Students Living with Caregivers: Tips for Local Liaisons and School Personnel

To determine the McKinney-Vento eligibility of students living with caregivers, consider:

- The nature of the relationship between the child and caregiver, including factors such as the type, quality, and length of the relationship;
- The length of time the child is expected to stay with the caregiver;
- Where the child would be if not staying with this caregiver; and
- What prompted the child's move. For instance:
  - ➢ If the move was to escape an unsafe or unstable situation, or if the child was abandoned, it is likely that the child would be eligible for McKinney-Vento services.
  - ➢ If the parent and caregiver mutually agreed in advance that the caregiver would house and care for the child for a specified period, it is unlikely the child would qualify.
  - ➢ If the parent continues to provide support for and remains involved in the child's care, it is unlikely the child would qualify for McKinney-Vento services. This may occur when a parent allows a child to stay with someone else to finish the semester or school year in the same school after the rest of the family makes a planned move, such as when a parent takes a new job in a different area.

Those who meet the homeless criteria and also are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian are considered unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY). For these students:

- There is no age limit for eligibility. If an UHY meets a state's age criteria for public education, he or she can receive McKinney-Vento educational services.
- If the caregiver is the legal guardian, the student is not unaccompanied, although it is possible he or she could still be homeless.
- It is also possible for a parent or guardian to be permanently housed while the child is homeless, and vice versa.
- An UHY can be eligible for McKinney-Vento services regardless of whether the student was asked to leave the home or chose to leave.
- State and local policies govern when youth living apart from their parents or legal guardians should be reported to authorities.

To facilitate an effective enrollment process, consider using a caregiver form that addresses:

- Where and with whom the student is staying
- If the student can self-enroll, or if the caregiver or liaison should enroll the student instead
- Who may make school or class placement decisions and schedule changes
- Who has signing authority for such things as school absences, and participation in extracurricular activities and field trips

School district strategies to ensure discipline is fair and likely to be effective may include:

- Reviewing discipline records for individual schools to identify patterns in punishments that could indicate an unfair bias toward students without parental advocates;
- Consulting with the school behavior response team to assign discipline that corresponds to the behavior and that is likely to result in more appropriate behavior in the future;
- Assigning an advocate for the student, remembering to consult the caregiver and student;
- Ensuring school personnel are aware that homeless students cannot be disciplined for issues related to their homelessness. This may be especially relevant when students accumulate absences and tardies related to a change of caregivers;
- Determining the key contact with whom to address truancy and other behavioral issues;

The following strategies can assist students with the transition to higher education:

- Consult *College Access and Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers*, available at: http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/he-toolkit
- Create a standard procedure to provide documentation for all UHY who are high school seniors. Provide each with *Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Documentation of Independent Student Status for the FAFSA* (available at http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/faa_det_tool.pdf)
- Work with school counselors to ensure that dropout prevention and graduation plans include the unique needs of homeless students living with caregivers, including support for transitioning to post-secondary education.
- Help students and caregivers create a plan for housing and meals during school breaks.
- Include caregivers in any parent nights that focus on helping students prepare for life after high school graduation, and facilitate discussions about the expectations of caregivers for the students.