



## Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY)

Policy Brief prepared for the California Department of Education (CDE), Homeless Education Program

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### Issue

Governor Newsom approved and signed AB 27, now CA Ed Code § 48851, on September 29, 2021. This law requires all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) receiving American Rescue Plan funds for Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) to implement a housing questionnaire to help identify students experiencing homelessness. To support implementation of CA Ed Code § 48851, the Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) 21-2022 PLUS Fellows researched the following question: ***What are the best practices for using a housing questionnaire and implementing a housing questionnaire?*** This report shares findings from our research and recommendations for future work.

### Methods

There were three main methods used to conduct research throughout the fall semester of 2021:

1. Interviews with Homeless Education Technical Assistance Center (HE TAC) Coordinators
2. Interviews with Homeless Student Liaisons at County Offices of Education and at LEAs by HE TAC region
3. Conducted a literature review of policy and research

## Findings

Below are key findings from the research conducted by the PLUS fellows:

**LEAs are using a housing questionnaire**, and almost all have it online as part of enrollment. Most have used the CDE questionnaire as a model or resource for creating their own questionnaire, or they are using the CDE questionnaire.

**Training is necessary** to support housing questionnaire and identification at school sites. Liaisons stressed the importance of educator and staff training and communication to successfully track homeless youth and children. All liaisons work with school staff and teachers to identify and track families who may be experiencing homelessness. Specifically, Alejandra Chamberlain of the Contra Costa County of Education, emphasized the importance of staff training on how to explain the purpose of the questionnaire to families and the potential benefits families could get from completing the questionnaire truthfully.

**Community partnerships** are key to identification and tracking students. Some districts and county offices have partnerships with local homeless shelters. They are able to work with the local shelter and other organizations to coordinate services and track families.

**Accessibility, phrasing & frequency** are all critical to make housing questionnaires effective. Many liaisons mentioned that most families who may be in need of assistance use smartphones to complete any digital forms. If the form is a PDF that needs to be completed digitally and then uploaded and submitted to an online system or emailed, it can be challenging for families to submit. It is best for the form to be a digital form that can be easily accessed and submitted on a smartphone or with a school computer. Additionally, the form must be translated into multiple languages to accommodate families who do not speak English. Since the form must be available in hard copy and various languages per AB27, it might be good for the CDE to clarify this requirement with LEAs and COEs. Two interviewees mentioned the phrasing of the first question in a version of the CDE form asked about “permanent housing”, which was interpreted in different ways by families and led them to not continue completing the form even if they identified with living situations that could be served by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

**Regular communication with county offices of education** is helpful support for LEA liaisons to implement best practices within their LEAs. Some HE TAC coordinators described at least monthly outreach to district liaisons, and offering trainings at district offices or school sites when requested. Regular emails and newsletters that they sent out to liaisons with updates, and both had online toolkits available to liaisons to collaborate and share resources can be helpful for liaisons. These communication strategies and meetings were also replicated by some district liaisons with the school based liaisons they support.

## Recommendations

Below are recommendations for future work and consideration:

- **Identify which LEAs are not administering a housing questionnaire**, and provide support to comply with AB 27. All of the people interviewed were shining star examples for using a housing questionnaire and identifying homeless students. However, it is clear from statewide data that there are many LEAs that are struggling with identification. Finding and compiling a list of which LEAs are currently not using a housing questionnaire, and providing training opportunities to these LEAs for how to begin implementing a housing questionnaire would be the first step.
- Support identification through **partnerships with community agencies**. Several liaisons emphasized the need for more community partnerships, and greater community awareness of McKinney-Vento rights. One district (Poway Unified) conducted significant outreach to community organizations. The liaison for this district let organizations know the definition for homelessness under McKinney-Vento, and gave organizations copies of the district's housing questionnaire. This is an example of a practice that could help improve identification, and should be replicated as much as possible by other LEAs with local organizations and agencies like local housing authorities. Coordination across these entities could help streamline the process, and help prevent families from having to navigate multiple processes.
- Publish or provide **trainings on best practices** for administering a housing questionnaire. Given the immediate deadline for implementing AB 27, many LEAs will need support with administering a housing questionnaire this school year. The CDE's Statewide Homeless Conference was a tremendous step in the right direction. Given all of the work happening within different counties and LEAs, sharing a compilation and synthesis of some best practices would be helpful for LEAs that are struggling or have liaisons who have multiple responsibilities.
- Continue **training educators** on identification. Educators and school staff should continue to be trained each year by each homeless liaison in best practices for identifying and tracking homeless children and youth.
- Greater conversation on the **use of the term "homeless"** to address the stigma surrounding the term. There is a lot of stigma surrounding the term homeless and many liaisons, parents, and students, do not like using the word. Some liaisons use other terms such as "in transitional housing" or "unhoused." More discussion on this term needs to happen in order to ensure that any children or youth who are experiencing homelessness will benefit from services and help they can receive.

- Continue interviews with LEAs to **increase sample size**The counties and districts interviewed were referred based on their successes identifying students. To better understand the scope of the problem, the team should do outreach to less-known counties and districts to understand their practices.
- Further examine best practices for housing questionnaires. While some interviewees mentioned difficulties, others explained how they had navigated switching to online forms or using a hybrid of both online and paper forms.
- Make housing questionnaire **repository** available to LEAs across the state. Interviewees explained they collaborated with other schools and districts to learn how others were identifying students and share their tools. Our initial collection of forms could be valuable to districts who do not have established relationships with other districts and schools.