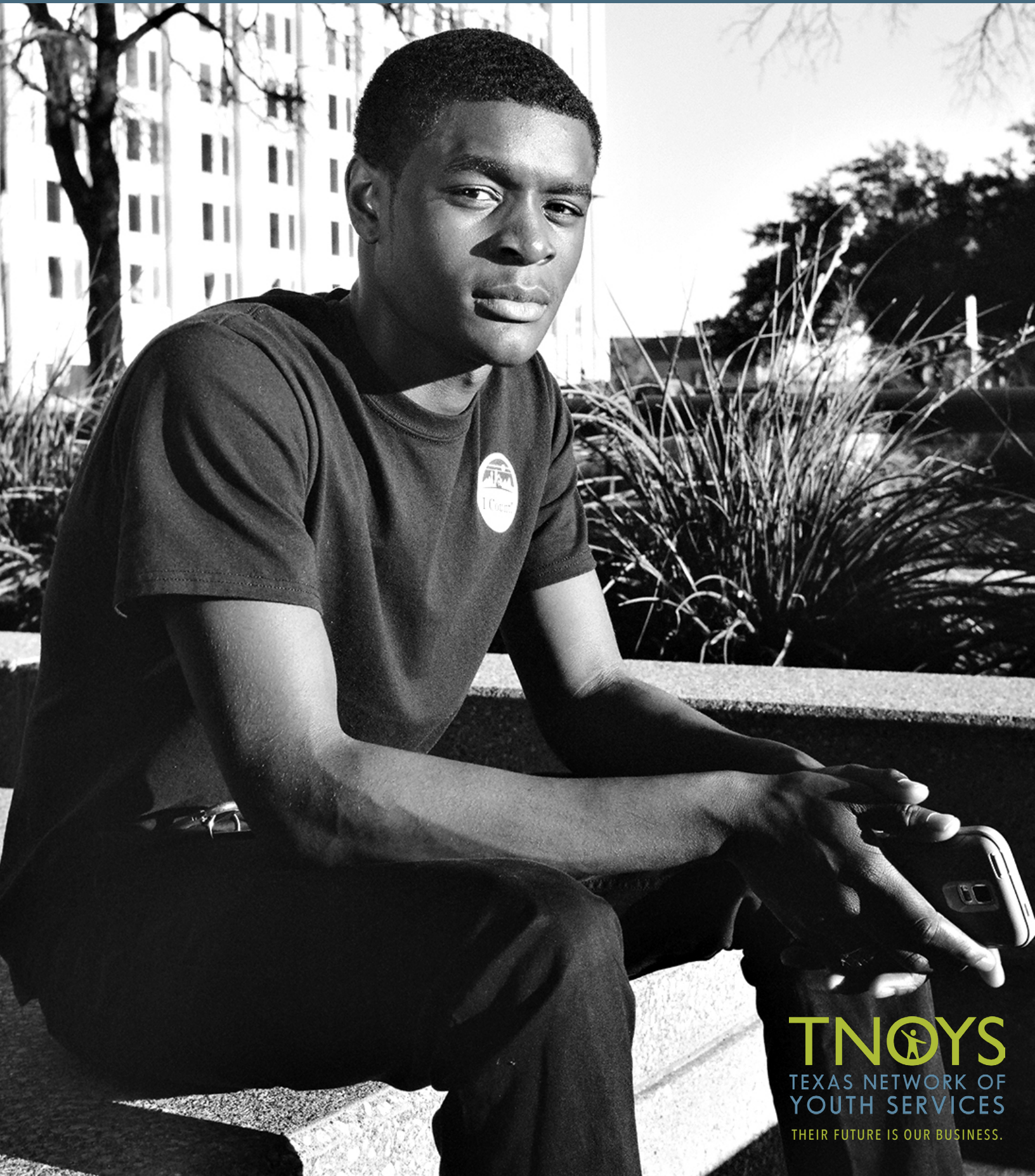


Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

Insights from a Survey of Homeless Liaisons in Texas Public Schools

MARCH 2017



TNOYS
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YOUTH SERVICES
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Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) is a statewide network of youth service organizations, with a mission to strengthen, support, and protect critical services for Texas youth and their families. TNOYS advocates for funding, policies, and programs that benefit youth; provides training and consultation services to youth programs; and works in partnership with youth to demonstrate their capabilities when adults invest in them. TNOYS was founded in 1980.

TNOYS completed a survey of Texas homeless liaisons in summer 2016 in conjunction with its work to coordinate and support the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs' Youth Count Texas! project. TNOYS was interested in hearing directly from those who work with homeless students in schools regarding needs of students who are homeless, capacity of existing community-based services, and other issues.

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BACKGROUND

The federal McKinney-Vento Act defines homelessness as lacking “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” which includes, but is not limited to, “living in emergency or transitional shelters... sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing or economic hardship... living in motels [or] hotels... [or having] a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.”¹

McKinney-Vento requires public school districts in Texas and across the country to designate homeless liaisons, tasked with identifying homeless students and facilitating their enrollment and attendance in education.² To that end, the McKinney-Vento Act provides the following specific provisions for homeless students: homeless students may attend their school of origin or the school in the attendance area where the family resides; homeless students must be permitted to immediately enroll in school, even if they lack records traditionally required for enrollment, such as residency documents or immunization records; transportation must be provided to the homeless student’s school of origin (if requested, even if the student moves outside of the school’s zone of attendance or the school district’s boundaries); and homeless students must not be segregated from a school’s general population, nor excluded from its typical programming.³

States are awarded formula grants by the U.S. Department of Education to implement McKinney-Vento Act provisions. According to an issue brief released by the Texas Legislative Budget Board (LBB) in May 2016, Texas received \$5.8 million in McKinney-Vento funding in 2015.⁴ The Texas Education Agency (TEA) administers these funds to school districts through a competitive sub-grant process carried out by the Region 10 Education Service Center (Region 10 ESC). Each year Region 10 ESC awards sub-grants to approximately 130 Texas school districts,⁵ or roughly 10 percent of the total school districts in the state in 2015.⁶ Regardless of whether a school district is awarded federal funding, it must comply with McKinney-Vento Act provisions. The Region 10 ESC also subcontracts with the University of Texas at Austin’s Charles A. Dana Center to support the Texas Homeless Education Office (THEO), which provides training and technical assistance services to school districts to support McKinney-Vento implementation.⁷

The Texas Education Code entitles students who are homeless to many of the same educational rights afforded by the federal McKinney-Vento Act in addition to other state-specific protections. For example, the Texas Education Code requires that a student’s records be transferred to his or her new school (if applicable) within 10 days.⁸ It also requires TEA to develop procedures to provide partial credit for homeless students who change schools during the school year, as well as promote practices that facilitate access to extracurricular activities for homeless students.⁹ The State of Texas does not appropriate state funds specifically for educating homeless children and youth or meeting relevant requirements in state or federal statute.¹⁰

PURPOSE

Texas public school districts identified 113,063 students who experienced homelessness during the 2014-2015 school year (approximately 2% of public school students in the state), including 12,101¹ unaccompanied homeless students.¹¹ This is an increase from the number of homeless students identified and reported by Texas school districts in previous years, partially due to improved data collection and reporting methods for homeless students.¹² The previously mentioned LBB issue brief highlighted the number of homeless students identified in Texas during the 2014-2015 school year and the state and federal legal protections designed to facilitate their educational success. There has been little discussion at the state policy level, however, regarding perspectives of Texas' homeless liaisons and whether they report having the resources and support needed to implement provisions of state and federal law.

To better understand the circumstances of Texas students who are homeless and those who serve them, TNOYS conducted a survey of homeless liaisons throughout the state in August 2016. The survey was developed by TNOYS, with input from researchers at the University of Houston and a number of homeless liaisons who volunteered to pilot the survey. The purpose of this policy brief is to share findings from TNOYS' survey and offer insight into how Texas can best support homeless liaisons as they work to ensure that legal protections for homeless students are met. The report also offers policy recommendations on how to better serve youth experiencing homelessness in Texas.

METHODOLOGY

There are currently 1,224 homeless liaisons designated by school districts, charter schools, and education service centers in Texas.¹³ TNOYS obtained email addresses for these liaisons through the THEO and emailed a link to an electronic survey on August 9, 2016. TNOYS left the survey window open until September 26, 2016, and sent two email reminders to liaisons during the survey window to encourage them to complete the survey. As an incentive for participating, TNOYS offered a raffle for a \$100 gift card.

Just under one-third (392) of Texas homeless liaisons responded to the survey. Most reported working in rural counties (63.2%), with the remainder split between suburban (12.8%), small urban (13.5%), and large urban (10.2%) counties. The vast majority of respondents reported serving as the homeless liaison for an entire district (83.2%), rather than a single school (12.2%). Just over 2.5% represented multiple schools, but not an entire district. The remainder indicated they did not fall into any of the above categories.

¹ This brief cites a finding by the TEA that Texas public school districts identified 113,063 homeless students during the 2014-2015 school year. *Youth Count Texas's* "Youth Homelessness in Texas" report put forth a slightly lower figure for the number of homeless students identified in Texas over the same school year. We recognize this discrepancy, and, for the purposes of this brief, we chose to use the figure that was most widely cited.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The following are findings from TNOYS' 2016 survey of Texas homeless liaisons.

FINDING 1: HOMELESS LIAISONS FIND IT CHALLENGING TO IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS.

A major challenge reported by homeless liaisons through the TNOYS survey was identifying students who are experiencing homelessness. Over one-quarter of respondents (27.4%) indicated their school or district has experienced challenges associated with identifying homeless students, and liaisons reported the identification of homeless students as the most difficult challenge they face. Despite the increase in the number of homeless students identified in Texas last year, more than one-third (36% or 141 of 392) of official homeless liaisons responding to this survey indicated they did not work with any homeless students during the 2015-2016 school year.

Challenges with identifying children and youth who are homeless are well documented. As noted in a recent brief from the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), both youths and their parents may conceal homelessness due to embarrassment or concern that they will be stigmatized. Parents may fear losing custody of their children, and some unaccompanied youth may not report homelessness to avoid a return to an unsafe family environment or placement into the child welfare system. In other cases, both school personnel and families may be unaware of the scope of the federal education definition of homelessness.¹⁴ Respondents mentioned many of these challenges in open-ended responses. Several also noted issues with forms used to screen for homelessness, both in terms of the wording of the forms and how to encourage students, parents, and staff to accurately provide the requested information.

Given the district-wide nature of their position, it is not surprising that fewer than half of liaisons (45.6%) indicated that students sought them out personally when needing services. Of the liaisons who reported they were not personally contacted by students, 98% indicated that another avenue for receiving referrals was available. For example, the vast majority (90.3%) of liaisons reported receiving referrals from other school personnel, and many (69.5%) reported obtaining referrals through the school assessments administered to all students. Some (42.5%) reported obtaining referrals through their engagement with students who are at-risk of homelessness and their families. Referrals from community organizations were less common (22.4%), as well as referrals from local homeless resources (16.4%). This suggests room for improving collaboration between schools and community providers.

FINDING 2: HOMELESS LIAISONS REPORT THEY DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO CARRY OUT THEIR DUTIES.

Challenges associated with identifying homeless students may be exacerbated by the broad purview of the positions of those serving as homeless liaisons. Most respondents reported serving at a district-wide level, and nearly 43% reported holding at least three separate job titles. Only 2% of respondents listed the word “homeless” as part of their primary job title. One particularly over-burdened respondent indicated that she had over 25 distinct job duties. Respondents also noted they have few hours in the day to devote to their homeless liaison duties. For the overall sample, the median amount of time that liaisons reported spending on homeless liaisons duties was just two hours per week. Respondents who indicated that they work directly with homeless students reported a median number of three hours per week.

Over 32% of respondents indicated they do not have enough time for their homeless liaison duties. In rural areas, this was slightly less of an issue – just more than one-quarter (26.7%) of those who responded to the question felt they do not have enough time. In suburban areas, nearly one-third of respondents (32.5%) reported not having enough time to carry out their homeless liaison duties. The figure was much higher, however, in small urban (46%) and large urban areas (45%). This finding is not surprising, given that school district data indicates urban areas have more homeless students, or at least identify more homeless students, than suburban and rural areas.

One homeless liaison serving urban middle-school students reported, “Instead of leaving at 4pm when I am allowed to end my work-day, I...end up staying past 8pm. I arrive to work at 7:30am many, many times due to all the duties that are tied to my position...And that’s without even getting a chance to touch on the homeless liaison [responsibilities].” Respondents generally affirmed public sentiment that teachers and other school personnel are over-worked and over-extended. According to a recent survey by the Texas State Teacher’s Association, school personnel spend an average of 17 hours per week outside the workday on school related tasks.¹⁵ Accordingly, TNOYS’ survey may actually underestimate the extent to which homeless liaisons are overwhelmed. It is quite possible that liaisons who responded to the survey had more time to do so than those who not respond. Furthermore, professionals with no time to dedicate to their homeless liaison responsibilities may have decided not to participate in the survey.

FINDING 3: HOMELESS STUDENTS ARE MOST IN NEED OF HOUSING AND SUPPORT SERVICES OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL.

As part of the survey, liaisons were asked to indicate if various services for homeless students and their families are available in their communities. The table below presents the five services that were most often reported lacking in the communities in which the liaisons work. Housing programs figured as the least available resources, from those specific to youth to general adult and family homeless shelters. Service unavailability was particularly acute in rural areas, with upwards of 93% of respondents indicating that there were no known youth shelters or transitional living programs in their area, and nearly 90% reporting there were no known homeless shelters in their community at all.

Service Unavailability By Program and Type of County				
	Rural	Suburban	Small and Medium Urban	Large Urban
Youth Shelter/Housing	93.20%	74.10%	52.20%	44.40%
Transitional Living Program	93.70%	79.20%	63.20%	50.00%
Other Homeless Shelter	89.40%	70.40%	34.60%	38.90%
Other Housing Program	85.90%	68.00%	55.00%	64.30%
Multi-Agency Referral System	76.20%	57.90%	69.20%	46.20%

Liaisons also ranked community needs in regard to youth homelessness. The top five identified needs are included in the table below.

Top Five Needs of Homeless Students as Reported by Homeless Liaisons
1. Supportive services outside school
2. Free lunch program
3. Connection to housing supports
4. School supplies
5. Transportation

Many respondents reported that they did not know whether certain services were available in their community. This is consistent with liaison responses to questions regarding the training that they receive. When liaisons were asked to rank the level of training they receive on various topics relevant to student homelessness, they ranked training on accessing community resources last (an average rank of 6.14 on a 10-point scale). Liaisons reported facing challenges related to inaccurate or outdated resource information and a lack of information sharing between community service providers and schools.

FINDING 4: HOMELESS LIAISONS ARE GENERALLY POSITIVE ABOUT THE SUPPORT THEY RECEIVE FROM THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND FROM THE COMMUNITY.

Homeless liaisons were generally positive about the training and support they receive, including support from their schools, school districts, and the THEO. Nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated they had received training specific to being a homeless liaison, and liaisons gave high ratings to training on service provision, advocating for homeless youth, and building rapport with homeless students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TNOYS recommends the following based on the findings in this report:

1. Increase training and support services for homeless liaisons in regard to strengthening referral systems and identifying students who are experiencing homelessness.

More than one-third of homeless liaisons who responded to TNOYS' survey reported that they had not identified any homeless students during the 2015-2016 school year. Given that the Texas school system identified 113,063 homeless students during the 2014-2015 school year, an increase over previous years, there are likely promising strategies for identifying homeless students that are not being employed across all schools and school districts. Consequently, homeless liaisons who are struggling to effectively identify homeless students could benefit from opportunities to learn best practices from liaisons from other schools and school districts who have been more effective in identifying students who are homeless.

There are indications that liaisons may also benefit from sharing strategies aimed at building and maintaining relationships with community-based organizations. Strong school-community partnerships could help homeless liaisons navigate community services, especially as the processes for accessing them are often changing. In addition to information sharing, these connections could be facilitated by organizationally supported opportunities for homeless liaisons to engage directly with service providers.

2. Limit competing duties for designated homeless liaisons.

It appears that in many cases homeless liaisons may be personnel with several competing job duties. Many are embedded into the school administration with full workloads apart from their liaison duties. The nature of the homeless liaison position, however, requires a liaison to take initiative and actively seek out students who need help, which can be time consuming on both the front- and back-end. The more work liaisons put into effectively identifying students who are experiencing homelessness, the more work they will need to put into ensuring that the needs of those students are met.

Relatedly, schools and school districts that do not effectively identify homeless students can easily contend that a dedicated staff position is not required to fulfill the homeless liaison's duties, and that such activities can be tacked onto an existing position with an already full workload. For these reasons, the competing responsibilities of homeless liaisons must be limited. In order to help ensure that the primary goal of effectively identifying and serving students who are experiencing homelessness is met, a liaison must be afforded the time to effectively carry out the duties of his or her position.

3. Increase information sharing and collaboration between homeless liaisons and community-based organizations.

The relationships between homeless liaisons and community-based organizations are extremely important, as liaisons are well positioned to introduce children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness to community-based organizations that can provide them with critical services. Given the turnover that exists among both homeless liaisons (and other school personnel) and staff at community-based organizations, these relationships are most effective over time when fostered and developed at the organizational level. Opportunities for school- and community-based organization staff to share information may need to be built into programming or scheduled on a regular basis. Local homeless coalitions and community services coalitions are ready-made venues for developing these relationships.

4. Strengthen and expand housing services and other community-based services available to homeless children and youth and their families.

In order for homeless liaisons to refer homeless children, youth, and families to community-based organizations for services, those services must be available. Homeless liaisons overwhelmingly indicated that services, such as emergency shelters and transitional living services, are not available in their communities. Research suggests that shelter, stability, and other basic needs are key contributors to educational success.¹⁶ Texas should consider investing in strategies that strengthen, expand, and support housing and other critical services for young people and their families who are experiencing homelessness.

CONCLUSIONS

Homeless children and youth in Texas face severe challenges accessing educational and supportive services that can set them on a path toward success in adulthood. As the principal institutional contacts for homeless children and youth, homeless liaisons are uniquely positioned to improve the circumstances of these young people. However, findings from TNOYS' survey suggest that the homeless liaison system has a range of structural shortcomings. Liaisons are often overworked and under-resourced, and such conditions diminish their ability to serve those experiencing homelessness. But if afforded the requisite training, time, and tools, liaisons could serve critical roles in the lives of students.

According to TNOYS' survey, homeless liaisons need more time to identify and serve homeless students. This could be accomplished by eliminating some of their competing job duties. They could also benefit from increased training on referral system development in addition to information sharing across schools and school districts on promising strategies for identifying students who are homeless. Their efforts connecting students with critical services could be enhanced with better information on the services in their

communities. Nevertheless, in some areas, existing services are not sufficient to meet the needs of homeless children and youth. An expansion of available services in such communities could improve student outcomes.

For many children and youth experiencing homelessness, the public school system may be the only state system with which they engage. Texas should leverage this opportunity to make a difference in the lives of young people by empowering homeless liaisons to do more than simply ensure that school districts comply with state and federal provisions regarding homeless students.

¹ National Center for Homeless Education. "The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: <http://nche.ed.gov/legis/mv-def.php>.

² Texas Education Agency. "Education of Homeless Students." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: http://tea.texas.gov/Texas_Schools/Support_for_At-Risk_Schools_and_Students/Education_of_Homeless_Students/.

³ Texas Homeless Education Office. "The McKinney-Vento Act At a Glance." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: http://www.theotx.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/MV_At_Glance.pdf.

⁴ Legislative Budget Board of Texas. "Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: http://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/Publications/Issue_Briefs/3088_Homeless_Students.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Morath, Mike. Texas Education Agency. "2014-15 Texas Public School Statistics." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=25769825221

⁷ Legislative Budget Board of Texas. "Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: http://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/Publications/Issue_Briefs/3088_Homeless_Students.pdf.

⁸ Texas Legislature Online. "S.B. No. 1494." (Accessed 2017, January 11) Retrieved from: <http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlodocs/84R/billtext/pdf/SB01494F.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Legislative Budget Board of Texas. "Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: http://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/Publications/Issue_Briefs/3088_Homeless_Students.pdf.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Education. "Total Number of Homeless Students Enrolled in LEAs with or without McKinney-Vento Subgrants." (Accessed 2016, October 17). Retrieved from: <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-element-explorer.cfm/tab/trend/deid/2478/state/TX/>.

¹² Texas Homeless Education Office. Email correspondence. (2016, November 17).

¹³ Texas Homeless Education Office. "Liaison Directory." Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin. (Accessed 2016, October 17). Retrieved from: <http://www.theotx.org/liaison/>.

¹⁴ National Center for Homeless Education. "McKinney-Vento Law Into Practice Series: Identifying Homeless Children and Youth." (Accessed 2016, November 22). Retrieved from: <http://nche.ed.gov/downloads/briefs/identification.pdf>.

¹⁵ Texas State Teacher's Association. "TSTA News: Nearly one-third of teachers moonlight to support families." (Accessed 2016, November 22). Retrieved from: http://tsta.org/sites/default/files/One-third_teachers_moonlight.pdf

¹⁶ National Center for Homeless Education. "Housing and Education Collaborations to Serve Homeless Children, Youth, and Families." (Accessed 2017, January 11). Retrieved from: http://www.theotx.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/housing_and_education_collab.pdf.

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