

Understanding Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (UHY)

A Resource Guide for Pennsylvania Schools



Who Are Unaccompanied Homeless Youth in Pennsylvania?

Unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) are children and youth who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and **are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian including:**

- Runaway children and youth.
- Children and youth forced out of their homes/told to leave by parent/guardian.
- Children and youth living in shelters, including domestic violence shelters.
- School-aged parents living in houses for school-aged parents without other housing options.
- Migratory children and youth.
- Children and youth who enter the country without their parent/legal guardian and/or for any other reasons have been separated from them (i.e. natural disaster, deportation, incarceration, etc.)

In 2023–24, 18 percent of the 50,030 children and youth identified as experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania were unaccompanied.¹ UHY in Pennsylvania can be any age from birth to 21 and if they are still eligible for public school enrollment. They **do not** need to have experienced a precipitating event that caused a loss of housing to be eligible

for services under the McKinney-Vento Act and often cite family dysfunction/conflict as a key reason for leaving home. Other contributing factors can include:

- Abuse, neglect, and/or abandonment.
- Substance abuse in the home.
- Teen pregnancy.
- Lack of support of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Issues related to blended families.
- A family becoming homeless and cannot secure shelter for the entire family, forcing them to split up.
- Lack of enough room for an entire family in a doubled-up situation, forcing the unaccompanied youth to live elsewhere.
- Opting out of the foster care system.
- Parental illness, death, or incarceration.
- Deportation of parents or caregivers.

It is important to note that the presence of a custody or guardianship issue alone does not make a student eligible for McKinney-Vento services; rather, the student's living arrangement also must be considered homeless.

Identifying Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) may not be aware of, or understand their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act. They may also fear the possibility of being treated differently if school staff or other students were to find out about their homeless status. They may also fear being reported to child welfare agencies or law enforcement. It is likely that the Homeless Liaison and local education agency (LEA) will need to pursue targeted outreach efforts to identify unaccompanied homeless youth.

Identifying UHY is a crucial first step in ensuring they receive the educational support they need. Effective strategies include:

- Developing outreach materials geared specifically towards students that include language and information about UHY.
- Posting materials where youth congregate, including laundromats, parks, campgrounds, skate parks, youth clubs/ organizations, libraries, and 24-hour stores. Make sure to include contact information for the Homeless Liaison in all outreach materials so that children and youth needing assistance will know whom to contact.
- Enlisting other students to help spread the word about services offered to students experiencing homelessness.
- Holding conversations with students in a safe space and using the means of communication that they are most comfortable with such as email, texting, and social media, while being mindful of confidentiality.
- Training all LEA staff on the definition of UHY.

When identifying UHY, here are some important considerations to ask yourself:

- ❓ How were they separated from their parent/guardian?
- ❓ Was there significant family conflict?
- ❓ Are they at risk of being asked to leave where they are currently living (i.e., teen living with boyfriend/ girlfriend's family is an unstable situation)?
- ❓ Is their current living situation intentional and a planned positive arrangement?
- ❓ Are parent(s) still "parenting" from a distance (i.e., military families and student staying in district for graduation)?
- ❓ Are the parent(s) hostile or disinterested in parenting?
- ❓ Are the parent(s) missing, deceased, incarcerated, deported, in rehab, or facing long-term illness?
- ❓ Is the student running away from a foster care placement or aging out of foster care?



[View eligibility flowchart.](#)

Enrolling Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Schools are responsible for enrolling and educating children and youth experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act. They should base enrollment decisions on the student's current nighttime residence, **not** on why the student is no longer living with a parent or guardian. Schools are not authorized or required to assess the reasons for or make judgements about a student's living situation.

Unaccompanied homeless youth have the same rights as other homeless students to:

- Enroll immediately and participate in the full school program as an independent student including anything that would typically require a parent/guardian signature (i.e., permission slips, report cards, etc.). They can enroll in school alone, with a temporary caregiver present, or with the help of a Homeless Liaison.
- Receive credit accrual, including a thorough assessment of prior work completed, to remain on track with their education.
- Receive assistance to prepare for and improve their readiness for post-secondary training and opportunities.
- Receive verification from the district Homeless Liaison of their UHY status needed for higher education financial aid determinations.
- Receive the benefits of Act 1 of 2022: Assisting Students Experiencing Education Instability if changing school entity.

Permissions and Signature Topics

Because the McKinney-Vento Act defines enrollment as "attending classes and participating fully in school activities," school districts must develop policies not only related to enrolling UHY, but also related to determining who can sign for issues and activities as part of a student's ongoing school participation. These issues may include:

- Who may sign for school absences.
- Who may sign for participation in extracurricular activities, school field trips, and other school programming.
- Who may consent to medical services for unaccompanied youth who have not reached age of majority in their state. (See Pa. Stat. §35-10104 and Pa. Code §27.97)

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), schools may give FERPA rights to unaccompanied homeless youth under age 18, although this cannot supersede the rights of their parents. FERPA also gives rights to "an individual acting as a parent in the absence of a parent or a guardian," although those rights cannot supersede the rights of parents. Once students turn 18 years old, all FERPA rights transfer to them.

Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act and Special Education (IDEA)

While unaccompanied homeless youth can enroll/participate in school without a legal parent/guardian, this does not extend to special education services. Unlike McKinney-Vento, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) does not grant rights to students, only parents:

- IDEA requires a "parent" to sign for special education evaluation/services.
- Parents retain rights until student graduates or turns 21.

LEAs must implement McKinney-Vento and IDEA simultaneously to ensure that homeless children and youth with disabilities receive the full range of services to meet their complex needs. If parents of UHY are not participating in their special education under IDEA, the school must appoint a surrogate parent.

[Learn more about surrogate parents and unaccompanied homeless youth under IDEA.](#)



As a Homeless Liaison what can you do to support UHY?

1. Inform unaccompanied homeless youth of their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act in language and context they will understand.

Listen to their concerns and wishes in a nonjudgmental way and provide support as you are able. Things that may seem trivial to you may be very important to unaccompanied homeless youth.

Ensure UHY have access to the dispute resolution process and that disputes are resolved promptly and in accordance with the law if the school district makes a determination that differs from the unaccompanied youth's choice.

2. Ensure their enrollment as an independent student without delay.

Unaccompanied homeless youth must be enrolled in school immediately, even if no adult caregiver is available to assist with enrollment.

3. Assess credits promptly and offer credit recovery options.

Students may have incomplete or missing credits recorded in their academic record. Additionally, many unaccompanied homeless youth are absent or tardy for long periods of time due to their housing instability and as they attempt to meet their own basic needs.

UHY may also be eligible for Act 1 of 2022 protections if they have experienced a school placement change as a result of their homelessness or other eligible life event. Students eligible for Act 1 of 2022 in grades 9-12 must have a graduation plan.



[Learn more about Act 1 of 2022.](#)



4. Create a school culture of safety and belonging.

LEAs with a school culture of belonging ensure UHY are valued and create a space where they feel comfortable and safe to share about their lived experiences. It is critical to talk to UHY about their home situation with care and sensitivity as they may hesitate to share if home is an unhealthy or dangerous environment.

5. Assist with identifying a safe adult/mentor who can help them feel supported along their academic journey.

Identifying at least one safe caring adult builds protective factors for the student's education stability and success. This may be the Homeless Liaison or another school staff member.

6. Consider identifying a peer mentor that the UHY feels safe and supported by.

This can help children and youth feel supported and learn the school's rules and culture if transitioning to a new school.

7. Address post-secondary education and training aspirations.

Help students explore options that align with their interests, strengths, and goals—including college, trade schools, apprenticeships, and certificate programs.

Host workshops or one-on-one sessions to help students complete the FAFSA, and explain eligibility for fee waivers, scholarships, and grants.

8. Establish relationships and coordinate with community service agencies.

Agencies or programs assisting LGBTQ+, teen parents, or juvenile court-involved students offer tailored support that schools may not be equipped to provide alone.

Identifying teen or drop-in/community centers, street outreach programs, mental health providers, and dropout prevention programs can offer additional wrap-around support to UHY.

What is the role of the Pennsylvania Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (PA ECYEH) Program and Regional Coordinators?

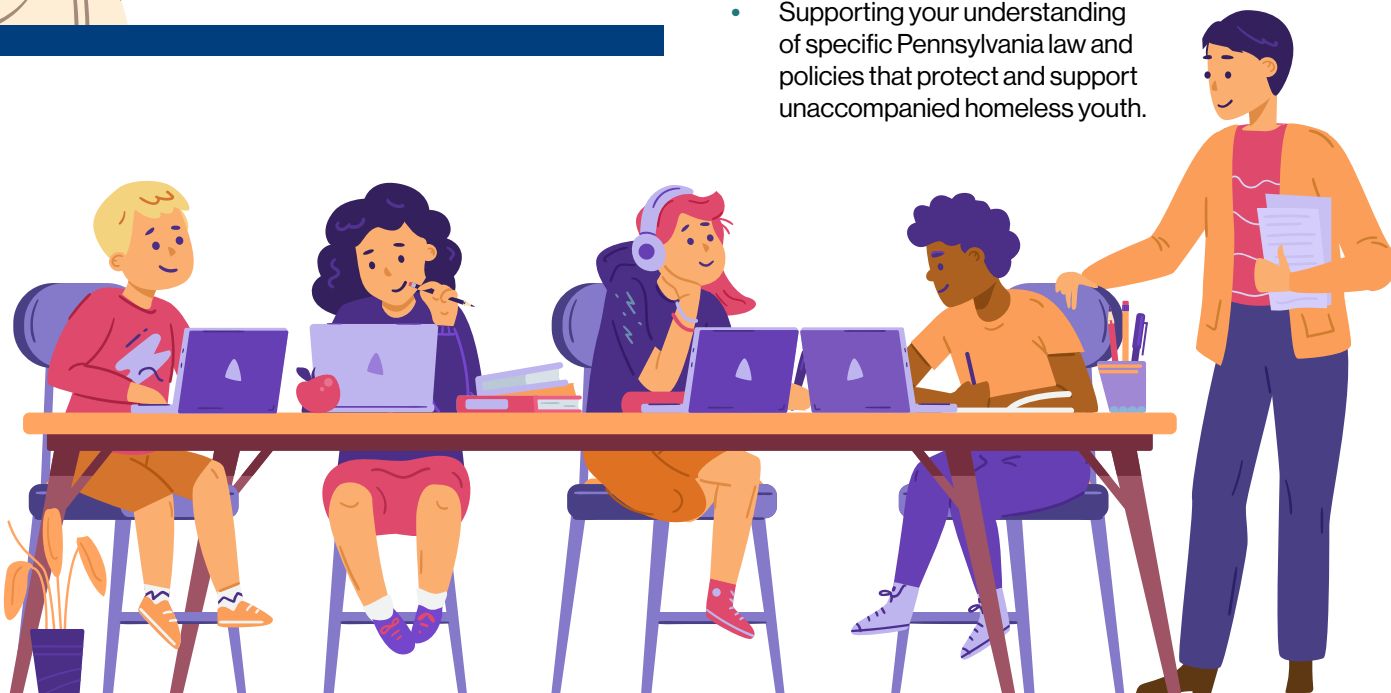
PA ECYEH provides statewide and regional guidance, information, training, and resources about the federal McKinney-Vento Act and the state educational rights of children and youth experiencing homelessness—including **unaccompanied homeless youth**. Pennsylvania's program includes eight regional program offices, each with regional office staff dedicated to supporting you!



**Contact your
Pennsylvania ECYEH
Program Regional
Coordinator**

Regional office staff can assist you with questions, next steps, and scenarios that involve UHY including:

- Assisting with enrollment topics and identifying educational guardianship AFTER enrollment occurs.
- Working with you to explore creative solutions for academic, housing/shelter, transportation, meals, and other needs.
- Navigating how to obtain medical and mental health care.
- Providing guidance on the legal protections unaccompanied homeless youth have for school enrollment, and privacy of school records.
- Supporting you in navigating students' participation in school events; field trips; extracurricular activities; afterschool programs.
- Providing resources to support completing FAFSA and additional post-secondary applications.
- Training for additional school personnel about the specific barriers and needs of unaccompanied homeless youth.
- Identifying additional community resources and organizations available to specifically support unaccompanied homeless youths' basic needs, academic success, and physical and mental health.
- Supporting your understanding of specific Pennsylvania law and policies that protect and support unaccompanied homeless youth.



For questions about this guide, please contact ECYEH@csc.csiu.org.

For more information, visit our website ECYEHpennsylvania.center-school.org.

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