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

Revised: September 9, 2024

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 newly arrived families arriving in Massachusetts in need of shelter and services, coupled with a severe lack of shelter availability in the state. As the shelter system reached compacity, in November 2023, the Administration declared that the Emergence Assistance shelter system had reached its maximum capacity of 7,500 families. On August 1, 2024, the overflow sites transitioned to Temporary Respite Centers (TRC) which allow families to stay for up to 5 full business days with some limited administrative extensions possible beyond that. Many of the individuals in EA shelters and TRCs are school-aged children. Governor Healey’s emergency declaration called 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’s (DESE) [New Student Assistance - Center for School and District Partnership (CSDP)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/csdp/New-Students/) which provides resources for school districts;
* DESE’s [homeless student and family support](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/mv/default.html) 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 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).

When DESE learns of a planned shelter expansion within a given community, DESE alerts impacted school districts with outreach to the Superintendent; however, given the on-demand nature of EA shelters, DESE’s ability to provide advance notice to districts is limited. DESE staff are available to provide technical assistance to impacted districts and schools and can serve as a liaison to share information from local stakeholders with the Commonwealth’s Incident 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 (EL). We have seen the growth of the EL student population with the influx of newly arrived families and the expansion of shelters.

DESE has recently updated the “[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.

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.

Other opportunities for additional funding for school districts include:

* State’s Supplemental Budget ([Ch. 88 of the Acts of 2024](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2024/Chapter88)) for students housed in eligible state homeless shelters
  + $104 per eligible student per day enrolled after October 1, 2023 in the district.
  + This funding is appropriated by the Legislature for allocation through December 2024.
  + Reimbursement requests are submitted and verified with SIMS data.
  + Payments made directly to the eligible districts.
* McKinney-Vento Homeless Transportation Reimbursement
  + The Healey-Driscoll Administration along with the Legislature have been supportive of providing state funds for transportation to students’ schools of origin through the state’s annual budget and the EA supplemental budget.

**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.

\*As per Massachusetts State law, immediate enrollment in a charter school is not permissible. Students who are homeless must apply to enroll in a charter school and submit an application prior to an upcoming application deadline, which vary by school. For further information, please consult [Charter School Technical Advisory 16-3: Enrollment Processes and FAQs](https://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/guidance/2016-3.html) or contact [charterschools@mass.gov](mailto:charterschools@mass.gov).

**What documents do I need before enrolling 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.

**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/guardian 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 families?**

DPH has contracted with John Snow Inc. (JSI) to offer an immunization assessment with all newly arrived children and their families currently residing in hotels and emergency shelters.

The assessment includes collecting vaccination history and uploading immunization records into the Massachusetts Immunization Information System (MIIS).

In addition, DPH deploys mobile vaccination resources weekly to the Quincy and Allston Family Welcome Center to provide Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR), Varicella and pertussis (whooping cough) vaccination for newly arrived children and their families. Influenza and COVID-19 vaccination will be added in early September.

**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. <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/)