

Navigating Different Definitions of Homelessness in Partnership Work

This resource:

- is part of the California Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center's (HETAC) [School-Community Partnerships: A Toolkit for Working Together to Serve Children, Youth, and Families Experiencing Homelessness](#); and
- recommends strategies for navigating different definitions of homelessness and partner priorities in collaborative work.

Context

Collaborations between schools and community organizations often bring together partners that approach homelessness work from different angles, including using a different definition of homelessness and focusing on a particular area of need (housing, education, employment, health and well-being, etc.). While these differences may create challenges, they can be navigated successfully with intentionality and good will, benefitting the partners and the children, youth, and families they serve. This resource builds on the [HETAC School-Community Partnerships Toolkit](#) resource entitled

Understanding Federal Definitions of Homelessness and recommends strategies for navigating different definitions and partner priorities in collaborative work.



Engaging with Intentionality and Good Will

When working with partners who approach homelessness work from a different perspective, it is important to look for opportunities rather than barriers and communicate value and respect to your partner. The HETAC recommends these strategies:

Focus on opportunities rather than barriers

Focus on things you can do together (opportunities) rather than things you can't do together (barriers). Seek to identify commonalities in your work rather than magnify disparities.

Example: Homeless response systems and schools are serving some of the same children, youth, and families. Ultimately, both the homeless response and education systems benefit from these children, youth, and families maintaining safe and stable housing and succeeding in school. Focus on how you might work together in a mutually beneficial manner in support of both systems' goals and the people they serve.

Choose language carefully

When referring to your partner's work, choose language carefully. Use "neutral" or "asset language", rather than "loaded" or "deficit language".

Example: When referring to a student who would be considered homeless under the U.S. Department of Education (ED) definition, systems that use a different definition of homelessness might refer to the student as "homeless under the ED definition" or "doubling-up/couch surfing" rather than "at-risk of

homelessness”. Referring to these students as “at-risk of homelessness” may be off-putting or confusing to education partners, as these students are considered homeless under federal education statute.

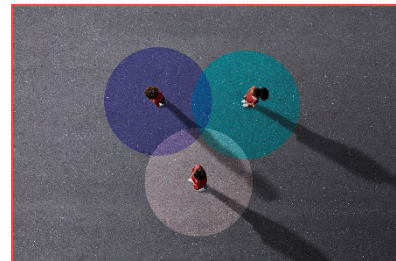
Communicate value and respect

While your partner may approach homelessness from a different perspective, it is important to communicate that you value your partner’s work. It also may be helpful to communicate to your partner that you understand that they likely are struggling with resource and system constraints, just as you are.

Example: While housing is not the primary focus of the education system, educators can communicate their understanding of the importance of safe and stable housing as a foundation from which youth and families can focus on other life goals. Similarly, while education is not the primary focus of homeless service providers, they can communicate to their school partners that they recognize the key role that education can play in equipping children and youth with the skills and credentials they need to achieve self-sufficiency and make a sustainable exit from homelessness.

Definitional Overlap

While the ED and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) definitions of homelessness generally are considered broader than the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition, the definitions overlap in areas. For instance, of the [students identified as homeless by U.S. public schools during the 2020-2021 school year](#),



- 76.8% were doubling-up (sometimes referred to as “couch-surfing”)
- 10.9% were staying in shelters or transitional housing,
- 7.8% were staying in hotels/motels, and
- 4.5% were staying in unsheltered locations.

Based on these numbers, at least 18.7% of children, youth, and families who meet the ED definition also meet the HUD definition. Additionally, some of the children, youth, and families staying in hotels/motels or in doubled-up arrangements may meet the HUD definition of homelessness under category 2 (at imminent risk of) or category 4 (fleeing danger). And given the fluid nature of youth and family homelessness, many youth and families will move between different unsafe and unstable living arrangements over a short period of time, such as a youth who is doubling-up one month, staying in their car the next month, and staying in a Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Basic Center Program the next month.

With these dynamics in mind, consider these strategies:

- Remember that some youth or families who meet the ED definition of homelessness also meet the HUD definition and would be eligible for HUD-funded homeless response services.
- Consider flexibilities under HUD homeless categories 2 (at imminent risk of) and 4 (fleeing danger) when determining eligibility for HUD-funded homeless response and other services. For instance, see the examples of Alexis (who is doubling-up and considered homeless under HUD category 4) and David (who is doubling-up and considered homeless under HUD categories 2 and 4) in HUD’s [Determining Homeless Status of Youth](#) resource.

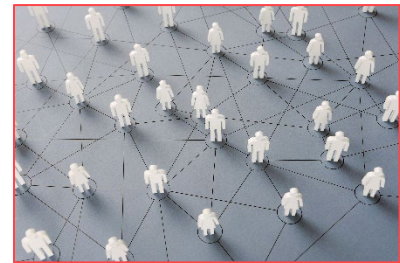
Flexible and Blended Funding

The federal homeless response funding communities receive from HUD and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) represents a significant investment of dollars dedicated to addressing youth and family homelessness; and yet communities may want or need to engage other partners to secure additional funds that may be used to develop and implement a coordinated community response to all forms of homelessness experienced by local residents. Depending on the additional funding source (public or private, etc.), these dollars may be able to be used in ways that HUD or VA funding may not be.

Communities will want to identify efforts that are critical to preventing and ending homelessness but that may not be paid for with HUD or VA funding due to funding usage restrictions or insufficient funding to meet the full need. In these cases, communities can use other more flexible sources of funding to meet the need or consider a blended funding model to serve a broader eligibility pool.

Leveraging Available Supports through Partner Referrals

No single system can meet all the needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness, which span multiple life domains and include safe and stable housing, education and employment, permanent connections, and well-being. Acknowledging this, HUD encourages Continuums of Care (CoCs) to engage a broad array of providers of services to people experiencing homelessness and poverty in the planning and implementation of CoC coordinated entry systems. Learn more about HUD coordinated entry in the NCHE issue brief entitled [*Coordinated Entry Processes: Building Mutual Engagement between Schools and Continuums of Care*](#).



Whether through a CoC's coordinated entry process or another partner-to-partner referral protocol, partners using different definitions of homelessness should learn about and refer to the full array of services available to people experiencing all forms of homelessness in their community. Even if a particular youth or family may not qualify for HUD homeless response assistance, they might be eligible for other housing and supportive services that use broader eligibility criteria.



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