

Information on Enrolling and Serving Children in Families Displaced by Hurricane Katrina

Developed by National Homeless Education Partners:
National Center for Homeless Education
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty

Many students from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama displaced by hurricane Katrina are seeking refuge in other states. State departments of education and local school districts are faced with enrolling these students and providing services. This process will be critical to children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the hurricane. School will restore a sense of normalcy while offering a critical source of stability and support. This is a developing process and our partners in homeless education (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, National Center on Homeless Education, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty) will be continuing to provide you with updates and information. The purpose of this memo is to provide initial guidance about serving the educational needs of storm victims.

Defining “Homelessness” Under the McKinney-Vento Act

Storm victims generally fit the definition of “homeless” under the McKinney-Vento Act, which includes those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The Act further specifies that the following students should be considered homeless if they are in one of the following living situations:

- sharing the housing of others due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to a lack of alternative accommodations;
- emergency or transitional shelters;
- abandoned in hospitals;
- awaiting foster care placement;
- a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar setting.

Enrolling New Students

Children and youth meeting the above criteria should be immediately enrolled in the school district where they currently reside. They do not need to provide birth certificates, school records, immunization records, proof of guardianship, or proof of residency to enroll in school. Given the lack of telephone services at their former schools and the potential permanent loss of school records, schools should begin new student files and seek to make appropriate placements based on information gathered from parents and students.

States that have imposed time limits on the collection of records should make exceptions for storm victims. It could be weeks and perhaps months before governmental agencies possessing birth certificates, proof of guardianship, and academic records are fully functioning and able to respond to request for documents. Further, when they do resume business, they will be overwhelmed with requests and possibly distracted by the need to rebuild their internal infrastructures. Therefore,

school districts and states should be vigilant in ensuring that their state-established records timelines do not lead to barriers to enrollment and attendance that are prohibited under the McKinney-Vento Act.

Finally, schools and districts should be aware that the responsibility for obtaining records does not solely fall on families. McKinney-Vento requires new schools to request academic records and old schools must transfer records when they are requests. School district homeless liaisons must also assist families in obtaining necessary immunizations.

Monitoring Residential Movement

Some storm victims may move frequently before finally finding a place to call home. Some may bounce between the homes of family members and friends. Others may be living in shelters provided by storm assistance efforts. As a result, their placements may continue to change as organizers are able to make incrementally better arrangements. The McKinney-Vento Act provides school stability by allowing homeless students to continue attending the same school, despite residential moves, if it is feasible for them to do so and desired by their parents or guardians. School transfers are detrimental to academic, social, and emotional well-being, and should be avoided to the greatest extent possible.

Transportation

If the district provides transportation for non-homeless students, it must also provide transportation for homeless students. If children and youth move within an area, they should receive school bus service to their schools of origin.

School Meals

Generally, homeless students are automatically eligible for free school meals. They should not be required to fill out forms or present proof of income eligibility. The USDA has issued special guidance in relation to storm victims. That guidance can be accessed through the following website: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Policy-Memos/2005-08-31.pdf>.

Crisis-Related Services

Students may demonstrate great needs for mental health counseling. They may also require essential material items such as clothing, school supplies, books, and back packs. Although it is permissible to use McKinney-Vento funds for these purposes, more substantial resources may be available from other sources. States and liaisons should contact government relief agencies and charitable organizations to learn if they have available funds or resources. We will post available information to NCHE's website.

Other School Services

Homeless students are eligible for compensatory education, bilingual education services, special education, or any other programs offered by the local school district for which the homeless child or youth is otherwise eligible. Homeless children also should receive priority in pre-school placement.

Segregation

Young people affected by the storm live with constant reminders of tragedy that they are still in the process of enduring. They may be waking up on cots in temporary shelters and remaining in those same spaces all day long. School is a time to escape these situations and be a normal kid. Shelter classrooms would deprive them of this vital component in improving their mental health. Thus, it is important for states and districts to remember McKinney-Vento's prohibition against segregated educational facilities—such provisions are of great importance to those students affected by Katrina.

Funding

Title I has a particular responsibility to serve homeless students in both Title I and non-Title I schools. Title I Directors in districts assimilating large numbers of displaced students may need to increase the amount of their district's homeless Title I set-aside. Additional efforts are being made to secure additional federal resources—NCHE, NAEHCY, and NLCHP will post updates on our websites.

Sharing Information

Please share this information with relevant parties, including state education and school district personnel, FEMA and relief organizations, service workers, and affected families.

State and School District Policies

Many states and school districts are creating their own education policies in relation to Katrina's victims. Many have been making commendable efforts to reach beyond federal legal requirements. Policies have addressed issues such as grief counseling, additional trainings for school staff members, increasing class size limits, and cross-state teacher certification agreements. Samples of those policies will be posted to NCHE's website.

Resource Information

NCHE, NAEHCY, and NLCHP will continue to keep you updated on any developments. To learn more, please refer to the following:

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