SERVING HOMELESS STUDENTS IN THE KANSAS CITY REGION: BARRIERS AND BEST PRACTICES

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We extend our thanks to the McKinney-Vento
Student Liaisons in the greater Kansas City region
who shared their insights for this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) reports that **1,304,446** students in pre-K through grade 12 were identified as homeless by the U.S. Department of Education during the 2015-2016 school year (2017). Of these students, **998,700 were "doubled up,"** or living with another family; **187,840 were in shelters, transitional housing, or awaiting foster care; 84,789 were living in hotels or motels;** the remaining **43,047 were classified as unsheltered, living in cars, parks, campgrounds, temporary trailers, abandoned buildings, etc.** (NCHE 2017).

Regardless of their circumstances, these children and youth meet the McKinney-Vento definition of lacking "a fixed, regular, and adequate residence" [42 U.S.C. 11434a(A)] and, as a result, face numerous risks to their physical and behavioral health, their education, and their future success in life.

Consider the impact homelessness has on education alone. Research has found that students experiencing homelessness for any length of time are "more likely to be held back … have poor attendance or be chronically absent … to fail classes, to have more disciplinary issues, and to drop out of school before getting their high school diploma…." Further, these outcomes become worse the longer a student remains homeless (Ingram et al. 2016, 10).

Homeless students do have legal rights and protections. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act and related legislation require that homeless students have equal access and opportunities in the same schools and programs as their housed peers. The Act further assigns states and local education agencies the authority to hire liaisons to protect and support these students.

> In the Kansas City region,* McKinney-Vento liaisons served 7,624 homeless students in kindergarten through grade 12 in the 2015-2016 school year. Homeless students represented 2.4 percent of the total K-12 student population.

These liaisons are tasked with myriad responsibilities, and as frontline professionals, they are uniquely attuned to challenges and opportunities associated with programs and services for students and families experiencing homelessness.

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* For this report, the area is defined by nine counties served by the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) with a total of 55 school districts. These counties include Cass, Clay, Jackson, Johnson, Leavenworth, Miami, Platte, Ray, and Wyandotte.

To identify specific barriers and needs liaisons face in addressing student homelessness and best practices for addressing students' needs, the L.P. Cookingham Institute of Urban Affairs in the Henry W. Bloch School Management at the University of Missouri-Kansas City conducted focus groups with local liaisons in the Kansas City region. The liaisons who participated serve 64 percent of the total homeless student population in the area.

KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

Five primary barriers impede progress in serving homeless students:

1. Lack of resources (money, staffing, time) to help students obtain essential wraparound services
2. Limited engagement, coordination, and support from community partners and service providers
3. Insufficient stock of decent, affordable housing and appropriate shelter space
4. Inadequate and complex transportation arrangements
5. Lack of knowledge among school staff and community members about policies and procedures related to student homelessness.

Students experiencing homelessness have difficulty keeping health care appointments, and they face particular challenges accessing mental health services if their needs are not acute. Dental services, by contrast, are readily available and fairly convenient.

To better serve homeless students, liaisons indicated that they need help from social workers and "navigators" who can help students and families obtain the benefits and services they need to improve their circumstances. Liaisons also expressed their desire for strategic help with fundraising, more shelter space and coordinated entry for students, and a "top-down culture of understanding" about homelessness and poverty.

Three best practices which liaisons believe are most effective at reducing student homelessness:

1. Drop-in centers and "one-stop shops" providing access to an array of services
2. Collaborative networks with shared data
3. Host homes.

Many of the liaisons' views are supported by empirical research analyzed for this report. Additionally, best practices recommended by local liaisons are supplemented with additional information on evidence-based Housing First and supportive housing models recommended by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).

Our hope is that this report will inspire community stakeholders to engage in collaborative efforts to improve prevention and intervention strategies for homeless students in the Kansas City region and beyond. The observations and experiences of local McKinney-Vento liaisons can inform the larger community about how to best serve one of its most vulnerable populations and, in the process, give every student the chance to live a safer, more successful life.

Purpose of This Report

The L.P. Cookingham Institute of Urban Affairs in the Henry W. Bloch School of Management at the University of Missouri-Kansas City prepared this report to achieve two key objectives: (1) determine the barriers and needs that McKinney-Vento liaisons in the greater Kansas City region (from Greater Kansas City Area) encounter as they carry out services in support of homeless students in public schools; and (2) identify and recommend policies and practices that aid McKinney-Vento liaisons in student homelessness intervention. We also hope this report will increase awareness about student homelessness and enhance strategic efforts that are already underway to end child and youth homelessness.

Nationwide, more than 1.3 million students from pre-K through grade 12 were identified as homeless during the 2015-2016 school year, according to U.S. Department of Education data compiled by the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE 2017). That figure is more than double the total reported for 2006-2007 (Ingram et al. 2016, 10). However, these numbers do not include students who never admit to being homeless for fear of embarrassment, stigmatization, harassment, or entry into the foster care system. For instance, according to a 2016 report, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools*, **67 percent of formerly homeless youth who were surveyed indicated that they are not comfortable talking about their situation with anyone at their school** (20).

While it is difficult to know exactly how many students are homeless, the reasons why they experience homelessness are well documented. Factors include a lack of affordable housing; financial strain; physical and sexual abuse; substance abuse by a parent or guardian; neglect and conflict within the home; and rejection by family and ejection from the household, particularly as a result of a youth's sexual or gender orientation and/or pregnancy (11). A 2010 report by First Focus and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) noted that school districts began reporting significant increases in the number of homeless students after the United States entered an economic downturn in late 2007 (1). The two groups surveyed 2,200 school districts in 47 states and 45 state coordinators with the U.S. Department of Education's Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) program to pinpoint the reasons for the sharp rise in homelessness. Sixty-two percent of respondents cited the economic downturn (and associated job loss, high cost of living, etc.) as the primary reason for increases, while greater school and community awareness ranked second at 40 percent, with the foreclosure crisis (including rental foreclosures) following closely at 38 percent (2).

School districts in the Kansas City region have reported an increase in the homeless student population consistent with this national trend. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Kansas Department of Education, **7,624 out of 314,597 public school students enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12 were classified as homeless in the nine-county Kansas City region during the 2015-2016 school year. The count represents 55 public school districts in Cass, Clay, Jackson, Johnson, Leavenworth, Miami, Platte, Ray, and Wyandotte Counties.** A majority (65 percent) of these school districts reported having homeless students during the 2015-2016 school year.

This report provides an overview of McKinney-Vento responsibilities and requirements, presents the views of local McKinney-Vento liaisons who serve the majority of the Kansas City region's homeless students, and examines current research on student homelessness to help schools,

nonprofits, public agencies, and other stakeholders pursue more effective, efficient, and equitable strategies for addressing student homelessness.

How This Report Is Organized

This report is organized into four sections. Section I opens with an overview of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, with an emphasis on the Act's definition of homeless children and youth as distinguished from the definition used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It also describes the role and responsibilities of McKinney-Vento liaisons. In Section II, we provide a literature review covering challenges and opportunities that McKinney-Vento liaisons encounter based on national scholastic and governmental research and survey data from nationwide McKinney-Vento liaisons. Section III provides the results of our focus groups with local McKinney-Vento liaisons. Findings are organized by interview questions.

We conclude the report in Section IV by summarizing the policies and practices recommended by local McKinney-Vento liaisons. Two appendices follow: Appendix A provides a list of the school districts included in our study area with data on each district's number of homeless students and total homeless student population. Appendix B presents brief author biographies.

How We Prepared This Report

In preparing this report, the L.P. Cookingham Institute of Urban Affairs (Cookingham) analyzed public school district data on homeless students in 55 school districts in nine counties within the Kansas City region. Data were collected from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Kansas Department of Education. The counties included in our analysis are Cass, Clay, Jackson, Johnson, Leavenworth, Miami, Platte, Ray, and Wyandotte. Although there are 14 counties total in the federally defined Kansas City Metropolitan Statistical Area, our count focuses on the nine counties comprising the metropolitan area served by the Mid-America Regional Council's (MARC's) Regional Planning Boundaries map as the most frequently used definition of the Kansas City region.

School Districts in Greater Kansas City
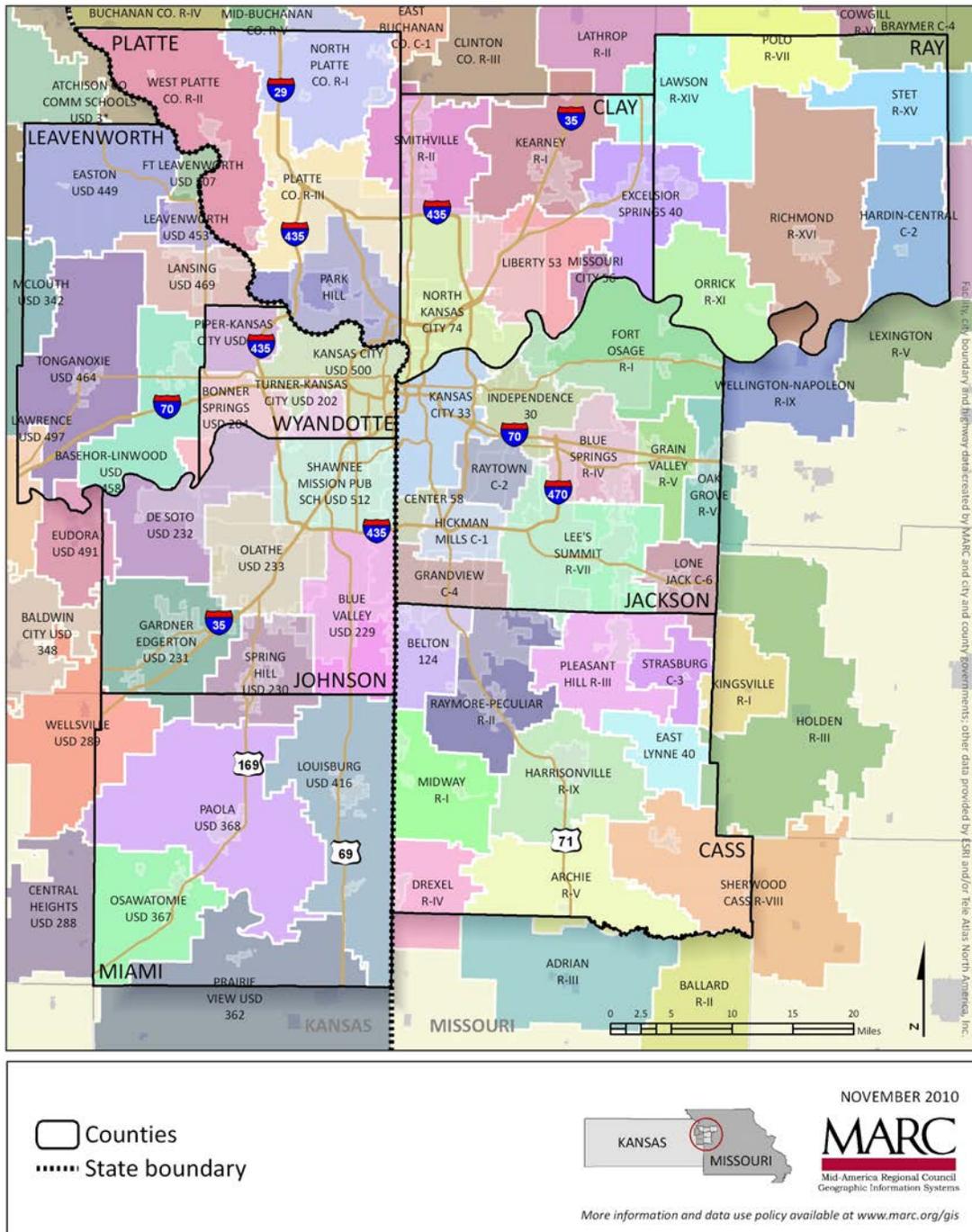
This map is reprinted with the permission of the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC).

Qualitative data were collected during two separate focus group sessions with ten local McKinney-Vento liaisons and one school guidance counselor from ten metropolitan public school districts in the bi-state Kansas City area. Liaisons from 37 Missouri and Kansas school districts were invited to participate (22 from Missouri and 15 from Kansas). Of those, **eight liaisons from Missouri (along with one school counselor) and two liaisons from Kansas took part.** Six liaisons attended a two-hour morning focus group session, while the remaining four liaisons and the school counselor took part in a two-hour afternoon session.

> These ten liaisons represent five of the nine counties in the Kansas City metropolitan area and served a total of 4,880 homeless students in their combined school districts during the 2015-2016 school year, or 64 percent of the total homeless student population. (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Kansas Department of Education 2016).

Given the large population served by the liaisons in urban, suburban, and rural school districts, the statements and opinions expressed in focus group sessions reflect experiences across the region. A notable exception may be Johnson County, which was represented by only one public school district during the focus groups. Johnson County encompasses a total of five school districts, but includes a relatively small portion of the overall homeless student population in the Kansas City region. (Appendix A provides a count of homeless students and total student population by school district.)

The focus groups were led by Dr. Anne Williamson, Victor and Caroline Schutte/Missouri Professor of Urban Affairs and Director of the Cookingham Institute at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Damon Guinn, the Cookingham Institute's Assistant Director, assisted with focus group facilitation.

Focus group sessions captured perspectives and issues facing those who serve homeless students. A portion of each session centered around serving homeless youth. Rising numbers of unaccompanied—and often, minor—homeless youth across the nation present special challenges for design and implementation of effective interventions, often arising from legal barriers to providing assistance to unaccompanied students who are under 18.

Both two-hour sessions were recorded by audio after obtaining written consent from the participants. The audio recordings were then transcribed, reviewed, and outlined by the researchers. Findings were categorized by interview topic, with prominent themes ranked into primary and secondary subcategories under each topic based on the degree of discussion and feedback spent on each theme during the focus groups.

The focus groups covered four key questions:

1. What are the barriers to ending student homelessness in our region?
2. What health issues do you see among the students you serve?
3. What do you need to serve your students?
4. What are some best practices you have seen for addressing student homelessness in our region and beyond?

This report provides a detailed account of the liaisons' responses to these questions and compares local liaisons' responses with national responses captured in the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report by Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates (Ingram et al. 2016). An examination of the concerns of local liaisons in relationship to those of national evidence gives us a basis for identifying the most suitable interventions and policies, and the extent to which those interventions and policies should be developed at the local, state, regional, and/or national levels.

An Overview of McKinney-Vento Legislation: Background, Definitions, and the Role of Liaisons

Signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1987, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was designed to provide communities with essential funding and technical assistance to shelter the homeless (National Coalition for the Homeless [NCH] 2006). The Act stated that "the Nation faces an immediate and unprecedented crisis due to the lack of shelter for a growing number of individuals and families…," adding that the problem "is expected to become dramatically worse" with "no single, simple solution to the problem of homelessness because of the different subpopulations of the homeless, the different causes of and reasons of homelessness, and the different needs of homeless individuals" [42 U.S.C. § 11301.102(a)(1),(2), and (4)]. The Act outlined three types of federal action to address the problem: (1) the establishment of an Interagency Council on the Homeless (now known as the Interagency Council on Homelessness); (2) the use of public resources and programs "in a more coordinated manner to meet the critically urgent needs of the homeless of the Nation;" and (3) the provision of funds "for programs to assist the homeless, with special emphasis on elderly persons, handicapped persons, families with children, Native Americans, and veterans" [42 U.S.C. § 11301.102(b)(1) - (3)].

Congress expanded McKinney provisions in 1990, 1992, and 1994 to include specific education protections for homeless students. Amendments to 1994 legislation gave homeless children the right to a free public preschool education and gave parents of homeless children and youth a say in their children's school placement (NCH 2006). Additionally, Congress gave local educational authorities (LEAs) greater leeway in their use of McKinney sub-grant funds for programs and services to homeless students and required educational authorities to coordinate efforts with public housing authorities (NCH 2006). States were also required to provide the Coordinator of the Education of Homeless Children and Youth with estimates of the number of homeless children and youth in the state and the number served under grants and contracts, as well as information on the nature of the problem, noting that every state shall:

> gather, to the extent possible, reliable, valid, and comprehensive information on the nature and extent of the problems homeless children and youth have in gaining access to public preschool programs and to public elementary and secondary schools, the difficulties in identifying the special needs of such children and youth, any progress made by the State educational agency and local educational agencies in the State in addressing problems and difficulties, and the success of the program under this subtitle in allowing homeless children and youth to enroll in, attend, and succeed in, school… [42 U.S.C. 11432.722(f)(2)].

This placed a greater priority on accounting for the number of homeless children and youth for the purposes of identifying the needs of communities and providing appropriate services. McKinney legislation underwent another round of changes in 2000, when the name was

changed to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act by President Bill Clinton as a tribute to the late Congressman Bruce Vento, a leading supporter of the law (NCH 2006). The Act was then reauthorized in 2001 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, which was itself a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) originally passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty (Klein 2015). **The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) pointed out in their 2013 Homeless Liaison Toolkit that "national statistics at the time showed that over one million children and youth were likely to experience homelessness in a given year and that extreme poverty, coupled with high mobility and loss of housing, placed these children at great risk for educational challenges"** (NCHE 2013, 1-A-3,4). In addition to expanding the definition of homelessness among children and youth, NCHE further noted that the updated Act prohibited school districts from segregating homeless students from their housed peers and required state coordinators to help integrate homeless students previously separated into schools and programs strictly for homeless students. State coordinators and school liaisons were also given greater discretion in how they utilized increased McKinney-Vento funds, with the understanding that coordinators and liaisons would work together to ensure accountability (1-A-4).

Since 2001, other federal laws, amendments, and reauthorizations have strengthened the rights and protections of homeless children and youth. The most recent reauthorization of McKinney-Vento, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), clarifies rules and regulations on elements of the legislation that have caused disputes between LEAs, states, and child welfare agencies. Most notably, **ESSA increased funding for the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth program from $70 million in 2016 to $85 million in 2017** (NAEHCY 2015). ESSA stipulates expanded and more flexible use of funds, increased support for pre-K students, new rules pertaining to foster care, and new rules for reporting disaggregated graduation rates for homeless students, while also stressing that SEAs and LEAs designate State Coordinators and local liaisons who have the time and ability to carry out their duties and requires that liaisons and any other school personnel providing McKinney-Vento services receive professional development to better identify and serve homeless youth (NAEHCY 2016, 1-6; Ingram et al. 2016, 50).

Additionally, ESSA requires liaisons to "publicly disseminate the rights of homeless students" and states that "liaisons are required to refer homeless families or unaccompanied students to housing services" (Ingram, 50). ESSA also addresses conflicts over the "school of best interest" and "school of origin," giving unaccompanied youth or parents greater say as to which is most suitable, and ensures that procedures are in place for a homeless student to enroll in a new school immediately if changing schools is in the best interest of the student, while ensuring that the student is able to transfer all class credits (50).

The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homelessness for Children and Youth

There has been much debate over who qualifies as homeless and why. This report uses the federal definition of homeless students in kindergarten through grade 12 as defined by Section 725 of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act, reauthorized under Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act (H.R. 1) in 2001. Homeless children and youth are defined as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1))" and who meet the following guidelines:

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement ["or are awaiting foster care placement" was removed from the definition by the Every Student Succeeds Act in December 2016, except in Arkansas, Delaware, and Nevada. The change of definition is scheduled to occur in those states on December 10, 2017 (NAEHCY 2016, 6)];

(ii) children and youths who have 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 [within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C)];

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii) (Pub. L. No. 107-110).

This definition expanded the scope of who qualifies as homeless beyond that of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition in Title 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter I of the U.S. Code by further covering children and youth who are forced to share housing with others (Miller 2011, 309). The inclusion of children and youth who are "doubled up" increased the number of students protected by the Act, "perhaps as much as fivefold," according to research conducted by Cunningham and Henry (2007) and cited by Miller, thereby complicating efforts to collect an accurate count of student homelessness (310). **Cunningham and Henry estimated that there could be between 2.4 million and ten million people "doubled up" across the nation each night** (310).

Role and Responsibilities of McKinney-Vento Liaisons

The McKinney-Vento Act requires every school district and local educational agency (LEA) in the United States to appoint a local homeless liaison to identify homeless children and youth at their respective schools and ensure that those students are both enrolled in school and have the same opportunities to succeed in school as their non-homeless peers (NCHE 2015, 1). To qualify for the position, NCHE stated in their "Best Practices in Homeless Education Brief Series" that each liaison "must be an employee of the school district" and that the position "is frequently assigned to an existing staff person or administrator" (4). NCHE added that the person under consideration should have "sufficient time, experience, and authority to carry out all local liaison responsibilities and will not have any conflicts of interest in identifying and serving homeless students" (4). Liaisons are responsible for ensuring that:

- Homeless families, children, and youth receive educational services for which they are eligible … and referrals to health care, dental, mental health, and appropriate services;
- The parents or guardians of homeless children and youth are informed of educational and related opportunities available to their children and are provided with meaningful

opportunities to participate in the education of their children;

- Public notice of the educational rights of homeless children and youth is disseminated where they receive services, such as schools, family shelters, and soup kitchens;
- Enrollment disputes are mediated according to the McKinney-Vento Act; and
- The parents and guardians of homeless children and youth, and all unaccompanied homeless youth, are fully informed of all transportation services, including transportation to the school of origin [42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(6)(A)] (2).

Additionally, liaisons are tasked with obtaining immunization and medical records on behalf of students, as well as:

- Informing parents, school personnel, and others of the rights of homeless children and youth;
- Working with school staff to make sure that homeless children and youth are immediately enrolled in school pending resolution of disputes that might arise over school enrollment or placement; and
- Collaborating and coordinating with the State Coordinator and with community and school personnel responsible for providing education and related support services to homeless children and youth [42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(6)(A)] (2).

These responsibilities are compounded by the complexities of understanding and applying local, state, and federal policies and providing guidance and technical assistance to administrators, staff, students, families, and service providers. The myriad demands require that liaisons possess "a high level of commitment, energy, intelligence, and experience working with at-risk students" (NCHE 2015, 2). Regardless of these competencies, liaisons have indicated that they are often overextended due to their numerous, complex obligations. A 2012 survey commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development found that among 390 liaisons, 66 percent reported that they spent most of their time identifying eligible homeless children and youth. Ensuring that students and their families received services ranked second, while coordinating transportation services ranked third (2015).

A separate survey of 504 liaisons conducted by Hart Research Associates found that 90 percent "work in another official capacity other than as a homeless liaison within their school district," while 89 percent "spend half their time or less on their responsibilities as homeless liaisons" (Ingram et al. 2016, 7). Liaisons surveyed also told the researchers that resources to address the problem have not kept up with the growing problem (7).

> Although 82 percent of liaisons indicated that their school districts are doing a "good or fair job of addressing youth homelessness," 33 percent stated that their school districts do not "place a high priority on the problem" and 89 percent see "room for improvement" (Ingram et al. 2016, 7).

McKinney-Vento school liaisons in the Kansas City region expressed similar frustrations and concerns as those surveyed nationally in 2012 and 2015. We present their responses in our focus group findings in Section III.

Challenges and Opportunities in Reducing Student Homelessness: What the Literature Tells Us

Barriers to Reducing Student Homelessness

"As jobs and affordable housing options have disappeared in recent years, more and more individual vulnerabilities have become evident, resulting in some of the highest rates of family and child homelessness in memory," University of Wisconsin professor Peter Miller noted in an analysis of student homelessness (2011, 310). Miller was calling attention to a conclusion drawn by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and First Focus in a joint report stating that historic economic barriers have exacerbated the problem of homelessness. Miller further cited research by Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman, and Valente (2007) that points to the population most affected by the downward economic trend:

> … [H]omeless families in the United States are overwhelmingly led by female heads of house who are substantially younger, less likely to have mental health and substance abuse problems, and more likely to have completed high school, and had recent contact with members of their social networks (310).

The disappearance of jobs and affordable housing, and its disproportionate impact on children and families, poses a significant disruption for school districts and McKinney-Vento liaisons. As the demand for limited jobs and affordable housing grows, homeless families are likely to search for new opportunities farther from familiar neighborhoods and schools (310-311), creating what is known as the problem of "spatial mismatch" between students and schools (Drier, Mollenkopf, and Swantrom 2014). Despite the challenges posed by increased distances, liaisons are nevertheless required by law to ensure that students have adequate transportation to the school that is most conducive to their living situation [42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(6)(A)]. In fact, 37 percent of McKinney-Vento liaisons surveyed in 2012 reported spending most of their time coordinating transportation services (U.S. Department of Education 2015).

Beyond the broader economic impacts that have created gaps in housing, jobs, and transportation, national McKinney-Vento liaisons and researchers highlight several other barriers to preventing and intervening in student homelessness.

A. Insufficient Resources

Liaisons in the U.S. have indicated that they struggle to fulfill their job responsibilities due to a lack of staffing and resources. The *Hidden in Plain Sight* report noted that "over 90 percent of liaisons report that they work in another official capacity other than as homeless liaison within their school district, and 89 percent say they spend half of their time or less on their responsibilities as homeless liaisons" (Ingram et al. 2016, 33). **When asked to rank the biggest obstacles to providing students and families with services and supports, 78**

percent of the surveyed liaisons pointed to funding, while 57 percent stated that "time, staff, and resources to handle caseloads" was a major factor (33). More training for staff, guidance counselors, social workers, and clerical staff could help ameliorate this problem.

> Fifty-two percent of liaisons reported that more training and professional development for school staff would make a "fairly big" or "very big" difference in improving the process of identifying homeless youth and connecting them with services and supports (Ingram et al. 2016, 34).

The report added that, "among those liaisons whose school districts do provide training, three in four (74 percent) rate that training as extremely or very helpful" (Ingram et al. 2016, 22).

B. Lack of Engagement and Coordination

Limited community engagement and support also create barriers to liaisons' efforts to identify and serve homeless students. **Only 36 percent of the liaisons surveyed by Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates indicated that they work "'a great deal' with community organizations, agencies, or businesses to help provide services and supports,"** while 37 percent work with these same groups "a fair amount" and 27 percent work with the groups "just some" or "not at all" (Ingram et al. 2016, 37). Liaisons were most likely to work with food pantries (79 percent), followed by faith-based organizations (71 percent), mental or physical health care providers (69 percent), shelter and transitional housing facilities (69 percent), and local and city government agencies (69 percent). Liaisons' interactions with area businesses were less frequent (45 percent), as was engagement with youth outreach organizations and drop-in centers (41 percent), foundations (28 percent), legal services (25 percent), and host homes (16 percent) (37).

Poor and inadequate coordination between liaisons and community partners prevents homeless students from accessing the full array of services they need, according to the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report.

> "Roughly six in ten (61 percent) of the young people we surveyed were never connected with any outside organization or entity during their homelessness, while 87 percent of those who were connected report that these connections were important and valuable to them" (Ingram et al. 2016, 38).

The report added that "three-fourths of youth who were accompanied at some point say that other members of their families besides themselves were never connected to services by the school system" (Ingram et al. 2016, 39).

C. Limited Interaction with Health Services

A 2001 survey of homeless youth by researchers Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, and Fitzgerald found that 60 percent had a history of sexual abuse, more than 56 percent had injected drugs, and more than 12 percent had attempted suicide at least once in their young lives (Hudson et al. 2010, 2).

> Additional research cited by the authors indicated that homeless youth are particularly at risk of sexually transmitted infections, chronic mental illness, hepatitis A and B, respiratory disease, skin disorders, lice, foot problems, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Hudson et al. 2010, 2).

These health concerns are magnified by the fact that homeless youth do not seek health services as often as they should. Lack of health insurance or proper documentation to qualify for Medicaid are common barriers, but studies have also found that homeless youth lack sufficient knowledge about health services; lack appropriate transportation to appointments; fear discriminatory attitudes, stigmatization, and legal intervention; and have limited access to appropriate health care facilities and providers (Hudson et al. 2010, 2).

Homeless youth do utilize health care, however, when services are tailored to their needs and are readily accessible. A literature review by Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, and Karnik cited a 2006 study in which 99 percent of youth participants used health care services in the three months prior to the study when those services were readily available (2012, 365). "Youth appear to access services primarily for pregnancy, mental health issues, trauma, STIs, and substance abuse problems, as well as chronic conditions and dental problems," the reviewers noted, adding that, "[u]nfortunately, because many youth do not seek health care early, they are at risk for more serious health concerns and emergency situations" (365).

Recommended Practices for Addressing Student Homelessness

Prevention, identification, and early intervention are widely recognized by service providers, researchers, and federal experts as essential strategies for interrupting the cycle of child and youth homelessness. HUD's *Ending Youth Homelessness Guidebook Series: Promising Program Models* cites four primary prevention strategies: (1) building family resiliency; (2)

supporting foster care transitions; (3) promoting school-based prevention; and (4) collaborating with juvenile justice and adult correctional systems (2016, 3). For identification and early intervention, HUD recommends street outreach, drop-in centers, and family engagement, emphasizing practices that are trauma-informed, youth-focused, culturally competent, and low barriers that also meet basic needs and promote positive youth development (5).

When youth need shelter or housing, HUD urges providers to follow a planned transition to stable housing, ranging from emergency shelters as the customary first point of contact, to host homes and transitional housing, to rapid re-housing and non-time-limited supportive housing (7-11).

Given the limited time and capacity McKinney-Vento liaisons have to focus on preventing student homelessness and the priority of placing children and youth experiencing homelessness in safe, stable housing, the recommended practices that follow focus primarily on intervention strategies. These strategies are based on a Housing First approach, described by USICH as:

> [A] proven approach in which people experiencing homelessness are offered permanent housing with few to no treatment preconditions, behavioral contingencies, or barriers. It is based on overwhelming evidence that all people experiencing homelessness can achieve stability in permanent housing if provided with the appropriate levels of services. Study after study has shown that Housing First yields higher housing retention rates, reduces the use of crisis services and institutions, and improves people's health and social outcomes (2017).

Despite the emphasis on intervention strategies, the first recommended practice in this section, coordinated community response, plays a significant role in school-based prevention efforts. According to the *Promising Program Models* guidebook, "Local homeless liaisons in school districts—or Single Points of Contacts at colleges—can identify youth who may be at risk and help keep them in school while coordinating community supports and stable housing" (3). Additional research and survey responses from McKinney-Vento liaisons further validate the importance of coordinating community efforts to address student homelessness, as explained below.

A. Coordinated Community Response

Coordinated community response to student homelessness is a chief directive of the McKinney-Vento Act. Section 102(b)(2) of the original 1987 Act states that **one of the purposes of the Act is to "use public resources and programs in a more coordinated manner to meet the critically urgent needs of the homeless of the Nation…"** (42 USC 11302). Since then, research has validated the effectiveness of coordinating efforts to address student homelessness. Peter Miller cited key studies as evidence in his research on student homelessness:

> James and Lopez (2003), for instance, conducted a case study of two school districts in Texas and found that not only must upper-level administrators such as superintendents and principals be on the same page in delivering services to students who are homeless, but so too must "frontliners" such as bus drivers and transportation department directors. Similarly, Zima and Forness (1997) suggested that special educators, general health providers, and housing services need to work together to help identify students' needs, and I found that shelter and agency personnel must work closely in concert with school personnel in the design and implementation of McKinney-Vento related support structures (Miller, 2011a) (2011, 325).

Miller's research corroborates the views expressed by liaisons in the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report, who placed value in coordination of services.

> "[S]eventy-one percent of those who connect with outside entities 'a great deal' give their district a good rating on providing students with services they need, compared to 55 percent of those who work with outside entities just 'a fair amount,' and only 34 percent of those who work outside the school system 'just some' or 'not at all'" (2016, 38).

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) advocates for coordinated community response to "meet all the physical, developmental, and social needs of youth experiencing homelessness" since these youth "require a range of interventions and solutions that no single funding stream can provide" (2015, 3). USICH recommends "collaboration across federal, state, and local partners" and states that coordinated response should:

- Prevent youth from experiencing homelessness through identification and early intervention of "families who are at risk of fracturing;"
- Connect homeless youth and those at risk of homelessness with "trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and developmentally and age-appropriate interventions;"
- "Intervene early … and work toward family reunification, when safe and appropriate:"
- "Develop coordinated entry systems" and "prioritize resources for the most vulnerable youth;"
- Ensure safe shelter and emergency services;
- Align assessments with "the unique needs and circumstances of youth," while also emphasizing "strong connections to and supported exits from mainstream systems;" and
- Offer services and housing "tailored to the needs of each youth" and measure outcomes across domains, "including education and employment" (3).

B. One-Stop Shops and Drop-In Centers

"One-stop shops" and drop-in centers have become increasingly popular as a best practice for addressing youth homelessness. The two service models are similar in that both typically offer homeless youth prompt access to wraparound services such as food, shelter, clothing, physical and mental health services and/or scheduling, education and employment connections at one location. In a report titled *What Works to End Youth Homelessness?,* the National Network for Youth (NN4Y) stated that drop-in centers "are seen as the first step toward engaging homeless youth into more intensive services and reintegration" (Bardine 2015, 12).

The report pointed to research by De Rosa et al. (1999) in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, which found that **homeless youth were more likely to utilize a drop-in center over an emergency shelter** (Bardine 2015, 12).

Additional research by Slesnick et al. (2007) found that psychological distress and substance use "significantly decreased" among homeless youth who accessed "comprehensive intervention and individual therapy" at a drop-in center in Albuquerque, New Mexico (12). One-stop service centers have gained increased popularity since the Department of Veterans

Affairs began hosting similar sites called Community Resource and Referral Centers for homeless veterans. "As of November 2012, five of the 17 CRRCs [sic] sites in various phases of development were already fully operational in the cities of Denver, Colorado; Detroit, Michigan; Portland, Oregon; and Washington DC," according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (Lisman 2013). A project called Youth Connect in St. Paul, Minnesota, was one of the early adopters of the one-stop model for youth. Beth Holger-Ambrose, the homeless youth services coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Human Services and one of the program's co-founders, said that the approach has enabled "youth service providers to build relationships with local teens in a comfortable and accessible setting and provide them with exactly the kinds of help they need" (Family and Youth Services Bureau 2013). In order to be successful, though, Youth Connect organizers emphasized that the location must be easy for all youth and families to reach.

C. Host Homes

Host homes are an effective housing model for unaccompanied youth because they are relatively low-cost, offer a family-like setting, encourage positive relationships with adults, and give youth the chance to participate in the identification of familiar adults who are willing to provide them with housing and support, noted Patricia Julianelle in *Housing + High School = Success: Schools and Communities Uniting to House Unaccompanied Youth* (2012, 30). To be effective, however:

> …[S]upport services should include regular visits from a counselor/coach to address challenges as they arise, academic support, independent living skills and transition planning, connection to needed community resources and services, and possibly a modest stipend to help the family cover costs (30).

Host homes should also be close to the youths' schools to facilitate more convenient transportation (32) and take precautions to ensure that hosts have proper powers of attorney to make appropriate medical and education decisions for minors when necessary (33). In Adrian, Michigan, the Roadmap to Graduation program placed 48 high school seniors without stable housing in host homes between 2008-2012, ensuring that all of the students were able to graduate. Forty-two went on to attend college (7).

Host homes are not without challenges, though. "The experiences of neglect and trauma to which many unaccompanied youth have been subjected can make adjustment to a healthy, stable home a shock for all involved," according to Julianelle (14). Julianelle also noted that:

> Roadmap's staff have learned to be clear with families and youth that the initial adjustment can be like learning a different language and that it is critical to respond swiftly and carefully to what may seem like minor disagreements. Even something as simple as a problem over a youth picking up her clothes after school can escalate into a crisis that can destroy a host home placement (14).

Matching youth to appropriate host families should therefore be a priority (23).

E. Transitional Housing and Living

Transitional housing generally refers to time-limited, supportive housing designed to help recipients develop the basic skills they need to live independently and become self-sufficient. The focus on transitional living and housing for youth was formalized by the Transitional Living Program for Homeless Youth, first enacted by 1988 amendments to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Act of 1974 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). The program places homeless youth ages 16 through 22 in extended residential shelter for a period up to 21 to 24 months, while also equipping them with basic life skills and counseling so they can transition to independent living. Transitional housing typically ranges from group homes (including maternity and parenting-specific homes) and host homes to "clustered units with or without a supervisor on-site [*sic*] or scattered site apartments or shared units in which youth may hold the lease" (HUD 2016, 9).

> HUD's *Promising Program Models* guidebook recommends a Housing First approach that promotes low or no barriers to entry and a focus on vulnerable populations of youth experiencing homelessness, such as "pregnant and parenting teens, youth with mental and behavioral health difficulties, youth fleeing domestic violence or trafficking situations, transition-aged youth, those leaving juvenile justice, and LGBTQ youth" (HUD 2016, 9).

Exit planning is also an integral part of transitional living and housing programs (HUD 2016, 9). Effective exit planning "requires formal partnerships with housing search staff and permanent housing providers" to help youth transition to independent living as soon as they are ready (9).

Although transitional housing is a popular and recommended practice, evidence indicates that it can be costly and produce weak results. **A study cited by the Urban Institute which examined 53 transitional housing programs found that 23 percent of families, on average, did not successfully "graduate" from the programs** (Cunningham, Gillespie, and Anderson 2015, 5). The study also found that while more families were working after completing the programs, "they are not self-sufficient and still struggle to pay for housing" (5).

F. Rapid Re-Housing

A significant amount of attention has been devoted to the topic of rapid re-housing and its initial success in helping individuals exit homelessness. Cunningham, Gillespie, and Anderson of the Urban Institute **confirmed that rapid re-housing "has low barriers to entry, high placement rates, and low rates of return to shelter," but added that families exiting rapid re-housing, particularly those who are low-income, have "high rates of residential instability"** (2015, 1). The researchers further stated that costs for rapid re-housing vary widely, while "its effect on shortening lengths of stay in shelter and reducing family homelessness within communities is unknown" (1). Nevertheless, rapid re-housing is considered to be an effective strategy by many groups that study homelessness, including the National Alliance to End Homelessness and HUD. **According to HUD, rapid re-housing is particularly promising "for older youth with greater independent living skills who cannot reconnect to family or who need time to do so"** (HUD 2016, 10).

In order to be successful, HUD recommends that programs:

- Utilize a low-barrier, Housing First approach with "voluntary but persistent services"
- Provide intensive case management ("daily or 2-3 times per week") with a ratio of "8 or 10:1" case managers who can help youth build independent living skills and offer support with other wraparound services
- Maintain a trained staff to "cultivate and maintain relationships with property owners, (co)sign and oversee leases, oversee tenant move-ins, and handle the rent payment process"
- Help establish long-term housing stability, starting with rental assistance in which youth pay "30 percent of their income or less, building savings as income increases," or help reunify youth with family or obtain non-time-limited supportive housing (HUD 2016, 10).

Despite the "limited, but growing evidence, about the effectiveness of the approach," researchers at the Urban Institute have concluded that "early evaluation and program data indicate that rapid re-housing reduces the return to homelessness" (Cunningham, Gillepsie, and Anderson 2015, 21).

G. Non-Time-Limited Supportive Housing

HUD defines non-time-limited supportive housing as **"a specialized age- and service-appropriate version of permanent supportive housing for youth [typically 18 to 24 years old] with complex needs"** (2016, 11). Complex, or highest, needs consist of mental health and substance abuse disorders and trauma resulting from gender discrimination and victimization. To competently address these needs, the non-time-limited supportive housing model calls for on-site staff to tailor services to the specific needs of youth using a harm-reduction and trauma-informed-care approach that addresses the "physical, socio-emotional, intellectual, and life skills development of youth" (11).

Youth may be housed in scattered site apartments or a single-site rental building, **"using tenant-based or project-based rental assistance, project-based units, or a sponsor-based set-aside within a mixed population building"** (11), and they typically pay 30 percent of their income in rent and hold the lease to the unit. In addition, rather than placing time limits on residency, youth are encouraged to move to independence or adult permanent supportive housing when they are capable of doing so.

> One unique aspect of this form of housing is that providers are encouraged to collaborate with a youth advisory council to foster a sense of community among peers and seek guidance on programming and activities, HUD reported (2016, 11).

Initial studies of non-time-limited supportive housing have returned positive results. Data collected by Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) on the first cohort of youth served by New York's first non-time-limited supportive housing program, the True Colors Residence in Harlem, revealed that "more than half of the youth moved on in an average of just under 2 years" (CSH 2016). CSH further noted that 72 percent of the residents will have moved on to independence with a tenant-based housing subsidy if the youth apply for the housing subsidy as planned.

McKinney-Vento Liaison Focus Group Results

As noted on page 5 of this report, Cookingham hosted two focus group sessions with ten local McKinney-Vento liaisons and one school counselor from five counties in the bi-state Kansas City metropolitan area to identify the barriers and needs liaisons encounter while serving their students. These liaisons were responsible for a total of 4,880 homeless students in their combined school districts during the 2015-2016 school year (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Kansas Department of Education 2016).

During the focus groups, Cookingham asked local McKinney-Vento liaisons to comment on four questions related to student homelessness:

1. What are the barriers to ending student homelessness in our region?
2. What health issues do you see among the students you serve?
3. What do you need to serve your students?
4. What are some best practices you have seen for addressing student homelessness in our region and beyond?

The following section provides a detailed account of the liaisons' responses to these topics and compares local liaisons' responses with national responses captured in the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report by Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates (2016). An examination of the concerns of local liaisons in relationship to those of national interests gives us a basis for identifying the most suitable interventions and policies, and the extent to which those interventions and policies should be developed at the local, state, regional, and/or national levels.

Barriers to Ending Student Homelessness

Liaisons must carry out a wide array of administrative tasks and requirements in order to provide timely support to homeless students in their districts. Given the breadth of responsibility associated with the position, we asked local liaisons to identify and describe barriers they have encountered or observed in their work with homeless students and their families. They identified five primary barriers and three secondary barriers.

Primary barriers were those that liaisons discussed at length and in the most detail. They include:

1. An overall lack of resources available in their school districts (including money, staffing, and time) to help students obtain essential wraparound services
2. Limited engagement, coordination, and support from community partners and service providers

3. An insufficient stock of decent, affordable housing and appropriate shelter space
4. Inadequate and complex transportation arrangements
5. A general lack of knowledge among school staff and community members about policies and procedures related to student homelessness.

Secondary barriers were those the liaisons felt were important to include but did not merit the same degree of discussion because they were not as common:

6. Inconsistent and insufficient communication between families and liaisons and within the school district
7. Challenges students and families face in obtaining legal documentation
8. Lack of affordable, time-appropriate childcare for parents.

Each barrier is described in detail below with direct quotes from focus group participants.

A. Insufficient Resources

Local liaisons unanimously agreed that they lack sufficient resources to fully address the needs of their students. Most notably, the liaisons stated that they can be overwhelmed by the obligations of the job, a challenge that is complicated by understaffing and lack of administrative support. One liaison noted that budget constraints forced her district to cut social workers from the staff, leaving her solely responsible for assisting students with counseling and other social and behavioral needs. She said:

> *I'm the one doing everything—managing, setting up transportation, taking the [students] to get immunizations. So, I've had to be diligent about how I go about all of this and make the secretaries in the buildings aware—kind of train [staff on] what McKinney-Vento is.*

Another liaison whose school district is fortunate to have social workers noted how valuable they have been in assisting students with essential services, spending as much as an estimated 60 percent of their time outside of the school doing home visits, connecting students to community resources, and transporting unaccompanied youth to and from school and appointments. According to the liaison:

> *[I]t's such a challenge just to get their birth certificate, or their immunizations, or [when] they need to go sign up for TANF.... [A]dults struggle navigating that system because of the bureaucracy involved … you can imagine sending a 16- or 17-year-old to navigate it without an advocate. We have one person who is our expert on that, and without her, I don't know how half the kids would get signed up for the services they need.*

Most of the liaisons interviewed were solely responsible for managing the multiple needs of their students, however. "If you dive just a little bit into it, it opens up this whole new world," a liaison explained, characterizing a typical scenario as follows:

> *It's like, "I need to get you to school, but I need to figure out this crisis over here and this crisis over here...." And, so, even though my supervisors are extremely understanding … your role as liaison is to ensure the educational rights of these*

kids … but you are torn in so many different directions that if you really want to do your job and work for the betterment of these kids it goes beyond the school district.

Being a problem-solver is therefore crucial to the position, the liaisons pointed out. "Our role is seen as 'solutioners,'" one liaison put it. She added:

It may be out of our jurisdiction to answer a particular question … [but] then it's up to you to say, "Well, I can find out for you," or just say, "I don't feel comfortable with this. I really do need to go to an outside resource or refer you to somebody who knows the answer." […] So, we do need support services from other resources, most definitely, whether it be the school community or outside of that.

B. Limited Engagement, Coordination, and Support from Community Partners

Local liaisons reported that the lack of support they perceive extends beyond the confines of the schools. Several liaisons voiced concerns that they are not receiving adequate assistance from community partners. According to one liaison:

Our community providers, they are referring the families to us for emergency services, and we're like, "That's what you're supposed to do. We're a school district." But they don't have the answer either. So, instead of being honest with the family and saying, "I'm sorry; I don't have anything for you," they'll say, "Call the school district. They can help you."

The same liaison noted that families who have students in other school districts have tried to enroll their children in her district to gain access to services they provide (such as affordable housing, access to health care, utility subsidies, etc.). Even when nonprofit programs are present and available in the community, some liaisons were frustrated by a lack of collaboration. A liaison from one of the more engaged school districts stated:

We are dependent on our community and resources to take it to the next step, because we are all paid to work school, education [tasks]. We know it doesn't stop there, but we have to have community partners that are just as passionate about this particular kid to keep it going and keep fighting for them. And that is a huge struggle for me.

Liaisons and homeless students need and value better connections with community partners—and these partners are likely to want an equal level of engagement. One solution that the liaisons recommended is the creation of a "student navigator" position, a dedicated staff member who can serve as an intermediary between the student and community partners and help the student obtain essential services that fall outside the purview of liaisons' chief responsibilities. We provide more detail about that recommendation in the section devoted to "What Local Liaisons Need to Effectively Serve Their Students."

C. Lack of Decent, Affordable Housing and Shelter Space

A lack of affordable housing has left homeless students and families with limited options. According to local liaisons, some have taken up near-permanent residence in hotels. "A lot of those hotels … I've actually gone and taken resources, and they're just not living in acceptable [conditions]," a liaison remarked. "There are people that are selling drugs in front of these buildings, there's prostitution, there's needles in the hallways, and they don't have refrigerators and things like that."

Appropriate shelter space is in short supply, too, liaisons remarked. They expressed a concern that local shelters tend to accept clients based on specific needs such as substance abuse or domestic violence or do not accept individuals with severe disabilities such as autism. The liaisons also noted that most of the shelters in the metro area are centrally located, requiring students and families who live outside the central city to move away from traditional supports in their community, such as friends, churches, and other social networks. Transportation then becomes a problem for those who must move away from their community, where they are more likely to hold jobs and attend school. Furthermore, inappropriate shelter space can do more harm than good by reactivating trauma. One liaison shared the following observation:

> *I have a grandma and a grandson who just drove here from California a couple of weeks ago. We got them into [the city shelter] a couple of nights ago. They spent one night, completely awake the entire night watching all these other people, like, banging their heads against the wall. They left, and they're sleeping in their van because … it reactivated all of this trauma in their lives, that they just feel unsafe.*

Another liaison told the story of a mother who admitted her kids to a children's shelter while she voluntarily went to jail to clear her record of outstanding traffic tickets. There were no shelters in the area that would accept the entire family because the mother had a warrant for her arrest for traffic violations.

Liaisons added that some families opt to sleep in their cars to avoid being separated from their pets. When sleeping in a car is the only, or preferred, alternative, one liaison said that she instructs families to go to parking lots where she can inform security guards about their presence. She contacts the security company in advance and gives them a description of the family and the license plate number of their car to ensure their safety.

D. Inadequate and Complex Transportation Arrangements

Kansas City-area liaisons stated that coordinating transportation for homeless students in the metropolitan area posed a significant challenge and cited transportation as one of the primary

barriers to ending student homelessness in the Kansas City region. A liaison from a school district outside the central city illustrated this challenge by pointing out that she struggles to arrange transportation for her students to and from their original district school since there are insufficient housing and shelter services in her district:

> *[O]ur families all end up in the Kansas City [Missouri] Public Schools' attendance area because that's where the housing is, that's where the shelters are … and we have no decent public transportation to get our kids back and forth…. I have to transport them by cab, and I have to bill [the Kansas City MO Public Schools liaison] for half of it. So, all of my kids that end up homeless, as hard as we try to keep them in our school district, end up with her. We're either forced to shove them all into her district for a short amount of time and then try to get them back out, or transport them back to us.*

This dilemma of determining which school a student should attend in relationship to housing and transportation needs (the school of "best interest," as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act) has been particularly problematic for families who are residing in hotels, another liaison added: "If a hotel is just off a particular street … even though it's really outside of our attendance boundary [but parallels the boundary] … we bear the burden [for transportation] as well."

Liaisons noted that they are required by law to share transportation responsibilities and costs equally if they do not have a specific transportation agreement. A brief by the National Center for Homeless Education clarifies the law:

> Many students experiencing homelessness cross LEA, county, and even State lines when traveling between temporary living arrangements and school. As such, coordination between LEAs is required in cases of inter-district transportation [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(5)(A)(ii). As noted previously, in cases where it is determined to be in a student's best interest to attend the school of origin, but the student is living in another LEA, the LEA of origin and the LEA in which the student is living must agree upon a method to apportion the responsibility and costs for providing transportation to and from the school of origin. If the LEAs are unable to reach an agreement, the responsibility and costs for transportation must be shared equally [U.S.C. § 11432(g)(1)(J)(iii)(II)] (NCHE 2017, 5).

The liaisons added that, in the Kansas City metropolitan area, the burden of seeking transportation reimbursements from outlying districts where students attend school falls on the Kansas City, Missouri, school district since most of the transitional housing, shelters, and services are centrally located and transportation services primarily stem from the central city. This arrangement creates an additional administrative challenge, the liaisons stated. Another funding source for out-of-district transportation is needed to free up funds for transportation alternatives, especially during a time when there is a nationwide shortage of drivers, a liaison pointed out.

Local liaisons also expressed concern for the safety of students who must be transported long distances across the metro area, including across the Missouri-Kansas state line. "If

you're transporting someone all the way from [School District A] to us, and I have a student or a kindergartner in a car for 30 minutes in traffic in the morning, it's a safety issue," a liaison explained. That problem is further complicated by human trafficking regulations that are applied to student transportation requirements. Liaisons indicated they are leery about transporting students across the state line between Missouri and Kansas when human trafficking laws expressly prohibit other agencies from doing so. "Don't force me to transport them over state lines if that directly conflicts with other laws that are in place," a liaison stated, "Because how do we know we're not engaging in human trafficking?"

E. Lack of Knowledge about Policies and Procedures

As the individuals charged with protecting homeless students' access and rights to a quality education, local liaisons insisted that proper knowledge and awareness of policies and procedures is fundamental to addressing the problem of homelessness—not only among school administrators and staff but also among parents, community members, and service providers. Local liaisons reported that they have encountered a lack of knowledge about homeless students' rights to services, such as entitlement programs, as they carry out their work in support of students. One of the liaisons shared an example:

> *When I submit a food stamp application, I send it with the USDA law stating that unaccompanied youth—doesn't matter what age—there are no barriers. Because, otherwise, they'll be like, "She's living with her grandma. Gotta go off of grandma's income." No, you don't … and here's your statute that says you don't.*

Another liaison added that he has to be a relentless advocate for students who need federal assistance due to the lack of knowledge about students' rights under McKinney-Vento. "[W]e have found that we have to be the expert on TANF laws and explain it to the people who are supposed to be helping us—or Social Security—and it's a challenge," he noted.

Educating parents about the rights of their children, and the school districts' responsibility to protect their children, is also essential, local liaisons reported:

> *People are fearful of school districts, too. They're fearful of us kicking them out of the schools. […] And they just don't understand the process of the McKinney-Vento Act, and they don't understand they can be honest, and that's when we can help them more.*

Liaisons pointed out that educating families and members of the community would not only help connect students with much-needed services, but it would also help reduce the stigma of homelessness. That view is shared by liaisons in other states who were cited in the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report. **Six in ten claimed that "enhanced public awareness efforts would make a big difference, and emphasize awareness, compassion, and breaking down stigmas, both in schools and throughout communities, as ways to better help students" (34).** Fifty-five percent of liaisons affiliated with the report stated that more efforts should be made "outside schools to notify homeless youth and families of available services" (34). Any awareness efforts should extend beyond orthodox settings such as schools and community centers, a local liaison stressed. Service providers should partner with churches and other large bodies in the communities that assemble on a regular basis (i.e., neighborhood associations,

community advocacy groups, etc.) to educate communities about student homelessness, she suggested. *Hidden in Plain Sight* recommended an even broader group of stakeholders who could take part in awareness campaigns, including "mentoring organizations, legal aid groups, domestic violence prevention organizations, and community-based education and social and emotional learning organizations" (43).

F. Additional Barriers

Local liaisons emphasized three additional barriers they encounter while serving homeless students:

1. Inconsistent and insufficient communication between families and liaisons and within the school district
2. Challenges students and families face in obtaining legal documentation
3. Lack of affordable, time-appropriate childcare for parents.

In response to the first barrier cited above, a liaison from Kansas stated that she had a student who had been missing for three weeks, but the liaison had no current contact information for the student or the family. Local liaisons also encounter language barriers for non-English speaking students and families. A liaison shared an experience at a community mental health center to illustrate the challenge that language barriers pose:

> *Say we do a two-hour intake only to find out that they don't have Spanish-speaking therapists. Then they say, "We're referring you out to [another provider]." So, that's an additional two-hour intake…. [J]ust the amount of time it takes to help these families navigate the system, fill out the paperwork, allow those agencies to then collaborate with each other … it's completely overwhelming.*

A second liaison added that the process is especially onerous for students with undocumented parents: "Finding agencies that are willing to work with them—getting legitimate employment, suitable housing—the whole documentation and language barrier is ongoing."

In addition to language and documentation barriers, the lack of affordable childcare prevents some families from escaping homelessness, a local liaison from Missouri remarked, adding:

> *There are a lot of jobs that are available [but] not during school hours. And to find affordable childcare between the hours of 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. is very difficult to do. So, our families are forced to either continue to live in the situation or survive in the situation that they're in, or find a job—especially single-parent families, especially single moms; it's very difficult for them to find someone to watch their children.*

Health Issues among Local Homeless Students

McKinney-Vento liaisons in the Kansas City area expressed significant concerns about their students' access to, and use of, physical and mental health care services. The complexity of the situation was illustrated by a liaison who described a typical scenario that she and her colleagues often encounter:

We're making the referrals. The families just don't get from here to there. It's just an access issue. They can't get from one point to the other … or you're dealing with people who are already in crisis and are living a chaotic life. For them to make a phone call, set up an appointment, write that appointment down on a calendar, and then get to said appointment on a particular day, which is sometimes four to six weeks later, is highly unlikely.

Getting an appointment is particularly challenging for unaccompanied youth who need access to mental health services, the liaisons added. "I think unaccompanied youth are darn near impossible to get seen," one liaison exclaimed. "Doctors won't see them. Mental health practitioners will not—WILL NOT— see them!" Getting an appointment is extremely difficult for unaccompanied homeless students who are too young to give legal consent and do not have a parent or guardian to give permission. The same applies to homeless students who are refugees, a liaison added. They have an even harder time accessing care since many do not have a Social Security number. The liaisons agreed that unless the student is in crisis due to suicidal ideation or self-harm and needs emergency care, the likelihood of getting treatment is very slim.

These barriers complicate an already delicate situation since homeless students and their family members are reluctant to seek treatment from mental health providers due to stigmatization and cultural biases about mental illness, limited transportation options, and the complexities of applying for care. Liaisons made the following observations:

I think mental health services within schools are imperative for a lot of our homeless families, but especially the unaccompanied youth, because of the transportation issue.

[Our school staff and counselors] do a lot of triage/crisis care…. They are doing this all day long. And it's not students who are just McKinney-Vento. There are a lot of problems with mental health.

I worked with a family for literally six months. I personally sent in the application for Medicaid on three different occasions. They never received it. It took up to six months for these kids to get help.

When asked if students have any difficulty accessing public health clinics, liaisons pointed out that the clinics are limited to certain areas of Kansas City and can be difficult for some students to reach. "We don't have providers [in our area]," a liaison lamented. "We had [a popular provider], and they closed shop and moved out. They were our largest provider." There are providers in an adjacent city, the liaison acknowledged, "but that's a world away from our families when there's no transportation."

When students and their families cannot conveniently access public clinics for health care, they usually go to the emergency room, the liaisons noted. The most common ailments that affect homeless students in the area are lice, asthma, diabetes, and sexually transmitted infections, according to local liaisons. "I often find that with my unaccompanied youth, because there's no parent or guardian there, they can't get services through the regular agencies, so the emergency room becomes their primary care," one liaison reported. Alternatively, students

use the school nurse as their primary care provider or simply miss school for an indeterminate amount of time, the liaison added.

On a more positive note, the majority of liaisons interviewed in the focus groups were satisfied with the dental services available to their students, especially mobile dental providers that travel to the schools to provide services. "I think access to dental is easy, to be honest. We send them to Miles of Smiles. They come out to the schools," a liaison shared, adding:

> *I had a kid with an abscess standing in my office one day. I found out where Miles of Smiles was that day in our district and took [the student] to that school that day and had the tooth pulled in the library. They set up full dental clinics in our school and go from school to school to school.*

Liaisons whose districts are in the northern half of the Kansas City metro area were also optimistic about an ongoing partnership with a mental health provider who is working closely with a nonprofit human services agency to support the needs of homeless students.

What Local Liaisons Need to Effectively Serve Their Students

Ideally, what I would like to see with McKinney-Vento is that from the moment that we qualify a family, I would like to see a plan in place to help these families go from homelessness to becoming stable. I feel like that is the big piece that is missing in this. There is no plan from A to B. We're just on that wheel that keeps going around and around….

– Local McKinney-Vento Liaison

Kansas City-area McKinney-Vento school liaisons are committed professionals with extensive experience in the fields of education, psychology, and social work. But even an ideal combination of qualifications and credentials does not ensure that liaisons can meet the numerous demands of a growing, increasingly fluid homeless student population. The National Center for Homeless Education, in a brief on selecting and supporting homeless liaisons, noted that one of the most common complaints among liaisons is that they do not have enough time to carry out all of their responsibilities (NCHE 2015, 5), a concern that was cited as a key barrier by local liaisons. NCHE advises administrators to "review legal requirements for the position along with the number of homeless children and youth the school district typically serves in a year, and allocate time for the position to ensure that the local liaison can do his or her job effectively" (5). A regular review of the position and its responsibilities, although helpful in identifying the needs of liaisons and school districts, does not guarantee that the liaison will receive the support he or she needs to carry out the required responsibilities. "Even with small numbers, one homeless liaison cannot identify and form relationships with students without some type of support system in the schools," a liaison stated during a 2012 survey referenced in NCHE's brief (4).

During Cookingham's focus group sessions, local liaisons reiterated the need for a dedicated support system and expressed several other needs that would enable them to better serve homeless students in the Kansas City region.

A. Dedicated Student Navigators and More Social Workers

Above all, local liaisons emphasized their need for staff who can guide students and families through the process of obtaining benefits and services. According to the liaisons, these individuals would be very similar to health care navigators who help patients manage medical crises, noting that homeless students and families "need someone to help them navigate the system." These navigators would not only help students and families schedule and keep appointments with physical and mental health providers, help them enroll in programs and services, and help them secure and maintain stable housing, they could also provide financial education on managing expenses and establishing and maintaining good credit, teach students independent living skills, and even serve as role models. "Some of these kids have never had a [role model], so they don't know what it means to get up every morning, [demonstrate] appropriate actions at work, [and] have appropriate engagement with your superiors," a liaison noted. Another added:

> *I need somebody who is going to walk hand in hand with a family through each and every barrier … and sit down and spend the quality time in sorting through and working out a plan for every kid and every family and sticking with them. Because you can knock out one barrier but then there are fifteen more.*

Navigators could also help students address traditional learning barriers that prevent them from making progress in school. "So many of our students who fall in that at-risk category aren't the sit-down, absorb-material-in-the-classroom types," said one liaison. "They need experiential learning, and they need to be out in the community."

Beyond the generalist role of a navigator, one liaison recommended assigning someone to serve as a mediator to negotiate disputes between property owners and families to help prevent evictions, adding that an employment mediator or coach would be equally helpful. For students specifically, the guidance should extend beyond high school, if possible, to help unaccompanied youth, in particular, transition to their next stage in life:

> *I feel like they don't have that support that's going to help them really get to a point where they can start to become independent. Because a lot of those unaccompanied youth are figuring it out on their own. I feel like they need some advocacy.*

Liaisons emphasized the importance of teaching financial education as well. "A lot of what we see are utility bills standing in people's way," a liaison stressed. "I don't hear about the people that are $150 past due. When they come to me, it's like $3,200." Families who get that far behind, once evicted, are rarely able to pay down outstanding bills in order to secure another lease. Faith-based communities could play a role in this regard, a liaison suggested:

> *I had a church in our area come to me last year, specifically wanting to work with parents on this exact thing, like a mentorship program. Just getting them on the right track and helping them build budgets … I think that would be a perfect option for some of our faith-based groups; it would be the perfect outreach.*

In addition to the forms of support described above, local liaisons were adamant about the need for more social workers at the schools. One liaison made the following argument:

> *I'm a big proponent of social workers in the buildings, employed by the school district. Some districts have contract social workers, but it's different. I think the school district employee makes a difference. You're more connected to the building. You're more connected to the families.*

Social workers should not remain entrenched in the schools, however—they need to be able to serve families in the community and create community collaboration, liaisons stressed. "Our social workers are special education only. They're only in a restricted classroom. They don't leave," said one liaison, referring to the limited role of the social workers at her school. By contrast, the presence and involvement of dedicated social workers who work to build community supports for students and families would give liaisons the flexibility to focus on homeless students' educational needs, several liaisons indicated.

B. Other Needs

When asked what else they needed to better support homeless students and families, local liaisons named several additional priorities. A simple, but essential, need the liaisons described was fundraising support to maintain special funds that help cover unexpected and emergency costs incurred by the individuals they serve. According to one liaison:

> *One of the things that our district established a couple years back was a Student Care Fund. Employees could pay in, community partners. It was nice because it really minimized the amount of red tape necessary. We can pay for clothing if needed. We can pay for pretty much anything that we can show that the community at large isn't able to provide.*

Another liaison added that her school district has a similar fund and that she cannot imagine doing her job without it:

> *We even partnered with our local utility company, and we do a fundraiser once a year. However much we raise, they match. And then we're able to help families with utilities to prevent homelessness, especially a lot of our families who are on vouchers or Section 8 housing. If they get utilities shut off, they could lose housing. But if we can get that utility bill covered, we can keep them housed.*

In addition to helping with utility bills, liaisons recommended using the special funds to cover the cost of hotels and motels when shelter space is not available, security deposits for new rentals, gas, laundry, bus passes, and more. "Anything that Title [I] dollars can't pay for," a liaison concluded.

Additional needs that liaisons listed were appropriate shelter space for students and families and a coordinated entry system (a project currently being implemented by the Mid-America Regional Council and the Greater Kansas City Coalition to End Homelessness). Liaisons also emphasized the need for their students to have better transportation options so students can more easily get to and from school and jobs. Arranging transportation was a key barrier cited by liaisons, and they pointed out that they must take advantage of every option available to

remain in compliance with federal legislation. They noted that they have used taxi companies, shuttle services, dedicated school buses, and mileage reimbursement plans for parents, but they still struggle with students' transportation needs. One liaison commented that people would be surprised to know how much money is being spent on transportation, as well as the number of invoices and bills that are being exchanged between districts. In Missouri, Title I funds cannot be used for transportation of homeless students, the liaison noted. Instead, school districts in Missouri are obligated to cover the costs of transporting students out of their standard operating budget. Additional, dedicated funding for transportation is needed to address the problem. "If my traditional transportation budget is $1 million, I need [another] $500,000," to provide sufficient transportation services between districts, a liaison argued. "… I can only help pull so much more money away from the building level" to cover additional transportation costs, she added.

Finally, local liaisons stressed the need for a "top-down culture of understanding" regarding the needs of homeless students and the poverty that affects them. Superintendents should create a philosophy of caring for students experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable populations and promote that philosophy, the liaisons stated, rather than liaisons having to struggle to get "buy in from the bottom up." One liaison shared the example of Dr. Tiffany Anderson, the superintendent of Topeka Public Schools, who made it a priority for every staff member, from custodians to senior administrators, to each mentor a student in the district. The philosophy is based on the approach that school employees have an obligation to provide a lifeline to vulnerable students, the liaison noted.

Liaisons who were surveyed for the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report shared that sentiment as well. One liaison is quoted as saying, "From your bus driver, to your crossing guard, to your cook, to your custodian: I think everybody needs to be involved" (Ingram et al. 2016, 35). In fact, 82 percent of the liaisons surveyed for the report indicated that more training and professional development for school staff would make a difference in improving the process of identifying homeless youth and connecting them with services (34).
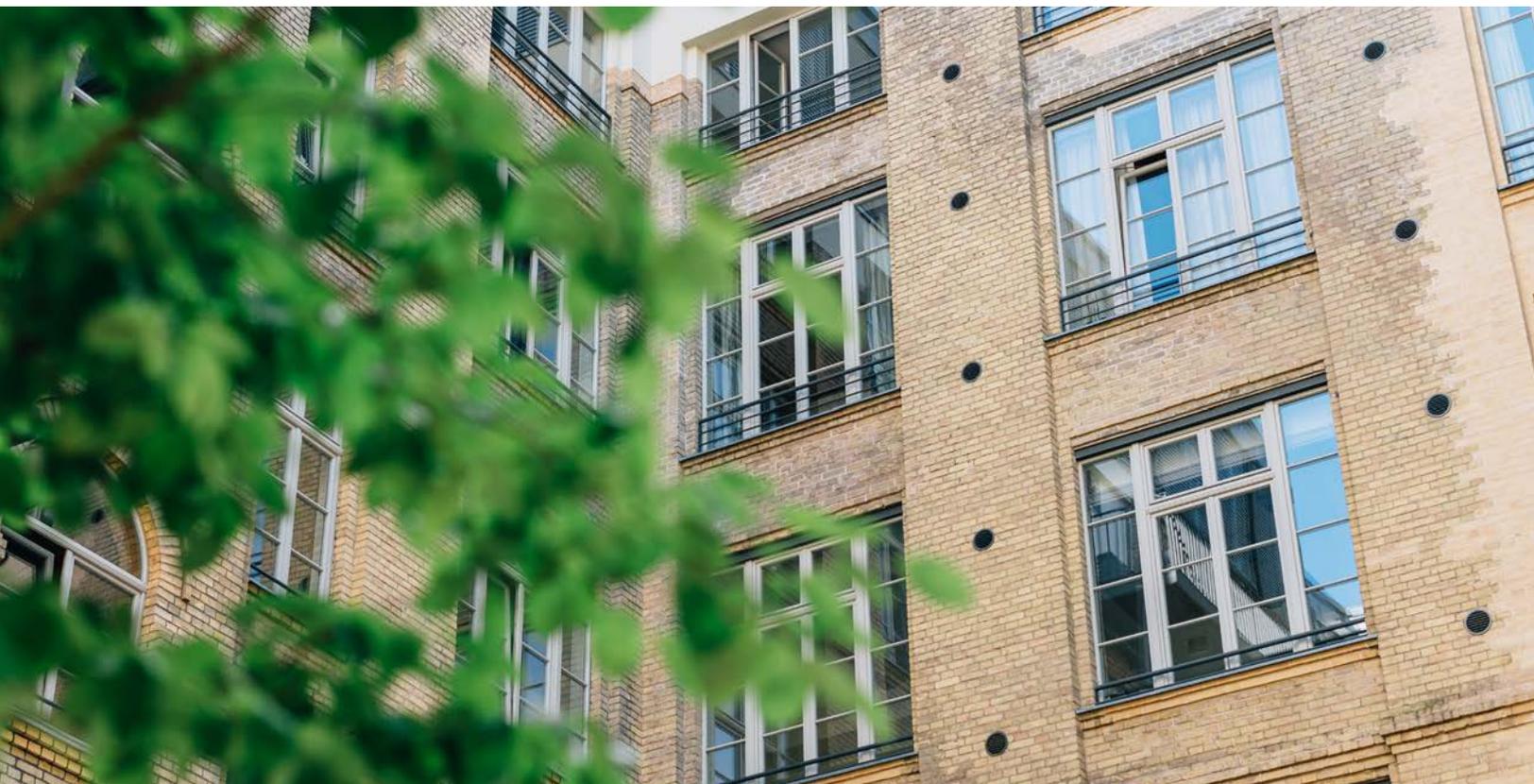
Best Practices Recommended by Local Liaisons

During the Cookingham Institute focus group sessions, local liaisons recommended three best practices for ending youth homelessness based on what they have observed, and participated in, in the Kansas City area:

1. Drop-in centers and one-stop shops
2. Host homes
3. Collaborative networks, including shared data

These recommendations are all promoted as best practices, to a greater or lesser extent, by a variety of local, regional, and national organizations.

A. Drop-in Centers and "One-Stop Shops"

Liaisons in the Kansas City area expressed strong support for drop-in centers where youth experiencing homelessness can get immediate access to safe services. They called attention to Synergy Services' Youth Resiliency Center (YRC) as an exemplary drop-in center in the area. Synergy's center delivers an array of services, including "showers, lockers, laundry and kitchen facilities, and a lounge where young people can hang out and be safe," as well as a clinic that provides medical, dental, and mental health services. Homeless youth who utilize the center also have access to Synergy's emergency shelter and transitional and permanent housing programs (www.synergyservices.org). "I really like Synergy and what they do for our unaccompanied youth," a liaison said. "It would be nice if we could replicate that." Liaisons also voiced their appreciation for the intervention Synergy provides through its street outreach team and the organization's partnership with Park University, a local university which helps youth aging out of foster care enroll in college, apply for financial aid, and maintain stable housing during their college career.

The "one-stop shop" model was widely popular among local liaisons as well, thanks in part to the success of the 1400 Diplomas initiative in Kansas City, Kansas. The initiative was launched after Mayor Mark Holland of Kansas City, Kansas, and Dr. Cynthia Lane, the superintendent of Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) urged community leaders to collaborate to end child, youth, and family homelessness and promote high school completion. In response, a group of private and public stakeholders formed the Kansas Community Leadership Enterprise (KCLE) and introduced an event known as "Impact Wednesday" to meet the needs of 1,400 students and family members who were identified as homeless in the KCK Public School District during the 2014-2015 school year. The weekly event, which is held at the local nonprofit Avenue of Life, provides McKinney-Vento students and their families with access to agencies and resources. Students and families can enroll in TANF and Medicaid, sign up for child support and child care, learn about job openings and employment services, seek financial assistance for utilities, sign up for public and private housing, connect with case managers, and participate in classes on Housing, Finances, Health Care, and Employment (USICH 2016, 1).

During the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, 601 families were reached, 174 were housed, and 130 were employed.* One of the first successes of Impact Wednesday was eliminating the waiting period for childcare, USICH noted. "[T]he number one barrier identified by families being served through Impact Wednesday was a standard 30-day waiting period for

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* http://www.avenueoflife.org/impact-wednesday.html

childcare," the brief stated. "To address this challenge the Department of Children and Families now waives the waiting period for eligible families that enroll in employment services on Impact Wednesday" (2016, 2). The USICH brief further reported that the 1400 Diplomas initiative has increased school attendance, reduced school mobility, and decreased the school district's transportation costs by 22 percent (3).

The strong partnership between Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) and the various community partners has been instrumental to the success of 1400 Diplomas. The former coordinating McKinney-Vento liaison explained the process:

> *The school district is the referral source so we know every family that is coming through and identified as homeless. All I have to do is send my intake form as a referral to our community partner, which is Avenue of Life. They have a case manager who is only dedicated to [KCKPS] kids and the referrals. I send that referral and they take it from there. They meet with the family, they do a more intensive intake, and they get them scheduled for whatever agency they need to meet with on Wednesday. And they make sure they get there, and they walk them through the process. They are doing intensive case management and taking it off my plate. So, the families now have them to contact instead of coming back to me.*

For this type of collaboration to work, however, the liaison said there must be champions who are willing to promote the program at all costs. "If one door closes, search for another one," she recommended. "That's what's really been the essential success of it … bringing partners together and convincing them that we will save you time and energy and resources by just bringing you into one room."

Liaisons in Kansas City added that convenient access was also crucial to the success of the one-stop-shop approach. "If I had an Impact Wednesday [in a central location], then as a school district, I can say that I'm going to do two buses: one at the south end of town and a bus at the north end," a liaison in a Missouri district stated, noting that one-stop shops can simultaneously help liaisons address transportation challenges of getting students to and from appointments."

B. Host Homes

Although little discussion was devoted to host homes as a best practice during Cookingham's focus group sessions, there was consensus among local liaisons that the housing model is especially beneficial to unaccompanied youth and transition-age youth. Their view is supported by research from the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), HUD, and other leading experts.

Host homes are highlighted as a best practice in the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report, which calls attention to the strategic collaboration behind successful host home models, particularly between McKinney-Vento liaisons and the service providers. Alternative House in Fairfax, Virginia, for example, ensures that liaisons assign each participating youth to one of their organization's case workers so that both groups remain aware of issues that could affect the student's school performance (Ingram et al. 2016, 46). The Housing Options for Students in Transition (HOST) program in Mason County, Washington, guarantees success by requiring

a thorough application process to match students and host families and by utilizing youth coordinators who arrange resources and advocate for the students, while also monitoring students' attendance and performance and mitigating problems. This has led to a 98 percent high school graduation rate since 2013, with 85 percent entering post-secondary education or employment within six months (47).

C. Collaborative Networks

When asked to name other best practices, local liaisons referenced the value of collaborative efforts with local nonprofits that help fill gaps in services in the areas of case management, financial support for living expenses, and other necessities.

> One local liaison remarked that "the level of sharing" she has observed should be viewed as a best practice. "I've just noticed recently … the willingness to really exchange dialogue," she said, prompting a second liaison to add, "The communication, just period, has been the best. The more we know, the more we can help. And the sooner we can help."
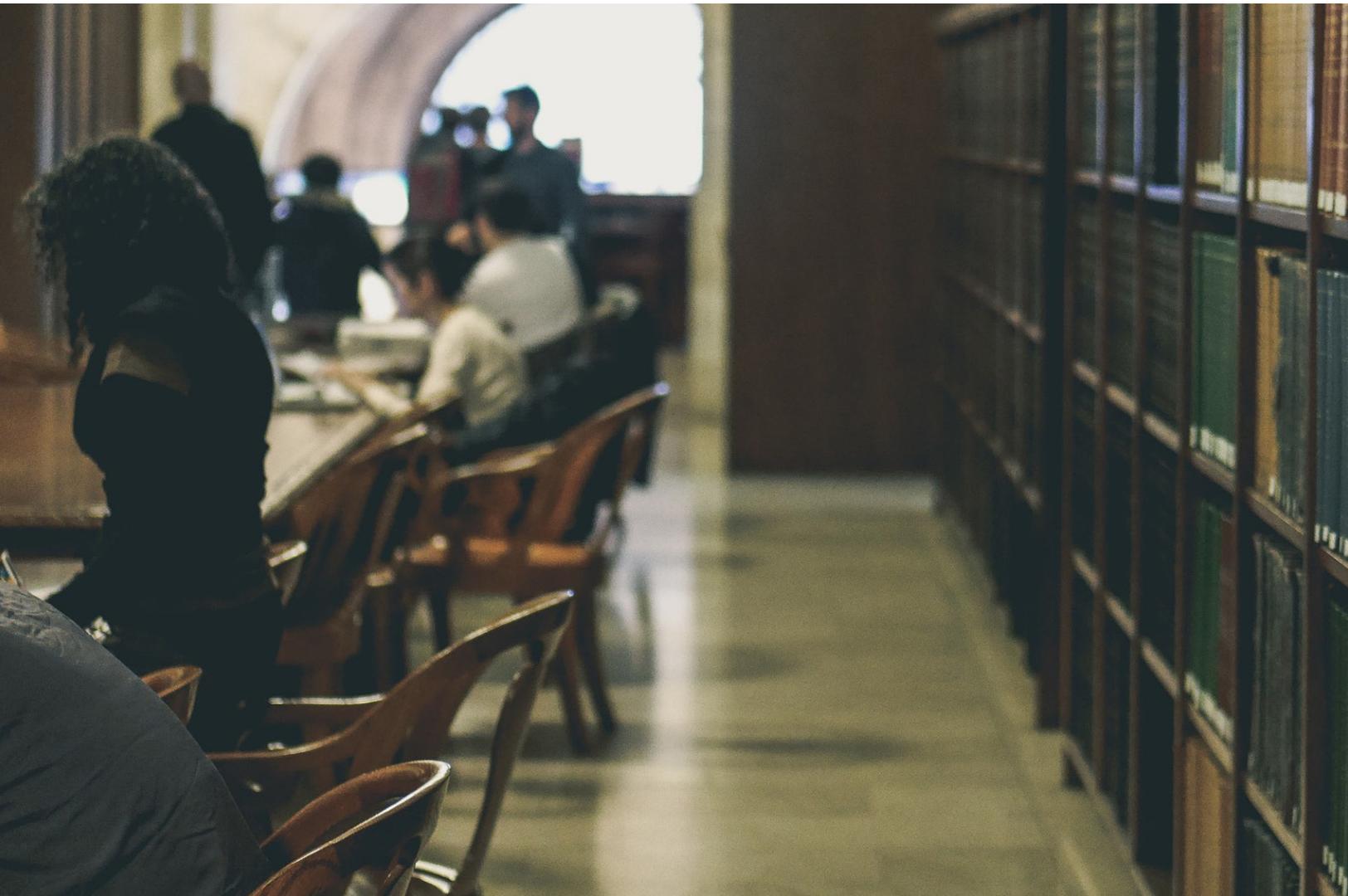
Local liaisons further emphasized the importance of collecting and sharing data within their networks to raise awareness about student homelessness and boost outcomes. "Our data system is awesome!" one liaison exclaimed, adding that the data vendor has made it convenient for her to share data with the appropriate channels in her network:

> *We have data going back to at least 2008 on the number of kids, who the kids are, how many addresses they were at. When they need numbers, I can tell you how many we have, how many are doubled up by running, like, three reports. And I can give you that information for the past six years fairly easily. I find it really helpful for us to really keep track of families over time.*

Another liaison concurred that data are vital to demonstrating the importance of serving homeless students. "When … you are looking to capture [data for] so many different people in the community, from politicians to economists to social workers, you have to be able to create some impact statements…," she observed.

USICH promotes better data collection for similar reasons. **A 2013 USICH resource guide stated that "better data can inform the scale of investments and the types of service delivery and coordination that are needed to end youth homelessness. In turn, this information will guide work to build the capacity of systems and service providers to meet the challenge"** (6). *The Hidden in Plain Sight* report produced by Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates also corroborates local liaisons' desire for increased data collection and sharing. The report's third policy recommendation for communities to create stronger networks to address student homelessness is to "set community goals and use data to drive progress" (Ingram et al. 2016, 44). The report added that, besides using data to track progress, "communities should also disaggregate data by homelessness, and work towards achieving equal outcomes for homeless students" (44).

Local liaisons' recommendations to increase collaboration and share data aligns perfectly with USICH's strategic plan to prevent and end youth homelessness, as outlined in the *Council's Opening Doors* plan. Objectives 1 and 2 of the plan promote collaboration across agencies and sectors in order to build capacity, strengthen interventions, and create collective impact. The plan noted that:

> Across the country, communities are making a strategic shift in their approach to preventing and ending homelessness—collaborating effectively, adopting and directing resources towards evidence-informed practices, monitoring and making performance improvements, and targeting interventions appropriately based on household needs and strengths (2015, 34).

CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

The growth in student homelessness is an unsettling trend with no simple solutions and no signs of abating given recent findings that low-income families are finding it increasingly challenging to cover the costs of core needs such as housing, food, and transportation (Pew Charitable Trusts 2016). Housing costs, in particular, are swallowing up a greater share of income for low-income families. **Pew has noted that "lower-income households' housing costs grew by more than 50 percent over the past 19 years," with lower-income renters spending close to 50 percent of their before-tax income on rent in 2014.** This trend has invariably driven demand not only for affordable housing but also for limited shelter space and transitional units, leaving many students and families homeless or at risk of homelessness.

> Despite the increase in homelessness, McKinney-Vento school liaisons in the Kansas City region have demonstrated their commitment to ensuring that homeless children and youth have equal access to education and support for their basic needs.

In the process, liaisons routinely go above and beyond their assigned responsibilities to help homeless students, a practice evidenced by the feedback we received from liaisons during our focus group sessions and liaisons' survey responses and comments in the *Hidden in Plain Sight* report. We, as residents and stakeholders, must take action if we are to bring an end to student homelessness.

A key priority that aligns with feedback from local liaisons and recommendations from sources cited in this report is to increase efforts to raise widespread awareness about student homelessness and the rights of homeless students and families. Liaisons create awareness by personally informing parents and guardians, school personnel, public officials, and service providers about the rights of homeless students; by publicly displaying information about students' rights at school and places where students receive services; and by reporting data and information to their school districts and states. **Agencies, organizations, and public officials can support liaisons and expand awareness by collecting, compiling, and sharing research and data and then promoting that evidence publicly.** Sharing firsthand knowledge from liaisons, along with quantitative findings from supporting groups, can engage the broader community and validate the concerns of homeless students and families. As one liaison in our focus groups pointed out, **it is difficult to grasp the scope of the problem that students face without first understanding the basic, everyday challenges they face.** "I'm talking to this kid about going to college and getting a job and everything," the liaison shared, "and I remember him saying, 'Oh, my [goodness], you always have toilet paper in your house, don't you?! I bet you never run out of toilet paper.' And that was so eye-opening to me."

As community stakeholders intensify efforts to raise awareness about student homelessness, they should also **work together to build and strengthen collaborative networks between school districts, public agencies, nonprofit providers, and private foundations to provide timely, innovative, and effective support to homeless students and their families.** Doing

so will help eliminate many of the barriers liaisons cited in the focus group sessions. Stronger collaborative networks help address the problem of insufficient resources by enabling partner organizations and agencies to share financial, structural, administrative, and technical resources, similar to continuums of care. They can reach larger audiences when fundraising to support the additional needs of liaisons and their students and even help educate the community about the rights and responsibilities of homeless students.

As collaborative networks coalesce and become more defined, they should replicate drop-in centers and one-stop-shop service models like the 1400 Diplomas Impact Wednesday program in Kansas City, Kansas, to improve engagement and coordination between school districts and community partners. That work has already begun in the Olathe and Shawnee Mission school districts in Johnson County and the Kansas City, Missouri, school district in Jackson County. These new efforts need the full support of the surrounding communities to succeed. **Drop-in centers and one-stop shops not only simplify students' and families' access to, and enrollment in, much-needed services, they help reduce transportation burdens on students, families, and liaisons by fulfilling multiple appointments within a certain timeframe at one location.** This approach can also strengthen connections and trust between students and their families and public agencies and service providers, while also improving communication and knowledge of policies among all parties, by establishing a safe, shared forum for questions and answers and equal access to services and support.

Pivotal to the success of any network, however, is the presence of champions to build momentum and engagement around the cause and help direct the goals of the network. Recall the quote from one of the liaisons about what is required to effectively implement a one-stop-shop approach. Besides a champion on the school side, which is fulfilled by the role of the school liaison, "You need the community champion that's willing to take the lead on it and build these partnerships," the liaison stressed. **The navigator role that local liaisons recommended to help homeless students and families enroll in services, schedule and attend appointments, and provide case management and various coaching activities could be the community champions who advocate for students and their families.** Community navigators are already utilized by other service networks, such as physical and mental health providers, immigrant support and advocate organizations, and groups that represent citizens with disabilities, to manage community outreach, organizing, screening, and application assistance on behalf of their clients. **Community navigators could help students and families experiencing homelessness build trust in school districts by virtue of having a more autonomous role than that of liaisons and by concentrating on outreach efforts. As a result, they could help identify students in need of services and reduce the stigma of homelessness in communities, while keeping students and their families connected to providers and services.**

At the same time the community partners increase efforts to spread awareness, strengthen collaborative networks, and help homeless students and families navigate enrollment in programs and services, **stakeholders should also attempt to develop and sustain a larger network of host homes, where hosts and beneficiaries enter a mutually approved living arrangement akin to the HOST program mentioned earlier in this report.** But host homes alone are not sufficient to reduce student homelessness since they are designed to serve unaccompanied youth and not those students who remain with family members. Homeless students within families need access to housing subsidies and low-barrier access to an array of safe and supportive transitional and permanent housing. These traditional housing services

have been proven effective and remain reliable solutions. The HUD *Family Options Study* found that "long-term housing subsidies reduced the proportion of families that were homeless or doubled-up in the previous six months by 50 [percent] and reduced the proportion of families who experienced a shelter stay by 75 [percent]," while "project-based transitional housing also reduced the proportion of families who experienced a shelter stay," according to a report by the Campaign for Housing and Development Funding (Weiss 2016, 5).

Greater awareness, stronger collaboration, improved navigation, and low-barrier, supportive housing are four key practices recommended by liaisons in the Kansas City area and backed by national research. These practices provide pillars of safety and stability for homeless students and families. By setting them in place, we will create firmer, more supportive foundations across our communities and in our region at large.

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Appendix A

2015-2016 McKinney-Vento Homeless Student Count for the Kansas City Metro Area				
County	**School District**	**Number of Homeless Students (K-12)**	**Total Enrollment (K-12)**	**% Homeless of Total Enrollment**
MISSOURI				
Cass	Archie	38	539	7.1%
	Belton	130	4688	2.8%
	Drexel	0	326	0.0%
	East Lynne	0	108	0.0%
	Harrisonville	151	2522	6.0%
	Midway	59	436	13.5%
	Pleasant Hill	0	2083	0.0%
	Raymore Peculiar	42	5997	0.7%
	Sherwood Cass	46	786	5.9%
	Strasburg	0	91	0.0%
	TOTAL	**466**	**17576**	**2.7%**
Clay	Excelsior Springs	157	2625	6.0%
	Kearney	49	3503	1.4%
	Liberty	135	11770	1.1%
	Missouri City	0	21	0.0%
	North Kansas City	329	19253	1.7%
	Smithville	88	2523	3.5%
	TOTAL	**758**	**39695**	**1.9%**
Jackson	Blue Springs	0	14244	0.0%
	Center	187	2412	7.8%
	Fort Osage	545	4965	11.0%
	Grain Valley	19	3949	0.5%
	Grandview	76	4200	1.8%
	Hickman Mills	202	6236	3.2%
	Independence	954	14308	6.7%
	Kansas City	1776	14228	12.5%
	Lee's Summit	107	17575	0.6%
	Lone Jack	0	589	0.0%
	Oak Grove	0	1968	0.0%
	Raytown	0	8845	0.0%
	TOTAL	**3866**	**93519**	**4.1%**
Platte	North Platte	0	602	0.0%
	Park Hill	60	10713	0.6%
	Platte County	49	3893	1.3%
	West Platte County	0	556	0.0%
	TOTAL	**109**	**15764**	**0.7%**
Ray	Hardin Central	0	217	0.0%
	Lawson	0	1148	0.0%
	Orrick	0	328	0.0%
	Richmond	0	1553	0.0%
	TOTAL	**0**	**3246**	**0.0%**
Total in Missouri KC Metro Counties		**5199**	**169800**	**3.1%**

KANSAS				
Johnson	Blue Valley	107	22546	0.5%
	De Soto	13	6990	0.2%
	Gardner/Edgerton	111	5760	1.9%
	Olathe	381	29009	1.3%
	Shawnee Mission	382	27655	1.4%
	Spring Hill	65	3641	1.8%
	TOTAL	**1059**	**95601**	**1.1%**
Leavenworth	Basehor-Linwood	0	2470	0.0%
	Easton	0	615	0.0%
	Ft. Leavenworth	0	1725	0.0%
	Lansing	0	2691	0.0%
	Leavenworth	179	3843	4.7%
	Tonganoxie	24	1967	1.2%
	TOTAL	**203**	**13311**	**1.5%**
Miami	Louisburg	39	1735	2.2%
	Osawatomie	97	1186	8.2%
	Paola	40	2018	2.0%
	TOTAL	**176**	**4939**	**3.6%**
Wyandotte	Bonner Springs	15	2771	0.5%
	Kansas City	855	21890	3.9%
	Piper-Kanasas City	NA	2031	0.0%
	Turner-Kansas City	117	4254	2.8%
	TOTAL	**987**	**30946**	**3.2%**
Total in Kansas KC Metro Counties		**2425**	**144797**	**1.7%**
Grand Total in KC Metro Area		**7624**	**314597**	**2.4%**

Note: Districts with 10 or fewer homeless students are not required to report to the state due to privacy issues.

Appendix B

About the Authors

Dr. Anne Williamson is the is the Victor and Caroline Schutte/Missouri Professor of Urban Affairs in the Department of Public Affairs of the Henry W. Bloch School of Management at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). She also serves as the Director of the L. P. Cookingham Institute for Urban Affairs at UMKC. Dr. Williamson previously served on the faculties of The University of Alabama, The University of Texas-San Antonio, and the University of Florida. She brings a blend of public- and private-sector management experience to her teaching, research, and service. An expert in housing policy, community development, citizen participation, public budgeting, and other urban issues, Dr. Williamson has published in journals such as *Urban Affairs Review, Social Science Quarterly, International Journal of Public Administration, Journal of Community Practice, Journal of Sociology & Social Work, The Social Science Journal,* and *Housing & Society.* She has also led public service outreach projects resulting in more than 25 externally funded projects and provided expert testimony on housing discrimination in U.S. Federal Court.

Damon Guinn is Assistant Director of the L.P. Cookingham Institute of Urban Affairs. A graduate of the University of Missouri-Kansas City's Executive Master of Public Administration program, Guinn has an extensive professional background in child, youth, and community development. He has worked as a writer and managing editor with an international humanitarian organization, as well as a grant writer and communications strategist with a local social and behavioral services provider. In his role as the Assistant Director, Guinn helps to implement and manage the Institute's applied research projects, conduct quantitative and qualitative analysis, and publish findings in the Institute's *Issue* and *Action Briefs*, in the Special Report Series, and during community-oriented presentations. He also serves as a facilitator for the Kansas City Bi-State Council on Youth Homelessness, a collaborative network of regional stakeholders who are working to end youth homelessness.

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