
Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for High School Counselors and McKinney-Vento Liaisons

Access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for Unaccompanied Youth

One third of unaccompanied female youth have been pregnant, and fifty percent of all unaccompanied youth have had a pregnancy experience, compared to less than ten percent of housed youth. Homeless young parents have difficulty meeting their family's basic needs, as well as accessing temporary income assistance.ⁱ

TANF provides a monthly cash payment to low-income families.ⁱⁱ Unaccompanied youth who are pregnant or have children may be eligible to receive TANF benefits, though many may not know that. Youth who receive TANF benefits are also eligible for childcare assistance during school and work hours. It is important to know there is a 5-year lifetime limit on receiving TANF benefits. This time limit usually does not start running until a youth turns 19 years old, if the youth is participating in school or works full-time.

Q: Does the law say anything special about youth experiencing homelessness?

A: Yes. To receive TANF benefits, youth must live with a parent or legal guardian, another adult relative, or in another approved living situation. To be approved, a living situation usually has to be supervised by an adult: for example, a group home for pregnant or parenting teenagers should qualify. The law allows a state to approve other living situations, such as independent living programs, in certain cases, if the youth is in a safe living situation that meets her needs.

Young women who are “couch-surfing” with family or friends, in an unstable living situation, or staying with someone under 18 will have trouble meeting TANF’s living requirements. Having an adult relative or mentor accompany the youth to the TANF office to explain the situation and advocate for benefits may help. TANF policy requires the state to assist youth in finding appropriate, adult-supervised living situations. In practice, TANF offices often deny youth’s applications for benefits without helping the youth find an appropriate living situation. Youth who are eligible for TANF except for their living situation should seek housing assistance from the TANF office.

Q: Can a teen parent apply for TANF without his/her parents?

A: Yes. Unaccompanied youth have the right to submit an application on their own.

Q: Will the TANF office count parents’ or guardians’ income when deciding if an unaccompanied youth can get TANF?

A: No. Parents’ or guardians’ income will only be counted if the youth lives with her parents or is being supported by her parents.

Q: How can youth apply for TANF?

A: Youth must apply through their local or county welfare office.

Q: Who can an unaccompanied youth contact for help getting TANF?

A: For assistance in applying for TANF, unaccompanied youth should contact a case manager from a youth services provider or homeless assistance program. Youth can also apply for TANF directly at a local welfare office, but should seek out a case manager or other advocate to help them with their claim. Youth should not be turned away at the front desk without filing an application. Local legal services agencies may also be able to help. Visit <http://www.lsc.gov/> or <http://www.ptla.org/legal-services-links> for a list of legal services organizations in your area.

ⁱ See National Network for Youth, *Pregnant and Parenting Homeless Youth*, available at: https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/IuuseBrief_Pregnancy-and-Parenting-2007_2010ish.pdf

ⁱⁱ See generally, *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (TANF)*: 42 U.S.C. §§601-619.