

## Tips on Information Sharing and Respecting Privacy of Students in Transition

Information about a student's housing status and other familial challenges is sensitive and should be confidential to the extent possible. However, there are times when sharing such information with select school staff may be appropriate in order to provide effective support. This tip sheet provides **strategies** and **conversation starters** for having sensitive conversations with students and families, as well as tips for when and how to share the information with others.

### Should the McKinney-Vento liaison inform other school staff when a student becomes homeless?

It depends. When deciding whether and how to share information about a student's housing status, the McKinney-Vento liaison should strive for a balance between respecting the family's and the student's privacy and the potential benefit of involving those who play a critical role in a student's academic, social-emotional health, and transportation needs.

When **speaking with Parents and Students** (depending on their age/maturity), liaisons should:

- **Explain why you want to share** the student's housing status with staff at the school and how you would share that information. For example, "I would like your child's teachers to be aware of why your child may be more distracted or tired than usual. This information will help them better support your child."
- Reassure families that you will **be discreet** about their housing situation and only share information on a need-to-know basis and only in the context of the student's educational needs.
- **Ask for permission** to share information about the student's housing status and explain with whom you intend to share the information. There are many stigmas associated with housing loss, and no one wants sensitive personal information being shared behind their back. **To build trust and partnership with the parent and student, you should ask and receive permission to share information about the student's housing status with other school staff before doing so**, even if it's not legally required (see questions below).
- Keep **open and consistent lines of communication** between yourself, students, their families, and other school staff so that everybody knows what supports exist and how to access them.

### Does FERPA require parental consent before sharing housing status information?

Under the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), a student's homeless status is a **protected educational record** and, in general, cannot be shared with others without parental consent (or the consent of the student if they are 18 or older). This means that parents (or students 18 or older) can decide whether and with whom homeless status information can be shared. However, there is an exception under FERPA that **allows the sharing of educational records with school staff** who have a legitimate educational interest in the information. As a best practice, though, **the liaison**

**should try to get the parent's and the youth's permission before sharing housing status information, even within the school district.**

When **speaking with school staff**, you should

- **Avoid using the word "homeless,"** and instead opt for "temporary housing" or a similar phrase. The word "homeless" should be avoided because it can be stigmatizing and sometimes confusing, as conceptions of homelessness can vary widely. Always use person-first language. For example, "the student is temporarily living with relatives after a housing loss," or "our district is educating 100 students living in temporary housing."
- Ensure that if you share information about a student's temporary living situation, you convey that such information is **sensitive** and **highly confidential**.
- Reinforce that students experiencing homelessness can perform just as well as their peers but **often need flexibility and understanding** in meeting those high expectations.

Coordinate with other school staff willing to be available to students and **let students know how to contact those staff members**. If certain staff specialize in particular issues or needs, make that information clear to students.

**When should liaisons and school staff share information about unaccompanied homeless youth with Child Protective Services (i.e., make a call to the hotline)?**

It depends. If a child or youth is in danger due to their parent's abuse or neglect, educators are required by law to report child abuse or neglect to DCS or law enforcement. Youth are unaccompanied for many different reasons and stay in various living situations; these situations often do not warrant a call to child protective services. **Being an unaccompanied homeless youth in and of itself does not require school staff to report the youth.** Each situation should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. It is also suggested that school staff let youth know about mandatory reporting requirements and possible outcomes of child welfare referrals, giving youth the option to decide what to reveal and discuss. This may give youth some self-determination and control over their own lives.

## Best Practices for Sharing Housing Information

The information below provides recommendations for why and how to share student housing information with respect and sensitivity with specific staff roles, including teachers/principals, school health staff, counselors and social workers, and transportation staff.

### **Staff Role: Teachers and Principals**

#### ***Why Students May Benefit if Housing info is shared:***

Housing instability can negatively impact student attendance and/or their access to resources necessary to complete certain assignments.

Students experiencing housing instability may be experiencing trauma and stress. This type of stress may manifest in negative or “out of character” behaviors in school, which can be better understood and supported if teachers know what may be underlying those behaviors.

#### ***Suggested Actions for Information Sharing***

Liaisons should inform principals and appropriate teachers of which students may require additional support. If the student and/or parent is not comfortable with housing status being disclosed, take an alternative approach like flagging their information on the school’s database as “handle with care” or a similar term.

School staff should not share or discuss a student’s housing status publicly, such as in a staff meeting.

When sharing housing status information, liaisons should make sure that principals and teachers are aware of what resources are available to support students and parents experiencing homelessness (e.g., supports paid through the Title I set-aside, transportation, free school meals, housing resources, RHY resources, etc.).

Teachers and principals should balance high expectations and accountability with an understanding of the trauma and instability outside of school the student may currently be experiencing or have experienced. To do this, they should, for example: regularly check in with the student, ask how they are doing, and actively listen; have readily available snacks for students; provide additional time or opportunities to make up for late or missed assignments.

### **Staff Role: School Health Services Staff**

#### ***Why Students May Benefit if Housing info is shared:***

Students and families experiencing homelessness may not always have access to health records or affordable healthcare services.

Unaccompanied homeless youths under the age of 18 may need medical care or attention while a parent/guardian is unavailable.

#### ***Suggested Actions for Information Sharing***

Liaisons should inform school staff responsible for providing health services of a student’s “handle with care,” or housing status and/or their unaccompanied youth status, in instances where not doing so may create a barrier to access health services or continued participation in school.

Liaisons should coordinate with school health staff for referrals to health and mental health care services as well as dental services.

Liaison should ensure that a records request is sent to the student's previous school and that the request includes health and vaccination records.

### **Staff Role: Counselors and Social Workers**

#### ***Why Students May Benefit if Housing info is shared:***

Access to social-emotional support is crucial for students experiencing homelessness.

Students who have experienced trauma may be guarded or distrustful of others. A stable relationship with an adult at school can help a student cope with the negative effects of trauma caused by housing instability.

#### ***Suggested Actions for Information Sharing***

When referring students in temporary housing to counselors and social workers for additional support, liaisons should have a plan for how they will follow up and/or coordinate to ensure ongoing support.

Liaisons should make sure that counselors, social workers, and other school support staff working with students in temporary housing are aware of outside resources that may help.

Counselors and social workers should be included in conversations about the design and implementation of **trauma-sensitive protocols** to better support students experiencing homelessness.

Counselors and social workers should make themselves accessible to students in temporary housing and let them know they can feel safe contacting, seeking support from, and sharing sensitive information with them.

### **Staff Role: Transportation Staff**

#### ***Why Students May Benefit if Housing info is shared:***

Bus drivers are often the first and last school staff that many students will encounter in their school day.

Bus drivers are expected to take routes that are outside of their regular coverage area and sometimes change those routes on short notice to accommodate students in temporary housing. It is helpful for them to understand why they are being asked to do so.

#### ***Suggested Actions for Information Sharing***

Liaisons should provide training to transportation staff, including bus drivers, on how to identify students who may be experiencing homelessness and on trauma-sensitive transportation practices.

Transportation staff should collaborate with the student and/or their parent to agree on a pick-up/drop-off point to not be outed or stigmatized by their peers due to their housing situation.

Transportation staff should ensure that students and their parents can contact the transportation office, or even their bus driver directly, to notify them of sick days or to request changes to bus routes and schedules. Encourage open and consistent communication between both parties.

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