

Accessing college as a homeless student

In the United States

According to the National Center for Homeless Education, there are approximately 1.38 million students experiencing homelessness in the United States.

ECMC is committed to the success of all students, regardless of their housing status. In this changing economy, skills and qualifications that are obtained through education beyond high school are becoming more important to earning a family-wage job. We have gathered some resources to help guide you through the process of accessing and succeeding in college as a student with housing instability in the United States.

McKinney-Vento Act of 1987

Federal legislation was passed in 1987 to ensure resources and support for homeless youth in the United States. The McKinney-Vento Act (M-V Act) provides school access and stability, support for educational success, and child-centered decision-making in the education of homeless youth. It is aimed to reduce barriers that may have traditionally prevented youth in this population from enrollment, attendance and success in school.

For protection under the M-V Act, one of the following must determine a student's homeless and unaccompanied status annually:

- Local liaison (school or school district)
- Runaway and Homeless Youth Administration (RHYA)-funded shelter director or designee
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-funded shelter director or designee
- College financial aid administrator

Unaccompanied homeless youth

Do you live in any of the following situations apart from your parents and with no financial support from them? Then, you may be eligible to be declared as an unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY).

- In a shelter, motel, vehicle or campground
- On the street, in an abandoned building or in another inadequate space
- Doubled-up temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to stay
- In a dorm, but with nowhere else to stay when the dorms close
- Supporting yourself, but on the verge of losing housing

Acquiring and maintaining identification

It is wise for homeless youth to have their Social Security (SS) card and birth certificate to prove their identity and U.S. citizenship when necessary. This information may be necessary for access to various programs, completion of applications and employment. While the process for securing these documents vary from state to state, most states will allow homeless youth to provide the following documents to get a SS card:

- Medical record from a physician

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- Religious record from a church or clergy
- School ID
- Employee ID
- Health insurance card
- Military ID

All documents must display name, date of birth/age and preferably a recent photo.

After a SS card is secured, students can use the SS card to attain their birth certificate, which is needed to then acquire an official government ID. For the official government ID application, students must present their SS card or birth certificate along with a school or employee ID.

Students will also need to use a reliable address where they have permission to receive mail for government documentation. Many schools, shelters, drop-in centers, churches and college administrator offices will give students permission to use their addresses for mail and applications.

Please keep these documents in a safe and secure place. With unstable housing, students may need to leave these documents with a trusted source for access and security.

Paying for college

Homeless students who are U.S. citizens have access to federal and state funding to attend college. Those who are not U.S. citizens do not have access to federal funding but may be able to receive state funding. Check with your school counselor or financial aid administrator for more information about your state's funding. In order to access federal and most state funding, homeless students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) annually. This application is available every year, beginning October 1, for paying for college the following fall. The application can be completed at <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>.

Other ECMC resource guides to assist in planning and paying for college are available online at www.ecmc.org/students/resource-guides.html.

To learn more about paying for college, download ECMC's "Paying for college" resource guide online, available in English and Spanish, at:

- English: www.ecmc.org/students/documents/paying-for-college-english.pdf
- Spanish: www.ecmc.org/students/documents/paying-for-college-spanish.pdf

To learn more about the FSA ID, download ECMC's "Preparing to sign your FAFSA electronically" resource guide online, available in English and Spanish, at:

- English: www.ecmc.org/students/documents/signing-your-FAFSA-english.pdf
- Spanish: www.ecmc.org/students/documents/signing-your-FAFSA-spanish.pdf

To complete the FAFSA, homeless students who are accompanied by their parents (and determined to be dependent for financial aid purposes) must provide the financial information for both the student and the parent(s).

If a student is designated as an UHY by those who can determine eligibility, they can complete a FAFSA without parental information. If the student is determined to be dependent for financial aid purposes, the student must work with their financial aid office to complete a dependency override. A dependency override will require supporting documentation. Students should speak with a financial aid administrator to learn more about the dependency override process.

Choosing a college

Homeless youth are encouraged to consider colleges and universities that are most supportive of students of this unique population. These schools tend to provide some of the following resources:

- At least one school dorm open during breaks (this is common among colleges with high populations of international students)
- "Host homes" in the community to host students during major holidays
- Single Point of Contact (SPOC) at the school

A SPOC is a trusted school official to share the student's homeless status and pertinent information. This person tends to work in collaboration with the school's financial aid office and is knowledgeable about ways to eliminate barriers to higher education for homeless youth on their campus.

Talk with your school counselor about schools that meet this description.

Applying to college

Because of the lengthy and detailed process that UHY must maneuver through, homeless students are encouraged to apply to two safety schools that are supportive of homeless youth to proceed with the financial aid process. Safety schools are schools where a student is most likely to be admitted due to their respective admissions requirements like GPA or SAT scores. After completing the applications for admissions and the FAFSA, homeless youth should contact those schools' financial aid offices directly to discuss their homeless and unaccompanied status. Students are encouraged to maintain ongoing communication with their schools of choice regarding dependency status and financial information.

Other resources

For more information on accessing college as a homeless youth, check out the following websites:

- Homeless Youth Handbook: www.homelessyouth.org
- National Center for Homeless Education: <https://nche.ed.gov>
- National Coalition for the Homeless: www.nationalhomeless.org

Need more information?

The College Place is here to help you with free college-planning resources and personal advice. Visit our website at www.ecmc.org/TCP.