

Homelessness: Today's Definition Is More Different Than Ever Before

Tri County Area Schools

When we hear the word homeless, we tend to think of a person that does not have a home to call their own. We often think of the homeless as living in parks, alleys, motels, cars, trailers, or tents. Today, there are more homeless families than ever before. Under the federal law, No Child Left Behind, the McKinney Vento Act spells out the definition of being homeless in much broader terms. School districts all across the country are charged with the task of identifying, assisting, and reporting families and/or students in homeless situations.

The McKinney Vento Act defines homeless families as those families or students that meet one of the following criteria:

*Any family or youth without a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence is considered "homeless" under the law. This includes children who are:

- Living with a friend, relative, or someone else because they lost their home or cannot afford a home;
- Staying in a motel, hotel, trailer park, or campground because they have nowhere else to go;
- Living in a shelter, including emergency or transitional shelters, domestic violence shelters, and runaway and homeless youth shelters;
- Staying in substandard housing;
- Living in places not ordinarily used for sleeping including cars, parks, public places, abandoned buildings, or bus or train stations;
- Awaiting foster care placement;
- Abandoned in hospitals

Youth not living with a biological parent or legal guardian through the probate courts are considered homeless and the term "Unaccompanied Youth" is used to identify these children. This may include youth who:

- *Are asked to leave home by parents;
- *Left home without the consent of a parent;

- *Have no formal custody papers or arrangements while their parents are in jail, the hospital, or a rehabilitation center;
- *Ran away from home.

The Tri County Area School District has identified Kristi Teall as the Homeless Liaison for the district. The ways in which school homeless liaisons can assist homeless families and youth include:

- *Assisting with immediate enrollment in their school;
- *Assisting with appropriate services such as transportation, preschool, special education, bilingual services, vocational education, Title I and similar services;
- *Make referrals to health care services, dental services, or other care providers;
- *Publicly post the education rights of homeless children and youth in places such as schools and family shelters;
- *Assist unaccompanied youth with enrollment, transportation and disagreements with schools;
- *Making sure that disagreements between students and schools are always resolved;
- *Assisting student with eligibility for free breakfast and lunches.

Whenever there is a disagreement or dispute between a school and parent, guardian, or youth the school must:

- *Provide written documentation explaining the school's decision and the student's right to appeal if there is a disagreement;
- *Allow students the right to enroll in their desired school until the dispute has been resolved;
- *Refer the student and family to the liaison who must help to resolve the dispute quickly.

If the disputes are not resolved in a timely manner, the student or family can call their state coordinator at the Michigan Department of Education; call a lawyer for assistance; or contact the United States Department of Education. Again, please contact Kristi Teall at Central Office for Tri County Area Schools (616-636-5454) or by e-mail at kteall@tricountyschools.com if you feel there are families and/or students in the school district that fit the criteria listed for homeless.