



Catalyst for Positive  
Community Change

# Project Report

UNITED COMMUNITY SERVICES OF JOHNSON COUNTY, INC.

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## Homelessness in our Schools: Meeting the needs of a growing homeless student population in Johnson County, Kansas

Homelessness is an unrecognized reality in Johnson County, and children and youth are a significant portion of that population. In the 2009-2010 school year, the six Johnson County public school districts reported 746 homeless children and youth attending their schools, which was a 30% increase from the prior school year and a 131% increase from two school years earlier. Based on projections from a mid-year count of homeless students December 1, 2010, the Johnson County schools may have more than 1,000 homeless children and youth by the end of the 2010-2011 school year.

School District	School Year		
	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
Blue Valley	12	16	19
Spring Hill	8	10	27
Gardner Edgerton	22	38	32
De Soto	13	0	38
Olathe	82	202	265
Shawnee Mission	186	310	301
<b>Total:</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>576</b>	<b>682</b>

The U.S. Department of Education defines a homeless child or youth as one that lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence and includes those children who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing or economic hardship (or doubled up), those living in motels or campgrounds for similar reasons, those living in emergency or transitional housing, abandoned in hospitals, or living in a place not meant for human habitation such as in cars, public spaces or abandoned buildings.

### ***Mounting a Response***

In 2010, United Community Service of Johnson County in partnership with the six Johnson County Public School Districts, members of the Johnson County Continuum of Care on Homelessness, and with supportive funding from the H&R Block Foundation, launched a year-long project to bring together those in the community serving local homeless children and their families. The purpose was to establish new communication and collaborative networks and develop strategies to better assist students who were homeless and their families meet their basic needs and succeed academically.

The Johnson County Continuum of Care (the Continuum of Care) is the local homeless assistance program planning network and was created to respond to the needs of the homeless in the county. It is made up of over three dozen organizations and their staff who collaborate to provide housing, services, and supports for local homeless and near homeless Johnson County residents. Through an analysis of gaps in existing programs and services, the Continuum of Care recognized that it had not effectively engaged local school districts or worked with them to ensure targeted programs and services for homeless students. Similarly, the school districts' homeless liaisons reported that their school systems did not have any programming specifically intended for those students who are homeless. Schools often struggled with balancing a desire to meet these children's needs and assuring that they do not feel stigmatized or further isolated by being publicly identified as homeless while meeting McKinney-Vento Homeless Education requirements. Homeless liaisons that attended a meeting of the Continuum of Care stated that they had not been networking or problem solving with one another to better serve these students. Communities across the country have established successful partnerships between school districts and Continuums of Care to meet the needs of their children and youth experiencing homelessness. A coordinated set of strategies to meet the needs of this underserved population was needed in Johnson County.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, initially established in 1987 and subsequently amended most recently with the signing into law of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) act on May 20, 2009, requires that all state educational agencies must ensure that each homeless child and youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as other children and youth. The act also assures a multitude of services, supports, and protections for this population including prohibiting



## Rights of Homeless Children and Youth

- Right to immediate enrollment even when records not present
- Right to remain in the school of origin, if in the student's best interest
- Right to receive transportation to the school of origin
  - Support for academic success



schools from segregating homeless children within their schools, requiring that local educational agencies (LEAs) provide transportation for them to and from a school of origin and admit them into their school of choice, and that each school district designate a local liaison to coordinate these services and resolve disputes. McKinney Vento legislation applies to all of the six Johnson County school districts.

Local organization and agencies who serve those who are homeless also have a responsibility to these students and their families, and one of the goals of the project was to not only connect the schools' homeless liaisons with each other but to connect them in a more systematic way to organizations that could be a resource for their students' families. Schools and homeless service providers were brought together in this process to share their experiences, resources, and to develop strategies that could be implemented now and in the future to improve the lives of homeless children.

### ***How Homelessness Affects Children and Youth***

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty's report "*Homeless Children and Youth: Causes and Consequences*", stable housing plays a pivotal role in the overall health and well-being of children and youth, and thus those who are without stable housing and other co-occurring challenges are at risk for multiple problems. Research indicates that children and youth who live in shelters have inadequate intakes of necessary nutrition (e.g., iron, magnesium, zinc or vitamins).<sup>3,4,9</sup> Children who are living in homeless families and unaccompanied youth also have a greater risk of experiencing mental health problems, including disruptive behavioral disorders, social phobia, and major depression,<sup>1,2,5,8</sup> compared to their stably housed counterparts. They are also more likely to witness or experience violence both prior to and following homeless episodes.<sup>1,2</sup> Finally, homelessness contributes to poor educational outcomes for children and youth. They are more likely to have to repeat grades, change schools three to five times in a 12 month period, and miss a week or more of school in a three month period.<sup>6,10</sup> This in turn leads to a greater likelihood of testing below their grade level in reading, spelling, and mathematics, needing special education services, and not completing high school.<sup>6,7,10</sup>



Between data shared from the State of Kansas Department of Education and conversations with local homeless liaisons, a picture of a homeless student in Johnson County began to emerge. During the 2009-2010 school year, approximately 85% were living "doubled up" or with family and friends due to a loss of housing, with the other 15% living in shelters, transitional housing or unsheltered. Very few (less than 1%) were unsheltered. Most were living with their immediate or extended family members, with others split among family or friends. The majority or about two-thirds of the homeless students identified in Johnson County schools, were in elementary school vs. at the secondary level (middle and high school). However, given that students must self-identify as homeless and the number identified is unlikely to reflect the full number who are homeless in the schools, it is unclear if families with elementary level children are at greater risk for homelessness or if those children who are older are less likely for a variety of reasons to self-identify as homeless.

Local homeless liaisons reported that the age of a student was somewhat predictive of the kinds of problems they were more likely to experience in the school environment. Students who were homeless and at the elementary level were more likely to be experiencing academic problems while those who were in middle or high school were more likely to struggle with mental health issues. Perhaps most disconcerting is that school representatives reported that for the majority of their students this was not the first time that they had been homeless, although an increasing proportion of homeless students identified were first timers. This was attributed to job losses in the recent economy and the lack of replacement job opportunities available. Families that are homeless for the first time are often not well connected to community supports and so present additional challenges to the liaisons who must then not only meet the student's needs but are often called on to act as a pseudo-case manager for the entire family.

### **Local Priorities for Action**

School homeless liaisons and representatives from several homeless service providers convened to create a list of priority actions that would make the greatest difference for homeless students and their families and which were feasible to consider (vs. requiring so many resources or changes in the law that they were extremely unlikely).

<b>Top Ten Priorities</b>
1. Flexible funds to assist in paying for 'non-academic' extracurricular activities and family transportation to critical events
2. Funds or waiver of fees to enable homeless students to attend after-school care before being returned to their temporary housing and related transportation (shelters have limited child care)
3. Access to emergency shelter options (2-3 days in motel or such) and related resources for families
4. Using enrollment to identify likely homeless students, place information in registration packet, training staff prior for clues, knowing criteria
5. Implementation of a standardized checklist of available services, supports and standard way to connect students to needed supports
6. Train all school staff on rights of homeless students, their enrollment and contact protocols so there is one standard point of entry into system for all
7. Train targeted school staff on Johnson County's Caseworker Resource Center (an electronic database of programs and services by geography) to better connect students/families with additional supports
8. Train all shelter and homeless service providers in how to connect with school districts using a standardized form that asks for specific information about the student and their needs
9. Set aside one Continuum of Care meeting a year to address the issues of homeless children and youth, and hear from each of the 6 school districts about new issues and opportunities
10. Plan for how to manage needs for transportation, other guaranteed supports when federal/state supports used up, alternative funding stream, partnerships with others

Several of the priorities were accomplished within the project's timeframe. September has been designated as the Johnson County Continuum of Care on Homelessness' meeting to focus on homeless children and youth, with each year the school districts' homeless liaisons presenting and providing updated contact information for the school year to homeless services providers that attend the meeting. Many of the homeless liaisons now regularly attend monthly Continuum of Care meetings in order to strengthen their relationships with providers in the community and learn of resources for their students and families. The Executive Team of the Continuum of Care voted in 2010 to recruit and retain one school district liaison as an Executive Team member in order to assure the perspective of the homeless student was represented in the Team's decisions.

Homeless liaisons received a demonstration presentation of Johnson County's Caseworker Resource Center which can be used as a tool to connect to local resources for their families – some were familiar with the system while others were not or felt that other staff would be more appropriate to train. As research into why families with children most often became homeless suggested that lack of affordable housing, extreme poverty and decreasing governmental supports combined with other factors to increase a families risk for homelessness, the Continuum of Care worked with one of its members, Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas, to develop and submit a grant application to the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2010 for a Housing First grant. This grant would provide housing and related supports for homeless families with children in Johnson County, and if received could be renewed.

The Shawnee Mission School District connected to a local large church within its boundaries with a long history of community involvement and received a grant of flexible funds to meet the immediate needs of homeless students in their school district. A single point of entry protocol was developed for homeless services providers as a way to connect with each of the school districts when they began working with a homeless family with school age children. Catholic Charities also shared its resource of a local hotel that had agreed to offer a special Homeless Household rate for families in need. A standardized form was created for all homeless liaisons to be able to access this special rate for their families as needed.

*"Our school has benefited from the increased awareness the project brought - homeless students and their families are coming forward having been told by others that we can help!"*

Both school districts and agencies in the community have reported that the changes and increased awareness from the project have benefited them. Examples include when teachers and select staff from Northview Elementary in Olathe took a “field trip” to the Olathe Family Lodge, an emergency family shelter sponsored by the Salvation Army. The principal wanted staff to better understand what the families of their homeless students were experiencing and how that affected the children, and subsequently to improve the school’s response to this population. Catholic Charities’ staff reported that the increased coordination since the Olathe School District implemented a systematic way of connecting homeless families with students to all eligible supports through an email list and raising awareness among local principals of the role they play in assuring McKinney Vento services has made a significant difference for her families. One contact lead to enrollment in free lunches, the waiving of school enrollment fees and a meeting to determine transportation needs.

**Moving forward**

In 2011 and the future, local homeless liaisons and the Continuum of Care’s membership will work in concert to improve services and supports for homeless students in multiple ways. Both schools and Continuum of Care members will identify policy and practice changes that raise awareness of the rights of homeless students and identify resources to fund needed activities. Each will also work to develop new partnerships with other organizations, the faith community, and businesses to assure that the needs of homeless students and their families are met and that these children and youth have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in school. Additionally, UCS, as an active participant in the Metro-wide Homelessness Task Force, will continue to bring attention to the issues facing those that are homeless in our county, especially those homeless families with school-age children, and influence the recommendation of future strategies and programming in the metropolitan area.

**In January 2011, a one day count of homeless in the county found that 53% of the literally homeless – those living in emergency shelter, transitional housing, or in places not meant for human habitation such as a car or on the streets - were less than 18 years of age. 168 children were homeless on January 26, 2011 – up from 61 just two years earlier.**

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