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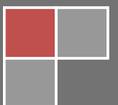
The Massachusetts Homeless Post-Secondary Students Network

A network to support homeless youth in access to public education

The Network's purpose is to create strategies that prepare and support homeless youth to transition from secondary education to succeed within post-secondary education settings. Comprised of diverse stakeholders who share a common purpose to support youth access to public education, the Network will act as a think tank to identify systemic barriers, develop best practices, and advocate for policy changes to facilitate meaningful access to post-secondary education for all youth.

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The Massachusetts Homeless Post-Secondary Students Network

The Massachusetts Appleseed Center and the Office of Urban and Off-Campus Support Services (U-ACCESS) at UMass Boston seek to establish the “Massachusetts Homeless Post-Secondary Students Network” (Network) whose purpose is to create strategies that prepare and support homeless youth to transition from high school and to succeed within post-secondary education settings.

The Network is comprised of diverse stakeholders who share a common purpose to support youth to access public education, including state universities, high schools, state agencies, service providers, policy advocates, and community members. The Network will act as a "think tank" to identify systemic barriers, advocate for policy changes, and develop programs and best practices to facilitate meaningful access to post-secondary education for youth at risk for homelessness, youth subject to chronic poverty, and youth experiencing homelessness.

An Emerging Trend

Institutions for post-secondary education have become aware of an emerging homeless population among their student body. Massachusetts has successfully implemented the McKinney Vento Act to identify, engage, and support homeless youth in elementary and secondary education. These youth encounter barriers, however, when they pursue post-secondary education, and struggle when they matriculate at post-secondary education institutions. Many do not have the life skills necessary for independent adult living and most lack a reliable support system to help them make the transition.

This initiative includes students twenty-four years of age and younger. Recent research shows that brain maturation continues well into the second decade of life.¹ Growing trends in developmental research, legal theories, public interest policy, and governmental policy support an age range through twenty-four years.² The strategy is to align recommendations for specific supports and services with the unique developmental needs of this age group.

¹ See *Homeless Young Adults Ages 18-24: Examining Service Delivery Adaptations*, NATIONAL HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS COUNCIL, 3 (Sept. 2004), <http://www.nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/101905YoungHomelessAdults.pdf>.

² See Staci A. Gruber & Deborah A. Yuregelun-Todd, *Neurobiology and the Law: A Role in Juvenile Justice?* 3 OHIO ST. J. OF CRIM. L. 321, 328-30 (2006).

The Numbers

According to the SY 2011-12 Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR) data collection, U.S. public schools enrolled 1,168,354 children and youth experiencing homelessness. This is a ten percent (10%) increase from the SY 2010-11 figure of 1,065,794. This is a twenty-four percent (24%) increase over the three-year period SY 2009-10 (939,903) through SY 2011-12.³ During the SY 2012-13, Massachusetts public schools enrolled 15,812 school aged children experiencing homelessness.⁴ The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and secondary Education (MA DESE) estimates the figure is likely over 44,000.⁵ Massachusetts public schools also identified 935 school aged homeless children without a caring adult in their life.⁶ The U.S. Department of Education's federal data for the SY 2009-2010 show that approximately seventy-five percent (75%) of homeless children and youth identified by school districts live in doubled-up situations.⁷ Approximately 800 youth in Massachusetts turn age eighteen while in foster care every year.⁸ Although youth may now remain in foster care until age twenty-two, over 300 youth a year chose not to remain in care for services and can face homelessness. Supports can include foster care maintenance payments, a housing allowance, State College Tuition and Fee Waiver programs, mentoring programs and more.⁹ However, lack of housing remains a key barrier for these youth. Studies show that youth who have been in foster care are at high risk for experiencing homelessness, mental health problems and unemployment.¹⁰

³ National Center for Homeless Education. [2012]. Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary. Retrieved October 23, 2103, from <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-0910-1112.pdf>. For information on US OESE's CSPR data collection, visit www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/index.html.

⁴ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Homeless Student Program Data 2012-13, provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education September, 2013.

⁵ Information provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, McKinney-Vento Steering Committee. Meeting Agenda, dated October 15, 2012.

⁶ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Homeless Student Program Data 2012-13, provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education September, 2013.

⁷ National Center for Homeless Education. [2012]. Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program Data Collection Summary. Retrieved October 23, 2013, from <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-0910-1112.pdf>.

⁸ E. Pitchal and M. Wilson, "Legislation will help youth aging out of foster care." Lawyer's Journal, Massachusetts Bar Association [March, 2011]. Retrieved July 19, 2012, from <http://www.massbar.org/publications/lawyers-journal/2011/march/legislation-will-help-youth-aging-out-of-foster-care>.

⁹ Child Welfare League of America, Extended Foster Care Chart. Retrieved on July 24, 2013, from: www.cwla.org/advocacy/adoptionhr6893fostercarechart.pdf.

¹⁰ "Preparing Our Kids for Education, Work and Life," A Report of the Task Force on Youth Aging Out of DSS Care. The Boston Foundation [June, 2008],

The Needs

These youth need a support system and services to succeed in post-secondary education. In 2001, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act was passed to ensure that elementary and secondary school homeless students are identified and enrolled, and to provide the support and services that may be necessary to enable them to achieve academic success, including technical assistance with enrollment processes; support for physical needs, such as food programs and transportation to school; academic support; mentoring; and more. This support system, which is coordinated by homeless education liaisons designated in each school district, disappears abruptly when high-school ends.

Further, anecdotal stories suggest that this support system does not transition homeless youth successfully from secondary education to post-secondary education. These youth lack a general preparedness. Although transition planning is available for special education students, the transition plans focus solely on academics and do not include planning in other non-academic areas such as housing or financial literacy.

The Barriers

Once in post-secondary institutions, homeless students face significant challenges in coping with personal circumstances and support issues while keeping up with academic requirements.

Financial Aid. Access to financial aid is a significant hurdle. Changes in the rules governing financial aid now recognize the independent status of unaccompanied homeless youth and make it easier to submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (“FAFSA”).¹¹ Students encounter difficulties, however, when asked to substantiate their homelessness with appropriate documentation. While some homeless youth may be able to obtain the necessary evidence from a school district homeless liaison or designated service providers, this can be a significant obstacle for students who are no longer in high-school and do not access services from specified shelters or youth centers. Federal Aid Administrators may recognize a student’s independent status based on other evidence, but many lack the necessary training and guidance to make this determination appropriately.

¹¹ College Cost Reduction and Access Act (“CCRAA”) and 2013-2014 Application and Verification Guide, 23 and 119. Retrieved on July 22, 2013 from: <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/higher-ed>. See also: National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. Helping Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Access College Financial Aid. Retrieved on July 22, 2013, from: <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/higher-ed>.

Housing. Lack of affordable housing presents further challenges. State university residences in Massachusetts are built by the Massachusetts State College Building Authority as revenue-funded facilities, funded by revenue bonds. This means that college housing administrators are not in a position to provide subsidized housing for homeless students. Furthermore, students who *are* able to access campus housing – through financial aid grants or otherwise – are generally not permitted to remain in their dorms during vacation periods, leaving them with nowhere to live when school is not in session.¹²

Support Services. In 2012, UMass Boston established its Office of Urban and Off-Campus Support Services (U-ACCESS) to help empower and support students to meet their challenges. In February, 2013, U-ACCESS reported that it provided services to 70 students, 45% of whom were homeless or on the verge of homelessness, and 10% of who struggled to afford food.¹³ In addition to a food pantry, the office provides support and referrals for students confronting legal issues, domestic violence, persistent poverty, emancipation from foster care and more.

Massachusetts lacks system-wide programs to ensure that students transition to post-secondary education institutions in Massachusetts and can access support services. McKinney-Vento liaisons are well-placed to assume an active role in such a state-wide effort, as they can help college-bound homeless youth transition from secondary education and navigate the college application process and establish direct links between these students and campus support services.

¹² See, for example, the following UMass Amherst Residence Hall Contract, which applies to the Academic Year, exclusive of various holidays, subject to receipt of special permission. Retrieved on July 19, 2013, from <http://www.housing.umass.edu/pdf/Residence%20Hall%20Contract.pdf>.

¹³ K. Landeragan, “UMass Opens Pantry for Students Who Cannot Afford Food” [February 19, 2013]. Retrieved on July 22, 2013, from: http://www.boston.com/yourcampus/news/umass-boston/2013/02/umass_boston_opens_pantry_for_students_who_cannot_afford_food.html.

Strategic Goal

The Network will act as a ‘think tank’ to identify systemic barriers, advocate for policy changes, and develop programs and best practices to facilitate meaningful access to post-secondary education for youth at-risk of homelessness, youth subject to chronic poverty, and youth experiencing homelessness (hereafter referred to collectively as “homeless youth”). Key features of programs and activities will be articulated for replication in other post-secondary education settings.

The Network will engage a cross section of diverse stakeholders who all share a common purpose to support youth in access to public education, including colleges, high schools, state agencies, service providers, policy advocates, and community members.

Step One: Establish the Network

Shirley Fan-Chan, Director of the U-ACCESS program at UMass Boston and Joan Meschino, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Appleseed Center will convene the Network and co-facilitate its meetings and activities. A diverse group of policymakers, service providers and advocates, including the MA DESE official responsible for implementing the McKinney Vento Act, have already been recruited prospectively as members. Additional candidates will be approached to encourage participation by all relevant stakeholders. A list of current and prospective Network members is attached as an appendix to this concept paper.

The Network members will be expected to meet at least twice annually or more often as necessary to conduct business. Members shall participate in smaller working groups to pursue the Network’s goals and report back to the larger Network for action. Meeting notes will be prepared to document the Network’s work.

Next steps: Network Activities

Once established, the Network will undertake the following activities (subject to modification and approval by Network members):

Data Collection

A critical first step is to explore the numbers, demographics, and needs of homeless youth. Ideally, this would be accomplished through a student life survey of homeless students. The purpose of the survey would be to identify obstacles to successful application and admission to post-secondary education programs and barriers to academic success.

The survey would be designed to capture a broad range of “homelessness” and living situations, such as foster care, youth homes and “doubling up,” and the specific barriers or constraints

youth may experience while they remain in these environments and once they “age out” or leave them. As a preliminary step, the Network would conduct research on the legal and ethical rules that have to be taken into account in planning and implementing such a survey, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (“FERPA”). The Network would draw on pro-bono legal assistance for this type of research. U-ACCESS of UMass Boston would be responsible for implementing the first student life survey.

Identification of Barriers

The data collected in the survey would be used to identify and analyze the particular barriers that are: (a) discouraging eligible homeless youth from applying to college and/or preventing them from being successfully admitted to college programs; and (b) negatively impacting on the ability of homeless college students to succeed in post-secondary education settings. Many of these barriers – particularly those related to the application and admission process – will not be specific to the transition from high school to college, and are likely to apply more broadly to the way that homeless youth experience the transition to any post-secondary education setting, such as vocational training schools. While the Network will initially focus its attention on the ways in which these barriers impact on college readiness and success, a broader focus on “career readiness,” or a focus on other types of post-secondary education settings, may be considered by the Network, or by an interested working group, at a later stage. This research will be written up as a white paper, or an issue brief, and disseminated widely among relevant stakeholders.

Developing Effective Solutions

The primary purpose of the Network will be to develop effective strategies to eliminate or reduce identified barriers, both in terms of initial access to post-secondary education and in terms of achieving success within this context. While most of this work cannot be anticipated until after the data has been collected and analyzed, the Network will initiate a number of immediate projects:

- a. **Campus Coordinators:** One of the primary goals of the Network is to advocate for the creation of a permanent, paid campus coordinator position, on all publicly and privately funded college campuses, which would coordinate assistance and support for homeless college students. This position would be largely modeled on the U-ACCESS at UMass Boston, which has taken important steps to respond to the physical, social and emotional needs of homeless youth (and others), such as establishing food pantry program and providing information and referrals to support non-academic needs. Campus Coordinators should also work closely with McKinney

Vento Liaisons in high-schools to increase college and career readiness, and to ensure that homeless youth are able to access all benefits, aid, support and services for which they are eligible, both in terms of the post-secondary education application process and once they are admitted to a particular program. Strengthening the relationship between McKinney-Vento Liaisons and Campus Coordinators will also deepen the latter's understanding of the needs of incoming homeless youth and improve the ability of post-secondary education institutions to meet them. The Network will articulate key elements of the Campus Coordinator role for replication on other college campuses, using the U-ACCESS Boston model as a best practice.

- b. **Defining parameters for success:** Defining parameters for success is a critical step in implementing this project. While the award of a college degree is the goal, it may not be a suitable benchmark for success for all students. In the context of post-secondary education, it may be more appropriate to conceptualize success as supporting students to become "career ready" or "self-sufficient." The Network will attempt to define what we mean by success and to develop measurable indicators of this achievement. Initial work on this topic might be disseminated in the form of a white-paper or presented as part of a symposium or conference organized by the Network.
- c. **Increase awareness:** Administrators and officials at universities and community colleges, both public and private, need to be better educated about college student homelessness, so that the needs of these students can be better understood and accommodated. The Network will develop strategies for raising awareness among faculty and staff, and for providing specialized training and guidance to relevant college officials, such as financial aid and housing administrators.
- d. **Addressing barriers to financial aid:** As noted above, access to financial aid and lack of financial literacy are key issues for homeless college students. The Network will research and analyze the barriers homeless youth face when applying for financial aid. In particular, the Network will examine how financial aid administrators in MA make determinations of eligibility for independent status on FAFSA applications. Based on this analysis, the Network will develop strategies for addressing the problem and prepare an advocacy plan for implementation of these strategies. To the extent that these strategies involve changes in federal law and/or policy, the Network may draw on the national Appleseed Network for support and assistance.

The survey will help to understand the scope of this problem, as well as additional barriers that students face in terms of access to financial aid.

- e. **College residences:** As explained above, the revenue-bond funding model used for college housing creates a critical obstacle to increasing housing opportunities on college campuses. The Network intends to explore innovative ways to address this problem, such as the use of social impact bonds to finance homeless student housing.

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Appendix 1 – Organizational Network Participants

Organization:	Name:	Email:	Website:
Massachusetts Appleseed Center	Joan Meschino	joan@massappleseed.org	www.massappleseed.org
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Housing Programs and Client Services	Mark Evans	mmevans67@yahoo.com	
Institute for Social Justice, Bridgewater State University	Michele Watkins	mwakin@bridgew.edu	
MA Coalition for the Homeless	Kelly Turley Exa Mendez	kelly@masshomeless.org exa@mahomeless.org	www.masshomeless.org
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MA Dep’t of Elementary and Secondary Education	Sarah Slutterback	sslutterback@doe.mass.edu	
MA Dep’t of Mental Health	Ann Capoccia	ann.capoccia@state.ma.us	
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Rediscovery	Danielle Ferrier	dferrier@jri.org	www.rediscoveryinc.org
Salem State University	Christine Sullivan	csullivan@salemstate.edu	
Schools On Wheels Massachusetts	Cheryl Opper Nicole Jensen	cheryl@sowma.org nicole@sowma.org	www.sowma.org

Appendix 2 – Other Interested Stakeholders

MA Dep't of Higher Education			
MA Dep't of Housing and Community Development			
MA Dep't of Labor and Workforce Development			
Stakeholders from Central Mass			
Stakeholders from Western Mass			
Jobs for the Future			