

Guidance for Montana Private Schools Serving Students Experiencing Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal law that addresses the educational needs of students experiencing homelessness; it only applies to students enrolled in public schools. However, private schools that are providing educational services to students experiencing homelessness can provide additional resources to these students using Title I funding, and can provide support to these students as they plan for college and career. The OPI encourages local public schools to partner with private schools in offering services to these students. The following steps are suggestions for ensuring that students experiencing homelessness are able to access services.

What are the benefits to the student/private school of identifying students in need? Students experiencing homelessness often need additional targeted supports to achieve and maintain success in the classroom. Identifying these students will allow private schools to work with their public school counterparts to ensure that every student has access to the supports and services they need. As these students prepare for graduation and the transition to college and career they may have the right to apply for federal financial aid as an independent minor if they are not living with a parent or guardian. This allows them to access Pell Grants, Work Study, and other need based aid without providing their parents' tax information.

1. Evaluate all students to determine if they would qualify as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act while enrolled in a public school setting. Refer to the [OPI Guidance for Coding Montana Children as Homeless in AIM](#) for definitions on qualifying living situations. A student or family may become homeless during the school year due to a variety of circumstances. Data should be updated whenever a student is identified.
2. The private school should designate a staff person to act as a "homeless liaison" and to maintain records of all students, particularly seniors, who have been identified as homeless. Include all of the data categories listed in the document linked in #1.
3. If a student receives services from the local school district under IDEA, or any other federal program, inform that district of the student's McKinney-Vento status.
4. If the private school receives Title I services from a local school district they can request targeted services for a student experiencing homelessness using Title I funds. Services might include fees for [dual enrollment](#), basic school supplies, or additional supplies for specific courses such as Career and Technical Education or Fine Arts. The school should also work with the district to help the student access clothing, food, or other community based donations or services that the school district's homeless liaison may have access to. Title I funds that are used to support students identified as homeless in a private

school are part of the private school's overall Title I allocation, and are not additional funds.

5. If the private school participates in state testing or ACT testing the student should be marked according to the options in the document listed in #1. Students marked during the testing window will appear in the OPI data base and can then be verified by the State Coordinator.
6. Applying for college and completing the FAFSA.
 - a. Seniors who are experiencing homelessness should fill out the FAFSA and note that they are currently homeless. If the student is living with someone who is not their parent or legal guardian (couch surfing) they should note that they are an "unaccompanied homeless youth" or "UHY" on the FAFSA.
 - b. Private school students who are experiencing homelessness will need to submit a request for a waiver from their college's Financial Aid Administrator in order to apply for financial aid as an independent minor.
 - c. The school counselor or designated "homeless liaison" should submit a letter on behalf of the student that outlines their living situation and verifies their homeless status. If the student slept in a shelter at any point during their senior year then the shelter director can verify their status as homeless.
 - d. More information on how to help students access [higher education](#).
 - e. List of [scholarships](#) available to Montana students experiencing homelessness.
7. Additional resources
 - a. [OPI's Homeless Education page](#) – links to laws, guidance, resources, and professional development
 - b. [Montana Legal Services Association](#) – pro bono attorneys who can assist with emancipation or other legal issues (not for criminal issues)
 - c. [Medicaid and SNAP benefits](#) – students must be at least 16 to apply for Medicaid or SNAP (Food Stamp) benefits on their own
 - d. [Tumbleweed](#) (Billings), [Sparrow's Nest](#) (Flathead Valley), and [Blueprint](#) (Gallatin Valley) – housing providers for youth in Montana
8. Contact your [local school district's homeless liaison](#) for more information on resources in your local community.

For additional questions or concerns regarding services to private school students who are experiencing homelessness, contact Heather Denny, the Montana State Coordinator for Homeless Education, at hdenny@mt.gov or at 406-444-2036.