

Connecting Students to the Homelessness Response System & Addressing Housing Instability:

10 PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR CALIFORNIA INSTITUTIONS OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

1. Know your community's coordinated entry access points, and refer students experiencing homelessness to access points.

A Coordinated Entry System (CES) is a process that communities use to assess and connect people experiencing homelessness to services and housing. Access points are localized community gateways to the homelessness response system where people are assessed using a standardized tool, and eligibility and need for various housing or services is determined.

Campuses should familiarize key campus staff with coordinated entry access points in the community, including the physical address and/or virtual or phone access depending on the type of access point. Campus staff should note which access points might be most youth-friendly, and in communities with Youth Coordinated Entry Systems or youth-specific access points, campus staff should refer students to these locations.

Campuses can use this roster (<https://www.jbaforyouth.org/coc-roster/>) to contact their Continuum of Care to learn about their community's access points. For a small number of communities, Coordinated Entry Systems are not yet operational. In these cases, campuses can find information on the roster for who to contact to connect youth to services.

2. Co-locate with a housing or services provider that administers assessments for coordinated entry.

Campuses should consider partnering with a local provider that administers assessments for coordinated entry so that students in need of services or housing can be assessed on campus. Campuses can enter into an MOU with the Continuum of Care or with one of their contracted providers to provide office space to a housing or peer navigator once or twice per week. This strategy reduces barriers for homeless students to receiving services.

Campus staff who come into contact with a homeless student can set up an appointment with the navigator, or students can contact the navigator directly. The navigator's contact information should be posted and circulated widely, and ideally should be co-located with basic needs or support services on campus. The navigator's time can be funded by the provider using government funding, such as a CES or housing contract from the Continuum of Care or through a behavioral health contract.

3. Ensure key campus staff are familiar with eligibility for various housing options.

It is important that campus staff have a general understanding of the HUD definitions of homelessness, and eligibility for the various housing options available. Campus staff should also be aware of any service providers who offer support to students who are housing insecure but who may not qualify for housing through the homelessness response system. (These students should still be referred to an access point – providers who administer CES assessments can inform youth of other options that might be available for them).

Campus staff should have a general understanding of eligibility for extended foster care and for the THP-Plus program for former foster youth so that these youth are being referred to their child welfare agency, Independent Living Skills Program or THP-Plus provider instead of going through the Coordinated Entry System. Information about extended foster care can be found here: <http://www.jbaforyouth.org/ca-fostering-connections/>. Information about the THP-Plus program for former foster youth can be found here: <http://www.jbaforyouth.org/thp/>.

4. Use touch points with students strategically.

When distributing emergency housing vouchers, campuses should ensure students are connected to the local homelessness response system.

When distributing any basic needs resources, campuses should take advantage of this opportunity to check whether this student might be eligible for independent student status by way of a homeless determination on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and if so, whether this student is currently classified as an independent student. An independent student does not have to provide any parent or guardian information on the FAFSA, which, if the student has little to no income, will qualify them for need-based aid. A homeless student eligible for independent status on the FAFSA is a person who “was determined at any time since July 1 [year prior to award year], to be an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless.”

Campuses should also post information in food pantries, support offices, health centers, etc. about access points or local providers, and contact information of any on campus support staff such as homeless youth liaisons or housing navigators. The roster of homeless youth liaisons, which California Community Colleges and California State Universities are required by law (EDC § 67003.5) to designate on campus, is available on this webpage: <http://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org/resources/>.

5. Attend care coordination meetings in your community.

Care coordination meetings are held to discuss individual cases (clients) to provide holistic, coordinated and integrated services across providers and to reduce duplication. If campus staff that work with homeless students are permitted to attend these meetings, this provides an opportunity to better collaborate with community-based providers to meet the needs of the students experiencing homelessness. To inquire about care coordination meetings, campuses should contact their Continuum of Care using this roster (<https://www.jbaforyouth.org/coc-roster/>) or contact a local homeless services provider.

6. Get involved with Continuum of Care stakeholder meetings during critical input periods.

Continuums of Care convene stakeholders to gather input during a planning process, usually associated with new funding or system redesign. These meetings are open to the public. Attending stakeholder meetings during critical input periods will help ensure that key populations (i.e. homeless youth, homeless students) are represented in the development and distribution of services. At these meetings, campuses can raise awareness about the prevalence of student homelessness in their community and describe the challenges specific to homeless students.

7. Participate in the Homeless Point-in-Time (PIT) Count in your community.

HUD requires as a condition of funding, that Continuums of Care conduct an annual count of homeless persons who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night, and a count of unsheltered homeless persons every other year. Some communities choose to count unsheltered persons annually, and/or conduct counts using broader definitions of homelessness to inform their own local planning processes. The information gathered in this count is the main source of data used by the federal government to track the number, demographics and needs of people experiencing homelessness, and determine federal funding allocations to address homelessness.

Each PIT Count is planned, coordinated, and carried out locally, organized by the Continuum of Care, and requires the efforts of many community volunteers. Campuses should encourage key staff to volunteer for the PIT Count in the community, and to ensure homeless students are counted. PIT Counts generally take place in January. To get involved with the PIT Count, campuses should contact the local Continuum of Care using the PIT Count Roster (https://www.bcsb.ca.gov/hcfc/documents/pit_count_coc.pdf).

8. Ensure your campus' financial aid policies address student homelessness.

Campuses should ensure their financial aid administrators (FAAs) are well-trained and advised on how to make a homeless determination. If a homeless student is unable to receive a homeless determination from one of the three individuals authorized to provide a determination other than a FAA, it is critical that the FAA is well-versed on the process and understands and appreciates the challenges of being a homeless student. FAAs have significant discretion when making a determination and are permitted by the Federal Student Aid (FSA) Handbook to base the determination on a documented interview with the student if there is no written documentation available (AVG-117).

Reevaluate Cost of Attendance based on individual circumstances. Eligibility for need-based aid is determined by taking the Cost of Attendance (COA), which is the total amount it costs to attend college (tuition, housing, books/supplies, etc.); and subtracting the Expected Family Contribution, which is the amount the student is determined able to contribute (parent or personal income, assets, household size, etc.). In some cases, a student's COA is calculated to be lower than their true cost of attendance which impacts the amount of need-based aid a student will be awarded. The FSA Handbook indicates that FAAs may take special circumstances into consideration and adjust a student's COA (AVG-111). The special circumstances listed include being homeless. In cases where homeless students qualify for more financial aid than the amount of their determined unmet need, the financial aid office should use their discretion to reevaluate COA for this student.

Prioritize special populations in timing of disbursements. The timing of the disbursement of financial aid varies by institution, and often across students. Some students receive their financial aid disbursement sooner than others. For students experiencing homelessness or housing instability, a timely disbursement can be critical. Schools can and should opt to prioritize certain student populations (such as homeless students) in the timing of their disbursements to ensure that these students receive their aid in a timely manner.

Modify appeals policy to make homelessness an extenuating circumstance. Schools may permit appeals when a student loses their financial aid because they failed to make Satisfactory Academic Progress. According to the FSA Handbook, students may appeal on the basis of special circumstances (Volume 1, 1-17). Schools should permit appeals, and state in their appeals policies that homelessness is considered a special circumstance which warrants continuation of financial aid.

9. Ensure your campus is fully implementing Assembly Bills 1393 and 1228.

Assembly Bill 1393 (Skinner, 2009) which went into effect in 2010, established priority housing for current and former foster youth at California State Universities and University of California campuses, and requested priority housing for these populations at California Community Colleges. The requirements refer to student housing generally, in addition to year-round housing or housing that is open for the most days in a calendar year, without additional charges during breaks.

Assembly Bill 1228 (Gipson, 2015) which went into effect in 2016, added current and former homeless youth to the population of students eligible for priority housing as described in AB 1393. The definition used for current and former homeless youth is a youth who was homeless during the 24 months preceding their application to college and under age 25.

10. Consider providing temporary housing on campus.

Campuses with student housing should consider setting aside dormitories to be used as emergency, short-term housing for students experiencing homelessness. This can serve as a vital resource for students who are waiting for referrals to housing through the homelessness response system, and for students who do not qualify for housing and need time to identify alternate housing options.

Another strategy to assist students in need of emergency housing is to provide hotel vouchers. This strategy can supplement short-term dorm housing, or for colleges that do not provide student housing, can be a viable option to provide support.

GLOSSARY

Continuum of Care (CoC): A Continuum of Care (CoC) is a regional planning body that coordinates housing and services for homeless families and individuals. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as amended by S. HEARTH Act of 2009 consolidates three of the separate homeless assistance programs administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under the McKinney-Vento Act into a single grant program—the Continuum of Care Program. CoCs administer this HUD funding, usually by contracting with local service providers to deliver housing and services. There are 43 Continuums of Care in California.

United States Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD): The Department of Housing and Urban Development is the principal federal agency responsible for programs concerned with the nation's housing needs, fair housing opportunities, and improvement and development of the nation's communities. HUD grants money annually to Continuums of Care across the country, including the 43 in California. Homeless services are organized and delivered on a local level to encourage responsiveness to the needs of specific communities.

Coordinated Entry System (CES): The Coordinated Entry System serves as a “front door” to connect people facing homelessness to housing and services. Coordinated entry is a process developed to ensure that all people experiencing a housing crisis have fair and equal access and are quickly identified, assessed for, referred, and connected to housing and assistance based on their strengths and needs. People are assessed using a standardized assessment tool, such as the VI-SPDAT. Some communities have separate Coordinated Entry Systems for youth, and may utilize a more youth-friendly tool, such as the Next Step Tool.

Coordinated entry access points: Coordinated entry access points are localized community gateways to the homelessness response system where an intake assessment is conducted using a standardized tool, and eligibility and need for various housing or services is determined. Access points can be non-profit housing or service providers, drop-in centers, schools, or any place where people experiencing homelessness can easily visit. Some communities have youth-specific access points, or entire youth-specific Coordinated Entry Systems.

Provider: An organization or agency that provides services and/or housing. Providers that operate within the homelessness response system receive funding through a contract with their Continuum of Care.

Homeless Point-in-Time (PIT) Count: HUD requires as a condition of funding, that Continuums of Care conduct an annual count of homeless persons who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night, and a count of unsheltered homeless persons every other year. Each count is planned, coordinated, and carried out locally, organized by the Continuum of Care. The information gathered in this count is the main source of data used by the federal government to track the number, demographics and needs of people experiencing homelessness, and determine federal funding allocations to address homelessness.