

McKinney-Vento Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Round-Up Week: Tips for School Counselors

Tips for discrete, positive conversations with youth experiencing homelessness:

- Before McKinney-Vento FAFSA Round-Up Week, contact your LEA's McKinney-Vento liaison. The liaison should have experience working with homeless youth and may have suggestions for how to talk with students. The liaison also may be able to provide you with hygiene supplies, food, clothing, backpacks, bus passes, school supplies, and/or contact information for local service providers who can assist youth. It will be helpful to have such supplies and information on hand to share with youth in need.
- Avoid using the word homeless when talking with students. It evokes images of stereotypes that do not match the reality of young people's situations. Youth tend to fear the stigma associated with homelessness and do not want their peers or teachers to know about their situation. They also may want to protect their parents or may fear retaliation from their parents if the school contacts them.
- Explain to students how their living situation might affect their ability to complete the FAFSA without a parental signature or financial information. It is important for students to understand why a school official wants to discuss such personal details as their relationship with their parents, economic stresses, and where and with whom they live.
- Inform students of your obligations as a mandatory reporter at the outset of the conversation. Students need to know your obligations, so they can determine what they want to reveal. Many students fear the involvement of law enforcement or child protective services because they fear for their parents, for siblings who are still at home, or for their own safety and well-being. In fact, many students leave school and refuse to seek other services simply to avoid the involvement of law enforcement or child protective services. It is important to work with the young person to find the most appropriate response to their situation while respecting both the student's wishes and concerns and the counselor's obligations.
- Ensure students that, aside from the reporting requirements you just explained, your conversation will remain completely confidential. Let youth know that you may need to discuss their living situation with the McKinney-Vento liaison to obtain additional services for the student and to obtain the verification necessary for the FAFSA.
- Ask the students to talk about their living situation and how they got there. How long have they been separated from their parents or guardians? Under what circumstances did they become separated? What is their current living situation like? With whom do they live? How long have they been staying there? Do they know how long they will stay?
- If your conversation leads you to believe a student meets the definition of "homeless," contact the school district McKinney-Vento liaison to discuss the situation. The liaison can help ensure the student is eligible, provide additional services, and write the verification letter for financial aid.
- Talk to students about college, college admissions, and financial aid. Many homeless youths assume they will not be accepted to a college or will not be able to pay for it. Encourage youth to apply to appropriate higher education, including community colleges and four-year colleges, and help them search for scholarships. For additional tips, see [FASFA Tips for Unaccompanied Youth without Stable Housing](#) from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)

- Ask the youth if he or she needs anything. Offer the supplies you have on hand; homeless Students often need hygiene supplies, food, clothing, backpacks, bus passes, and school supplies. Ask the youth if they would like information about services available in the local community and allow them to use your phone to make contact with service providers. Ask the youth if access to school resources would help them; for example, students who are homeless often can benefit from access to school showers, laundry facilities, libraries and other study areas, and storage areas. Students need to be able to access these resources at inconspicuous times, to avoid stigma.
- Make sure the youth knows he or she can come back to talk about difficulties with academics, college applications, financial aid, the emotional and physical stresses of his or her living situation, or other concerns.