



OUR HOME

Opening Doors: Statewide Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth

OUR HOME

March 2005

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CREATING COMMUNITY AWARENESS LITTLE BY LITTLE

Adela Martinez
Rock Island County Regional Office of Education #49

DATA COLLECTION

By mid April, via the ISBE IWAS system, it is anticipated that a homeless data collection form will be available. Each district will be asked to provide the information appropriate for their district. Each local liaison will receive, via email from Rich Dehart, a copy of the data collection form. The local liaisons are encouraged to work with their Superintendent, or appropriate district individual, on timely completion of the form.

Resources on the Web

National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE
<http://www.serve.org/nche/>

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty
<http://www.nlchp.org>

Hotline Assistance

If you have questions or comments regarding the Opening Doors Project, or a homeless student, you may contact the ISBE Homeless Hotline at **800/215-6379** or contact Rich Dehart, Principal Consultant Accountability Division Illinois State Board of Education 100 North First Street Springfield, IL 62777-0001 Phone 217/782-2948 Fax 217/524 - 8750

Have you ever felt like you're a little fish in a big pond? In the Quad Cities we are a community of 80 schools with 11 school districts. That totals up to 26,515 students. Can you imagine the challenge we faced when we received our McKinney-Vento Homeless Youth Grant and realized that we needed to create awareness for such a large area? Being ever so optimistic and determined, we decided to take small pieces of the pie and try to reach as many principals, teachers, or secretaries as we could.

How? Well, with the guidance and wisdom of Linda Delimata, we passed out goodie bags with information about our Homeless Program and the McKinney-Vento Act for our secretaries a week before the big rush of registration. The chocolates and smiles were greatly appreciated. Imagine all the candy we had to buy! but it was well worth it. Next we decided that with the support of our Regional Superintendent, Joe Vermeire, we would set up workshops at the Regional Office and invite as many school personnel

as we could. The first workshop we scheduled was a flop. We had to cancel it due to the lack of people that registered.

Did we give up? No, we decided the best approach to advertising our workshops was to have face-to-face contact with our school professionals. I personally went to the schools and invited the secretaries and principals and let them know that anyone from the school was more than welcome to attend our workshops. The next workshop was scheduled for January 26th with Linda Delimata as our presenter. Did anyone show up? Was this a flop as well? Are you in suspense?

Surprise! Twenty people from our schools showed up for the workshop and Linda did an AWESOME job! It was well received and we started to get a large volume of phone calls after the workshop. Too much of a good thing? No, we were happy with the outcome.

One of our attendees was a reporter from a local newspaper. How she

heard about the conference I have no idea. Good news travels fast. She actually sat in on the entire workshop and interviewed Linda and me about homeless students. It was great. The next day an article was published in our local newspaper with all the names of the liaisons, listed by district. It was very helpful for us to get the word out about this important issue.

After our first workshop, we were asked to train Rock Island School District's secretaries as part of their in-service day. Twenty secretaries showed up for the workshop with great questions. Thanks to our workshops, we had a domino effect on the schools and we were able to reach a few more people.

We are going to have another workshop in April and we hope to reach even more people. I guess I will have to leave you in suspense. Tune into the next episode of "As the Awareness Turns." Keep up the hard work!



Best Practices

Training Tips

*Becky Malkovich - Area 6
ROE #21 - Franklin/Williamson*

Develop a master training folder/binder to use each time. Meet ahead of time with the people you will be doing the training for, such as the ROE contact person. Ask if they have any special concerns they want addressed, and then develop a more individualized training packet for them. Then meet with that person, go over the packet, and make any changes needed.

Deliver or mail the packets before the training date, and ask the contact person to get everything set up. That way, when you arrive you will be fresh and ready to go and not have to be lugging in boxes of materials.

After introductions, give the history of McKinney-Vento so that people have a better feel for the program. Afterwards, stay to visit and answer any final questions that did not get addressed during the presentation. Remember to send a note of thanks to the contact person.

Finding Help for Families

*Linda Peete - Area 4
ROE #9 - Champaign/Ford*

Our Homeless Program sponsored a Giving Tree at Christmas for two of our families. The tree had paper decorations that included specific needs and wants of the families, and ROE employees took the ornaments and purchased the items for the families. The gifts included clothing, books, toys, and gift certificates for food and discount stores. Although I wasn't present when the gifts were distributed, I was told that they were received with a mixture of smiles and tears of gratitude.

CONNECT CONNECT SUCCESS

Glen Weatherwax, Case Manger, ROE #47 - Lee/Ogle County

"It's not what you know, but whom you know." This old adage is proving itself to be quite true in my role as a case manager for my ROE's Homeless Education Program. Connections are definitely the way to help achieve success in dealing with the plights of identified homeless students. More people involved, more ideas shared, more resources available, and more opportunities abound! Collaboration is key!

One case in point will help to show exactly what I mean. An identified homeless student attending an alternative high school is rising above his problems through some very caring and results-driven actions taken by "people who know other people." Without getting too particular, this young man has no living parents and no relatives that are willing to actually help him through school or life. However, this young man has the benefit of being under the tutelage of people who can help. Through a local Child & Adolescent Local Area Network (LAN) with its famous "Wrap" program and a school counselor, who is also the facilitator of his wrap, things are definitely on the upswing! Prairie State Legal Services is involved in helping this young man to become emancipated at the age of sixteen. Housing, which will include all utility expenses, is being arranged with the assistance of the counselor, who is also going along with the student to see the landlord and make sure that all is appropriate and affordable. Insurance is in place, transportation is not an issue at this point, and food needs are being addressed beyond the free issuance of breakfast and lunch while at school. The wrap, as it is written and executed, shows this young man that others do care, that he has worth, and that "his connections" have proven to be very beneficial to him. Lucky for him that he has connected with a sincere and involved counselor who has further connected him with others. Now, he has to continue to do his part to be successful in school.

Case managers, school district liaisons, district superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors, nurses, secretaries, attendance registrars, social workers, lawyers, agency personnel, LAN people, homeless students and all others do NOT have to feel that they have to do anything alone. With connections, identified homeless students can be given opportunities to succeed. Whom do you know that can help? Whom do they know that can be of further assistance? And so on, and so on. . . .

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY!

Connie Frank, ROE #48 - Peoria, ROE Homeless Liaison

The main purpose of all our jobs is communication. Communication leads to understanding. For those of us involved in the Homeless Program, we are charged with the duty of communicating the "law of the land" as it relates to homeless children and families. Because people are not always happy to be told what they are required to do and that they must follow the law, we in Peoria County try to go one on one with them and build relationships that allow for the give and take of sharing frustrations and misunderstandings. This seems to make the "pill easier to swallow" for our people and we are finding that when there is a question or concern, our contacts will pick up the phone and call us rather than the State or Eileen! We can work the problem out together between us. This process does not seem to take any longer than planning a large meeting that everyone cannot attend anyway. A few minutes several times each year is all each contact takes, and we can even get quite a few done in one day when we go from school to school (we have 63 schools that we deal with). This method has definitely made our jobs easier over time and allowed us to serve the homeless students in Peoria County much more efficiently!

AT THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

Faith Sanderson, ROE #51 - Sangamon, ROE Homeless Liaison

Governor Rod Blagojevich has declared March 13 - 19, 2005, Affordable Housing Week in Illinois. More than 20 events are currently scheduled to highlight this issue in Illinois communities. If you agree that homelessness is produced primarily by increased poverty and the lack of affordable housing, then this is one of our best opportunities to raise the level of awareness in our communities about the problems faced by the growing number of disadvantaged people in Illinois.

The Statewide Housing Action Coalition (SHAC) has a complete and current list of events. Check out their website at www.statewidehousing.org or call Bob Palmer at 312-939-6074. To remain well informed, have Bob add you to the Illinois Housing Roundtable for updates on housing issues that are crucial to the families we serve.

Perhaps you'd like to come to Springfield for the April 7 Rally and Lobby Day where SHAC will help you advocate for safe, decent, accessible and affordable housing for the people of Illinois. I have found this to be the best opportunity to let my Representative and Senator know exactly how many homeless students there are in my area and how critical housing issues are to their families.

SHAC will provide informative, up-to-date information to help you talk intelligently to your legislator and also help you identify and locate these individuals if needed. I have always found it helpful to have a little something to give to the elected officials I want to visit. One year, I had individual cans of potato chips and attached a note asking the legislator to help us "chip away at homelessness." Another year, I had a picture of a shack with a large sign saying "For Rent - Call.....", asking State of Illinois leadership to help remedy the problems homeless education liaisons deal with every day.

At first, this may seem like a challenging or scary event. Actually, there are many veteran lobbyists at the rally and you can always partner up with a group to make it less intimidating. I find legislators almost always interested in facts about their constituency and genuinely interested in being helpful if you can tell them precisely what you want. SHAC will have the "what you want to ask for" details available that day. All you need to do is come with facts about the children living in poverty in your legislator's district and how that has changed over time. As I like to comment, good news for me: job security; bad news for children: increased homelessness.

On February 24, the Rental Housing Support Program (SB 75) passed out of the Housing and Community Affairs Committee in the Senate. This was an exciting day for two reasons. I accompanied a single mom from one of our local shelters to testify in front of this committee about the importance of this bill. Without a babysitter, she had to bring her two-year-old son. This was the last bill testimony was heard on, and while she remained calm, her son lost patience with the boring ordeal. Ultimately, a shelter employee had to come pick up the child but Mom remained calm.

When called to testify, she started her story and was quickly reduced to tears. As she explained how hopeless self-sufficiency seemed to her in light of the cost of housing, she broke down and did her tearful best to tell of the difficulties of a single working parent to find and keep safe, affordable housing. I have been advocating forms of SB 75 for four years. In five minutes, this woman put a face on the problem and made a big difference in the opinion of decision makers in our Capitol.

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Opening Doors

Who are we?

Opening Doors is an Illinois State Board of Education grant-funded project provided through the McKinney - Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001.

Under the direction of Rich Dehart, Principal Consultant, Accountability Division, the goal of this initiative is to disseminate information and provide technical assistance to Illinois schools and shelters as to the educational rights and needs of homeless children and youth. The Opening Doors project partners include:

Adult Learning Resource Center

1855 Mt. Prospect Road
Des Plaines, IL 60018
Phone 847/803-3535
Fax 847/803-3231

Regional Office of Education #26

Hancock/McDonough
130 S. Lafayette Street
Suite 200
Macomb, IL 61455
Phone 309/837-4821
Fax 309/837-2887

Illinois Coalition to End Homelessness

P.O. Box 3956
Oak Park, IL 60303
Phone 708/263-3590
Fax 708/401-0105

Visit us on the wide web at
<http://homelessed.net>
to receive FREE materials!

Our Home

To submit an article for OUR HOME please send to:
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ROE #26 - Hancock/McDonough
130 South Lafayette
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Opening Doors

Statewide Access to Education for Homeless Children and Youth

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We're on the Web! <http://homelessd.net>

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HERE AT LAST! *LUNCHBOX NEWS*, vol.2

For a number of years, Opening Doors has been sending out copies of the first issue of *Lunchbox News*, which was created for the Illinois State Board of Education as a summary of the Illinois Education for Homeless Children Act (signed into law in 1994). McKinney-Vento, the most recent version of federal law guaranteeing the educational rights of children in homeless situations, became part of *No Child Left Behind* in 2002, and it is the strongest federal response to this issue to date.

The Opening Doors project partners decided it would be helpful to produce volume two of *Lunchbox News* to spread awareness about the reauthorized law and additional guarantees it provides, such as the requirement for each school district to appoint a homeless liaison. Volume two offers updated information on issues in homeless education as well as the compelling story of a homeless mother and her struggles to keep her children in their old school. This new version is now available: it can be ordered from Opening Doors or downloaded from our website, <http://homelessd.net>. Programs wishing more than 10 copies should request a master for duplication.

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I urge you to have the patience (because talking to legislators always involves a lot of waiting), the commitment and the courage this single homeless mom exhibited that day. She knew what SB 75 would do for her. I challenge you to find out what it might do for your homeless families. Go to the SHAC website and get the details about this bill and the Source of Income Amendment to the Illinois Rights Act (House Bill 45/Senate Bill 167) which would reduce discrimination by landlords who refuse to rent to folks because of their source of income (e.g., SSI, SSD, TANF and Housing Choice Vouchers).

Remember to bring a photo ID for access to the Capitol, and feel free to call me at 217-741-1772 if you run into any problems. I pride myself on removing barriers!