



## WISCONSIN SCHOOL NUTRITION **IN A NUTSHELL**

# Meal Eligibility for Students Experiencing Homelessness

## **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ensures all children and youth experiencing homelessness receive access to the same free, appropriate public education as provided to other children and youth. Under McKinney-Vento, a student is identified as homeless if they lack a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence. The circumstances that may qualify children as homeless include:

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations.
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters.
- Having 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.
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Migratory students living in any of the circumstances described above.

*\*Unaccompanied youth living in any of the circumstances described above.*

## **Determining Meal Benefits**

Every public school district and charter school must designate an appropriate staff person as the homeless liaison. Homeless liaisons must be able to carry out their duties as required under the McKinney-Vento Act. An official of a homeless shelter may identify a student as homeless. Private schools may use documentation obtained from shelter directors, public school liaisons, or the State Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youth to determine a child's eligibility for free meals. Although the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act only applies to public schools, private schools are encouraged to establish a homeless or runaway liaison for this purpose.

- [Homeless Liaison Directory](#) lists the staff member responsible for performing these duties for every public Local Education Agency's (LEAs) in Wisconsin. LEAs are encouraged to develop procedures to ensure students identified as homeless receive the free meal benefits as soon as practicable.
- Acceptable documentation [7 CFR 245.2] to establish eligibility based on homelessness includes a list of names of homeless children with effective dates from the homeless liaison.
- On a Free & Reduced Meal Application if the "homeless" box is checked the application may not be processed until documentation is provided to support homelessness status.
- Determining Official should be alerted immediately when a child qualifies as homeless. Meal benefits are effective when the determining official is notified of the student's

homeless status. Backdating meal benefits is not allowed. A best practice is for the Determining Official and the homeless liaison to work together so the meal benefit is extended immediately upon a student determined as homeless.

- Students experiencing homelessness remain eligible for free meals for the duration of the current school year, regardless of a change in their living situation, and up to 30 days into the subsequent school year, due to the yearlong eligibility requirement [7 CFR 245.6(c)(1)].

### **Children Experiencing Homelessness Due to a Disaster**

Students experiencing homelessness due to a disaster are categorically eligible for free meals in the Child Nutrition Programs (CNP). In this situation, the homeless liaison makes a determination of homelessness and provides the determining official a list of all children determined homeless due to the disaster. Children certified for free or reduced-price meal benefits because of a disaster situation maintain their eligibility status for the entire school year and up to 30 days in the next school year [7 CFR 245.6(c) (1)]

### **Children Experiencing Homelessness Residing Within Another Household**

When a household hosting a homeless family applies for free and reduced-price benefits for their own children, the host family may include members of the homeless family as household members if the host family provides financial support to the homeless family. "Financial support" may include shelter, utilities, clothing, or food. When applying for benefits, the host family must also include any income received by the homeless family. The eligibility status for the host family is based on its income or other sources of categorical eligibility. However, as stated at 7 CFR 245.6(b)(8), the categorical eligibility of a child experiencing homelessness does not extend categorical eligibility to other children in the household.

- Children determined to be homeless are categorically eligible for free meals, regardless of the eligibility determination for the host family's children.
- Acceptable documentation [7 CFR 245.2] to establish eligibility for homeless children residing in another household includes a list of names of homeless children, effective dates and the signature of a homeless liaison or an email from a homeless liaison provided to the school's Determining Official.

### **Additional Resources**

- [Free and Reduced Meal Eligibility Webpage](#)
- [Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#)
- [National Center for Homeless Education - Access to Food for Students Experiencing Homelessness](#)