**Guidance on Supporting Homeless Students During the State of Emergency**

August 24, 2023

On Tuesday, August 8, 2023, Governor Healey declared a [state of emergency](https://www.mass.gov/news/governor-healey-declares-state-of-emergency-calls-for-support-for-newly-arriving-migrant-families) due to rapidly rising numbers of migrant families arriving in Massachusetts in need of shelter and services, coupled with a severe lack of shelter availability in the state. Governor Healey’s emergency declaration calls for urgent action, including solicitation of federal resources from Congress and the Biden Administration.

This guidance document provides information on:

* State homelessness policy context, state of emergency, and impact on districts;
* Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) newcomers support resources for school districts;
* DESE homeless student support resources for school districts; and
* Supplemental funding available to support school districts with homeless students.

**State homelessness policy context, state of emergency, and impact on districts**

Massachusetts, the only “right to shelter” state in the country, is required to house eligible families facing homelessness. The state is working to continually expand its Emergency Assistance (EA) shelter capacity for additional families needing housing. Currently, more than 5,900 families (nearly 20,000 individuals) are in state shelters across the Commonwealth. Many of these individuals are school-aged children.

The Healey-Driscoll Administration has set up a command center to address the crisis, employing a cross section of state agencies, including the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC), the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA), the Executive Office for Administration and Finance (A&F), the Department of Public Health (DPH), the Executive Office of Education (EOE), the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC).

As soon as DESE learns of a planned shelter expansion within a given community, DESE alerts impacted school districts; however, given the on-demand nature of EA shelters, DESE’s ability to provide advance notice to districts is limited. When informing districts of shelter expansion plans, DESE staff will be available to provide technical assistance to impacted districts and schools and can serve as a liaison to convey local stakeholder concerns back to the Commonwealth’s command center team.

**DESE homeless student support resources for school districts**

Districts and schools across the Commonwealth have considerable experience serving homeless students under the [McKinney-Vento Act.](http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim) DESE collaborates with other state agencies and community providers to offer technical assistance, guidance, and support to districts and homeless families in order to ensure that homeless children are able to enroll, attend, and succeed in school.

More details can be found on DESE’s website on the Office of Student and Family Support’s [Educational Stability resource page](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/edstability.html). DESE’s [McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Advisories](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/mv/advisories.docx) *(download)* guidance document provides further details regarding the role and responsibilities of the [school district’s homeless liaison](https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search.aspx?leftNavId=11239); relevant content on school placement, transportation, and enrollment; and parental enrollment decision forms. Brochures and flyers can be found on DESE’s [McKinney-Vento webpage under Guidance and Resources](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/mv/).

Additional information can be found in the Frequently Asked Questions at the end of this guidance document.

**DESE newcomers support resources for school districts**

DESE is committed to providing technical assistance to districts to support newcomer immigrant students and families, many of whom may be English learners. This group is expected to grow with the influx of migrants and shelter expansion initiatives. As noted in the Commissioner’s Weekly Update, DESE’s Office of Student and Family Support and Office of Language Acquisition are hosting a two-part webinar series.

The first webinar took place earlier today and reviewed DESE’s “[Enrolling and Supporting Newcomer Students in Massachusetts Schools and Districts Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/guidance/newcomer-faq.docx)” guidance document.

The second webinar will take place on **Thursday, September 28, from 3:00-4:00 p.m**. In this webinar, district representatives and practitioners will share best practices and ideas, especially around student enrollment and support. Please register for this webinar [here](https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZMkc--qrzguG9DvJJpDQFEGy7hTh5-KFsh7?utm_source=DA-Commissioner%27s+Weekly+Update&utm_campaign=a930e3b6fa-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_08_07_11_41&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-a930e3b6fa-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D#/registration).

You can find additional resources for supporting English learner students on the [Office of Language Acquisition’s webpage](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/). The following may be especially useful:

* [Resources for Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Students](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/resources/immigrant-refugee.html);
* [Guidance on English Learner Services and Programming](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/guidance/services-programming.docx) *(download)*; and
* [Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE).](https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/slife/default.html)

**Supplemental funding available to support school districts with homeless students**

Supplemental funding is available to districts with significant numbers of homeless students, including additional state funding to support students and families in eligible EA shelters. These funds can be used to provide tutoring and academic support, professional development, engagement of homeless parents in their children's education, access to mentoring, and after school and summer programming.

The [FY2024 Fund Code 344: Homeless Emergency Support Grant](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2024/344/) is currently available and can help address immediate needs such as laptops, hotspots, clothing, or other supports for eligible students.

Other opportunities for additional funding for school districts include:

* State’s Supplemental Budget (Chapter 2 of the Acts of 2023) for students housed in state eligible homeless shelters
  + $104 per eligible student per day enrolled in the district, distributed quarterly
  + Equivalent to $18,000 annually per eligible student, the state’s annual per pupil rate
  + Reimbursement requests are submitted and verified with quarterly payments made directly to the district
* McKinney-Vento Homeless Transportation Reimbursement
  + The Healey-Driscoll Administration provided increased funding in the FY24 state budget to support transportation to students’ schools of origin
* Massachusetts Migrant Families Relief Fund
  + Newly established fund will distribute donations through local organizations to support families with essential needs and services such as clothing, health screening, and legal assistance.

**Frequently Asked Questions for Districts on Supporting Homeless Students**

**How is homelessness defined?**

Homeless children and youths areindividuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. For additional information about the definition of homeless children and youth, please see DESE’s [McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Advisories](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/mv/advisories.docx) *(download)* guidance document.

**How do I enroll a homeless student?**

Students who are homeless must be enrolled immediately regardless of whether they have required documentation.

**What documents do I need to enroll a homeless student?**  
None. Homeless students must be enrolled immediately.  
  
**What if limited or no records exist?**  
The district should work with families to compile available documentation and seek alternative means to fill any gaps of unattainable records. This way, the student will begin to have a current portfolio of records. Keep in mind that online forms can be a barrier for homeless families.

* **If students are missing health records or birth certificate:**
  + Contact the previous school, if possible;
  + Consider requesting a release from the parent/guardian to speak with the child’s pediatrician to determine health and age;
  + Refer the parent/guardian to a local pediatrician to facilitate acquiring necessary records, where possible;
  + Check [the Massachusetts Immunization Information System (MIIS)](http://massimmunize.org/miis/pagesLogin/welcome.jsf) to see if enrolling students have records entered in the system from vaccines given since they arrived.
* **If students are missing academic records:**
  + Contact the previous school, if possible;
  + Schools should serve students based on information from students and parents/guardians;
  + Classroom observations and assessments should be done to help determine appropriate placements and services.

**What is a school of origin for a homeless student?**

A school of origin for a homeless student is the school the child or youth attended when permanently housed, or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled and attended, including a preschool. When a child or youth completes the final grade level served by the school of origin, the school of origin includes the designated receiving school at the next grade level for all feeder schools. Based on parental choice, homeless students are entitled to attend their school of origin or enroll locally.   
  
**Does transportation have to be provided for a homeless student?**  
Yes, under McKinney-Vento, students who are homelessare entitled to transportation, if needed, to return to their school of origin.

Transportation must:

* Be comparable to what is being provided to their peers within the district.
* Meet state pupil transportation requirements.

**Which district pays for transportation to the student’s school of origin?**  
The school of origin and the school in the community in which the student lives mutually agree upon a method to apportion the responsibility and costs for providing the transportation to and from the school of origin. If the local educational agencies are unable to agree upon a method, the responsibility and costs for transportation shall be shared equally between the districts.  
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**What if the student is unaccompanied (no parent or legal guardian)?**  
In the absence of a parent or legal guardian, Massachusetts state law allows for a Caregiver Authorization Affidavit for medical and educational decision-making rights.   
  
**What must be included in a** [**Caregiver Authorization Affidavit**](https://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=4979)**?**

The following must be included:

* Must identify the student (name and DOB)
* Must be signed by the parent and the caregiver
* Must be notarized

Please note that Caregiver Authorization Affidavits are valid for up to two years and can be revoked or overridden by the parent at any time.

**What resources are available to support school districts in determining whether new students may need to be referred for special education supports?**

To support schools and districts in meeting their requirement to identify children who might need to be referred for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education, DESE has created [sample customizable letters and posters](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/ta/docs/child-find-resources/) for child find purposes. These materials, translated into numerous languages, might be useful for providing information to homeless families and those who are supporting them in the community (such as physicians, social workers, etc.).

**How is the state evaluating and updating immunizations for newly arrived migrant families?**

DPH has contracted with John Snow Inc. (JSI) to perform an immunization assessment with all newly arrived children and their families currently residing in hotels or emergency shelters. The assessment includes collecting vaccination history and uploading immunization records into the Massachusetts Immunization Information System (MIIS). In response to this assessment, JSI will deploy DPH-contracted VFC-certified, mobile vaccination providers to provide required immunizations to children. Mobile vaccinators will return to provide subsequent doses to children in a vaccine series. A subsequent deployment of mobile vaccination will focus on adult immunization. Concurrent efforts will continue to ensure migrant children and their families are linked to a primary care medical home as soon as possible.

**How can schools partner with local boards of health?**

Many school districts have an existing partnership with their local board of health on public health issues affecting students and families, including childhood immunization. DPH encourages all districts to reach out to their respective local board of health to explore ways to strengthen that partnership. Local boards of health may seek guidance from DPH on establishing an immunization program for children.

**How can the public help?**

Information about how the public can help is available at [mass.gov/shelter crisis](https://www.mass.gov/help-families-in-crisis).

Anyone who can offer assistance should contact the state at [shelterhelp@mass.gov](mailto:shelterhelp@mass.gov) or by dialing 211, which will be monitored by the [Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-emergency-management-agency)**.**

**Where can I find more information about homeless education?**

Additional resource links:  
[McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/mv/)[Training Modules](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/edstability/training.html)[The National Center for Homeless Education](https://nche.ed.gov/)[National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth](https://naehcy.org/)[SchoolHouse Connection](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/)