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A black and white photograph of a school bus with "SCHOOL BUS" written on its front. The bus is parked on a street with trees and buildings in the background. A blue semi-transparent box covers the bottom half of the image, containing the title and authors.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN NEW YORK STATE: BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO IDENTIFICATION AND CONTINUED ENROLLMENT

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BACKGROUND

Housing instability can have negative educational, developmental, and health consequences for children.^{1, 2, 3} Nationwide, more than 1.2 million children in preK-12 schools were identified as experiencing homelessness in SY 2021-22, an increase of 10.8% over the previous year, but still lower than the number identified as homeless prior to the pandemic.⁴ New York State, excluding New York City, mirrors these national trends. While improvements in the identification of school-aged children experiencing homelessness have been seen in this region, post-pandemic numbers have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. In SY 2021-22, 5,088 fewer homeless students were identified by schools than in SY 2018-19. This was driven by 350 districts—just over half (57%) of school districts in the State.⁵

By region, decreases in identification were most notable in Long Island, where 73 school districts identified 2,377 fewer children experiencing homelessness (a 28% decrease in identification) and in the Finger Lakes region, where 40 school districts identified 1,087 fewer children (a 24% decrease) from SY 2018-2019. The Mohawk region is also noteworthy. Despite only identifying 180 fewer children experiencing homelessness in SY 2021-22 compared to SY 2018-19, more than three quarters (76%) of all districts in the region reported a decrease in identification, and an additional seven districts (19%) saw no decrease but identified zero children experiencing homelessness. Because it is unlikely that a school district does not have a single child experiencing homelessness, these numbers suggest systemic challenges across the Mohawk Region with homeless student identification.

Also of concern, evidence of likely under-identification of children experiencing homelessness was prevalent across New York State. Ninety-three school districts are believed to be under-identifying homelessness based on having a lower-than-average rate of homelessness despite having a higher-than-average child poverty rate compared to the State overall. Likely under-identification was most pronounced in the Western Region (21 districts) and Southern Tier (17 districts). An additional 133 school districts reported no students experiencing homelessness. These districts, particularly those with more than 1,000 students, are also likely under-identifying homelessness among their school aged children. By region, Hudson Valley had the largest number of school districts identifying no children experiencing homelessness (25 districts, or 30% of all school districts) followed by Southern Tier and Western region both at 19 districts (41% and 23% of districts respectively). The Finger Lakes region had the fewest school districts identifying no children experiencing homelessness (only 4 districts or just 5% of districts). The table on the next page shows these as well as other trends across regions in New York from SY 2018-19 to 2021-22.

TABLE 1. OVERALL TRENDS IN IDENTIFICATION BY REGION

Region	Number of Districts with Decreased Identification	Percent of Districts with Decreased Identification	Change in Identification 2018-19 to 2021-22	Total Number of School Districts	Zero Students Identified as Homeless	Percent of Districts with Zero Identification	Likely Under-Identification
Capital	41	57%	-504	72	10	14%	11
Central	25	52%	-241	48	6	13%	8
Finger Lakes	40	50%	-1,087	80	4	5%	11
Hudson Valley	52	62%	-605	84	25	30%	5
Long Island	73	66%	-2,377	111	18	16%	0
Mohawk	28	76%	-180	37	18	49%	9
North Country	28	60%	-144	47	14	30%	10
Southern Tier	25	54%	132	46	19	41%	17
Western	38	45%	-82	84	19	23%	21
All	350	57%	-5088	609	133	22%	92

TABLE 1 CONTINUED

Region	Percent of Districts with Likely Under-Identification	Number of Districts with Sub-Grant 2020-21	Percent of Districts with Sub-Grant in 2020-21 (not including ARP)	Homeless Students Identified 2018-19	Homeless Students Identified 2021-22	Percent Change 2018 to 2022
Capital	15%	11	15%	3,535	3,301	-14%
Central	17%	5	10%	3,443	3,204	-7%
Finger Lakes	14%	10	13%	4,580	3,498	-24%
Hudson Valley	6%	34	40%	7,520	6,915	-8%
Long Island	0%	22	20%	8,411	6,034	-28%
Mohawk	24%	3	8%	1,119	939	-16%
North Country	21%	18	38%	1,248	1,104	-12%
Southern Tier	37%	0	0%	1,372	1,504	10%
Western	25%	4	5%	3,035	2,953	-3%
All	15%	107	18%	34,263	29,182	-15%

In light of these data, which show significant gaps in the identification of school aged children experiencing homelessness, the New York State Department of Education funded a qualitative study of School District McKinney-Vento liaisons to learn more about current practices of McKinney-Vento Liaisons and to identify opportunities to improve support for children experiencing homelessness.

METHODS

INTERVIEW SAMPLE SELECTION

From February 2024 through April 2024, staff from Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan reached out to McKinney-Vento liaisons working in school districts throughout New York State, excluding New York City. We chose to speak with McKinney-Vento liaisons due to their 1) direct experience with children and families experiencing homelessness; 2) understanding of the McKinney-Vento Act and its implications for children and schools; and 3) integration into the larger educational system.

Poverty Solutions staff sorted school districts based on the percent of children identified as experiencing homelessness and the school district poverty rate of children ages 5-17 years. From the list of all school districts, three groups of school districts were selected for interviews.

- **Low Identification:** School districts that were in the top quartile of the state for child poverty (20% or more) but identified less than the state average (4.8%) for the percent of children experiencing homelessness.
- **Good Identification:** School districts that were in the top quartile for the percent of homeless students identified—regardless of child poverty rate.
- **No identification:** Schools with more than 1,000 students that identified zero children experiencing homelessness.

These three groups included a total of 101 school districts, or roughly one sixth of all 609 school districts in New York State, not including districts in New York City or districts that were administrative and enrolled no students.

We then randomly selected ten participants from the *low identification group*, five from the *good identification group*, and five from the *no identification group* and reached out via email to arrange for Zoom interviews. When we could not reach liaisons through email, we called and left messages with staff or answering machines. Initial outreach started with a random selection within each group, but by the end of April, we had emailed and called all 101 school districts that met the *low identification*, *good identification*, and *no identification group* criteria.

Out of the 101 school districts that were contacted, 18 interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom representing 17 school districts (low identification $n = 11$; good identification $n = 5$; no identification $n = 2$). Average interview length was about 42 minutes (standard deviation about 13 minutes). We were not able to reach our proposed sample size for the *no identification group* despite numerous emails and phone calls, a challenge we discuss in the Findings section.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE AND ANALYSIS

All three authors conducted interviews with participants from home offices or offices in Poverty Solutions. Interviews were recorded and auto transcribed on Zoom. We used an established interview guide for each interview that contained demographic questions and covered the following domains: 1) Identification Practice and Approach, 2) Funding Support & Financial Infrastructure, and 3) Transportation Practice and Approach. Three to four questions were established for each domain, with prompts to use as necessary.

Our analysis consisted of the following three steps. First, after each interview, we individually completed a guided reflection to consider emerging themes, new discoveries, and pending questions. Second, we listened to interviews conducted by the other interviewers (that is, we listened to the interviews that we did not complete ourselves) so that every interviewer was familiar with as many interviews as possible. Lastly, we held a brief data analysis retreat in which we revisited the initial questions and developed responses that we agreed aligned across the sample. If discrepancies emerged, we discussed them until they were resolved. We discussed emerging themes based on the three domains in the interview guide, plus demographic questions.

Direct quotations are taken verbatim from transcriptions and edited for clarity. We use participant identification numbers (for example, “P3” for Participant 3) in place of names to protect anonymity.

FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND PROFESSIONAL ROLES

DEMOGRAPHICS

Eighteen people from 17 different school districts across New York State participated in interviews (in one district, the district Liaison and their supervisor opted to join the Zoom call at the same time. We count this as a single interview as both participants were reporting on the same district. We report demographic data from each). Interviewees ranged in age from 31 to 61 years, with an average age of about 49 years (two participants did not share their age). Two thirds of participants were female (one participant did not share their gender), 61% (eleven of eighteen) identified as White or Caucasian and 22% (four of eighteen) as Black or African American. One participant did not share their race and one identified as neither Black nor White; we refrain from sharing their racial identification for anonymity. While school districts from all regions were contacted, no liaisons from school districts in either the Long Island or North Country region agreed to participate in an interview.

PROFESSIONAL ROLE

Many McKinney-Vento liaisons filled other professional roles in their school or district as well, such as administrators or counselors. Generally speaking, liaisons with a larger portion of their position dedicated to their roles as liaison tended not only to be able to identify students more accurately and frequently (discussed in the next section), but also developed programs and resources to prevent homelessness before it occurred.

P7, for example, who served as the liaison for her district, spent 100% of her time supporting McKinney-Vento students and would regularly attend community events so she would be more recognizable among those who may need her support. Liaisons with less available time were only able to address needs as they arose.

Available time was not the only factor related to success as a liaison. Authority (e.g., a higher-ranking administrative position), autonomy (e.g., requiring oversight or permission), seniority, and established relationships seemed as important as available time in successfully working as a liaison. That is, when staff, students, parents, and fellow educators recognized the liaison, knew them personally, knew their role as a liaison, and knew how to contact them, news of a student who may be experiencing homelessness traveled quickly to the liaison. As one participant shared, “The longer that I’ve done the job the easier that it has been. And now there are people that reach out to me. They know that that’s part of what I do.” Another participant described this as her “rep” in the community: “I have a little bit of a rep so somebody will say so and so told me to call you, you’ll help me, you know, so it’s nice to have been there a long time.”

Some liaisons noted that there appeared to be a seasonality to the demands of their liaison role, with the needs of the position fluctuating wildly throughout the academic year. One participant shared, “I would say certain times a year. It’s [McKinney-Vento responsibilities] like the big bulk of my day, like over 80%, and then, certain times a year, things kind of settle down, and it’s maybe less than 20%. You know it really kind of ebbs and flows with what’s happening in the community.”

It was clear that many liaisons were, like most educators, extremely busy, their attention being pulled in multiple directions across many projects at the same time. During multiple interviews, the interviewee stopped the interview to address a need of a parent, student, or administrator following up about a homelessness issue. It was evident that many liaisons were spread so thin in their multiple roles that they dealt with homelessness issues only when they were emergent and did not have the time or energy to be foresightful about how to prevent homelessness or support students who have co-occurring issues—like living in situations of poverty—but who may not be homeless at that time. For example, P8 described how she managed her schedule related to McKinney-Vento responsibilities, “I don’t carve out particular time to do that [McKinney-Vento work] unless it requires a particular appointment. So, it’s like I just deal with them as they come at me.”

IDENTIFICATION

STRUCTURAL PRACTICES

While staffing structure and outreach for identification differed across districts, two primary structures emerged in districts with good identification. Smaller districts with good identification had a high-ranking administrator who had served as the McKinney-Vento liaison for a number of years and prioritized training infrastructure at every level of staff—particularly transportation—to support identification. They regularly tracked their identification data and shared those data with their staff as a way of creating awareness and a sense of shared urgency. P17 highlighted how this practice of sharing data on the number of children experiencing homelessness in the district had changed attitudes and engagement of staff. They note, “[Before I started] there wasn’t a whole lot of tracking or anything much done with this [data], and it was pretty eye opening for everybody when we saw how many students we had in this situation.”

Larger districts with good identification had both dedicated McKinney-Vento staff and the support of a senior district administrator to create a network of people at every school who were actively engaged in identification and outreach. This structure enabled liaisons to extend the reach of the program beyond what was possible for an individual alone.

Districts with lower identification tended to have liaisons who were covering multiple roles, in addition to the role of McKinney-Vento liaison, without having the authority or active support of someone higher in the school administration that enabled them to create a network of support. This left one or a few people to try to reach all students experiencing homelessness in the district, a structure that inevitably was limited by individual capacity and time.

Among districts that identified no students experiencing homelessness, the most basic structures to identify students experiencing homelessness were often not present. Contact information for the liaison was not always correct, and district staff who answered the phone were often not able to provide useful connections or referral information. This pattern was exemplified by the fact that despite repeated emails and phone calls we were only able to speak with two districts that fell into the no identification category even though our original goal was to speak with five.

HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE

Across all school districts, the required housing questionnaire was one of the first tools mentioned when liaisons discussed how their district identifies students experiencing homelessness. In many cases, however, information barriers and differing district practices reduced the potential effectiveness of the form. One liaison highlighted that a lack of awareness of McKinney-Vento protections among families meant that the form was often completed inaccurately: “Part of the problem, though, is I would say a good third of the families currently on my list, when they enrolled, clicked permanent housing. They do not think they’re allowed to go here if they don’t have their own lease, if they’re not permanently housed. They don’t know the law. So, they click ‘permanent housing,’ and then we have to become detectives.”

Another factor impacting the effectiveness of the housing questionnaire was how the district decided to implement this requirement. Across the 17 school districts, 3 distinct implementation approaches emerged:

1. The housing questionnaire was only given to families when they first enrolled their children in the school district. This approach captured families who might newly transfer into a district because of homelessness but meant that families otherwise only completed the form when first enrolling in kindergarten/first grade, at the transition to middle school, and at the transition to high school.
2. The housing questionnaire was given to families when they first enrolled their children in the school district and whenever a change of address was identified by teachers and staff or reported by the family.
3. The housing questionnaire was completed at the start of every year and whenever there was a change of address suspected or reported.

Overall, school districts that implemented the housing questionnaire more frequently and more strategically (i.e. when a potential change of address was noticed) tended to discuss the form as a more important tool in their identification process.

TRAINING

In addition to the housing questionnaire, the critical role of staff training was another widely discussed identification strategy among liaisons for districts with good identification and those with low identification that had seen significant identification increases since receiving ARP-HCY funding.

Liaisons discussed how, without constant training and education about McKinney-Vento, school staff often did not understand what homelessness looked like for families.

For example, when discussing the housing crisis in their community, one liaison summarized, “My colleagues have a hard time understanding, ‘Well, this person’s been McKinney-Vento, and they keep moving, and... they’re on year two or three.’ I’m like, ‘That’s normal! That could be.’ That’s how it is and so I’m finding that I need to do a lot of educating.”

Most liaisons reported that the economic impact of the pandemic had increased awareness of homelessness. Additionally, they suggested that more training at all levels in the school district was needed. Successful identification required collaboration. “Our school social workers are highly involved in the process. Our counselors are highly aware and highly involved. Our building principals have an awareness... They’re always ears to the ground when they’re meeting with kids, talking to kids or hearing things from teachers who may be saying, ‘You know, something’s going on with so and so. Their grades are changing. Their mood is changing.’”

Along with councilors and social workers, the importance of the role of bus drivers in identifying and reporting signs of housing instability to liaisons was a repeated theme among districts with good identification. It was critical for the director of transportation to be trained and involved in training their staff. As a liaison from a smaller rural district described, “My director of transportation, our head bus driver... they hear a lot because the bus drivers will come in and say, ‘Hey, you know so and so said something, and I’m letting you know’ and then they’ll be reaching out. So, we’ve got unofficial kind of monitors that are pretty highly aware to keep an ear out for this stuff then report it back up to me.”

A number of liaisons expanded on this idea and discussed how a strategy that had helped their district training led to greater identification was recognizing that successful identification requires a different set of skills depending on the role of the person at the school. Bus drivers, for example, would recognize different signs than social workers or counselors, and administrators often needed to understand more about how school policy could be structurally preventing access to mandated supports. Actively tailoring McKinney-Vento training to different roles allowed liaisons to maximize opportunities for identification and communication at every point of connection. While awareness of homelessness and the legal obligations was necessary, educators benefited from understanding how their day-to-day actions fit into the bigger picture. One liaison highlighted this when talking about the kinds of things they train their bus drivers to look for: “...you know Mom or Dad are still in the car outside that same place with the kids in the car getting them on the bus at the same spot, but then the bus driver kind of picks up that they’re not, might not be living there type of situation... a lot of times [the bus drivers] will be the first ones to see those changes.”

BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION

When discussing efforts to improve their district’s identification of children experiencing homelessness, many liaisons mentioned the need to build trust and break down barriers related to fear and stigma, which prevented parents from informing schools about their living situation and seeking help. Fear of Child Protective Services was reported as particularly strong for families. One liaison noted, “Part of it is shame. Part of it is not knowing what the answer will lead to, fear of knowing, you know, will this affect something about my ability to have my kids living with me?”

This highlights the ongoing importance of addressing the role of school staff as mandatory reporters and the rights of families experiencing homelessness under McKinney-Vento in tailored ways that address both parental and school staff fears. Likewise, among recent immigrants, fears of the potential consequences of allowing school personnel to know about housing and economic challenges were particularly strong.

To break down barriers to identification, liaisons talked about building partnerships with community-based organizations, attending events and meetings outside of school, and providing direct resources, such as food or backpacks, that reached children beyond those known to be eligible for the McKinney-Vento program. Speaking particularly about outreach efforts after the pandemic, one liaison said, “[A]s an attempt really to reconnect with the community as a team, as a department, we all went out into the community to the different events to say, ‘Hey, we are here, you know we are available to you. The district is open.’”

When discussing the importance of this type of outreach, liaisons frequently mentioned how useful ARP-HCY funding was, particularly districts that had approval to use dollars to provide families with flexible cash, usually in the form of store gift cards and gas cards. The ability to provide direct resources that were needed by families opened the doors of communication and trust. Once families received tangible support, liaisons were more likely to reach out again when problems arose, making flexible cash assistance an invaluable tool for reaching families and improving identification.

TRANSPORTATION

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

While the provision of transportation support for students experiencing homelessness is central to the McKinney-Vento Act, meeting this requirement was among the most challenging aspects of many liaisons’ jobs. Across multiple interviews, transportation—when to request it, from whom to request it, how to request it, and who pays for it—was clearly a contentious, stressful, or, at a minimum, complicated topic.

Interviewees described many creative ways to address these transportation challenges, though ultimately, most of the solutions relied on repurposing established bus routes in the district or in-kind collaboration with neighboring districts to leverage their existing bus routes. One respondent discussed how, rather than creating new routes, they had leveraged the existing bus routes for different school age groups (i.e. elementary, middle, and high school) that were usually operated separately because of differing school start times. In this case, the district found that it was less expensive to provide childcare to fill the gap between school start and end times than to establish a new bus route that matched the child’s school level. This solution also allowed siblings to ride the same bus, which was preferable to families.

When discussing in-kind collaboration across districts, participants emphasized that these agreements were possible because of long-standing relationships between districts and their directors of transportation. In some cases, legal documentation or agreements allowing districts to transport each other’s students were important, primarily for liability reasons. Because there was no direct compensation for districts helping one another in this way, when their transportation departments collaborated on existing routes, it was the relationship that had been established by the transportation departments and the districts overall that made these exchanges possible. As one participant described, “It is just a lot of handshakes and promises, but for better or for worse, it’s getting it done right now.” In discussing these arrangements, one liaison hoped that there could be a mechanism for recognizing and supporting this kind of transportation collaboration across districts. The fact that it was unfunded and often went unnoticed created a sense of tension around the sustainability of these arrangements.

LIMITATIONS OF STANDARD SOLUTIONS

Other attempts at addressing the challenge of transportation included drawing on approaches that could be reimbursed through Title I or ARP-HCY funding. These included providing gas cards, public transportation passes, and mileage reimbursement. Whether it was because of differing district rules or a lack of information about what expenses were reimbursable, not all of these options were used by all districts. In general, gas cards were reported as the most useful by liaisons, as they were most flexible and often preferred by parents. Districts that reported the most success with implementing gas cards for transportation used mileage estimates to figure out how many gas cards to provide a family rather than just providing a standard gas card amount per family. Only a few districts reported using direct mileage reimbursement, a mechanism which is legally limited to a child's parent or guardian. Parents, however, often relied on other family members and friends to help get their child to school. There was a strong desire among liaisons for this mechanism to be more flexible and reflective of the reality of families' needs and resources.

BUS DRIVER SHORTAGE

While liaisons tried to address transportation creatively, sometimes, the only option was to create new bus routes to meet the needs of children. This was, however, the most expensive and logistically challenging option, often taking multiple days to implement. Many interviewees described that there simply were not enough buses or bus drivers at all, whether transporting McKinney-Vento students or not. "We don't have enough people. We don't have enough drivers. We don't have enough vehicles. We might have enough vehicles, but you know people are calling in sick, and we have to combine things," one participant told us, while another said, "We can't find the people. Nobody can."

This shortage had been exacerbated by the pandemic, but one liaison who also served as a senior administrator in the school district pointed out that this issue had been brewing since the federal changes in bus driver licensing more than seven years ago. They said most people in their community who had previously served as bus drivers - mostly older adults and retirees - were not able to meet the new physical requirements of being able to crawl under the bus to complete repairs. They also pointed out that, as a rural district, these rules meant that the closest certification location was more than two hours away.

NAVIGATING MULTIPLE NEEDS

The age of students also brought many challenges to the transportation of McKinney-Vento students. Older students could ride public transportation alone, but this was not possible for young students, and time spent on a school bus also weighed heavily into parents' decisions to have their kids continue attending their school of origin or not. Many interviewees stated that it was unreasonable for children in early elementary school to sit on the bus for upwards of an hour, suggesting that switching schools may be easier on the child than multiple hours on the bus five days a week.

Extracurricular commitments and before and after school programs further complicated transportation scheduling, shifting student pick up and drop off times to be challengingly early, late, or variable throughout the week. But supporting participation in extracurricular activities was the law and seen as essential, good for the community, and positively influential on students. P16 described:

One challenge is we don't provide transportation for all of our students for extracurricular activities, but for some of our McKinney Vento students, they wouldn't be able to participate if they didn't have transportation so we use some of our COVID emergency money to do some of that, and we've moved some of that [money] into the budget because being connected to a team, a sport, a club, can make the difference between doing well in school, you know, or not.

REQUESTING TRANSPORTATION

Requesting transportation from those in charge of arranging it—often a contact at a district transportation office—elicited a range of responses from interviewees, such as frustration and ambivalence. Some interviewees clearly did not like to call the transportation office or thought that those in the transportation office did not want to hear from them. One participant shared, “Oh, gosh! Our director of transportation...we are not friends. And I feel badly, but I make her life so difficult.” Another participant, despite respecting the incredible efforts of the transportation coordinator, was also aware of how much work her requests elicited from the transportation coordinator. She recounts, “Our transportation coordinator should have the subtitle, ‘Miracle Worker.’...But that transportation coordinator, I actually think when she sees my name, she doesn't answer the phone.” Others responded more straightforwardly, suggesting that it doesn't matter how anyone feels about the burden of transportation: it's simply the law and has to be done. Overall, requesting transportation was one of the areas where the authority of the liaison within the school district had the most impact. Liaisons that were senior administrators or had the strong backing of senior administrators reported less trepidation about making calls and were less likely to feel their calls were being avoided.

Despite the challenges of finding bus routes for students, bus drivers continued to be among the most helpful resources reported by liaisons for identifying students experiencing homelessness, as they recognized when a particular student didn't show up as planned, was picked up at a new address, or simply looked like something was different. As one participant detailed, “First and foremost, our bus drivers know everything about every family within the city boundaries and the school district boundaries. So, if they notice that a house is vacant [they can tell you], because they are the first to see the families and the last to see the families.”

FUNDING

CHALLENGES TO FUNDING TRANSPARENCY

Very few interviewees were able to answer questions about how much funding was directed towards McKinney-Vento support prior to ARP-HCY or how funding decisions were made. This gap in financial information was even more pronounced when it came to the District's Title I set aside. While a few respondents indicated that they could easily find out the set aside, no liaisons had that information readily available or reported using that information for planning purposes.

LASTING STRUCTURAL IMPACTS OF ARP-HCY

Prior to receiving ARP-HCY funding, the majority of districts did not have a McKinney-Vento Sub-Grant, which meant Title I set aside was the primary source of funding available to support students experiencing homelessness. Liaisons described that the influx of ARP-HCY dollars altered many of their roles in two lasting ways.

First, the injection of funding led to improvement in the engagement of those on the front lines of McKinney-Vento support in decision making about spending. Liaisons reported that, for the first time, as a result of ARP-HCY, they were being asked what their students needed. This led to more creative and needs-focused solutions, such as food pantries, washing machines, and asking families directly for their input. While ARP-HCY funding is now ending, opportunities exist to build on the greater liaison engagement in funding decisions through mechanisms in statewide McKinney-Vento grant and reporting requirements.

The second significant structural shift was that ARP-HCY funding made liaisons aware of ways that they could support students experiencing homelessness with Title I set aside dollars that they had previously been unaware of because their district had never received or applied for a McKinney-Vento sub-grant. For example, P17 noted this when speaking about using ARP-HCY dollars to provide families with gas cards for transportation saying, “...we had never done that before, and we started with the grant [ARP-HCY]... We’ll probably start using our Title I funds for that, I think.”

LOGISTIC BARRIERS TO SPENDING

While overall respondents reported ARP-HCY dollars to be a resource that drastically increased their ability to identify and support children experiencing homelessness, there also were many barriers to spending money, sometimes resulting in left over funds that were never used. A number of respondents reported that their district had primarily budgeted ARP-HCY dollars to cover the cost of bussing. Shortages in the number of bus drivers and the length of time it often took to establish new bus contracts through the state often meant that it was impossible to use these funds, particularly for districts that did not have their own bus fleet.

You know the nature of this is, it happens fast. There’s a fire. There’s a domestic violence incident. There’s a death. There’s whatever, like, it’s typically not something like, ‘Oh, I think we’re gonna be homeless in a month. Could you please start working to be able to provide us with transportation?’ That’s not how this works. It’s urgent [but] the processes [to set up transportation], aren’t. They don’t function that quickly. So that...can be a challenge.

At the same time, districts reported that they were unable to move these funds initially allocated towards bussing to cover other costs. It was unclear when speaking with liaisons whether the restrictions preventing them from reallocating ARP-HCY funds were at the district, BOCES, or state level, but all liaisons reporting this challenge said it was not within their authority to reallocate funds.

While the inability to spend funds that had been allocated for bus transportation represented the largest single category of unspent ARP-HCY funds, liaisons reported a number of other challenges. The one-time nature of the funding and the need to spend the money without a mechanism to carry over dollars for later use meant that districts needed to purchase large quantities of items while funding was available. Districts saw the opportunity to meet the needs of students for items such as clothing, shoes, and hygiene supplies, but they did not have the space to store these items. Some districts also reported burdensome requirements for keeping receipts, which became overwhelming when there were lots of very small purchases, like school supplies. P13 described these challenges,

We can’t just order like \$100,000 worth of stuff all at once. We had to be very strategic, because incoming in a district are ...not just our grant purchases...we had to compete for space, we had to compete for our turn in everything else that the district is doing. We had to wedge ourselves in there.... It’s like keeping inventory of...a massive store.

IS THERE A HOW TO GUIDE?

Many liaisons were relatively new to their positions and had taken on the role since the return to school after the pandemic. This was at least in part due to the fact that American Rescue Plan funding provided schools new opportunities to bring on staff, but also reflects the turnover in the McKinney-Vento liaison role. As a result, interviewees often wanted more understanding of how to spend their funds. They felt that they understood the basics of McKinney-Vento and what they were allowed to buy, but they wanted to know how to buy it. One liaison summarized this with the following example:

“I think it would be helpful to have a little more practicality. Okay, so you’re ordering glasses for students, right? How do you do that? Do you contact an optometrist and get a contract? Do you put bids out? We don’t know how to do that. We want to, we just don’t know how to do it. They [the State] don’t have that gap information and background knowledge to help you go from what the book says to what you want to do, and that’s where we’re really lacking... So we’re not using McKinney-Vento, the Title I element, to its fullest capacity because of that.”

It was unclear whether some of the practical challenges were made more difficult by differing rules at the school district or BOCES level that were not covered by NYS TEACHS materials, or whether greater clarity of these details at the state level would address the challenges liaisons currently face when trying to make needed purchases.

FLEXIBLE FUNDING IS KEY TO SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Most respondents discussed the importance of having flexible funding to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. For example, liaisons often applaud the flexibility of store gift cards. P11 noted, “[the] American Rescue Plan, it gives us a chance to give families things more directly. Like, ‘Hey, we don’t have clothes.’ ‘Okay, let’s get you a Target gift card.’ You can go buy, you know, what you need.” This ability of liaisons to provide families with not only the resources they needed but to be able to provide them in a manner that preserved the dignity of families to choose for themselves what they purchased was discussed by participants as invaluable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ARP-HCY funding dramatically expanded the number of school districts in New York State and nationally that received dedicated dollars to identify and support children experiencing homelessness after the pandemic. This new landscape, while temporary, provided a unique opportunity to learn from districts across the state about best practices and challenges. Across all districts interviewed, it was clear that both the pandemic and the influx of funding to re-engage students experiencing homelessness had raised awareness about the educational implications of housing instability. Even as ARP-HCY funding now expires, this greater awareness of homelessness has created opportunities for the New York State Department of Education to strengthen its McKinney-Vento program going forward. Recommendations include the following:

USE ADMINISTRATIVE DATA TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF UNDER-IDENTIFICATION AND TARGET OUTREACH AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO THOSE DISTRICTS.

Interviews showed that there are different identification and outreach practices taking place in districts that fall into the good identification group versus those that fall into the low-identification and no identification groups. Liaisons at school districts with low-identification (defined as higher than average child poverty and lower than average identification of children experiencing homelessness) more frequently reported lacking the institutional support of someone high up in the district to help them break through bureaucratic hurdles, or being so overwhelmed with putting out immediate fires that they did not have time to strengthen a broader district wide network of identification and support to distribute the large volume of work and meet the needs of students.

No identification districts (defined as those identifying zero children experiencing homelessness) often lacked McKinney-Vento supports at the most basic level. In our outreach, districts that identified no children experiencing homelessness were the most likely to have inaccurate liaison contact information and minimal or no awareness at the district level of who to speak with regarding the McKinney-Vento program. Targeting these two groups of districts for outreach and support would yield the greatest increase in identification and ensure that all schools are meeting the basic requirements of the law.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH GOOD IDENTIFICATION TO SHARE THEIR BEST PRACTICES WITH OTHER SCHOOL DISTRICTS.

Districts with good identification (defined as above average identification of children experiencing homelessness) reported systems and approaches to identification and support that have the potential to be shared with other school districts. Some of these practices included regularly sharing data with staff to raise awareness, having a McKinney-Vento ‘champion’ in a position of authority to help break down bureaucratic barriers, providing tailored training at all levels of staff so there is awareness of how day-to-day activities relate to McKinney-Vento, and adopting a structure where every school has a “point of contact” who helps with identification and outreach. Providing opportunities to learn about what works and, for districts interested in adopting one of these best practices, establishing mentoring relationships across districts, could be an effective approach for dissemination.

STRENGTHEN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HOUSING QUESTIONNAIRE ACROSS ALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS.

The housing questionnaire was an important tool for identifying children experiencing homelessness, but districts implemented this requirement differently. The most effective implementation of the questionnaire asked families to complete the form annually and followed up with families to complete the form again during the school year every time a change of address was reported by a staff member or the family. Working across districts to adopt this best practice has the potential to increase identification in a large number of school districts with minimal additional cost.

ENGAGE AND TRAIN ALL BUS DRIVERS AND DIRECTORS OF TRANSPORTATION IN HOW TO IDENTIFY STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND CONNECT THEM TO SUPPORT.

While most liaisons primarily discussed their work with the transportation department in terms of how to get students to school, a few respondents described how invaluable their bus drivers were in identifying children who might be experiencing homelessness. This approach was praised as highly effective with liaisons pointing out how drivers were often the first to notice when children did not show up at their usual pick up, or when families may be dropping a child off at their usual stop but no longer appeared to be living there. It also appeared that liaisons reporting this type of collaboration described fewer tensions with their transportation departments, perhaps because their interactions were not limited to when bus routes needed to be changed, a process that all respondents reported as challenging. Prioritizing the training and engagement of transportation directors and bus drivers in not only the transportation requirements of McKinney-Vento law, but on how to identify children experiencing homelessness is a promising strategy that should be implemented more widely.

ADVOCATE FOR FEDERAL BUS DRIVER LICENSING REQUIREMENTS TO BE REVISITED.

Every school district reported not having enough bus drivers to meet their students' transportation needs. One significant barrier to ending the current bus driver shortage was current federal licensing requirements that had become more stringent in recent years. For example, liaisons reported that current licensing requirements may be worth reconsidering, as some requirements limit applications from older adults, including retirees, who historically had been an important part of the bus driver team and were capable of all other licensing requirements besides those that are physically demanding.

RECOGNIZE AND FOSTER INTER-DISTRICT TRANSPORTATION COLLABORATION AND CREATIVE USE OF EXISTING BUS ROUTES.

Building on pre-existing bus routes was more efficient and less expensive than creating a new bus route or finding another mode of transportation. Transportation directors didn't always have the time or experience to be aware of bus routes outside of their own school district, but particularly in rural areas, liaisons reported this type of 'good will' collaboration was vital.

Identifying ways to recognize and incentivize these types of inter-district collaboration among transportation authorities could allow more liaisons and transportation directors to utilize this type of solution. Another way to utilize pre-existing bus routes is to find ways for students to shift their arrival or departure time to and from school in order to be able to get on other district buses. In these cases, providing financial flexibility to districts to subsidize after or before school programs when those are less expensive than creating a new bus route may allow students to shift their schedule so that they align with available bus routes.

MAXIMIZE THE FLEXIBILITY OF FUNDING DIRECTED TOWARDS STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.

ARP-HCY funding represents the first time districts have been provided flexible funding to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Liaisons reported that this flexibility enabled them to improve their outreach, build trust, and directly meet the needs of the families they were serving in a manner that maintained dignity, autonomy, and respect.

Access to store gift cards was frequently referenced by liaisons as one of their most valuable tools, and one that would be missed most when ARP-HCY funding ended. Sharing lessons learned about the importance of flexible cash at the federal level and identifying all mechanisms available at the state level to maximize funding flexibility will strengthen liaison's ability to successfully do their job.

CREATE STRUCTURES THAT INCREASE FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY FOR MCKINNEY-VENTO LIAISONS.

For most liaisons, receiving ARP-HCY funding was the first time that they were asked to provide input on the service needs and priorities of families experiencing homelessness in their district. This disconnection creates barriers that can limit access for students experiencing homelessness to services that are legally guaranteed. Building on the engagement of liaisons in ARP-HCY funding decisions, the State Department of Education should create structural mechanisms so that every liaison is aware of their district's per student Title I set aside and so that liaisons are required to be involved in McKinney-Vento subgrant applications submitted to the state.

LEVERAGE LESSONS LEARNED FROM ARP-HCY TO IMPROVE DISTRICTS' USE OF TITLE I SET ASIDE FUNDING.

All school districts are required to establish a dollar amount per student experiencing homelessness that is set aside from Title I funding specifically to provide support for students experiencing homelessness in the district. These dollars are often under-utilized because of lack of awareness about this funding mechanism and how money can be spent. ARP-HCY funding provided many school districts with their first grant funding to support students experiencing homelessness. As districts spend the last of their ARP-HCY dollars, opportunities exist to provide outreach and training to districts that are not receiving McKinney-Vento subgrants to identify ways that they can continue to implement successful ARP-HCY efforts, such as the provision of gas cards to families, through the use of their Title I Set Aside.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Perlman S, Fantuzzo J. (2010). Timing and influence of early experiences of child maltreatment and homelessness on children's educational well-being. *Child Youth Services Review*, 32(6), 874-883. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2010.02.00>
- 2 Haskett ME, Armstrong JM, Tisdale J. (2016). Developmental Status and Social–Emotional Functioning of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness. *Early Child Education Journal*, 44(2), 119-125. doi:[10.1007/s10643-015-0691-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0691-8)
- 3 Brumley B, Fantuzzo J, Perlman S, Zager ML. (2015). The unique relations between early homelessness and educational well-being: An empirical test of the Continuum of Risk Hypothesis. *Child Youth Services Review*, 48, 31-37. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2014.11.012>
- 4 [Data Download Tool](#). Ed Data Express. United States of America Department of Education.
- 5 School districts included in this number are those that are located outside of New York City in the state of New York and have at least one student enrolled.