

Q & A With ...

Homeless Education Coordinators in Los Angeles County

The *Beyond Housing* conference has always been a place where professionals with wide-ranging experience levels—and from communities as different as Little Rock, Arkansas and Seattle, Washington—can come together with a common purpose: determining how to best serve the families impacted by housing instability. The “Q & A with” section came about after hearing from people—some at the beginning of their careers, others seasoned professionals but new to working on behalf of homeless families—who want to better understand some of the field’s commonly used terms, laws, acronyms, and studies. This first installment focuses on student homelessness and such terms as “McKinney-Vento Act,” “homeless liaison,” and “school of origin.”

Homeless education coordinators and liaisons across the country are dedicated to bridging divides and facilitating coordination among schools, families, and the shelter and housing system. Experts Leeane Knighton and Dr. Jennifer Kottke have many years of combined experience navigating the world of homeless education and homeless services. Knighton is a coordinator for homeless education with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE). She is positioned in and partners with the lead agencies in Los Angeles County’s Coordinated Entry System. Kottke supervises

the coordinators and the entire homeless education program for LACOE, bearing responsibility for supporting families with children and youth experiencing homelessness in 80 school districts (Los Angeles Unified—the second-largest school district in the United States—plus 79 smaller entities) and over 380 charter schools across the county.

What is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act?

Leeane: This is a federal law that stipulates that all children have a protected right to attend any publicly funded school and fully access all school-sponsored programs while they or their families experience forms of homelessness.

Jennifer: The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act really changed the landscape on how schools serve and support students experiencing homelessness. The act provides a definition of what homelessness looks like for children ages 0–22, and it outlines rights and protections for this population. The McKinney-Vento Assistance Act has been a federal law since 1987.

California has passed laws to strengthen McKinney-Vento in practice. For example, SB 400 of 2021¹ requires that school staff

Editor’s note: Under the McKinney-Vento Act, children and youth are considered homeless if they are “sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters.” Children also meet the definition of experiencing homelessness if they are residing in a “public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” or if they are “living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.” Finally, the children of migratory agricultural workers (“migratory children”) receive protections under McKinney-Vento if their living situation meets the aforementioned criteria.²

1 [https://sclscal.org/legal-update-memo-no-34-2021-ab-27-sb-400-lea-identification-of-homeless-students-k-12/#:~:text=The%20federal%20McKinney%2D-Vento%20Homeless,of%20homeless%20children%20and%20youths.&text=Senate%20Bill%20\(%E2%80%9CSB%E2%80%9D\)%20400%2C%20which%20will%20go,amend%20Education%20Code%20section%2048852.5](https://sclscal.org/legal-update-memo-no-34-2021-ab-27-sb-400-lea-identification-of-homeless-students-k-12/#:~:text=The%20federal%20McKinney%2D-Vento%20Homeless,of%20homeless%20children%20and%20youths.&text=Senate%20Bill%20(%E2%80%9CSB%E2%80%9D)%20400%2C%20which%20will%20go,amend%20Education%20Code%20section%2048852.5)

2 <https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition>; <https://www.nysmigrant.org/about>

who work with youth experiencing homelessness receive training annually, which must then be verified by the California Department of Education. I know other states have passed their own state laws to strengthen McKinney-Vento and these laws look different than our laws. We always say that McKinney-Vento trumps local and state [laws], so state and local laws cannot supersede McKinney-Vento, but they can strengthen it.

What more can schools and communities do to educate families and youth about their McKinney-Vento rights? And what kind of outreach can be conducted with allied professionals in other community-based organizations/settings (healthcare providers, food security-focused organizations like food pantries, childcare centers, afterschool programs, houses of worship, barber/beauty shops, etc.) so they have a better understanding of McKinney-Vento rights?

Leane: We advise that schools have McKinney-Vento posters placed in their front offices and have the liaison's name listed prominently on their websites. Schools also have a Student Housing Questionnaire as part of their enrollment packets. So, families will fill out this form that specifically asks them to describe their housing situation, including whether they are doubled or tripled up.

When we get the opportunity to table community events, we offer informational brochures and will answer questions. We also work with Head Start and Early Head Start providers to bring awareness to the staff. We present to faith-based organizations regularly. During COVID-19, we virtually meet with stakeholders weekly for case conferencing and to share updates on opportunities, such as job training programs for their participants and scholarships.

Jennifer: We have seen many of our LEAs (Local Educational Agencies) do creative things about outreach and engagement. LAUSD and several other of our LEAs do public service announcements. They work with local public television systems or public radio to put out mini-ads about eligibility for McKinney-Vento. Many of our LEAs place posters about McKinney-Vento around the community in public places like laundromats, grocery stores, pharmacies, libraries, coffee houses, etc. We have many LEAs that have great relationships with local partners, and they collaborate over services and identification. A school might have a great partnership with a local foodbank and the foodbank will let them throw a flyer into their food boxes each week to make families aware of McKinney-Vento. Our LEAs have become very creative and have had to be even more creative during COVID-19.

When I sat in a district as a McKinney-Vento Liaison I worked very closely with my local entities. I attended community groups, I worked closely with my housing partners, I worked closely with my food partners, and I partnered with my local faith-based entities. I was always open and willing to training any of our partners. I was a McKinney-Vento Grantee, so I had a lot more ability to expand myself and my staff into the community. My district also supported my work because of our high count of students experiencing homelessness. A lot of these connections were made because I understood that I needed to get off my campus to leverage the

few dollars I had to build a program for my students. Many of our LEAs are connected with their communities and participate with their local allied professionals, however, many more of our Liaisons struggle with building community networks. Much of this has to do with the fact that many of our Liaisons wear many different hats along with being the Homeless Liaison, so they struggle to get into the community to make these connections or they just do not have the availability to offer trainings. Additionally, we often struggle with a high turnover rate for McKinney-Vento Liaisons. It would be optimal that we would be doing this work, but this really depends on the capacity of the LEA and the capacity of the Homeless Liaison in the LEA.

What are the differences between the kind of services communities with McKinney-Vento grants vs. those without grants can offer?

Jennifer: McKinney-Vento grants are limited funding that is offered out to LEAs (school districts and charters) in the form of grants. Communities do not get McKinney-Vento grants; LEAs are the entities that can apply for these funds. This grant funding is considered "sprinkles on the cupcakes"—extra funding that is used on top of your funding that must already be set aside by your LEA for students experiencing homelessness, regardless of your student count. If a district or charter has no students experiencing homelessness, they are still required to have money available. If they did not set aside any money and a student experiencing homelessness comes to their district or charter and has educational barriers that need to be removed—such as lack of transportation—the LEA will have to pull funding from their general fund.

For an LEA that is not a McKinney-Vento Grant Recipient, services will be rendered to meet the letter of the law. You will see things like transportation being provided, possibly uniformed clothing (if required), referrals to local resources, and basic school supplies. McKinney-Vento Grant Recipients may hire additional staff with funds, may use money to hold events, pay for staff to offer out classes, have transportation agreements with local taxi companies to provide transportation, pay for tutoring services ... and the list goes on ...

Leane: Regardless of whether a school community has money earmarked for McKinney-Vento families, they must ensure that students continue to fully access all school-related programs, like sports, field trips, etc., regardless of personal housing struggles. If a McKinney-Vento student cannot afford to pay for the football or cheerleading uniform, the liaison will ensure that the student does not quit over lack of funding. The same is true for participation in clubs and afterschool activities. We know that the more a student engages with their school, the more willing they are to continue to attend school. This is important because students experiencing homelessness are 87 percent more likely to drop out of school than their housed peers—often due to chronic absenteeism. Lack of a high school diploma, according to a study conducted by Chapin Hall, is the greatest predictor of homelessness for [youth] ages 18-24.³

3 <https://www.chapinhall.org/news/new-study-shows-youth-who-experience-homelessness-less-likely-to-attend-college/>

How can family shelter staff, including housing specialists or navigators, use McKinney-Vento to support children experiencing homelessness and housing instability?

Jennifer: These professionals can support students by advocating and providing support around school of origin [the school a child attended while permanently housed or the last school they attended]. Under McKinney-Vento, students have the right to remain in their school of origin to reduce disruption in the learning process. Housing specialists, family shelter staff, and homeless liaisons should also collaborate around services for families. If a student in a shelter needs school supplies, shelter and school staff should have some type of internal process to create a referral for the student to be served and supported.

Leeane: Shelter staff can support families by familiarizing themselves with their residents' McKinney-Vento rights and protections. For example, if a student attended School B until the spring, but moved to a shelter where School A is located, both schools might agree to split the costs of bus fare if the student takes public transportation through the end of the school year. If school liaisons do not provide transportation or negotiate with each other on transportation accommodations, then the student may end up not attending (or may even drop out) and the school will be out of compliance with the law.

How can schools work with shelters and housing staff to coordinate support for students experiencing homelessness and housing instability?

Jennifer: We encourage homeless liaisons and shelter and housing staff to coordinate support for families experiencing homelessness and housing instability. This looks different across the county, because in some locations, there are very few shelters, while in other areas there are numerous shelters. Creating collaborations is critical to ensuring that school of origin is honored, that students can have a quiet place to study, that parents are encouraged to be part of their student's education process, and that there is a culture of education within the shelter. Shelter staff should immediately reach out to local homeless liaisons when a student enters their program or connect with a local school if it appears that a student may not be attending school. Effective coordination should include a wrap-around team for the specific purpose of protecting education.

Leeane: Shelter staff may offer time for a representative from the school to speak with residents. Even if the families do not have children attending that particular school or district, the information presented still applies, even for families with children who are not school-aged.

What role do school or district homeless liaisons play in supporting families and students experiencing homelessness and housing instability?

Jennifer: Homeless liaisons play a pivotal role in supporting students experiencing homelessness. The homeless liaison's role, by federal definition, is to remove barriers to education. Homeless liaisons work with families and students experiencing homelessness to ensure they have the necessary tools to be successful in their academic journey. They also connect families and youth with outside

community resources. The liaison can assist in making housing referrals to connect families with stable housing.

Leeane: Because they respond to the physical, psychological, and emotional urgencies characterized by the trauma of homelessness and housing instability, liaisons wear many hats. They provide mental health referrals, organize food pantries or clothing closets, and maintain an inventory of school supplies to distribute at any point in the school year. (Students who qualify for McKinney-Vento services typically do not enroll at the beginning of the school year due to frequent moves.) Most vital, though, is they simply listen to the families and youth who seek their advice and input. They also support their school community by keeping staff informed of broad policies, such as immediate and continuous enrollment for students identified as qualified for McKinney-Vento services.

What common signs should classroom teachers be on the lookout for if they suspect a student is experiencing homelessness?

Jennifer: One common sign that classroom teachers can be on the lookout for is absenteeism. A student may also appear to be wearing the same clothing over and over or struggling with hygiene. The student may seem unprepared or lack supplies to complete their homework. Students might mention that they are hungry, having problems sleeping, or acting withdrawn and struggling to make friendships. Additionally, teachers may see a long history of schools in their student records, which may indicate repeated movement due to unstable housing. Parents may be absent or hard to reach due to working long hours at multiple low-wage jobs. A student may also be reluctant to share or may even be very clingy due to instability at home and the feeling that school is their only safe space.

Leeane: Classroom teachers might see tardiness or absences as a possible sign that a student has a hard time getting to school. This might even be due to the need to access bathroom facilities when local public restrooms open. Conversely, early arrivals may indicate a need to access school facilities, such as the showers or the bathrooms. Older students quietly attending school without a parent or caregiver in their lives might seek emotional support through casual conversations with adults at school.

What role can classroom teachers play in preventing and addressing student homelessness, and who can they go to for help if they know or suspect a student is experiencing homelessness or housing instability?

Jennifer: Teachers are often very good at catching on that a student may be struggling. A good homeless liaison will ensure that teaching staff is trained on McKinney-Vento and how to recognize a student who is struggling with homelessness, the procedures on how to notify a liaison, and what resources to refer the family to, if the family requests assistance. Classroom teachers are pivotal in helping to prevent and address homelessness by ensuring that students never feel called out for their housing status, and that they bond to their school site both academically and socially. School bonding is critical for students experiencing homelessness. If a student does not see school as having value, this is what often causes them to drop out of school. If more value is placed on working or doing other activities

to maintain survival, then school becomes less important, and this is where we lose students.

Leeane: If liaisons regularly facilitate presentations at staff development meetings, then the teachers should know who to call once a student or family discusses their situation with them. It's crucial for teachers to maintain sensitivity without judging a situation or making assumptions about how a family or student fell into homelessness. They must ensure confidentiality by sharing information only with the McKinney-Vento liaison and only if the family or youth authorizes them to make this referral on their behalf. The liaison will then connect the family to resources and support.

How does housing instability and homelessness intersect with student absenteeism, mid-year transfers, and graduation rates?

Leeane: The reason these protections exist is because our government realized how difficult it is for students of any age to succeed and fully participate in school while experiencing homelessness. There are obstacles to completing homework at a shelter when the noise level is high or if there are distractions. Turning in class projects is a challenge if the family does not have a place to store the supplies or materials needed. Showing up at all is hard if a student is without electricity or water or feels embarrassed about wearing the same clothes each day.

Jennifer: Students who are housing unstable have almost double the chronic absenteeism rate as their housed peers. Students who experience homelessness may miss school for illness, due to a lack of quality medical care, or to assist with childcare because a parent needs to work. Students may also be working to help their family pay for basic needs. LA County is very large and even a small change in residence of five to ten miles can result in a two-hour public bus ride each way to school. This cycle is repeated as a family attempts to seek stable housing.

How might McKinney-Vento be different for students in a rural vs. suburban vs. urban county? Can you describe the students who you support at LA County Schools?

Jennifer: LA County covers over 4,700 square miles. This mileage includes very dense urban areas such as the city of Los Angeles, suburban areas like Malibu, and rural areas such as Wilsona Gardens in the Antelope Valley. Many rural locations in the Antelope Valley struggle with transportation and resources. Suburban areas often have low numbers of students experiencing homelessness or it appears they have low numbers, so locating resources can be an issue. Urban areas often have so many students to serve and support, but not enough resources to match the need.

Los Angeles in particular but also many other municipalities across the country are thinking about ways to better address the overrepresentation of Black families among all families experiencing homelessness. In what ways is training around McKinney-Vento and outreach changing due to this heightened awareness?

Jennifer: I can't speak about all of our LEAs—I think each of them is in a different space and place around better addressing the

overrepresentation of Black families among all families experiencing homelessness. I know at LACOE we are excited about the American Rescue Plan funding that we are receiving because we do want to build out a better training model for helping our LEAs understand how to broach this topic. We want to lean in on understanding and exploring the data so that we can better help our LEAs understand the overrepresentation of Black families among all families experiencing homelessness. This includes understanding explicit bias, it is understanding how to service and support through an equity lens, and it includes acknowledging historical issues and specifically laying out a plan for a better future for our Black families.

What additional resources would you recommend to allied social services and youth professionals who want to learn more about McKinney-Vento protections and how to assist students experiencing homelessness in their own communities?

Leeane: SchoolHouseConnection.org provides training to communities and engages through social media platforms. The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) also compiles evidence-based practices to service families and youth. Finally, the National Center for Homeless Education—an arm of the US Department of Education—will answer questions over the phone to clarify issues that schools and service providers have when it comes to looking at the whole picture of a student.

Jennifer: I would encourage allied professionals to reach out to District Homeless Liaisons and offer to collaborate. Work together to create a plan to support students experiencing homelessness. I always advocate for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)—formal or informal. Look for ways that you can collect and explore data together, consider working on a goal together. And if one of your local LEA Homeless Liaisons does not respond, move on to another—every district/charter has one and sometimes they have the capacity and sometimes they don't. I honestly believe this work takes a village; I come from a place where I reached out and connected with anyone in my community who would listen because I understood the impact. Working with families and youth experiencing homelessness requires a holistic, community approach, and all parties must be involved.

How to Connect:

Leeane Knighton / knighton_leeane@lacoed.edu
Dr. Jennifer Kottke / kottke_jennifer@lacoed.edu