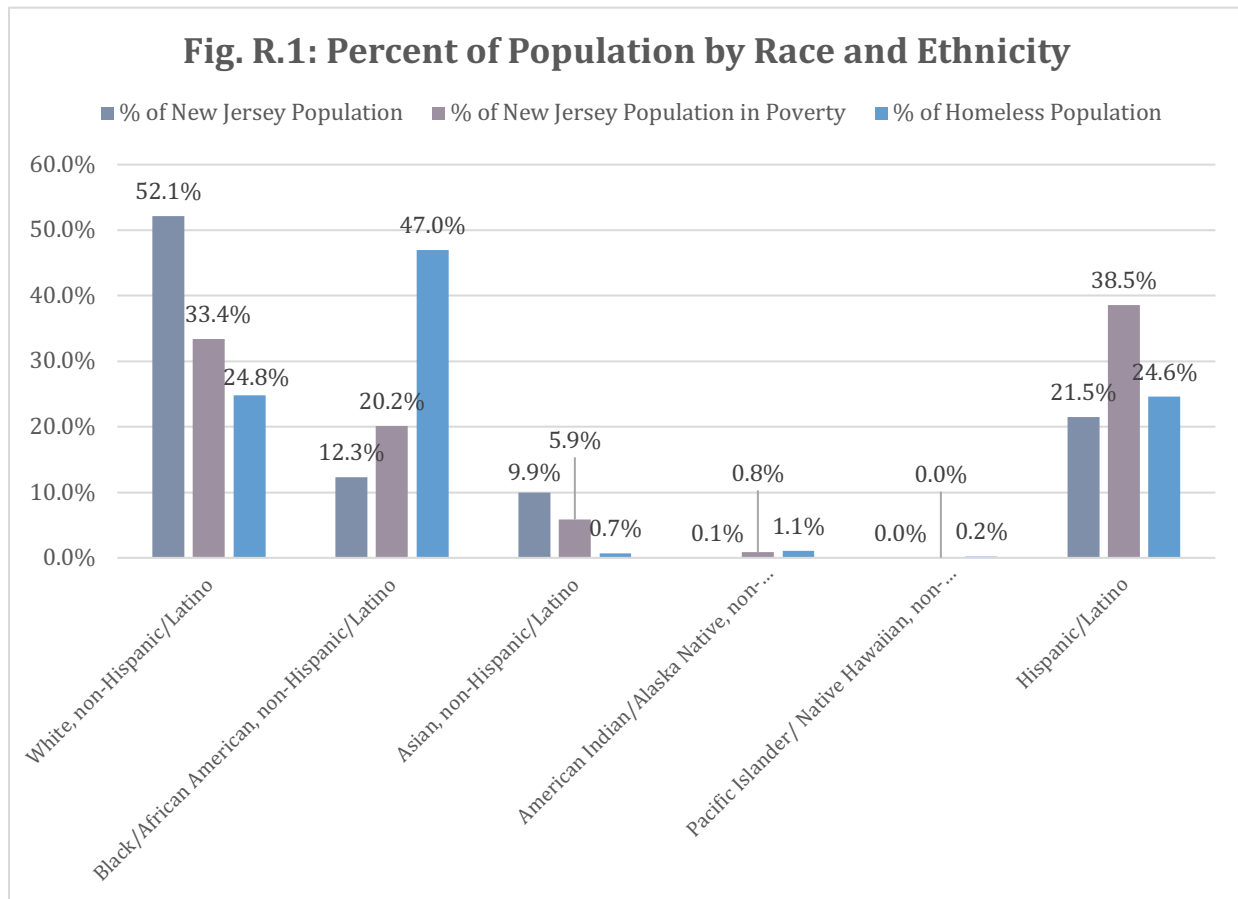
Need 2: Quell caretaker concerns around disclosing homeless status

Of the 1,434 households that reported experiencing homelessness currently or previously, only 13% identified that the school district was aware of their housing instability. For those that did not report their housing instability to their school district, they listed the top two reasons as “I do not believe the school will be able to help/I do not see any benefits to sharing this information with the school” and “I am worried that sharing this information will be used against me/my child in some way.”



When exploring these concerns further through focus groups, almost all families discussed a fear of being reported to the State Department of Children and Family Services (DCF) and

¹⁴ Monarch Housing Associates (2023). 2023 Point in Time Count Reports for Bergen, Passaic, Tri-County and Somerset Counties.



having their children taken away because of their housing instability. In addition to the fear of DCF, many families raised concerns about stigma or their children being treated differently by coaches or teachers because of their homelessness.

Adding to this feeling of stigma or information being used against the family, many families reported previously experiencing acts of racial discrimination from their school district and felt that seeking services or reporting an experience of homelessness would just exacerbate the issues they were facing. This report is especially concerning, as homelessness disproportionately impacts households of color. The 2023 Point in Time Count for New Jersey shows that while households that identify as Black/African-American only make up 12.3% of the state's population and 20.2% of the New Jersey population in poverty, Black/African-American households represent 47% of the state's homeless population.¹⁵

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With these facts it is easy to see how families would be less likely to trust the system and report their experience of homelessness, even if it meant missing out on services they are eligible for.

¹⁵ Monarch Housing Associates (2023). New Jersey Point-in-Time Count of the Homeless Report.

¹⁶ Monarch Housing Associates (2023). New Jersey Point-in-Time Count of the Homeless Report.

Need 3: Implementation of consistent and accurate counting methods of students experiencing homelessness

While collecting information for this report and conducting focus groups with liaisons and other school personnel, one trend was seen throughout: there is a lack of consistency among how school districts are identifying and reporting students who are experiencing homelessness throughout the year.

The New Jersey Department of Education uses the NJ Standards Measurement and Resource for Teaching (NJ SMART) system to collect student level data for all school districts throughout New Jersey. This system was developed with the goal of helping New Jersey's education system become more "evidence-based where progress toward instructional goals are measured, and where the effectiveness and efficiency of educational programs are monitored."¹⁷ The NJ SMART system is open year-round, with two data collection snapshots reviewed by the NJ DOE. The first snapshot is taken in October and the second is the final full year snapshot which is taken in August.

While the goal of these snapshots are to provide a cumulative total of students who have experienced homelessness during the school year up until that point, some school districts are not doing regular data entry or separate tracking and so the information entered at the time of the required snapshots does not include all students who may have been identified throughout the school year, but instead consists of the students who are identified at that time.

Additionally, one issue experienced by the regional local education agencies is the lack of real time data they can access from the school districts. Because NJ SMART is a Department of Education system, and liaisons report directly to the State, the regional directors only receive information after the two snapshots are taken by the State and a full report is released. This prevents regional directors from being able to identify in real time, school districts that may be under or miscounting, or seeing whether outreach and trainings they have provided to certain school districts have helped improve the counts seen throughout the region.

Need 4: Improve consistency and quality of services provided by homeless liaisons across school districts

Per the McKinney-Vento Program regulations, the school district "local liaison serves as one of the primary contacts between homeless families and school staff, direct personnel, shelter workers, and other service providers. The liaison coordinates services to ensure that homeless children and youth enroll in school and have the opportunity to succeed academically."¹⁸ In this role, local liaisons must ensure that:

¹⁷ State of New Jersey Department of Education (2023). New Jersey Department of Education SID Management Student Data Handbook v8.7.

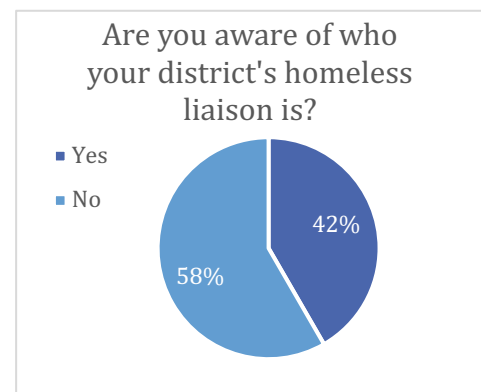
¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education (2018). "Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance."

- Homeless children and youth are identified;
- Homeless children and youth are enrolled in school;
- Homeless families and children have access to and receive educational services for which they are eligible;
- Homeless families and children receive referrals to health, dental, mental health, and substance abuse services, housing services, and other appropriate services;
- Parents and guardians of homeless children and youth are informed of education and related opportunities available to their children and are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate;
- Public notice of the educational rights of homeless students is disseminated in locations frequented by parents and guardians and in a manner and form that is understandable to parents and guardians;
- Enrollment disputes are mediated in accordance with the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act;
- Parents and guardians and unaccompanied youth are fully informed of all transportation services;
- School personnel receive professional development and other support; and
- Unaccompanied youth are enrolled in school, have opportunities to meet the same academic standards as other children.¹⁹

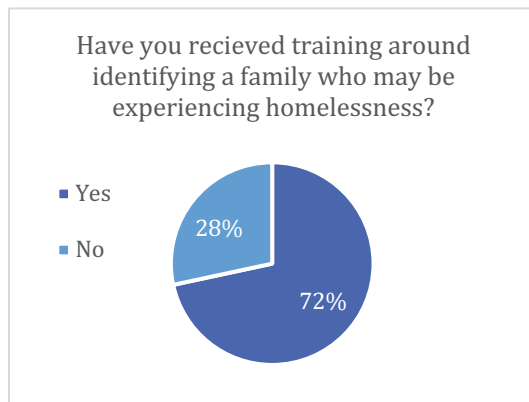
While the McKinney-Vento Program regulations outline the requirements of local homeless liaisons, how each school district implements these requirements and who they designate as their liaison is at the discretion of the school district. This leads to a lack of consistency in the level, qualifications, and experience of each liaison.

While conducting focus groups, one struggle that was heard for many school districts, is that the role of homeless liaison is not a full-time position, leading to liaisons having to learn the regulations as well as system partners, while completing their other role(s) within the school district. This also makes it more difficult to maintain the same homeless liaison for multiple years, lending itself to the confusion of parents, service providers, and even other school staff, on who to connect with regarding children who are experiencing homelessness.

Of the 239 total school personnel surveys completed, 72 were completed by staff who were not the homeless liaison, guidance counselor, or had experience working with families experiencing homelessness. Of these 72, only 42% knew who their district's homeless liaison was. This lack of understanding was felt by families in the focus groups who reported connecting with their school district but never being connected to the liaison or being unsure of whether they were ever connected with the liaison.

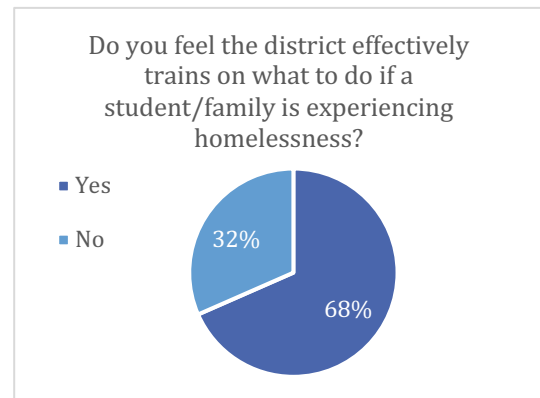


¹⁹ U.S. Department of Education (2018). "Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program Non-Regulatory Guidance."

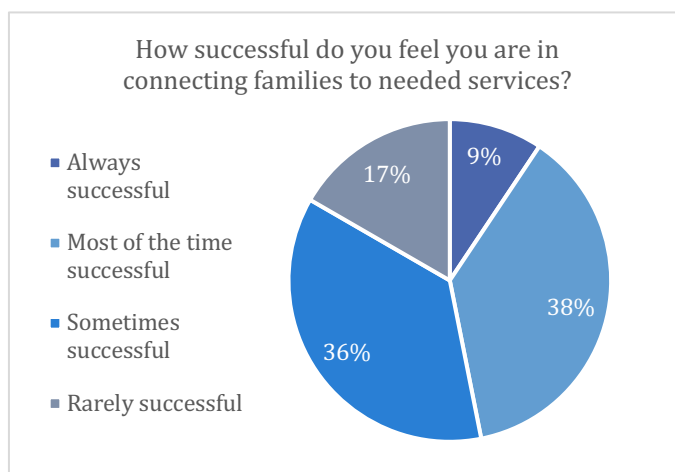


The other element that was identified as needing standardization was the trainings that liaisons and other school personnel receive regarding the liaisons role and the services that are available to students experiencing homelessness. Of those school personnel who were surveyed, only 72% reported receiving training around identifying a family who may be experiencing homelessness, one of the primary roles of homeless liaisons. When asked about the quality of training, only 68% of respondents felt that school districts effectively train on what to do if a student or family is experiencing homelessness.

When discussed during focus groups, it was found that many trainings that liaisons attend are prerecorded trainings or trainings administered by the regional director and outside of the one mandatory training in the beginning, are not required. School districts are not setting mandatory trainings that liaisons or school personnel must attend. Additionally, if trainings are offered, not all school districts are providing liaisons and other school personnel with the time to participate in these trainings due to the multiple roles they are trying to fill. This lack of training leads to many school personnel not realizing these services are available to students in their school.



As identified through focus groups, these factors leave many families feeling they need to advocate for themselves for services even if they are connected to the homeless liaison. They reported feeling like they were not provided information regarding all services or opportunities that may help them with their education and housing gaps.



These issues also impact homeless liaison's with only 9% of liaisons feeling like they are always successful at connecting families to needed services and 17% feeling they are rarely successful at making service connections.

Need 5: Increase accountability through the McKinney-Vento Program

Due to the structure of the McKinney-Vento program, the State of New Jersey consisting of 669 total school districts, 209 of which fall within the Region I district, implementation and oversight of the McKinney-Vento Program has its challenges. As outlined earlier in this report, ultimate oversight of the McKinney-Vento program is left to the U.S. Department of Education, with the NJ Department of Education being the responsible state entity. School districts and their McKinney-Vento local liaisons report numbers and services directly to the State of New Jersey. While the McKinney-Vento Regional Directors were originally developed to provide technical assistance and training, it is difficult for the State of New Jersey to follow up with individual school districts, leading to them relying on regional directors for support. This process results in regional directors helping to enforce the requirements of the McKinney-Vento program, but due to school districts reporting directly to the state, many times they are left attempting to provide oversight without access to the data and outcomes needed to ensure the partners and system are working. These challenges are then exacerbated due to the factors listed above such as each school district implementing the program in a different way. In order to truly address the other needs listed above, the system needs to also build in additional accountability and oversight structures to ensure the program works as intended.

V. System Recommendations

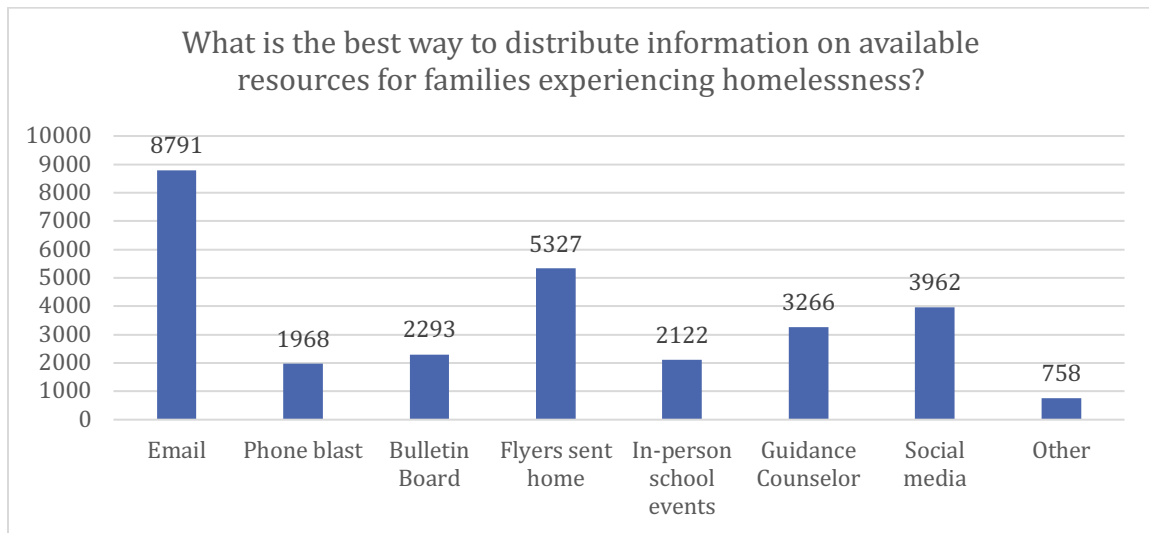
The following recommendations are based directly on community feedback and research and are targeted to address the identified needs and barriers identified above. These recommendations provide an opportunity to improve access to critical supports that will assist students and families experiencing homelessness in addressing their immediate needs and maintaining their continued participation and performance in the educational system.

Need 1: Improved awareness of resources among families experiencing homelessness

Recommended Strategies:

1. *McKinney-Vento Resource Guide* – To assist with the ease of sharing information regarding the McKinney-Vento program, a standardized McKinney-Vento resource guide should be developed that includes student's rights, homeless liaison contact information, and guidance on when liaisons should be contacted. The resource guide should be clearly available on all school websites, completed in language that is easy to understand, and updated on a quarterly basis to reflect any changes in information, especially liaison contact information.
2. *Visibility of McKinney-Vento Policy* – All school districts should have their official McKinney-Vento policy easily accessible on their district website for families to find when they are in need. This policy should clearly delineate eligible and ineligible services through the McKinney-Vento program.

3. *Standard Information Sharing Checklist* – To ensure all school districts are sharing the same information through all possible methods, a standard checklist of how school should share information about McKinney-Vento services with families should be developed. These efforts would help expand the distribution of the information and normalize the topic of homelessness within school districts. Suggestions for methods of distributing the information include flyer being sent home in backpacks, bulletin boards, email blasts, and school wide events. When families were asked what the best way to distribute information about available resources was, email was the most reported response, followed by flyers being sent over. Links to free informational flyers and sample resource guides can be found in Appendix B.



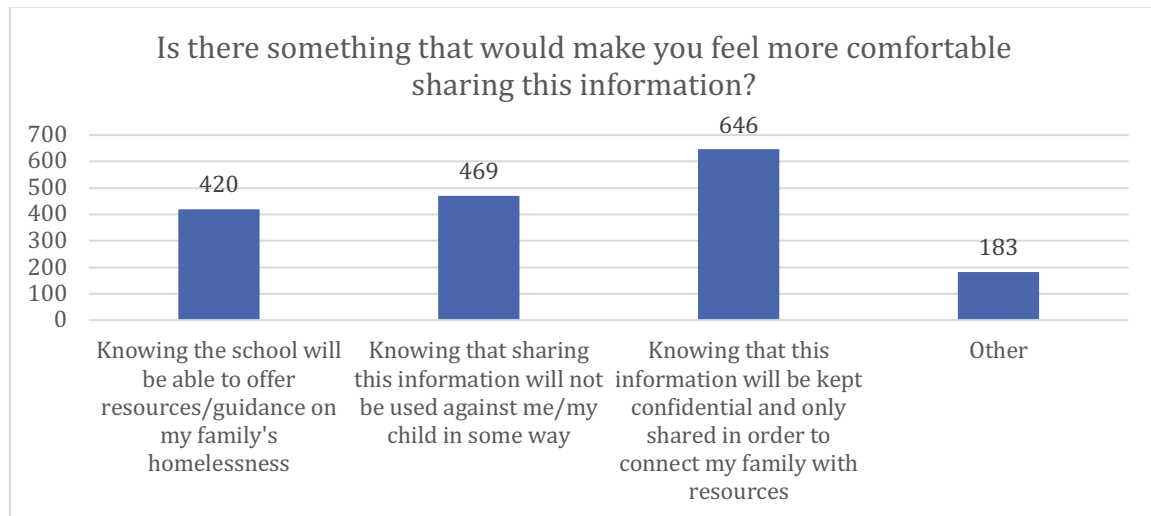
4. *Language Accessibility* – All outreach and information materials should be available in multiple languages, based on the primary languages of the families in each district.
5. *Community Engagement* – Homeless liaisons and the Regional Director team should continue to participate in local community meetings such as the local Children's Interagency Coordinating Councils and Continuums of Care to ensure community members and housing service providers are aware of the role of the homeless liaison and McKinney-Vento resources. Homeless liaisons should be trained to identify themselves as the liaison when reaching out to community partners at community and school meetings, including back "Back to School Nights", in order to continue to spread awareness. Lastly, the Regional Director should help coordinate McKinney-Vento services with early childhood programs, such as Head Start, to include questions on their enrollment forms which will link any identified homeless child to the liaison. This partnership between liaisons and Head Start programs has proven successful, as shown by the Tennessee Department of Education.²⁰

²⁰ Tennessee Department of Education (2023). "McKinney-Vento Toolkit: A Guide for Homeless Liaisons, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and Schools."

Need 2: Quell caretaker concerns around disclosing homeless status

Recommended Strategies:

1. *Transparent Communication* – All messaging, resource guides, and information sharing provided to families should have a goal of building trust as much as possible. All resource information shared should clearly state that the disclosure of homeless status will not lead to repercussions. Information can also be shared with families about the type of training staff are attending so they feel they have a better understanding of the staff they are reaching out to. Families should also be provided with a clear outline of the homeless status disclosure process, including all parties that will be notified. When families were asked if there was something that would make them more comfortable to disclose their homelessness, 53% reported “knowing that this information will be kept confidential and only shared in order to connect my family with resources.”



2. *Establish Grievance Procedure* – All school districts should have a policy for families to report if they feel services are being withheld from them or if they feel they are being subject to discrimination. Families should be provided clear guidance on who to contact regarding these issues and this process should be outlined in the district's McKinney-Vento policies.
3. *Conduct Racial Disparity Analysis* – Whether through the State Department of Education, or the Regional education agencies, an analysis should be completed to identify any racial disparities in the McKinney-Vento services that are provided to families. While some strategies may address the racial disparities impacting families identifying as homeless, it is important for the system to also address any racial disparities in the services that are provided.

Need 3: Implementation of consistent and accurate counting methods of students experiencing homelessness

Recommended Strategies:

1. *Update Current NJ SMART Reporting Guidelines* – The State of New Jersey has many resources for school districts regarding the reporting requirements to NJ SMART. While details are provided regarding what categories must be filled out and how to complete the information in NJ SMART, guidance should be updated to ensure all school districts are tracking homeless students in the same way to ensure accuracy. Updated guidance should include details of how school districts should be tracking homeless youth, whether in or outside of NJ SMART throughout the year, the expectations of the DOE when schools are completing their data submissions as for counts consisting of cumulative numbers; requirements around ensuring that liaisons and NJ SMART entry staff (if they are not one in the same) are cross checking data reports to ensure the full number of homeless youth identified throughout the year are being counted.
2. *Increase data entry snapshots** - It is recommended that data submission standards be updated to require at a minimum monthly counting and data entry of students experiencing homelessness. Snapshot reports should be conducted quarterly to provide an ongoing account of the number of students experiencing homelessness and to identify concerns of undercounting in a timelier manner.
3. *Provide regular access of school district data to McKinney-Vento Regional Directors** – currently all NJ SMART data is submitted by the school districts directly to the State DOE, with the regional directors receiving this information only after the State is able to compile their full report. McKinney-Vento Regional Directors should have access to NJ SMART directly or receive an initial estimated report of numbers to allow them to evaluate counting trends and possible undercounting issues in a timelier manner.

*Data Tracking Outside of NJ SMART - Understanding the extent of data the State Department of Education is collecting, there may be inherent difficulties the State would encounter in trying to increase the data review process or enabling data access to regional directors. If for that reason this strategy is not possible, the recommendation is for a local data standard or reporting method to be established that would allow for more real time reporting of the number of homeless students experiencing homelessness throughout the districts. This could be a simple survey form that is completed by liaisons for each student they are working with that is automatically sent to the regional director. This would provide the director with a sense of how many students are experiencing homelessness and what to expect for each school district through NJ SMART. This would also aid itself to the need of more real time technical assistance for communities experiencing issues with undercounting.

4. *Integrate HMIS Data into NJ SMART* – The Department of Education should establish an agreement with the Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, and Tri-County Continuums of Care

(CoCs) to allow the CoC's Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) to upload homeless student data received from the CoCs into the NJ SMART data system on a monthly basis. This recommendation originates from our review of national best practices, specifically from Washington, D.C.

The Washington, D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) established an agreement with The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness who provides a monthly data feed directly to OSSE with information regarding families who are receiving emergency shelter or homeless service programming. This information provides liaisons and the OSSE with contact information for families and students who may not have been identified by the school district as homeless. Each homeless liaison is then able to outreach the family to assist with McKinney-Vento services such as transportation assistance, school uniforms, etc., and provides the liaisons with a more accurate count of the number of students experiencing homelessness.²¹

Need 4: Improve consistency and quality of services provided by homeless liaisons across school districts

Recommended Strategies:

1. *Implement full-time dedicated homeless liaison positions** - Depending on the district, the homeless liaison may have a large number of students they are responsible for identifying, supporting and connecting to services. Paired with the immense task of understanding the homeless service system, McKinney-Vento regulations, and the nuances of housing crises, the role can seem unmanageable when liaisons are filling other roles and responsibilities within school districts. For these reasons, it is recommended that each school district have a full-time dedicated homeless liaison position to fulfill the responsibilities tied to the McKinney-Vento program. Through this process, the method used for identifying liaisons should also be standardized to enable consistency across school districts and regions.

*Due to the differences in school district size, number of students and resources, while it would be best practice to implement at least one full-time liaison for each school district, it is understood that this solution may not be possible for all districts. For districts that cannot establish a full-time homeless liaison position, the recommendation is that districts pool their resources to establish a dedicated multi-district liaison with their in-district liaison acting as a connector. This approach could be modeled after the regional navigators that were hired through the ARP-HCY II funds detailed earlier in this report. In addition, school districts could consider stipends for liaisons to encourage consistency in the position. At a minimum, all school districts should identify back up staff who are able to assist the primary liaison to

²¹ District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (2017). "Homeless Data Collection, Reporting, and Use Guidance."
<https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/Homeless%20Data%20Collection%20Reporting%20and%20Use%20Guidance.pdf>

allow for continuity of services in the case of staff turnover. Additionally, any liaison who will not remain the liaison for the following school year should leave a resource file for the new liaison to begin with.

2. *Mandate additional standardized liaison training and resources* – As with many areas in social services, much of the institutional knowledge and success seen in programs can be stifled or sometimes lost when employee turnover occurs. The McKinney-Vento liaison role experiences similar struggles when liaisons change. While all liaisons are required to attend an initial training, these trainings do not provide the in-depth knowledge and best practices needed to see success in the role. Setting standard training and resources, ensuring regional directors have the funding to implement these trainings and liaisons have the support from their administration to attend these trainings will help ensure the program can continue smoothly even through liaison turnover. Based on best practices found by the Tennessee Department of Education, it is recommended that all liaisons are provided training and resources which should include:

- Common signs of homelessness;
- Trauma-informed strategies for conducting conversations with families regarding their housing insecurity (See Appendix C for Tips on Navigating Challenging Conversations about Housing);
- How to review forms for other educational programs serving at-risk students such as the National School Lunch Program; Title I, Part A, Title I, Part C, or 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs, in order to identify students who may qualify as homeless;
- How to conduct outreach to low-cost hotels, social service agencies, local law enforcement, and other public service agencies, to better assist with identifying and connecting them with families experiencing homelessness;
- Reviewing students with high absence rates, in order to identifying students who may have homelessness-related attendance issues.²²

Additional guidance and resources should be standardized and provided to all liaisons upon starting the position. These resources should be standard across school districts to ensure consistency. Resources should include²³:

- The McKinney-Vento Housing and Educational Rights guide (Appendix D)
- The school districts written policies and procedures for McKinney-Vento programming including the procedures for identification, enrollment and transportation;
- An outline of liaison responsibilities and expectations (Appendix E), as well as a timeline of action item reminders for liaisons to complete throughout the school year (Appendix F)

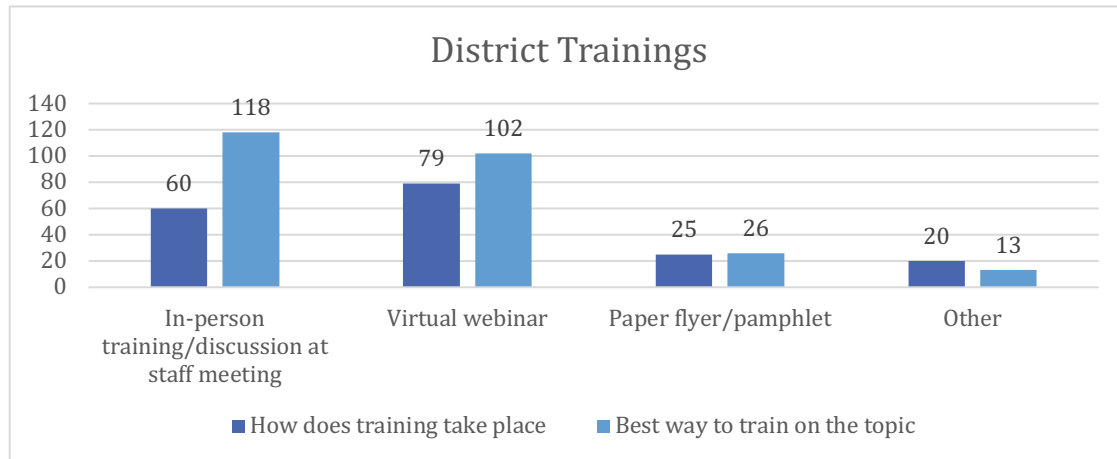
²² Tennessee Department of Education (2023). “McKinney-Vento Toolkit: A Guide for Homeless Liaisons, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and Schools.”

<https://eplan.tn.gov/DocumentLibrary/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentKey=1729403&inline=true>

²³ Ibid.

- Community services resource guide (sample provided in Appendix G)

When asking school personnel, the best method for training liaisons and school staff about the services, eligibility and responsibilities of the McKinney-Vento program, most staff preferred “In-person training/discussion at a staff meeting” followed by “Virtual Webinar”.



3. *Increased awareness of McKinney-Vento liaisons school wide* – Because many school districts may only have one homeless liaison, who is responsible for multiple roles within the district, there are many non-liaison school personnel who are not aware of the role of the McKinney-Vento liaison. These staff are sometimes the primary contact for students and families and may be more likely to find out that a student is experiencing homelessness. For this reason, strategies should be implemented to increase the awareness of the McKinney-Vento position within the school districts such as:

- Require homeless liaisons to train school district staff on the McKinney-Vento Program and supporting students experiencing homelessness (see Appendix H for a sample school district training plan). All staff, especially trusted teachers should be aware of liaison duties and understand how to connect families in need with their homeless liaison.
- Post and distribute notices regarding the education rights of homeless children and youth around schools and in places where teachers frequent.²⁴

4. *Improve support for homeless students within higher education* – The primary efforts in New Jersey focus on providing McKinney-Vento supports to students who are enrolled in K-12 education. Students seeking higher education are entitled to these

²⁴ Tennessee Department of Education (2023). “McKinney-Vento Toolkit: A Guide for Homeless Liaisons, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and Schools.”

<https://eplan.tn.gov/DocumentLibrary/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentKey=1729403&inline=true>

supports and should be aware of these resources. The following best practices from California highlight examples of how higher education institutions can offer such support²⁵:

- All public postsecondary education institutions in California are required to designate a homeless and foster student liaison, who is responsible for informing current and prospective students about financial aid and other assistance available to them and helping them apply for and receive federal and state financial aid and available services.
- California requires state university campuses and asks community colleges and University of California campuses to offer former foster youth and current/former homeless youth priority access to student housing, especially student housing that is available year-round at no additional cost. The law also requests that each campus create a housing plan for these student groups to ensure they can access housing all year, including during academic breaks.

Need 5: Increase accountability through the McKinney-Vento Program

Recommendations:

1. *Incorporate Regional Directors in system oversight* – As regional directors are responsible for helping ensure requirements are being implemented correctly, regional directors should have more access to the data and system outcomes of the districts they oversee. Additionally, school districts should be made aware that they are required to respond and report to the regional teams when needed.
2. *Enforce a penalty for McKinney-Vento noncompliance* – Because districts can use Title I funding in many ways, there is no incentive for districts to accurately count students experiencing homelessness. For districts where there is an understood and clear miscounting of students experiencing homelessness or students connected to services, the State should enforce penalties including possible loss of Title I funding.
3. *Incorporate follow-up and feedback protocols* – To ensure families are provided with the services that they are entitled to once they are identified, the regional or statewide McKinney-Vento policies should incorporate a follow-up and feedback protocol mandating liaisons to follow up with families, record progress updates, and request and document feedback from families in NJ SMART (or a separate database).
4. *Develop a Statewide Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness* – As much of the oversight of this program and best practices for implementation require cross sector partnership, it is recommended, based on Massachusetts's best practice, that a Statewide Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness be developed, as well

²⁵ "Public Postsecondary Education: Campus Housing: Priority for Homeless Youth." AB 1228, Gipson. C. 571 (2015). https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB1228

as an oversight steering committee that advises the state on the McKinney-Vento implementation.²⁶

VI. Conclusion

Education is a critical component of a child's development. Attending school provides students with socialization, education, support, and assistance to grow. It is critical that regardless of housing situation that students have the ability to access and maintain their education despite environmental factors outside of their control.

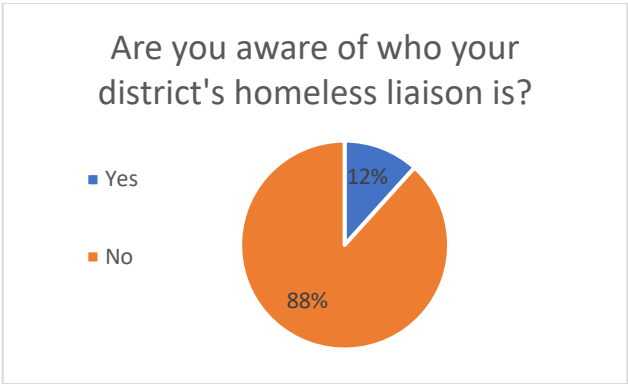
Findings from the data collected and research conducted identified the key components to effectively identifying students experiencing homelessness and connecting them to resources: (1) improving awareness of resources and fostering trust among families, school districts and homeless service providers; (2) standardizing and normalizing communication around McKinney-Vento and family homelessness; (3) enhancing counting, reporting, and data analysis; (4) reforming and re-evaluating the liaison onboarding process and responsibilities; (5) incorporate measures of accountability; and (6) heightening identification of homeless students.

Support in navigating homelessness and the homeless service system is frequently needed by not always adequately provided. Understanding and addressing the needs of families experiencing homelessness will not only allow schools and homeless service providers to meet families where they are but will better equip the system to service those who may experience homelessness in the future. It is proposed that the strategies outlined in this plan will allow for schools and homeless service providers to better serve and connect with families and students experiencing homelessness, ultimately reducing the burden families face while undergoing a housing crisis and ensuring the educational stability of their children.

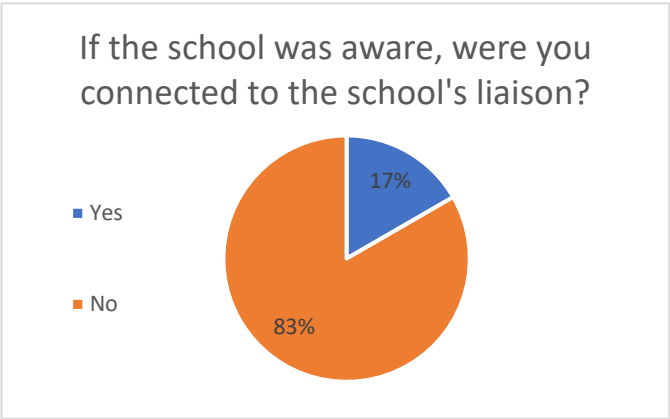
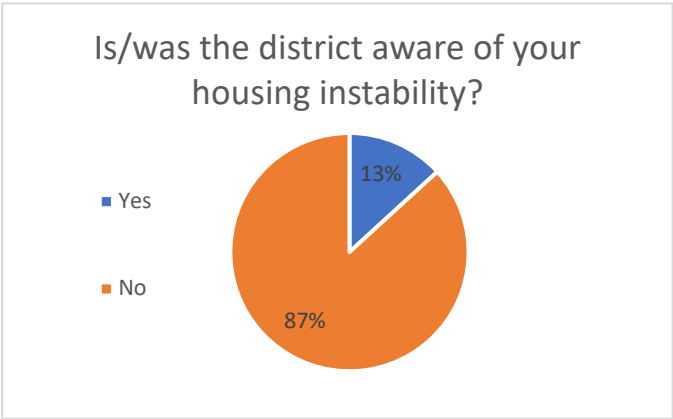
²⁶ Massachusetts Homelessness Statistics," Homeless in Massachusetts Statistics 2019. Homeless Estimation by State | US Interagency Council on Homelessness, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/ma/>

McKinney Vento NJ Region I Survey Responses
Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, Hunterdon, Warren, Sussex Counties
Family Responses

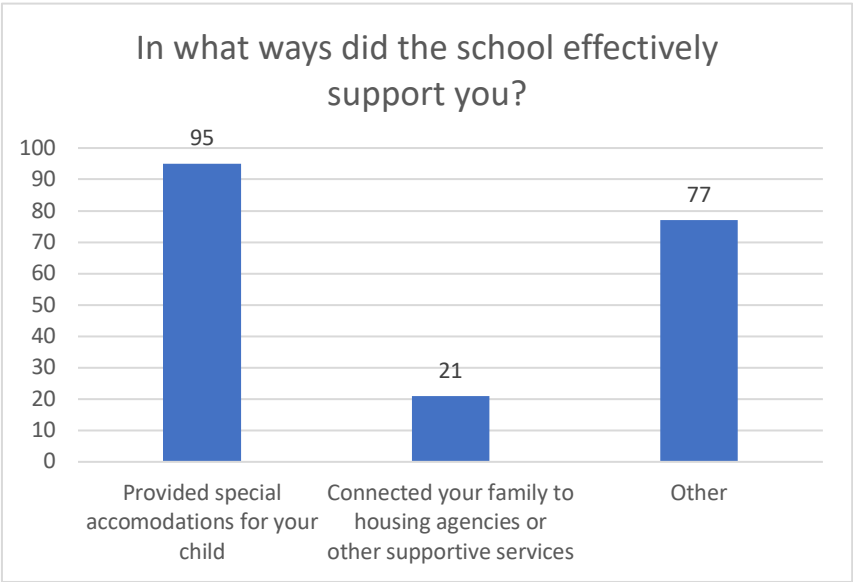
Total Family Surveys Submitted: **15,308**



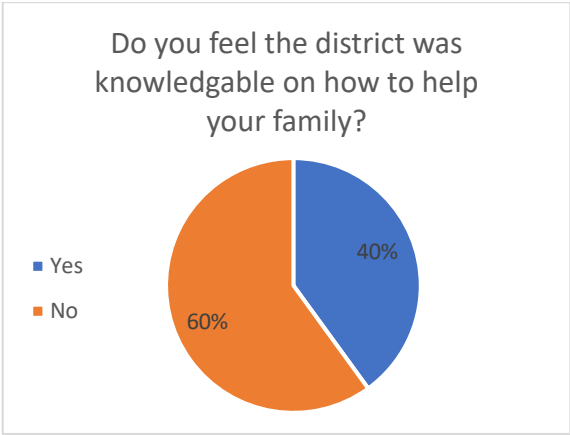
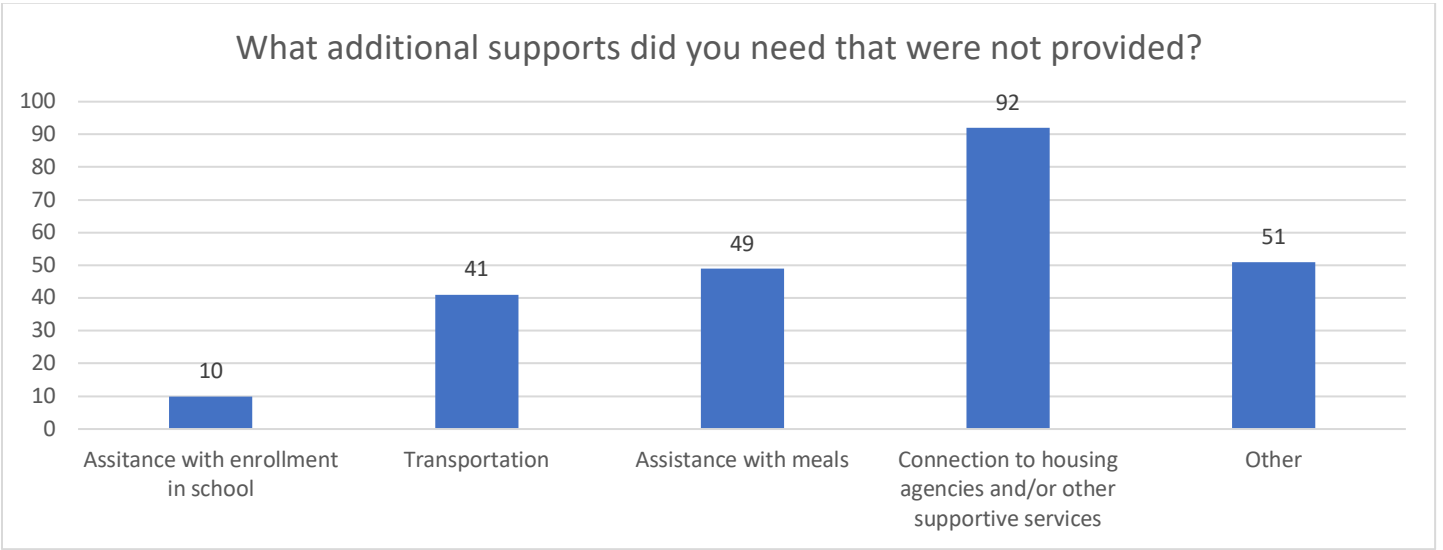
1,434 total households reported previously or currently experiencing homelessness
Currently experiencing homelessness - **643** households
Previously experienced homelessness - **791** households



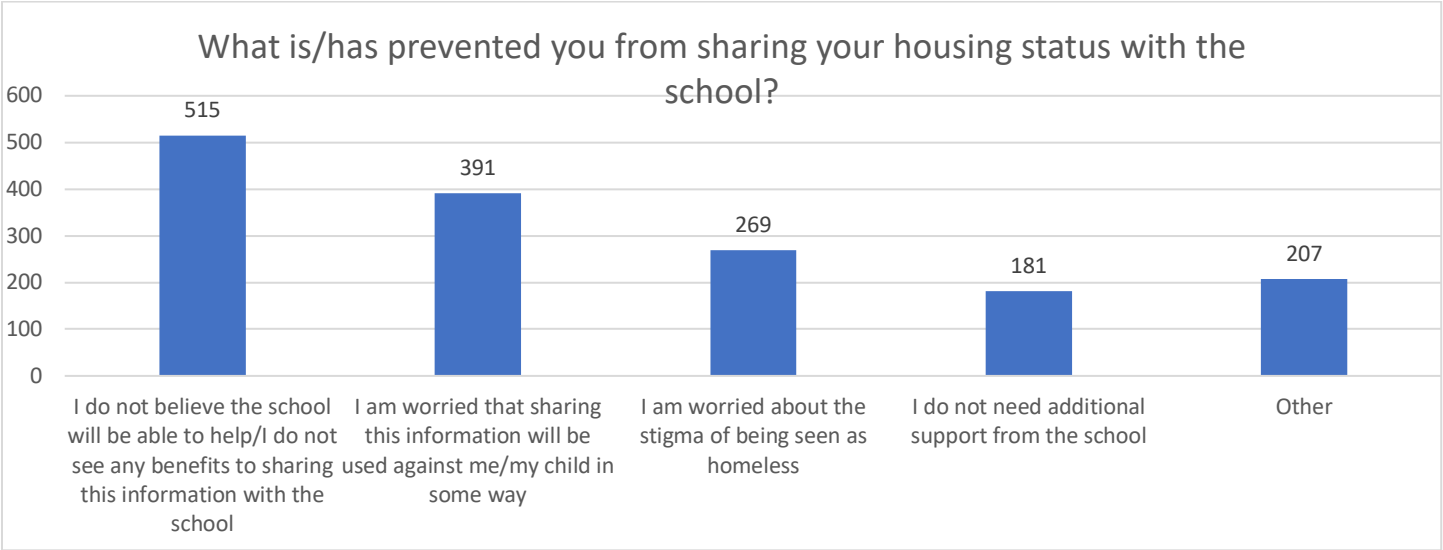
220 households identified that the school district is or was aware of their housing instability



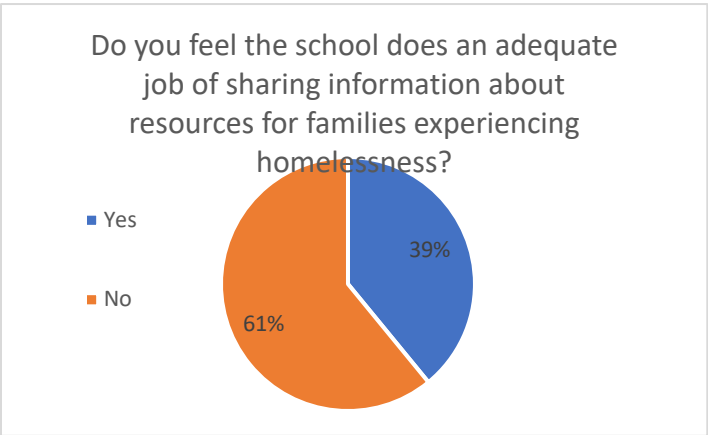
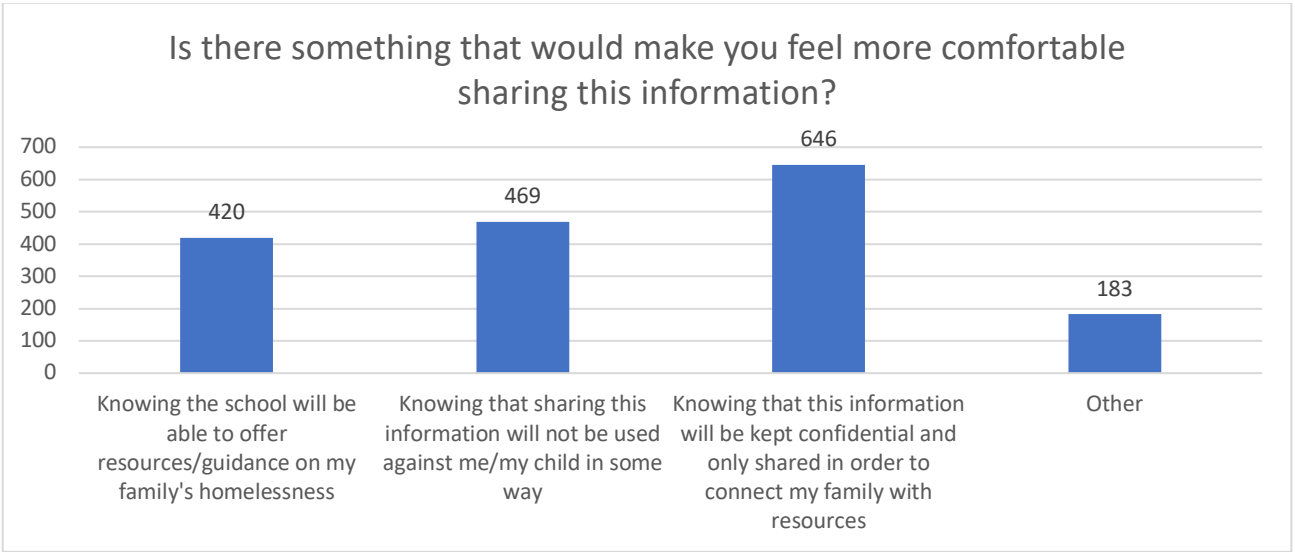
McKinney Vento NJ Region I Survey Responses
Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, Hunterdon, Warren, Sussex Counties
Family Responses



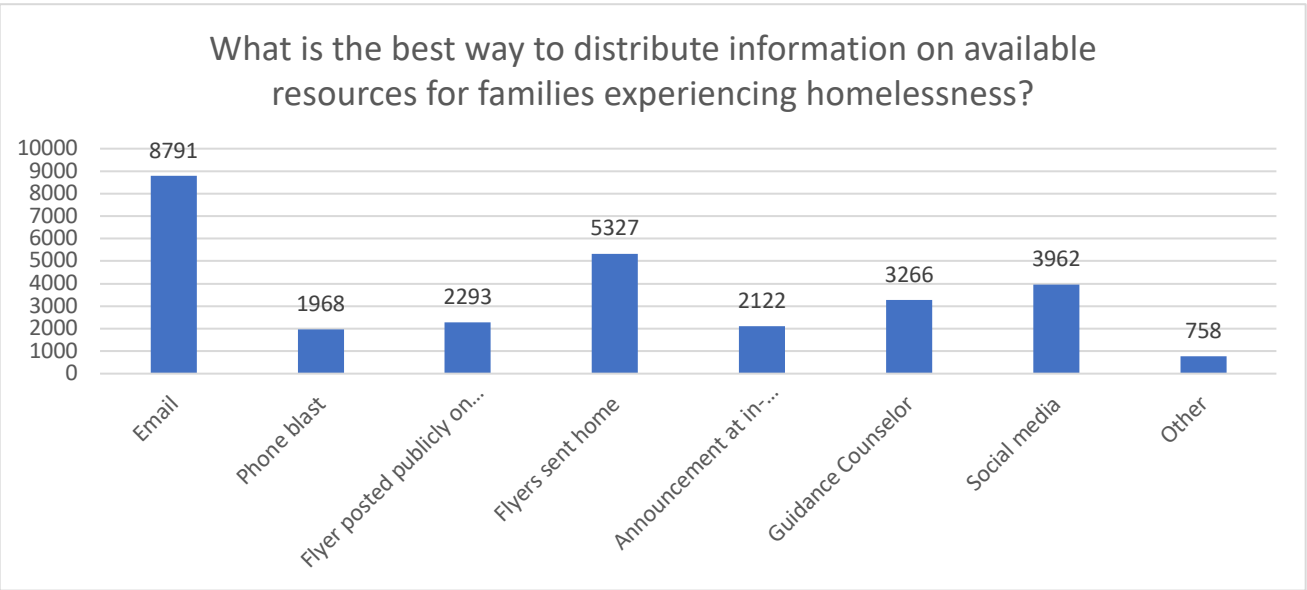
1,214 households reported that their school district was not aware of their housing instability



McKinney Vento NJ Region I Survey Responses
Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, Hunterdon, Warren, Sussex Counties
Family Responses



8,047 households (70%) stated they would let the school district know if they were to experience homelessness in the future.

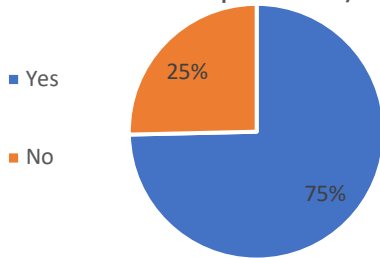


McKinney Vento NJ Region I Survey Responses
Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, Hunterdon, Warren, Sussex Counties
School Personnel Responses

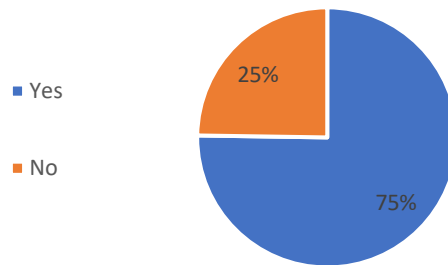
Total School Personnel Survey Submitted: **239**

58% identified that they were a homeless liaison, guidance counselor or has experience working with families experiencing housing instability or homelessness

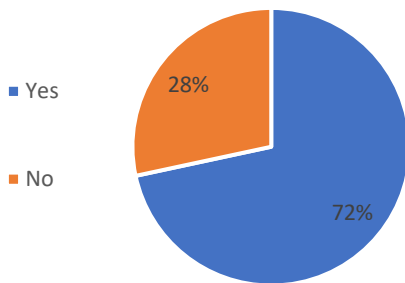
Are you aware of who your district's liaison is? (all responders)



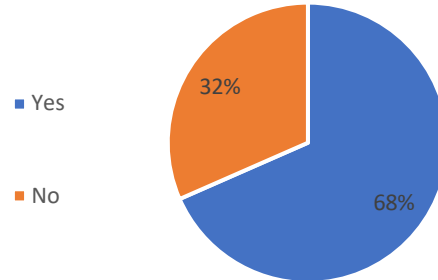
If you were to suspect a family is experiencing homelessness, do you feel confident you would know how to connect them to services?



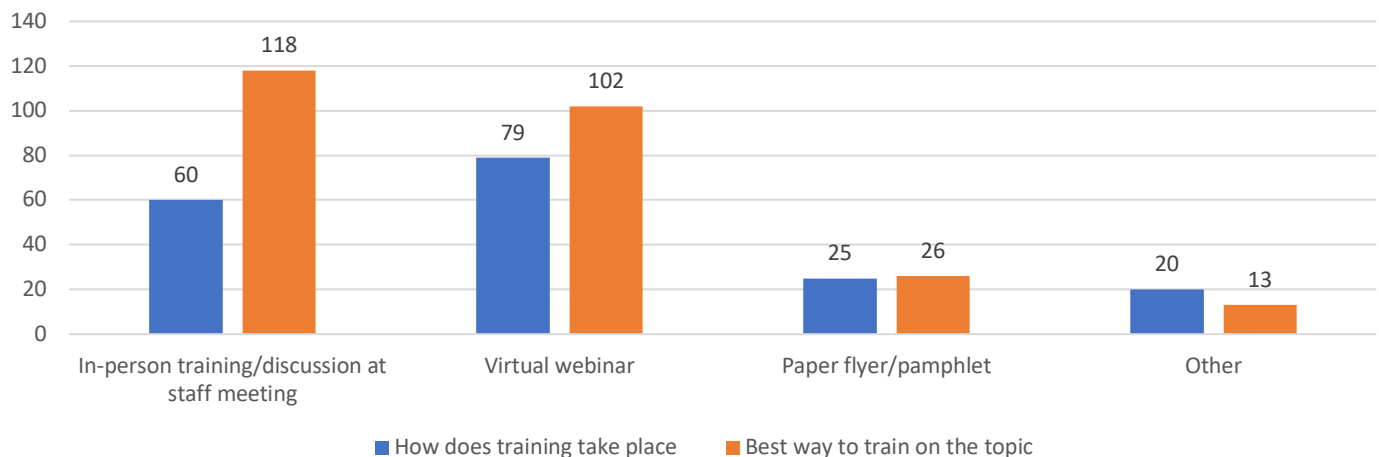
Have you received training around identifying a family who may be experiencing homelessness?



Do you feel the district effectively trains on what to do if a student/family is experiencing homelessness?

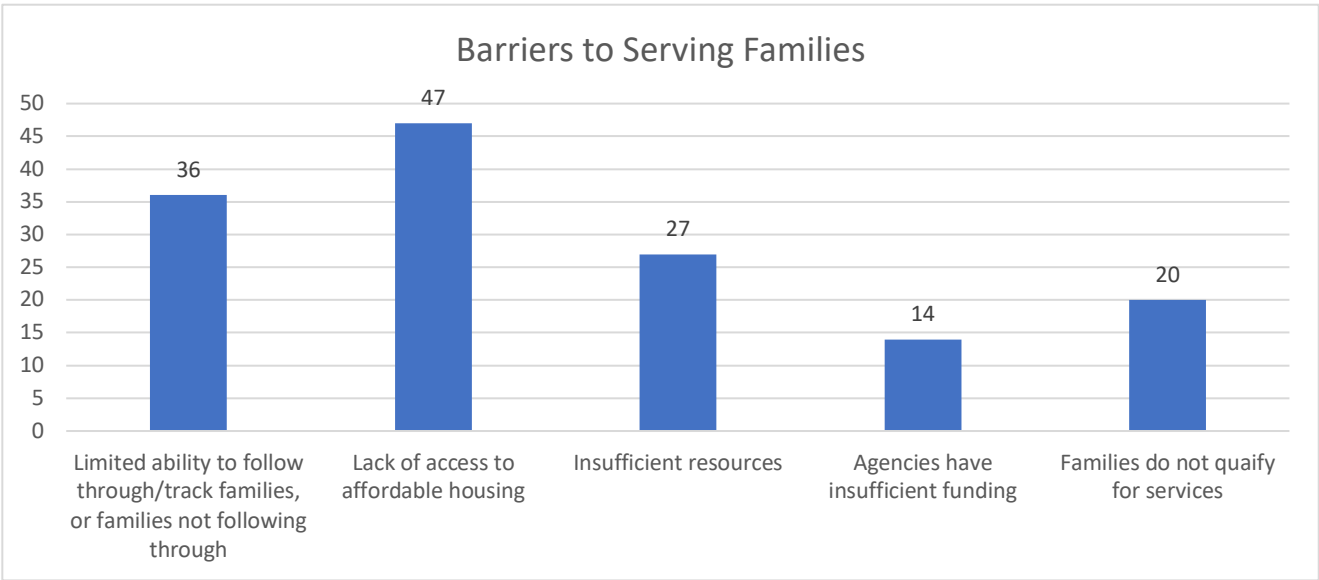
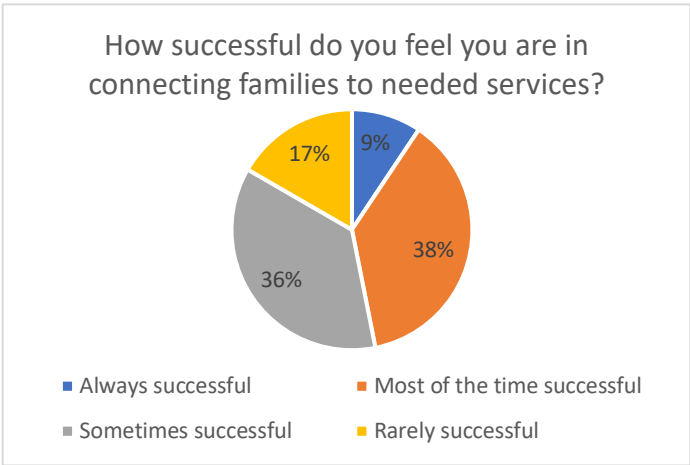
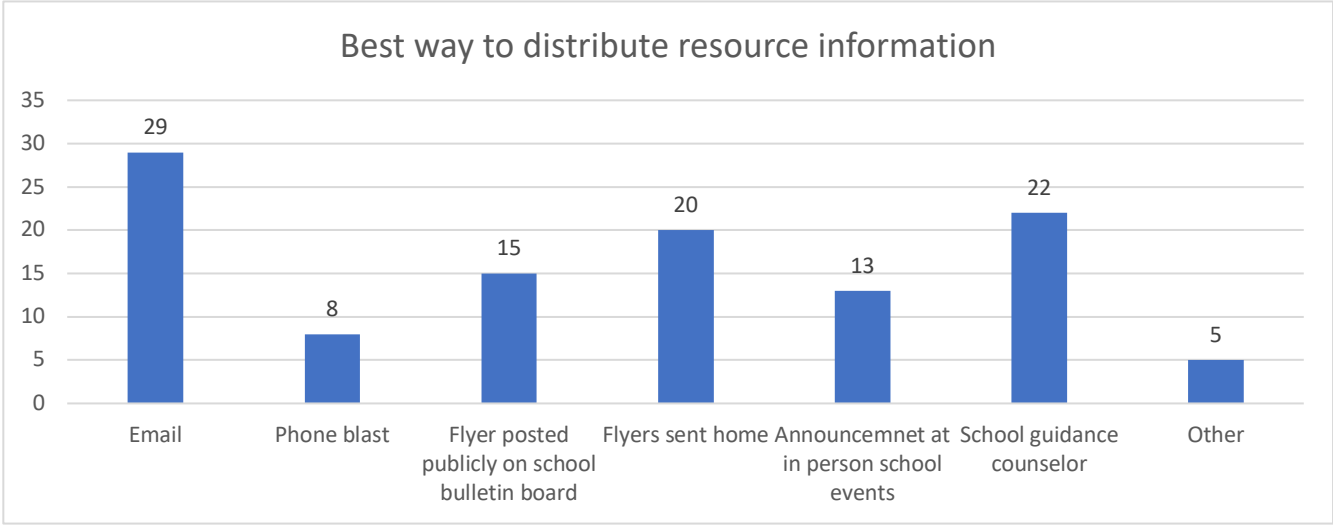


District Trainings



McKinney Vento NJ Region I Survey Responses
Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, Hunterdon, Warren, Sussex Counties
School Personnel Responses

73% of respondents feel their district does an adequate job of sharing resources for families experiencing homelessness



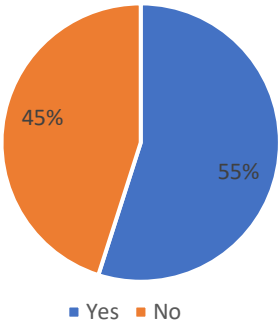
McKinney Vento NJ Region I Survey Responses
Bergen, Passaic, Somerset, Hunterdon, Warren, Sussex Counties
Service Provider Responses

Total Service Provider Survey Submitted: **70**

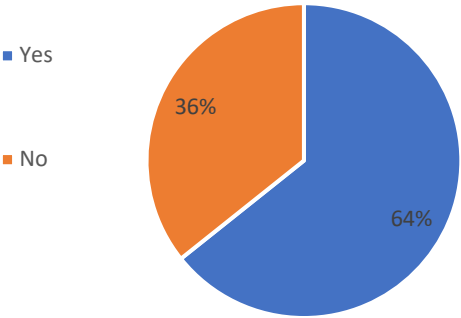
94% regularly serving families with children

73% reported knowing that families experiencing homelessness could be eligible for the services such as transportation or assistance with remaining in school district of origin, etc

Did you know that there is a school homeless liaison in all schools?

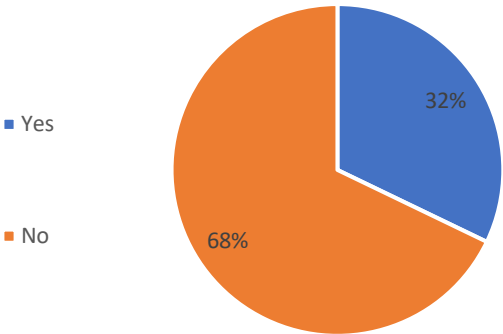


Do you know who to contact at the school district if a family you are serving needs to enroll their child in school or needs accomodations?



26% reported being provided an updated contact if there is a change in who the liaison for the district is

Do you feel information about education services for homeless families is easily accessible?



APPENDIX B

McKinney-Vento Parent Resources/Samples Links:

Two Minute Video Covering What is McKinney-Vento?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owwwztok2pQ&themeRefresh=1>

Free Educational Rights Poster for Parents:

<https://nchehelpline.org/collections/limit-10/products/educational-rights-poster-for-parents>

Sample Parent Pack from the National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE:

<https://nchehelpline.org/collections/limit-5/products/parent-pack-pocket-folder-english>

Unlocking Potential! What Families and Shelters Need to Know About Homelessness and Special Education:

<https://education.wm.edu/centers/hope/publications/infobriefs/documents/unlockingfamilies2014.pdf>

Navigating Challenging Conversations about Housing

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act is a federal law that protects the educational rights of students in temporary housing. It defines “**homeless children and youths**” as any student who **lacks fixed regular and adequate nighttime residence**.

Conversations about a family’s housing situation can be tense, uncomfortable, or feel invasive. This tip sheet provides trauma-sensitive strategies and conversation starters for some of the most common conversations you will encounter with students, families, and LEA administration.

The Challenge	<i>When asked about a current address or living situation, the family gives only vague or generalized answers.</i>
Why It’s Challenging	This is challenging because liaisons and/or LEA staff need specific housing information to make informed decisions about McKinney-Vento eligibility. Vague answers may be misinterpreted as a “false story,” leading someone to make an incorrect determination. Additionally, a family may feel under attack or become upset by numerous clarifying questions.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>If you need more information from a family about their housing situation, first explain <i>why</i> you need housing details before you ask any additional questions. You may also want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite the family to speak with you in a private setting. Avoid talking at the front desk or registration counter. • Explain your position/role and intentions. For example, “I am the McKinney-Vento liaison, and my job is to connect students in temporary housing with educational supports and services.” • Be clear about the goal of the conversation. Make clear that you are not trying to get them in trouble, but rather, want to ensure they receive all services they are eligible for. • Avoid the word “homeless.” Instead, talk about a temporary housing arrangement.

The Challenge	<i>A family's housing situation seems to be fixed and regular, but you need to know if it is also adequate.</i>
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because questions about housing adequacy can feel particularly uncomfortable and intrusive. Adequacy conversations are also challenging because families may be nervous that information shared about housing will result in a report to the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (TDCS).
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>It is important to take a very sensitive approach to this type of conversation. Before asking any questions about the adequacy of the housing arrangement, begin the conversation by reminding the family that students living in temporary housing situations have special education rights, which may be beneficial to the student and his/her family. Reassure them that your questions are intended to connect the student with appropriate supports and services.</p> <p>Additionally, you may want to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the concept of "fixed, regular, and adequate" as it relates to McKinney-Vento protections. Note that the word "protection" may help put a family at ease. • Give examples of "inadequate housing" instead of asking direct questions. You can list examples like "multiple children sharing one bed" or "not having a working kitchen" and then ask the family if any of those examples apply to them. You may also try asking, "do you feel comfortable telling me more about that," rather than asking direct questions. • If appropriate, let the family know that inadequate housing is not the same as child abuse or neglect. Mandatory reporting laws for suspected child abuse and neglect are different from McKinney-Vento eligibility determinations. If the family is concerned about a call to child protective services (TDCS), reiterate that the purpose of determining eligibility under McKinney-Vento is to connect students with appropriate services and protections.



The Challenge	<i>A family has been living at the same address for more than a year and you are unsure if the housing should still be considered to be temporary.</i>
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because revisiting a McKinney-Vento eligibility determination may feel like an awkward "investigation" or worse, could be re-traumatizing for the family. It may also be challenging if you believe that a family's temporary housing situation has become permanent, but the family disagrees.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>As a best practice, we suggest that schools check in with families at the end of each school year about their housing status. By having annual McKinney-Vento eligibility conversations in the spring, you can limit disruption for students and schools in the fall. A few suggestions for having this conversation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Let the family know at the time of initial identification that you plan to follow up at the end of the school year. Having a plan in place will make it seem less like an "investigation."• Have any follow-up conversations WELL BEFORE August! If you believe the family's situation is now permanent, talk to the family in May or June about making a smooth transition to the local school. Make sure that the student starts the next school year off on the right foot (and in the right school) by connecting the family to the enrollment office at the new school, transferring records, etc.• To the extent possible, have end-of-year conversations with ALL families who have been identified as living in temporary housing. Let them know that this is routine practice in the LEA to avoid having families feel like they are being singled out.



The Challenge	<i>The student or family seems to be telling a different version of their housing story to the liaison versus the school principal or enrollment secretary.</i>
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because variations in housing explanations/descriptions can raise a red flag for school or LEA staff about the authenticity of the story.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>For some families, a temporary housing situation can be a very sensitive issue. Depending on whom they are speaking with, a family may change or omit details of the story out of fear, shame, or embarrassment. When having a housing conversation, a few suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When possible, a person who already has a relationship with the family should lead the conversation. This may reduce anxiety and unnecessary repetition of difficult stories.• Before asking the family about their housing situation, assure them that your questions are meant to determine what services may be available to their children under McKinney-Vento. Remind the family that you are not trying to get them in trouble.• If appropriate, let the family know that inadequate housing is not the same as child abuse or neglect. If the family is concerned about a call to child protective services, reiterate that the purpose of determining eligibility under McKinney-Vento is to connect students with appropriate services and protections.• Explain your position/role and intentions. For example, "I am the McKinney-Vento liaison and my job is to connect students in temporary housing with educational supports and services."



The Challenge	<i>A family shows up at a school to enroll their student but does not have any documentation</i>
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because front-line school staff may not be aware of the right to immediate enrollment without documentation under the McKinney-Vento Act and may mistakenly turn families away. Making matters more challenging, families may also be unaware of McKinney-Vento protections causing them to avoid or delay school enrollment for their children
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>Make sure all front-line school staff are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained to recognize the signs of homelessness, • Understand the basic protections for families in temporary housing • Recognize that the safest place for a child or youth is to be in school. <p>When a family comes to a school to enroll, the staff person should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have every new student (family) fill out a <u>housing questionnaire upon enrollment</u>. This will give staff an immediate clue as to the family's housing status. • Do not ask if the family is homeless. If needed, use phrases like "housing status" or "temporary living situation" instead. • If the family is temporarily housed, enroll the student immediately and refer the family to the LEA's McKinney-Vento liaison. Remember that "immediately" means same day, regardless of what documentation the family can or cannot produce.



The Challenge	<i>An unaccompanied youth shows up at a school or enrollment office without any paperwork wanting to “sign up for school.”</i>
Why It’s Challenging	This is challenging because schools are often nervous about enrolling a student without parental permission. It is also challenging because unaccompanied youth may not be upfront about their reasons for leaving home.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>Make sure all front-line school staff are trained and understand that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most youths leave home because of significant family dysfunction and abuse, not because they don’t like their parent’s rules. Most youth who have left home, especially those who stay away from home for a long time, have fled abusive homes. They may not tell you what has happened to them, but studies of unaccompanied youth have found that 20-50% were sexually abused in their homes and 40-60% were physically abused. • The safest place for a student to be is in school. Whatever the background story is, it is always preferable, and indeed required by law, for unaccompanied youth to be immediately enrolled in school. <p>A few suggestions for having an effective conversation with an unaccompanied youth include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the conversation by focusing on the student’s strengths. For example, “I’m glad that you came to enroll today. We want to help you be successful in school.” • Make sure the unaccompanied youth knows that they can either stay in their same school and get transportation back to that school or immediately enroll in the local school. Oftentimes youth don’t know that they can stay in the same school if they are temporarily living outside of the LEA boundaries. If the youth does decide to stay in the same school, make sure that the youth is connected with the LEA’s McKinney-Vento liaison and that transportation is arranged. • Make the student feel welcome by stressing partnership over power. For example, you might tell the student, “We want to help you be successful in school. Let’s work together to make sure you can get here on time each day.” • Take steps to connect the youth with services in the school community and beyond. Without parental support, an unaccompanied youth may rely on support and services from the community. Talk to the youth about any available tutoring/mentoring programs or other after-school activities. Also, try to talk to the student about his/her needs and interests and make appropriate referrals, including to housing service providers.



The Challenge	<i>A student who is temporarily housed is exhibiting challenging behavior in school and/or is repeatedly absent</i>
Why It's Challenging	This is challenging because school staff may see negative behavior and/or frequent absences as "attention seeking," "intentionally defiant," or "apathetic." Any of these labels can cause friction between students and staff and impede school success.
Trauma-Sensitive Strategies	<p>When working with a student in temporary housing, keep in mind that losing one's home can be traumatic. In some cases, the student may be contending with chronic stress caused by the instability of being homeless and additional factors such as substance abuse on the part of the parent(s), untreated mental illness on the part of the parent(s), or domestic violence. Chronic stress and trauma have a very real effect on a student's brain, body, and behavior. When talking with a student, be sure to use trauma-sensitive strategies including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Start any conversation by pointing out a strength before discussing a problem. For example, "I noticed that you did a great job following instructions in math class yesterday. What do you think helped you do that and how can we do that again today?"• Make the student feel safe and supported. Make sure an adult in the school community is regularly checking in with the student. Practice active listening and emphasize partnership over power. Avoid causing shame or blame, and be very clear about expectations.• Help other school-based staff understand the impact of trauma and provide professional development on trauma sensitivity.

* This tip sheet was adapted from materials from the New York, Illinois, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia Departments of Education and the National Center for Homeless Education.



Housing and Educational Rights Notification **TEMPLATE**

Instructions: Once a student has been identified as homeless, this form is intended to be used as a guide for LEAs to document that the parent/guardian or unaccompanied youth has been informed of their housing and educational rights under the McKinney-Vento Act. This document should be transferred to LEA letterhead - deleting or updating all red font areas and providing the most up-to-date McKinney-Vento Liaison contact information.

Students without fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residences have the following rights:

- 1) Immediate enrollment in the school they last attended or the local school where they are currently staying even if they do not have all the documents usually required at the time of enrollment without fear of being separated or treated differently due to their housing situations;
- 2) Transportation to the school of origin for the regular school day;
- 3) Access to free meals, ESEA Title I, Part A and other educational programs, and transportation to extra-curricular activities to the same extent that it is offered to other students.

Any questions about these rights can be directed to the local McKinney-Vento liaison, **<<Insert Name and Phone Number>>**.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have received and understand the above rights.

Signature of Parent/Guardian/Unaccompanied Youth

Date

Signature of McKinney-Vento Liaison

Date

Local Liaison Roles & Responsibilities

The Duties of the Local Liaison

The McKinney-Vento Act includes a "job description" for the local liaison in the form of a list of duties. Local liaisons must ensure that:⁴

- (i) children and youth experiencing homelessness are **identified** by school personnel through outreach and coordination activities with other entities and agencies;
- (ii) children and youth experiencing homelessness are **immediately enrolled** in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, schools within the district;
- (iii) children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness have access to and **receive educational services** for which they are eligible, including Early Head Start and Head Start programs, early intervention services under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and other preschool programs administered by the Local Education Agency (LEA);
- (iv) children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness receive **referrals** to health care, dental, mental health, substance abuse, housing, and other appropriate services;
- (v) the parents or guardians of students experiencing homelessness are **informed** of the educational and related opportunities available to their children, and are provided with meaningful **opportunities to participate** in the education of their children;
- (vi) **public notice** of the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness is disseminated in locations frequented by families, and youth experiencing homelessness, including schools, shelters, public libraries, and soup kitchens, in a manner and form understandable to parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth;
- (vii) enrollment **disputes** are mediated in accordance with the provisions of the Act;
- (viii) parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness are **fully informed of all transportation services available** to McKinney-Vento students, including transportation to the school of origin, and are assisted in accessing transportation;
- (ix) school personnel providing services to students experiencing homelessness receive **professional development** and other support; and
- (x) unaccompanied youth:
- (xi) are enrolled in school;
- (xii) have opportunities to meet the same challenging State academic standards as other children and youth; and
- (xiii) are informed of their status as independent students⁵ and receive assistance verifying this status for purposes of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(6)(A).

⁵ 20 U.S.C. § 1087vv.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Program Timeline of Reminders

July

- At the start of the new school year, begin identifying students who are eligible for McKinney-Vento services. Utilize the previous school year's year-end status and checkpoints, as well as enrollment form/residency forms for identification. Utilize McKinney-Vento rights and notification forms as students are identified.
- Update homeless poster placements and ensure that the LEA homeless liaison and the state homeless grant manager's contact information is current. Ensure poster locations are documented in writing for easy identification if asked where posters are located.
- Evaluate and update any LEA paperwork, forms, and written policies utilized for the homeless program including that all information is on LEA letterhead, making sure contact information, school year and dates, and policies are correct and meet all requirements.⁶
- Check the LEA's Student Information System (SIS) to ensure that the LEA begins the school year with **zero** (0) students identified as McKinney-Vento eligible.

August/September

- Provide annual McKinney-Vento Enrollment, Identification, Resources, and Support Training to LEA staff, including front office staff, principals, social workers, counselors, teachers, support staff, cafeteria staff, janitors, and bus drivers.
- New McKinney-Vento liaisons must submit an [ePlan User Access Form](#) if they will require access to ePlan.
- New McKinney-Vento liaisons must update ePlan with the correct contact information.
- New McKinney-Vento liaisons are strongly encouraged to participate in the online McKinney-Vento Self-Paced Training provided by the [National Center for Homeless Education \(NCHE\)](#).
- Provide training to LEA- and school-level staff (certified and non-certified) and community partners so they are aware of homeless identification, eligibility, and enrollment procedures.
- Enter eligible students in your SIS and keep your system current throughout the year.
- Seek support from community-based organizations and partners for students (begin to plan for holidays as well).
- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and Education Information System (EIS) uploads.
- Complete the Immunization Report due in ePlan.

October/November

- Ensure McKinney-Vento eligible students are in your SIS and align with EIS uploads for certification.
- The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) Conference is held.
- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and EIS uploads.

⁶ See the [Mandated Policy & Procedures](#) section.

December

- Facilitate and organize support from community-based organizations for children/youth during the holidays (e.g., food and clothing drives).
- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and EIS uploads.

January

- Review McKinney-Vento Programming Enrollment, Identification, Resources, and Support Training with staff during the beginning of the new semester.
- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and EIS uploads.

February

- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and EIS uploads.
- Begin to plan summer programming for McKinney-Vento-identified students.
- Begin planning the McKinney-Vento Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Round-Up Week. A tip sheet for school counselors can be found [here](#).

March/ April

- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and EIS uploads.
- Seek support from community-based organizations and partners for students (begin to plan for summer break needs and resources).

May/June

- Verify students' living situation at year-end for prioritization at the beginning of the school year.
- Send an end-of-year letter to McKinney-Vento families. An end-of-year letter sample template can be found [here](#).
- Access what worked well with the homeless program and determine if any changes need to be made.
- Be sure to review data to determine student outcomes and include relevant stakeholders in the assessment process.
- Check the accuracy of McKinney-Vento students' identification and alignment with SIS and EIS uploads.
- The Homeless Immunization Report opens in ePlan.

A QUICK GUIDE TO COMMON CRISES

FOOD ASSISTANCE



Sussex County Division of Social Services (Newton)
(973) 383-3600

Benny's Bodega (Newton)
Bennysbodega@gmail.com

Sparta Ecumenical Food Pantry (Sparta)
(862) 266-0563

Holy Counselor Lutheran Church (Vernon)
(973) 827-5251

Grace's Food Pantry (Franklin)
(862) 266-9126

Harvest Home Food Company (Hamburg)
(973) 827-4076

Bodhi Monastery (Lafayette)
(973) 940-0711

Samaritan Inn (Stillwater)
(973) 940-8872

Westside Methodist Church (Hopatcong)
(973) 398-0846

Minisink Reform Church (Montague)
973-293-3514

Project Self-Sufficiency (Newton) (973) 940-3500
Monday-Friday 9am-5pm (hours are flexible)

Manna House (Newton) (973) 579-6517
Free meal served M-F 11:30 a.m. -12:30 p.m.

Harvest House Lunch Program (Sussex)
(973) 875-6445

Free meal served M-F @ 11:30 a.m.

WIC (Women Infant Children) Program
(973) 579-5155

NJ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
(formerly known as Food Stamps) (973) 383-3600
(S.C. Div. of Social Services)

A QUICK GUIDE TO COMMON CRISES

HEATING & UTILITY ASSISTANCE



Sussex County Division of Social Services

(973) 383-3600 May provide emergency utility assistance to families in need of deliverable fuel or who are faced with the termination of their utility service. Certain eligibility restrictions may apply, please contact the Division for further information.

NORWESCAP (908) 454-4778

Home Energy Assistance Program (HEA) –The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEA) and Universal Service Fund (USF) can assist with heating and cooling costs as well as provide funds to assist eligible individuals to lower the amount that they have to pay for their gas and electric bills.

Project Self-Sufficiency

973-940-3500 or 844-807-3500

Provides step by step help for all of your energy assistance needs. PSS will work with individuals on submitting necessary documentation to ensure application completion.

Family Promise of Sussex County (973) 579-1180

Provides Home Energy Assistance (LIHEAP and USF programs) to help low-income households with heating and cooling bills.

NJ Power On (732) 982-8710

NJ Power On provides several assistance options that can assist families with affording their ongoing utility bills. Please contact NJ Power On for assistance with deciding which program is right for your household.

A QUICK GUIDE TO COMMON CRISES

MENTAL HEALTH, COUNSELING & SUBSTANCE USE TREATMENT



- **DASI** Domestic/sexual violence (973) 579-2386
- **The Counseling Center at Roxbury** (862) 296- 2062
- **Mental Health Urgent Care & Drop- In Support Center** (973) 840- 1850
- **Intensive Family Support Services of Sussex County** (973) 579- 4399
- **Newton Medical Center for Mental Health** (973) 383-1533
- **Psychiatric Emergency Services** (973) 383-0973
- **Bridgeway Rehabilitation Services** (973) 383-8670
- **Center for Evaluation and Counseling** (973) 300-1900
- **Family Partners of Morris/Sussex** (973) 940-3194
- **NewBridge Services** (973) 316- 9333
- **Project Self-Sufficiency** (973) 940-3500 or (844) 807-3500
- **NAMI Sussex** (862) 299-9250
- **Perform Care** Children/adolescents (877) 652-7624
- **Youth Advocate Program** (973) 729-3617

Suicide & Crisis Hotline (24/7, Call or Text)
9-8-8

- **Center for Prevention & Counseling** (973) 383-4787
- **Hackettstown Medical Center, Counseling & Addiction Center** (888) 247- 1400
- **Center for Family Services** (973) 940- 0105
- **Willow Tree Therapy Services** (973) 903- 5431
- **C.L.E.A.R.** (844) SC-CLEAR
- **Freedom House** (908) 537-6043
- **Sunrise House** (973) 862-4820
- **Turning Point** (908) 522-7000

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HOMELESS OR IN NEED OF SHELTER



Sussex County Division of Social Services

(973) 383-3600 May provide emergency and/or temporary housing assistance to single men, women and families. Certain eligibility restrictions may apply.

Samaritan Inn (973) 940- 8872

Provides short term emergency shelter for families, couples, and single women.

Project Self-Sufficiency Central Intake

(973) 940-3500 or (844) 807-3500 to speak to a local community-based resource specialist that provides live, real time assistance to help you navigate all of your needs. Intensive case management and homeless prevention services.

Family Promise of Sussex County (973) 579-1180

Provides short term emergency shelter, intensive case management services, homeless prevention, and rehousing services.

Domestic Abuse & Sexual Assault Intervention Services (DASI) (973) 875-1211 (24-hour helpline)

Provides emergency shelter for victims of domestic and sexual violence, sexual assault and human trafficking who are not safe in their own homes.

Birth Haven (973) 579-7979

Provides short-term shelter and education for pregnant homeless women.

Market Street Mission (973) 538-5854

Provides overnight emergency shelter for homeless males.

After- Hours Homeless Response Service

NJ 2-1-1

A QUICK GUIDE TO COMMON CRISES

**CLOTHING, CASH
ASSISTANCE,
TRANSPORTATION,
MEDICAL**



Partnership for Social Services, Franklin (973) 827- 4702

Thrifty Mouse, Sparta (973) 729-9121

Benny's Bodega, Newton Bennysbodega@gmail.com

Project Self-Sufficiency, 127 Mill Street, Newton

Monday-Friday 9am-5pm (hours are flexible)

Branchville United Methodist Church, Branchville

(973) 948-3749

Beehive Thrift Store, Newton (973) 383-1228

Sussex County Division of Social Services

(973) 383-3600

Clients can apply for General Assistance (GA) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Eligibility restrictions may apply. Please contact the Division for further details. The Division can also assist with evictions and security deposits.

Skylands Ride (973) 579-0480; press 1

Provides transportation options to residents of Sussex County. For additional information including available routes, schedules and fare pricing please call their main office or visit their website.

Modivcare (866) 527-9933

Provides medical transportation for Medicaid recipients in the State of New Jersey. This includes upper-mode non-emergent Mobility Assistance Vehicles, ambulance services and lower-mode delivery services.

Zufall Health Center (973) 862-6650

Free Clinic Newton (973) 400-8432

Sussex County Division of Social Services

(973) 383-3600

Sussex County Division of Senior Services

(973) 579-0555

Sample McKinney-Vento Training Plan for School Districts

Discovery Session

We will identify the needs of your school district and we could best serve you. By the end of the call, we will have a plan on who needs to be trained, when we would do the training.

Training (Three Sections)

We will do a typical "KWL" format as the base of the training.

Part 1

What do you KNOW about McKinney-Vento?

This is where we begin to better assess how to proceed with the rest of the training.

Part 2

Participants will be asked WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW about McKinney-Vento?

These questions direct best practices for the remainder of our training.

Part 3

Resources and support will be provided. Together we will collaborate on creating a minimum of *three different kinds of procedures* when a student may be identified. These include (but not limited to) the following:

- a) Teacher/Staff identifies student.
- b) Outside resource identifies student (Non-Lea Organization such as food pantry, Domestic Violence Center etc.).
- c) Self-identifies or a student identifies a friend.

Part 4

At the end of the session, questions from the "WANT TO KNOW" portion of the three-part session will be answered.

County resources will be provided to support the families. This includes all dates for "Ask the Liaison" sessions for the 2023/2024 school year, the McKinney-Vento online training and the contact information for support of McKinney-Vento post this training.

Part 5

November zoom meeting with those who participated in the training:

- a) What has been working?
- b) What has not been working?
- c) What would you need in order to do your work more efficiently?