



# OUR HOME

**Opening Doors: Statewide Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth  
Illinois McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program**

March 2010

Volume 8 - Issue 2

## Collection of Homeless Data In IWAS

Effective March 1, 2010, a more comprehensive collection effort was initiated for tracking homeless students in Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) is requesting that school districts provide more detailed information on homeless children and unaccompanied youth through the Student Information System (SIS). This tracking system is more accurate and will give those who work with homeless children and youth a better idea of what areas of need should be addressed. Information on the new homeless data elements can be found at:  
<http://www.isbe.net/sis/pdf/homeless.pdf>  
Please work with your district staff to identify and report this very at-risk population.

The receive an electronic copy of OUR HOME please send your request to:  
[mworthin@roe26.net](mailto:mworthin@roe26.net)  
The current issue of OUR HOME and back issues are available at <http://homelessed.net/resource/newsletters.htm>

## ISBE Homeless Assistance Hotline 800/215-6379

Sharon Neely,  
Principal Consultant  
Curriculum & Instruction  
Illinois State Board of Education  
100 North First Street  
Springfield, IL 62777-0001  
Phone 217/557-7323  
Fax 217/782-7937  
[saneely@isbe.net](mailto:saneely@isbe.net)

## Unaccompanied Youth: Who Are They? How Can District Liaisons Help?

*Ann Schwarm, Area 5 Lead Liaison, ROE #3 Bond/Fayette/Effingham*

Unlocking the door to educational services for a homeless unaccompanied youth may be the most important task accomplished by a local liaison. As the title implies, an “unaccompanied youth” is someone who has no parent participating in his or her life. An unaccompanied youth is officially defined as “a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.” While most think of unaccompanied youth as “teenagers on their own,” the McKinney-Vento Act does not specify an age range.

What must a school district liaison do in support of an unaccompanied youth? Immediate enrollment is paramount. First, though, the youth may need guidance in determining the appropriate school placement. This is when the liaison must remember that it is his or her job to advocate on behalf of the student and take into account the student’s wishes when assisting with the school placement decision. An unaccompanied youth must be advised of his or her rights to appeal a school placement decision. The liaison must also advise the student of his or her right to have transportation provided to and from the student’s school of origin and must assist the student in accessing transportation. Health issues also sometimes come into play. Assisting homeless unaccompanied youth in obtaining immunizations along with updated medical records are also responsibilities of the local liaison.

Without a parent or guardian to advocate for the homeless unaccompanied youth, the student’s rights might not be fully acknowledged and honored. Therefore, the role of the local homeless liaison becomes that much more important. He or she may be the only adult who is actively participating in the educational life of this homeless child.

Each homeless unaccompanied youth brings to the school house door barriers to academic success. This same individual also brings limitless potential and the local liaison can have great impact on the life of that one student.

For more information on serving unaccompanied youth, check out the National Center for Homeless Education’s Local Homeless Education Liaison Toolkit \*, chapter 3, page 23 and Appendix J, page 23.

\* *The National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE is located at <http://center.serve.org/nche>. They offer resources and information to enable communities to address the education needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The Local Liaison Toolkit can be downloaded from their site at: <http://center.serve.org/nche/training.php#toolkit>. It is a comprehensive resources that will assist both new and veteran local liaisons in carrying out their responsibilities. The Toolkit, updated in 2007, contains over 250 pages of the most useful and current information on supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness.*

## BEST PRACTICES

### Calling All Liaisons: You Can Make College a Reality for Unaccompanied Youth!

*Beth Cunningham,  
Staff Attorney, Law  
Project of the Chicago  
Coalition for the  
Homeless*

For the estimated 26,000 unaccompanied homeless youth throughout Illinois, barriers to applying for financial aid and attending college can seem insurmountable. But homeless liaisons can help! The College Cost Reduction and Access Act allows unaccompanied homeless youth and self-supporting youth at risk of homelessness to apply for financial aid as independent students without the signature or financial information of a parent or guardian. 20 U.S.C. § 1087vv(d). However, the youth's living status must be verified by homeless liaisons or shelter personnel. *ID*. Because so many homeless youth are unable to access shelter due to the extremely limited number of shelter beds, the liaison's role in identification and verification is critical. If not properly identified and verified, these youth will not receive the full amount of financial aid, affecting their ability to attend and pay for college. Sample verification letters and more information can be found at <http://www.chicagohomeless.org>

## On Their Own: A Video on Unaccompanied Youth

*Deb Foust, Area 2 Homeless Liaison, ROE #47 Lee/Ogle*

More and more schools are seeing an increase in unaccompanied students. Unaccompanied youth are not just found in urban areas, rural schools are also seeing these youth come through their school doors. These youth are some of the most vulnerable students in our educational system. Many have left abusive homes and are now battling for their safety while living on the streets or "couch surfing" from place to place. They have no one to be their voice so we, as Homeless Liaisons and educational staff, need to fulfill this vital role. Because of this concern and in order to help foster greater awareness of this problem throughout the state, the video *On Their Own* was created.

Derek Rury, a Vista worker at our office last year, spent hours interviewing numerous youth from many high schools. The unaccompanied youths' stories were touching, direct, and eye opening as to the challenges they faced on a daily basis and their struggles to complete their high school education. No story is better told than those told by the people who have lived through the experience. Interwoven throughout the students' stories are several educators sharing techniques they used to successfully help these students complete their education.

But for every success story we have of an unaccompanied youth, how many others are falling through the cracks at our schools? As in all homeless issues, but with unaccompanied youth specifically, the schools alone cannot "fix" this problem. Schools, social service agencies and communities must work together to combat the problem of unaccompanied youth. The video is meant to be a training and sensitivity tool for educators and an excellent awareness tool to be used generally in communities.

The video can be downloaded from the Illinois State Board of Education's Homeless Education page at <http://isbe.net/homeless>. The video is listed at the top of the home page as [On Their Own](#). It may be used for any and all educational purposes. We need to be the voice for these vulnerable youth. If we don't step up and do it... who will?

## Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

*Patricia Rivera, Area 7 Lead Liaison, Chicago Public Schools*

As of January 31, 2010, there were over 3,000 identified homeless youth attending Chicago high schools. Reasons they are homeless vary from conflicts with parent(s) to pregnancy, sexual orientation, violence, or other issues. To assist these students, Patricia Julianelle (2008), with the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), compiled a best practices report ([http://www.naehcy.org/dl/uwwk\\_youth.pdf](http://www.naehcy.org/dl/uwwk_youth.pdf)). The report lists seven strategies to support unaccompanied homeless youth acquire their education:

- Meet young people's basic needs so they can achieve their educational goals.
- Show young people school is a safe, supportive place so they will enroll, attend, and succeed.
- Facilitate attendance and success with more consistent implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act through increased personnel and uniform procedures.
- Adopt flexible school policies and programs to accommodate homelessness and independence by offering an engaging environment where students can be more successful.
- Be caring and persistent in drawing back disengaged youth into school.
- Improve child welfare policies and practices so youth can achieve their educational goals.
- Support educational success by coordinating the efforts of all youth service agencies, accepting joint responsibility for outcomes, and involving youth as active partners.

It is incumbent on LEAs (*Local Educational Agencies*) to remain flexible when working with unaccompanied youth and to remember that each person is unique. Young people want to remain in school and do value their education; our job is to recognize and remove the barriers to achieving this goal.

## Where Do Unaccompanied Youth Go At Night?

*Mary Kay Bonness, Good Samaritan House*

The number of unaccompanied homeless youth is increasing and services are inadequate to meet their needs. Because of liability issues, few emergency shelters accept unaccompanied youth unless they are emancipated. There are a very few transitional housing programs designed specifically for pregnant and parenting teens scattered throughout the state. Even fewer housing programs accept unaccompanied male youth. Supportive services that are often not known about or used because the unaccompanied young people are moving among friends, staying in abandoned buildings or other inadequate places. Most youth have no one to advocate on their behalf to help them access needed services.

Education is not a priority when you are hungry, alone and afraid. Often, temporary cash assistance, which requires recipients to volunteer 30 hours a week, is the only income of a young mother, but the jobs associated with public assistance do not require nor teach job skills. And most unfortunately, the time involved hinders their ability to continue their education and thus their opportunity for better employment.

Housing, childcare, assistance accessing supportive services, and continuing education are key to helping unaccompanied young people become productive, independent and self-supporting.

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## Unaccompanied Youth, Runaways & Throwaways: School District Liability and Duty to Parents

*Dave Levek, Area 1 Lead Liaison, ROE #56 Will*

One of the most difficult situations a local school encounters is when a parent(s) or legal guardian becomes upset, even irate, when the school of residence enrolls their runaway youth without their permission. Minimally, this creates an uncomfortable atmosphere for all concerned, but more importantly, it may lead to issues of what's right, what's wrong, are school districts liable, are they not?

First, regarding liability: liability is based on the concept of negligence and schools districts are not negligent when they follow state and federal law. Both federal and state laws define an unaccompanied youth as a child not in the physical custody of a parent or legal guardian. Most commonly, unaccompanied youth are recognized as "runaways," having chosen to leave home, or "throwaways," having been asked or told to leave home by the parent or legal guardian. Neither runaways nor throwaways can be forced to return home against their will.

School districts should therefore enroll immediately followed by involving appropriate school personnel and other agencies to determine a course of action that is in the best interests of the child. A school district's responsibilities when working with unaccompanied youth are the same as dealing with any other homeless child: immediate enrollment, fee waivers, free lunch, and transportation. When the parent or legal guardian remains involved, or is otherwise simply available, school districts should continue to share school information with the parent or legal guardian.

Each situation involving unaccompanied youth is unique and must be handled on a case-by-case basis. Most significant is immediate enrollment thereby ensuring a safe and secure environment for the unaccompanied youth. Following enrollment, the engagement of a school social worker or guidance counselor is critical to the overall success of unaccompanied youth. Additionally, we suggest the school district initiate contact and facilitate the support of such outside organizations as the local Comprehensive Community-Based Youth Service (CCBYS) for crisis assistance to youth. This support is critical to understanding family dynamics and establishing a plan that will be in the best interest of the child.

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## SAVE THE DATE!

### National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY)

*Nov 6 - 9, 2010 –Intercontinental Hotel Galleria District – Houston, TX*

NAEHCY's Annual Conference is a unique showcase of best practices and services from across the country. It is the only national conference dedicated to supporting the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The conference equips educators, service providers, and advocates from across the nation with the knowledge, skills, information, and inspiration they need to remove barriers and help ensure that every child and youth is successful academically, personally, and socially. For more information, go to <http://naehcy.org>.



# Opening Doors

Statewide Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth — <http://homelessed.net>

## COORDINATOR'S CORNER

### Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

*Vicki Hodges, Principal Consultant, Curriculum & Instruction, ISBE*

According to the National Association of Education Center for Homeless Youth (NAECHY) (2007), between 1.6 and 1.7 million unaccompanied youth run away from their homes each year and that number is on the rise. Many have been driven from their homes because of unsafe living conditions. Over half report being physically abused at home and over one-third report sexual abuse. Over two-thirds report that at least one of their parents abuses drugs or alcohol. Schools may be the only safe and stable environment available to unaccompanied youth.

Therefore, immediate enrollment of an unaccompanied youth is mandated by the McKinney-Vento Act. Barriers that prevent unaccompanied youth from immediate enrollment must be removed, such as guardianship issues and the need for birth certificates and health records. The school district liaison is to act as an advocate for the youth and advise them of their rights. Unaccompanied youth have the same rights as other students experiencing homelessness. They have the right to remain in their school of origin, receive transportation to and from the school of origin, enroll immediately in a new school servicing the area in which they are currently living, even if they don't have documents typically required for enrollment, and receive equal access to programs such as gifted and talented education, special education, vocational education and English language learner services.

During the course of a natural disaster, such as the earthquake in Haiti, schools can be the most stable and secure environment for youth who are unaccompanied by their parents. Without a parent to advocate for them and exercise parental rights, these students may face barriers to accessing education and related support services. But the McKinney-Vento Act ensures educational protections for students like those coming from Haiti who are unaccompanied and homeless.

## RESOURCES

### Illinois McKinney-Vento Lead Liaison Programs

**Area 1** ROE 56 Will-Dave Levek, [dlevek@willcountyillinois.com](mailto:dlevek@willcountyillinois.com)  
702 West Maple Street, New Lenox, IL 60451  
Ph: 815/462-5404 Fax: 815/740-4788

**Area 2** ROE 47 Lee/Ogle-Lois Porter, [lporter@leeogle.org](mailto:lporter@leeogle.org)  
7772 Clinton Street, Dixon, IL 61021  
Ph: 815/652-2054 ext. 234 Fax: 815/652-2053

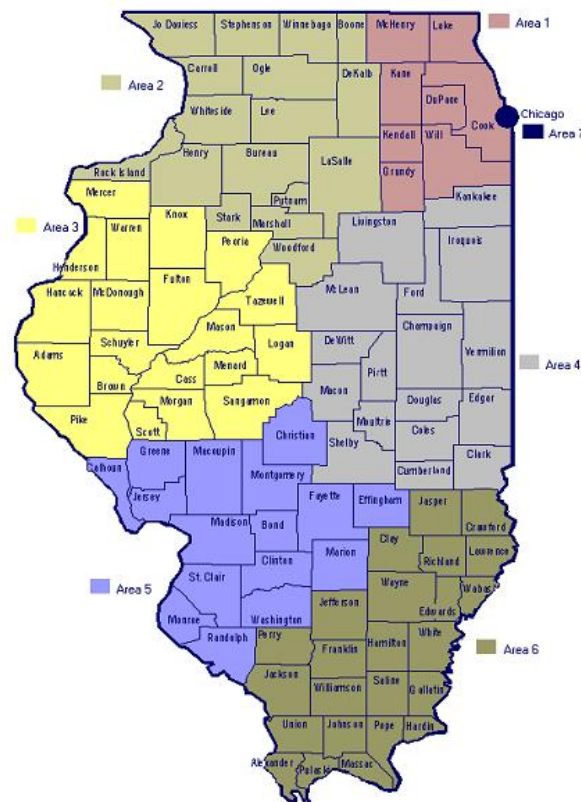
**Area 3** ROE 26 Hancock/McDonough-Eileen Worthington, [mworthin@roe26.net](mailto:mworthin@roe26.net)  
130 South Lafayette Street, Macomb, IL 61455  
Ph: 309/837-4821 Fax: 309/837-2887

**Area 4** ROE 32 Iroquois/Kankakee-Jim Moberly, [jmoberly@i-kan.org](mailto:jmoberly@i-kan.org)  
189 East Court Street - Suite 600, Kankakee, IL 60901  
Ph: 815/937-2952 Fax: 815/937-2921

**Area 5** ROE 3 Bond/Fayette/Effingham-Ann Schwarm, [aschwarm@fayette.k12.il.us](mailto:aschwarm@fayette.k12.il.us)  
1830 W. Fletcher St. - Suite B, Vandalia IL 62471  
Phone: 618/283-1763 Fax: 618/283-9833

**Area 6** ROE 21 Franklin/Williamson-Mickey Sullivan, [msullivan@roe21.k12.il.us](mailto:msullivan@roe21.k12.il.us)  
4004 N Monroe St., Marion, IL 62959  
Ph: 618/998-1283 or 800/455-5843 Fax: 618/998-9226

**Area 7** Chicago Public Schools District 299-Patricia Rivera, [privera@cps.k12.il.us](mailto:privera@cps.k12.il.us)  
125 S. Clark, Chicago, IL 60603  
Ph: 773/553-2242 Fax: 773/553-2182



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Under the direction of the Curriculum and Instruction Division, the goal of this initiative is to disseminate information and provide technical assistance to Illinois schools and shelters as to the educational rights and needs of homeless children and youth. The Opening Doors project partners include:

Adult Learning Resource Center, 2626 Clearbrook Dr., Arlington Heights, IL 60005. Phone 224/366-8620 / Fax 847/378-6225

Regional Office of Education #26 Hancock/McDonough, 130 S. Lafayette St.-Suite 200, Macomb, IL 61455. Phone 309/837-4821 / Fax 309/837-2887

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