

# Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



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## Let's let fewer kids be homeless

*by Clinton Householder, staff attorney, and Shannah Carino, District Homeless Liaison and McKinney Vento Specialist, Akron Public Schools*

When you think of homelessness, you typically think of not having a roof over your head.

But the law actually defines homelessness much more broadly than that. It includes staying in an emergency shelter, staying with family/friends, living in your car, or being transient and constantly on the move.

For the last five school years, Ohio has seen more than 20,000 students experience homelessness, although those of us who work with students and families know that number is underreported and likely much higher.

Originally signed into law in 1987, the McKinney-Vento Act was passed to ensure that all students have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education, even if they are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness. Since that time, school districts throughout Ohio have put in place programs and support systems to help families facing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

So, you may be wondering: It's been 35 years. Why do we still have homeless children?

The core of the problem lies in the complexity of housing security, especially for low-income

populations. It's a carefully constructed web of income stability, health and safety, and education and access that create an environment where families can find a true home.

The easiest way to understand the issue is by sharing an example. Shayla\* is a woman we are working with who has been struggling with chronic homelessness. She had some prior issues with public housing. She can't get utilities in her name because of past-due utility bills and shut-off notices. She's been working for \$9.50 an hour at a local convenience store, even though she has a medical condition to where she really shouldn't be standing for long periods of time like her job requires her to do. But she has applied for and been denied disability and can't figure out the appeals process on her own, so against her doctor's wishes, she works. She hasn't received any tax refunds since 2018 because of a problem with her IRS record, which means she also didn't receive her federal stimulus checks during the pandemic. And last month, her landlord raised the rent on her by 25%.

Here is a person who is trying her best, but is shut out of burdensome, administrative systems that are virtually impossible to navigate on your own.

And it's not just her who suffers. It's her children.

When it comes to homelessness, children are often subjected to the realities that their parents or guardians face. So if the parents are negatively impacted by systems that they did not design and can't navigate, the kids are automatically set up to fail. They become collateral damage.

The fact is, for millions of Americans living paycheck to paycheck, housing stability is a delicate balance that can tip if just one factor shifts unexpectedly. It doesn't take much for families to end up being chronically homeless. It seems like they'll never get out of it, because there's just too much to overcome.

What's worse is that it can carry long-term effects for children. Children who move multiple times each year are more likely to have chronic health conditions and poor health outcomes, are less likely to have health insurance, are more likely to struggle with substance abuse and self-harm or suicidal thoughts, have a higher chance of having a learning disability, and are less likely to advance academically or even graduate. They're also more likely to witness violence. All these adverse events stack against them and cause them to start out behind their peers, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to catch up.

Experiencing homelessness is traumatic enough. No one should have to go it alone.

One way to combat these issues is by forging partnerships between school homeless liaisons and legal aid organizations.

It may not seem obvious, but all the issues we identified with Shayla have legal solutions:

The past public housing issues? A housing attorney can try to find a resolution and get her back into affordable housing.

The unpayable past-due utility bills? A bankruptcy can give her a fresh start.

Disability denial? A legal advocate can help her through the appeals process.

Tax issues? A tax attorney can help resolve her issues with the IRS.

Rent hike? A housing attorney can review her lease to see if her landlord's decision was legal.

And the best part of this partnership is this: while the legal aid attorneys are hard at work dealing with issues that you may need a law license to resolve, the school's McKinney Vento liaisons can focus on what they do best - devoting their time and energy to wrap around supports to help keep the kids engaged in school.

As poverty law experts, legal aid advocates are important and unique resources for anyone facing homelessness. So it seems like a natural partnership and resource for school personnel working with at-risk families.

Removing the barriers that keep families from having stable housing is one of the best ways we can combat childhood homelessness. There is no system that exists in our community to address these issues. We have to partner together to create that system ourselves.

*\*Name changed to protect client anonymity.*

*This article is part of Legal Aid's "Big Ideas" series.*

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