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| PA Education for children and youth experiencing homelessness Educational Stability for Foster Care Youth in Pennsylvania | | |
| *Region 7 Newsletter*    PAhci pic  \\lius01\jzimmerman$\My Pictures\020638b6-187f-41c5-b3bd-67274670c19b.png | | |
| Our Mission  The Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program (ECYEH) is an initiative of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and is based on on the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This federal legislation ensures that homeless children and youth have access to a free, appropriate, public education.  The Region 7 staff is committed to ensuring that all students experiencing homelessness have the opportunity to succeed in school.  We provide training on the following topics:  **McKinney-Vento 101** –A basic overview of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Participants will gain  an understanding of the challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness, including the specific challenges faced  by unaccompanied youth. Characteristics of homelessness and identification strategies will be explored. Training can be  modified for general audiences or specific staff members.  **New Liaison Training**- Designed to aid new LEA liaisons with information and background to serve as primary contact between homeless students and families and school staff.  **Monitoring Preparation**- Assist LEAs in preparation for state monitoring.  **Foster Care** – This training will provide a basic overview of school district responsibilities for foster care youth. Collaboration strategies and best practices in working with foster care youth will be explored. | | |
| **FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)** | | | |
| * **Important to remind students FAFSA is available so they can pursue as much financial aid as possible** * **An independent student is one of the following: at least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor, unaccompanied homeless youth, or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, or youth that have been in foster care at any time since age 13.** * **Per federal guidance, the determination process must focus only on whether a youth meets the legal definition of being unaccompanied and homeless, or at risk of being homelessness, rather than the reasons for the applicant’s homelessness.** * **The unaccompanied homeless youth status is not a professional judgement decision. Financial aid administrators are required to make a determination of UHY status based on the legal definition of homelessness.** * **The unaccompanied homeless youth status is not a professional judgement decision. Financial aid administrators are required to make a determination of UHY status based on the legal definition of homelessness. (McKinney-Vento definition)** * **If a student does not have and cannot get documentation, the financial aid administrator must determine if the student**   **is an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or is self- supporting and at risk of being homeless.**        **Five Quick FAFSA Tips for Liaisons**     1. Let seniors know that they can start the FAFSA process starting on October 1 (when the FAFSA becomes available), and inform them of their status as an independent student for financial aid. As an independent student, unaccompanied homeless youth do not need to include parental information on the FAFS 2. Write a determination letter for students. Liaisons can use the form provided. Some colleges might have their own verification form, so check the institution’s website. 3. Give the determination letter to youth. Even if youth aren’t sure about whether or not they want to go to college, make sure they   have the determination letter in case they decide to apply. Keep a copy so you have it in case you are asked by institutions,  and/or in case youth lose it. If students know what school they are going to attend, help them send it to the college via email.   1. Let youth know that they will need another determination letter next year (but new changes are coming to the law starting with the October 2022 FAFSA, so they should not need letters each year after that). 2. Connect youth to college access programs, homeless higher education liaisons, counselors, or other sources of assistance in completing the FAFSA and helping the student transition to higher education.   \*\*All Pennsylvania colleges have a foster care liaison. For the directory, please visit **pafostercare.org.** | | | |
| **A Most Overlooked Population of Students** By [Jacob P. Gross](https://www.insidehighered.com/users/jacob-p-gross)  As we look ahead to the coming semester, uncertainty and fear continue to hang over higher education. While we can hope the new vaccines will help us begin to return to normal, the coronavirus pandemic currently still rages on. Public health demands we maintain our distance and remain as careful and cautious as ever.  In this difficult time, we should be particularly concerned about an often-overlooked population of students at our institutions for whom fear and uncertainty are especially well-known: youth who were formerly in foster care. The assumptions we make about our students having consistent family support, housing, food security, adult mentoring and more may not hold true for these students. And although they are resilient in many ways, such students have already faced substantial systemic barriers to successfully earning a postsecondary credential.  Unless colleges and universities work deliberately to help students who’ve been in foster care continue to navigate the pandemic, even more barriers may arise. For campuses with no or limited support for these students, this is an opportunity to lay the foundations for providing such support in a much more robust way post-pandemic. To do that, institutional leaders must first educate themselves about challenges these youth face and then take steps to mitigate those challenges.  **High Aspirations, High Barriers**  That youth who have experienced foster care have high aspirations but face considerable barriers to obtaining a postsecondary credential is well established in the research literature. For example, although an estimated 80 percent of those youth [hope to attend college](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26030989/), studies have found that only an estimated 3 percent to 5 percent successfully [complete an undergraduate degree](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.01.005), compared with 29 percent of the general population.  In normal times, the roadblocks to success include inadequate academic preparation, in part because these students have experienced high rates of mobility throughout K-12 education and have been more likely to attend under-resourced schools and be placed in special education. In fact, only about half of youth who’ve been in foster care complete high school, compared to around 80 percent of the general population. In addition, these students are more likely to struggle with mental health issues related to past traumas and to lack the adult support and mentorship they need to navigate enrolling in and attending college.  Finally, such students often don’t have the financial resources to pay for higher education, including tuition, fees, housing, food and other associated expenses. In fact, despite federal aid programs that provide some financial support, they may be less likely than their other first-generation and low- income peers to apply for it.  Researchers, social workers and student services personnel across the country are striving to better understand how to support youth who have formerly been in foster care and lessen barriers to degree completion. But more work is needed. The hurdles I’ve described suggest key areas in which campus leaders should work to mitigate possible negative effects of institutional plans on these students. A one-size-fits-all checklist for leaders is not realistic, given the diversity of youth who experienced foster care and the variety of colleges and universities in the United States. But asking questions like the following can be a good starting point.  **Who on Campus Is Paying Attention to the Needs of These Students?**  The first step college leaders should take is to recognize that at least some youth who have experienced foster care are probably enrolled in their institutions, especially in community colleges and less selective four-year institutions. Although you may have no clear way to identify every one of these students, it is important to understand that they exist -- and to question who is paying attention to the varied and specific needs they have at your institution.  Some institutions have established support programs, such as the nationally known [Seita Scholars program](https://wmich.edu/fosteringsuccess/seita) at Western Michigan University or the [Great Expectations program](http://greatexpectations.vccs.edu/) across Virginia’s community colleges. Such programs are relatively rare but appear to be growing. They provide mentoring, academic support, food and housing support, direct connections to social workers, mental health care, and financial aid, among other assistance.  These programs are especially important in the midst of the pandemic. In fact, they may provide the model of holistic support for our most vulnerable students, whether they have been in foster care or not. COVID-19 has brought into even sharper relief the social and economic disparities throughout our society and specifically higher education. Those of us who work in community colleges or access-oriented institutions are almost certainly seeing in a new way the breadth of needs -- including health care, mental health and access to computers -- a wide range of our students have.  But most institutions do not have such programs, and creating them amid budget restraints and cutbacks may be close to impossible. In that case, campus leaders should consider designating a senior administrator as a point of contact who can help them be more aware of foster youth in their planning and decision making. For example, that person can help ensure that contingencies are made in online learning plans for students like foster youth who lack internet access and regular use of a personal computer. The point of contact should also be a visible resource to whom foster youth and other students can reach out if they need help.  **Are Basic Needs Being Met?**  For many students who’ve previously been in foster care, campus housing and dining may have been a source of consistent shelter and nourishment for them, providing the foundation from which they could focus on their studies. But as institutions have limited the number of students who can live in residence halls and dine on campus, these students may have no stable place to live and find food.  In reviewing plans, institutional leaders should consider how to prioritize foster youth with respect to campus housing. For example, even if an institution shuts down some residence halls completely, how might those students be allowed to live on campus? And if they cannot, what supports -- such as connections to local housing authorities and programs -- should be put in place? Another pressing basic need of many youth who have experienced foster care is help finding access to health care and health-care providers, including mental health assistance and medication management.  **Are Academic Supports Accessible?**  Accessibility to academic support -- both formal (e.g., tutoring centers) and informal (e.g., peers, faculty mentoring) -- is crucial for these students, especially if their classes are online due to the pandemic. That includes accessibility to faculty members, academic advisers and peers. We also know that the support of seasoned adults is important for all young college students, but that is especially true for youth who have been in foster care and have probably lacked consistent adult guidance in their lives. Institutional leaders must also take steps to ensure foster youth have reliable access to the internet and be cognizant of the extent to which other academic supports -- such as professional academic advising, writing centers, math tutoring, office hours and more -- are available in online formats.  **How Will Budget Shortfalls Impact Support for Former Foster Youth?**  Although study after study illustrates the resiliency of youth in foster care, one common challenge they face is a history of adults not investing in their lives. That history bears out in numerous ways, including the limited resources these students have to attend college -- in terms not only of money but also of know-how.  I have two key concerns. First, institutions face a highly uncertain budget landscape in the face of increased, necessary investment in the safety and health of students, possible enrollment declines, and loss of money from auxiliary services. Colleges and universities across the country have enacted budget stabilization efforts in the form of cutting budgets, furloughing employees, freezing or cutting salaries, and, in some cases, laying off or terminating employees. Although such steps may be necessary in the face of significant budget shortfalls, it remains to be seen whether they will disproportionately affect foster youth. Will these cuts undermine the staff support these students need? Will they impact the provision of mental health services for such students?  My second concern is in the area of finances and financial aid. Before the pandemic, evidence suggested that despite probably being eligible for need-based financial aid as well as federal aid specifically for them, youth who formerly have been in foster care were less likely than other low-income, first-generation students to [complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)](https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319994581#aboutBook). That has a variety of implications, including likely ineligibility in the current moment to receive emergency institutional grants available through Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The U.S. Department of Education allows institutions to award emergency CARES Act funds only to students who submitted a FAFSA. If foster youth students are not physically attending colleges now, do they still have the access they need to counselors who could encourage them to apply for aid?  **How Can You Help as an Individual?**  Even if you have no formal role at your institution in planning, you can play an important and immediate part in helping support youth who’ve formerly been in foster care. If you are not already aware of what your institution is doing to support them, educate yourself as much as possible. Then offer help to your colleagues supporting these students, and also look for opportunities to work directly with them, such as serving as a mentor.  If your institution doesn’t have a designated program or point of contact for working with such youth, you might look to your social work college or program. Or you can identify organizations in your community that work with them, such as residential facilities, private foster care agencies, social workers or youth advocacy organizations. It may sound clichéd, but simply asking, “How can I help support you?” can pave the way for impactful work. As you learn more about what your institution is doing, begin to advocate with others also engaged in supporting these students.  Institutional leaders face a seemingly unending and dizzying series of decisions about how to continue the important mission of higher education while keeping their communities safe. Those of us in higher education who work with and care about youth formerly in foster care must share the burden of helping campus leaders support this often overlooked yet highly resilient population of students during the pandemic. This is an opportunity to highlight the needs of this student population at our institutions and aid them in the current moment. Most important, however, it can perhaps even help us rethink assumptions about the support structures all our students do -- or don’t -- have.  *Jacob P. Gross is associate professor of higher education administration and director of the* [*Center for Economic Education*](http://louisville.edu/education/centers/economic-ed) *at the University of Louisville.*  Original link to article:  https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/01/25/colleges-should-do-much-more-support-students-who-have-been-foster-care-opinion    **Contact Information:**  **Jeff Zimmerman PA ECYEH Region 7 Coordinator**  **570-718-4613** [jzimmerman@liu18.org](mailto:jzimmerman@liu18.org)  **Darci Berti PA ECYEH Region 7 Program Specialist**  **570-718-4697** [dberti@liu18.org](mailto:dberti@liu18.org)  **Andy Kuhl PA ECYEH Region 7 Staff**  **570-718-4646** [akuhl@liu18.org](mailto:akuhl@liu18.org)  **Region 7 websites:** <http://www.liu18.org/index.php/ecyeh>  http://www.liu18.org/index.php/esfcy    **Storm Camara State Coordinator**  **717-772-2066** [scamara@pa.gov](mailto:scamara@pa.gov)  **PA ECYEH website:** <https://directory.center-school.org/homeless>  Resources:  PA ECYEH Website <https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Homeless%20Education/Pages/default.aspx>  Schoolhouse Connection [www.schoolhouseconnection.org](http://www.schoolhouseconnection.org)  NAEHCY [www.naehcy.org](http://www.naehcy.org)  National Center for Homeless Education <https://nche.ed.gov/>  PDE Family Resource Page <https://www.education.pa.gov/about/Resources/ResourcesFamilies/Pages/default.aspx>  PAhci pic | | |
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