NAEHCY REOPENING OF SCHOOLS GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. States and communities took necessary steps to limit spread of the disease by issuing stay-at-home orders and closing schools, child care programs, public benefit offices, non-essential businesses, and many other public spaces where families experiencing homelessness typically receive support. As a result, families experiencing homelessness faced and continue to face extra barriers to resources and services on which they rely, and swift and intentional action is needed to ensure families experiencing homelessness receive the support they need to prevent significant and persistent harm to their physical and mental health, learning and development, and overall well-being.

As such, the following are considerations and issues that have already arisen with **school closures** beginning at the end of the last school year and are likely to continue to be issues as schools decide to remain with virtual only instruction or a hybrid model of virtual and in-person in the many different forms that currently exist and are likely to exist moving forward. Even for schools that decide to return in-person only, there will be challenges given the year end closures and issues that have arisen as a result of those closures including losing track of students previously identified as experiencing homelessness.

General concerns

Homelessness already creates barriers to resources and services, and those barriers are now amplified with schools, programs, and service providers being available virtually or partially virtual, and having gone through year end closures. That being said, we also recognize the delicate balance that needs to be considered with regard to in-person considerations and the benefits to in-person learning and the importance of schools to our students experiencing homelessness.

Issues/Considerations Identified: The issues identified, and potential strategies outlined below are a result of a NAEHCY survey to primarily homeless liaisons and others servicing our 1.5 million students experiencing homelessness. There were 564 respondents from 42 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

Key to the strategies are partnerships. Partnerships have been established throughout the nation between schools/school districts and community members, local businesses, local service providers, and churches.

ISSUE	STRATEGIES
Food and Nutrition: *Schools serve as sites for providing daily sustenance while schools are in session.* • *Access to Food and Nutrition.* Not all schools were able to provide the amount of food that was needed during the closures on their own, and some were not able to account for those students who needed delivery. • Access to Transportation. Families may not be able to make it to food distribution sites, especially if those sites are in multiple locations, due to lack of access to safe, reliable transportation • Access to Space and Refrigeration. Families may have trouble storing food because they don't have access to adequate space, refrigerators, etc. • Access to Credit. Families experiencing homelessness may not have access to credit which makes buying groceries online nearly impossible as well	• Collaboration with churches, businesses, organizations, community members to provide meals for families and students • Delivery through collaboration with the local community • Bus stop delivery through schools
Reliable and Consistent Internet Connectivity, and Access to Technology • Families experiencing homelessness often do not own computers or even smart phones; they also often lack access to reliable internet service	• Partner with local cable companies and/or other businesses to provide stable and reliable internet connection, and devices to facilitate connectivity • Schools and/or school-business partnerships to provide the devices • Placing WIFI on buses and parking them in various locations where needed • Libraries and community centers can provide WIFI in parking lots

Supplies and Learning materials • Students experiencing homelessness often lack the supplies and learning materials needed for academic success that they may be able to otherwise obtain while at school	• Provide supplies and materials to McKinney-Vento students • Delivery made available through partnerships to provide students with the supplies and materials • Drive through pick-ups • Home visits to deliver supplies and learning materials
School Communications/Connections • Connection and communication gaps as a result of the year end closures and the high mobility of our students have resulted in a continued fear of our children and families not receiving the information they need during this time	• Create a schedule to maintain constant connection and/or establish a coordinator to make regular contact with families • Visit shelters • Home visits • Utilize text apps and text messaging for communication • Create a plan to reestablish contact with families who may have been lost through school closures
Consistent Space to Learn, Study, Work • McKinney-Vento students often lack the space to be able to complete their work and studies	• Establish space in small cohorts for the students to work and study • Partner with community centers and libraries to provide work and study space
Mentors, Tutors, Adults • McKinney-Vento students will not have access to mentors, tutors and adult presence to assist in work and study	• Create a mentor and tutor program specifically for McKinney-Vento students • Establish small cohorts for instruction • Keep the students on a structured schedule • Establish regular check-ins • Create child care programs
After school activities • With school closures or partial school closures, after school activities have been eliminated or limited with COVID-19 restrictions	• Partner with your city or town to assist with the administering of after school programs

Healthcare: *The students and their families are not likely to have access to PPE and are likely to be identified as a vulnerable community* - Vulnerable by pre-existing conditions. People in families experiencing homelessness often have higher rates of health problems, including high rates of asthma in children; these underlying health issues make them more vulnerable to negative outcomes of COVID-19 - Vulnerable by living conditions. Families experiencing homelessness are often living in congregate or crowded living situations, which also make them more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. Families experiencing homelessness may not have access to cleaning supplies, soap and water, etc. and control over the space they live in, which means they must depend on someone else to keep their living space sanitized - Vulnerable by lack of transportation. Lack of transportation is a well-documented barrier to education, healthcare, employment, public benefits, etc. among families experiencing homelessness. Many families experiencing homelessness don't have access to a personal vehicle, meaning they must depend on public transportation, which exposes families to COVID-19	- Work with local organizations to educate families on the COVID-19 virus - Provide kits with PPE and hygiene products - Partner with local businesses to provide access to washers and dryers and cleaning supplies

• Vulnerable by lack of educational resources on the COVID-19 virus	
Mental Health • Mental health challenges as a result of COVID-19 compound an already often challenging experience of homelessness and the roots of homelessness	• Establish a mental health program with resources to assist students and families
Transportation • Transportation is an impediment for many M-V families which interferes with gaining access to most services and products needed for a hybrid model or an all virtual model	• Partner with local community to provide delivery of supplies, products, devices, meals • Provide home visits • Make calls • Create a coordinated system of communication with families • Work with partners to provide bus passes
Intimate Partner Violence and Child Maltreatment • We already know domestic violence can be a contributor to family homelessness. During times of crisis, rates of intimate partner violence often increases and with few alternatives for families experiencing homelessness to flee to, we expect more families to experience violence during this time • Likewise, during a time of great uncertainty, significant financial challenges, heightened stress and anxiety, and restricted access to resources and social supports, children may face greater risk of experiencing maltreatment	• Home visits • Coordinate communications and contact with other agencies and resources • Make phone calls