

Identification of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Homeless children and youth reside in every county in Washington State.

In an effort to ensure the educational success of all students, school districts are required to identify and serve children and youths living in homeless situations as per the federal McKinney-Vento law. While the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness is very broad, when making a determination of homelessness, it is important to review each child or youth's situation on a case by case basis. The information provided herein is to be used only as a general guide. School district personnel are strongly encouraged to review the definition of homelessness as stated in the McKinney-Vento law, as well as the Non-regulatory Guidance for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth published by the United States Department of Education.

When is a child or youth considered homeless?

The term "homeless children and youths" means individuals who **lack a fixed, regular, and adequate** nighttime residence and includes the following:

- **Shared housing or "doubled-up":** Children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons (friends, family, or others) due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, **or a similar reason** are considered homeless. (This is often referred to as "couch surfing.")
- **Motels, hotels, campgrounds, and other locations:** Children and youths who are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations are considered homeless.
- **Transitional settings:** Children and youths who are living in emergency or transitional shelters are considered homeless. Also, transitional housing programs are not considered permanent housing, but rather temporary accommodations for homeless individuals and families, as a step to permanent housing. Residents of transitional housing continue to be considered homeless until they move into permanent housing.
- **Abandoned in hospitals:** There are instances when children and youth remain in a hospital beyond the time that they would normally stay for health reasons because they have been abandoned by their families. These children and youths should be considered homeless because they have no other place to live.
- **Awaiting foster care placement:** Although the law does not provide a definition for "awaiting placement," this should be interpreted to include all children and youths in interim placements. Due to the nature of social service placements, it will often be impossible to predict how long a child or youth may actually remain in a placement, or how temporary or permanent that placement may be. However, until a determination is made that the child's placement is

appropriate and intended to be long-term, the child should be considered to be awaiting foster care placement. The phrase, “awaiting foster care placement” is likely to include the following: shelters, emergency/interim/short-term foster homes, group homes and residential placements that are not intended to be long-term, evaluation centers, or placements for the sole purpose of evaluation.

- **Accommodations not ordinarily to be used by human beings:** Children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings are considered homeless.
- **Cars, train stations, and similar settings:** Children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, **substandard housing**, bus or train stations, or similar settings are to be considered homeless.
- **Migrant children:** Migratory children and youths should be considered homeless if they are staying in accommodations not fit for habitation, or if they are living in any of the circumstances described in the definition of homelessness as per the McKinney-Vento law. (They should not be considered homeless simply because they are children of migratory families.)
- **Runaways:** Children or youth who have run away from home and live in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, the streets, or other inadequate accommodations are considered homeless, even if their parents have provided and are willing to provide a home for them.
- **Throwaways:** Throwaway children or youth (i.e., those whose parents or guardians will not permit them to live at home) are considered homeless if they live on the streets, in shelters, or in other transitional or inadequate accommodations.
- **Unaccompanied youth:** The term “unaccompanied youth” includes a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This would include youth living in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing, and children or youths denied housing by their families (“throwaways”), and school-age unwed mothers who are living in homes for unwed mothers and have no other housing available.

If a child or youth’s living situation does not clearly fall into the situations described, the school district should refer to the McKinney-Vento definition of “fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence” and consider the relative permanence of the living arrangements. **Determinations of homelessness should be made on a case-by-case basis.**

Additional resources and documentation can be found on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Web site at www.k12.wa.us/HomelessEd/default.aspx or contact Melinda Dyer, Program Supervisor at (360) 725-6050 or email melinda.dyer@k12.wa.us. The agency TTY number is (360) 664-3631.