**mn DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

# Gaps Analysis Report

Programs and Services for Youth and Families Experiencing Homelessness

*Prepared by Bellwether Consulting and Humanize MN*

November 2024

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# Introduction

In early 2021, the U.S. Department of Education allocated $800 million nationwide via the American Rescue Plan and Secondary School Emergency Relief - Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) fund to address the extraordinary impacts of the COVID–19 pandemic on children and youth experiencing homelessness. ARP-HCY funds are intended to expand and improve systems in the areas of identification, enrollment, participation, and success in schools for children and youth experiencing homelessness. As part of this effort, Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) committed to enhancing collaboration with statewide partners in provision of wrap-around services and capacity building.

In 2023, the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness (MICH) formally adopted its most recent Crossroads to Justice Plan to coordinate enterprise-wide strategies around homelessness. As part of this plan, MDE, a MICH member, committed to completing a gaps analysis to identify where programs and services surrounding youth experiencing homelessness in Minnesota are disconnected, inadequate, or missing. MICH is comprised of the commissioners of 14 state agencies and the chair of the Metropolitan Council. It is accountable for leading the state's efforts to move towards housing, health, and racial justice for people experiencing homelessness by preventing homelessness whenever possible, and if homelessness does occur, to help ensure that it is rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

As a result, in early 2024, MDE contracted with Bellwether Consulting to conduct the Gaps Analysis, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. This report summarizes the findings of that effort.

# Data Findings

The following are four key findings from the quantitative data analysis. For more detailed quantitative analysis, see the Gaps Analysis Research Summary in Appendix A.

## Youth Homelessness is Growing

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ensures support for students experiencing homelessness to maintain educational stability. Since the 2020–21 school year, the identification of students experiencing homelessness has been on the rise. In the latest school year for which data is available, 2022–23, student participants totaled 17,744. Data on McKinney-Vento student identification reflects youth homelessness trends in Minnesota. However, this data excludes students not enrolled in public schools, youth experiencing housing insecurity but not McKinney-Vento eligible, and youth who have graduated or dropped out.

**Figure 1: Number of Minnesota students identified as McKinney-Vento eligible, 2018–23**



**McKinney-Vento identified students**
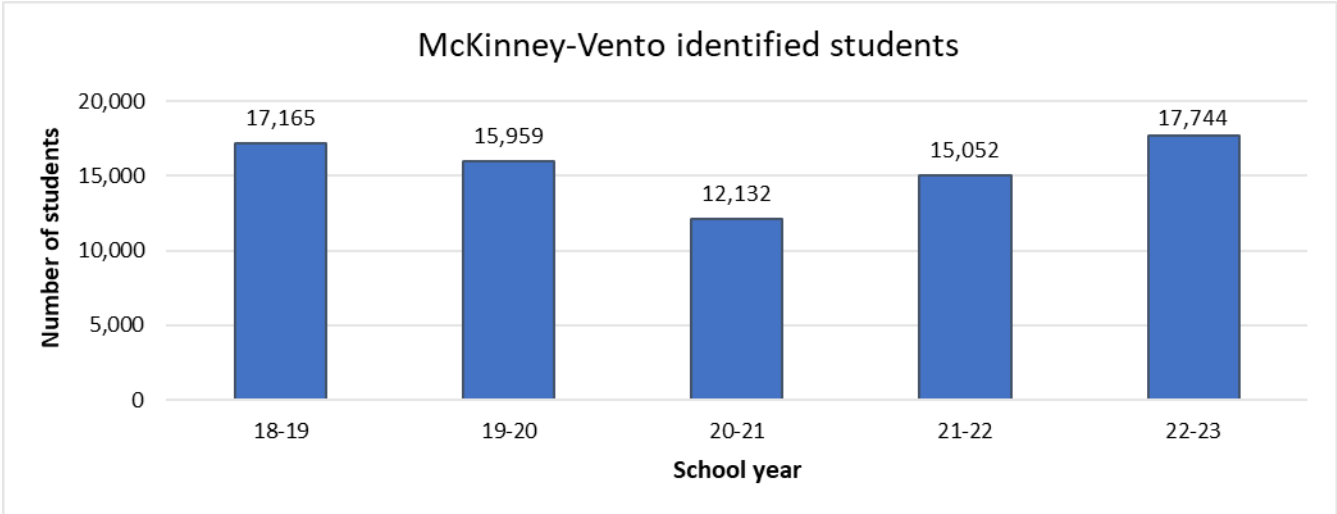
Source: MDE Student Enrollment Data, Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) End of Year (EOY) 2023

## Homelessness Disproportionately Impacts BIPOC Youth

Youth who are black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) disproportionately experience homelessness. In the 2022–23 school year, BIPOC youth comprised 34.3% of the statewide student population, but made up 77.7% of the McKinney-Vento identified students. Black, white, and Hispanic students have the highest numbers of McKinney-Vento identified students. However, North American Indian, Pacific Islander, and other indigenous students, are disproportionately McKinney-Vento identified compared to their total student population statewide when considering the percent of McKinney-Vento identified students by race and ethnicity compared to the statewide student population by race and ethnicity.

**Figure 2: Minnesota students by race and ethnicity, 2022–23**
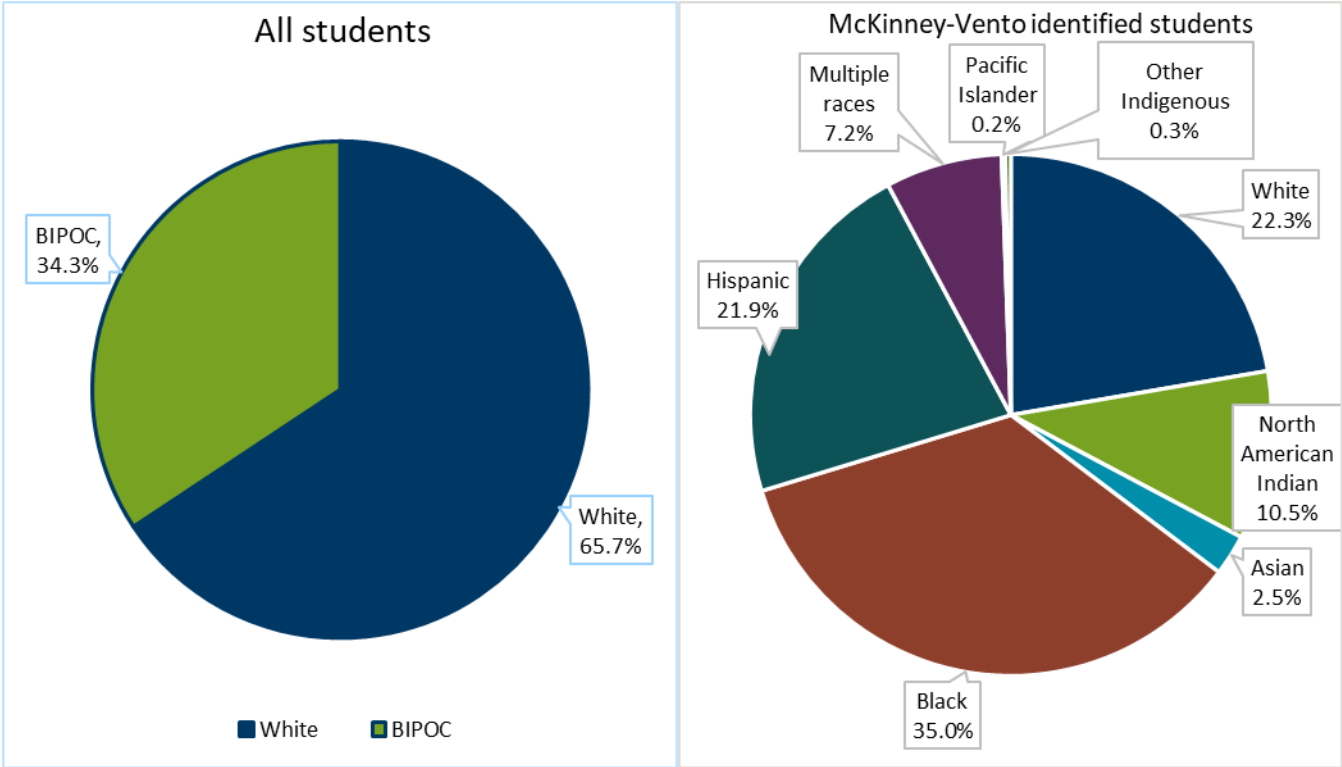


**Source: MDE Student Enrollment Data, MARSS EOY 2023**

## Homelessness Among English Learners is Growing Rapidly

As of the 2022–23 school year, 8.4% of students in Minnesota were English learners (ELs). However, 17.9% of McKinney-Vento identified students were ELs. The percent of students who are ELs is growing gradually; however, the percent of ELs also identified as McKinney-Vento eligible is growing more rapidly in comparison.

**Figure 3: Minnesota students who are ELs, 2018–23**
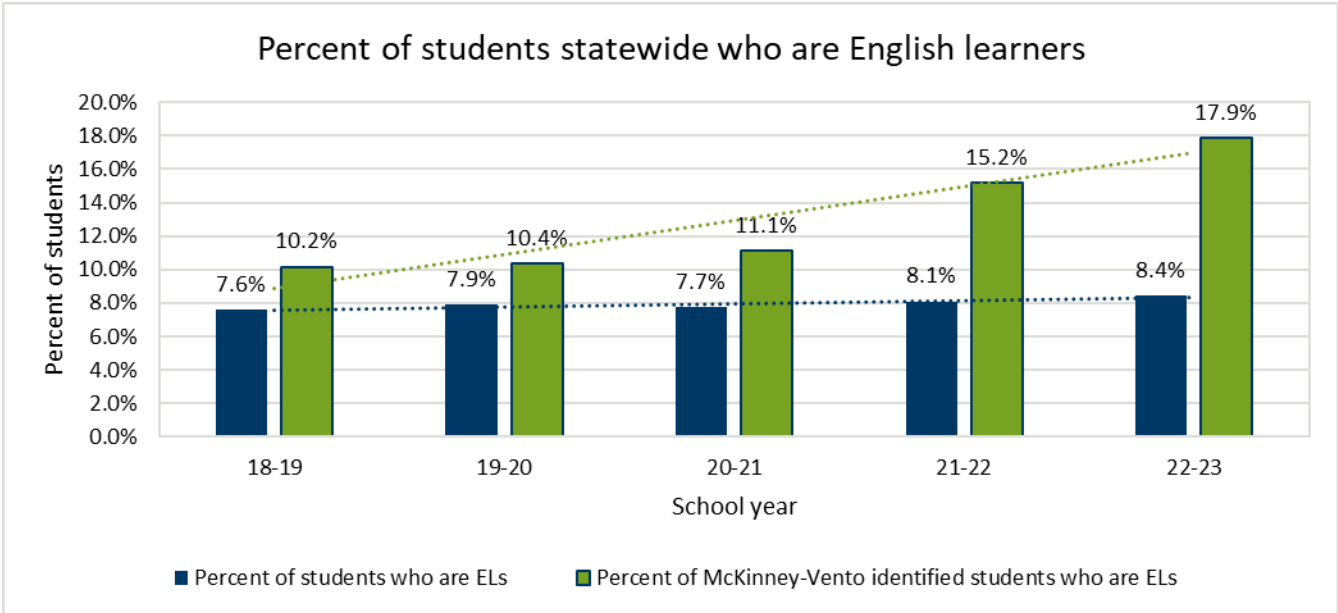


**Source: MDE Student Enrollment Data, MARSS EOY 2023**

## Homelessness Affects Educational Outcomes

Homelessness is closely linked to a student's academic outcomes. While graduation rates are increasing and dropout rates are decreasing across the board, McKinney-Vento eligible students are far less likely than their classmates to graduate high school in four or seven years and more likely to drop out.

**Figure 4: Minnesota graduation and dropout rates, 2018–23**
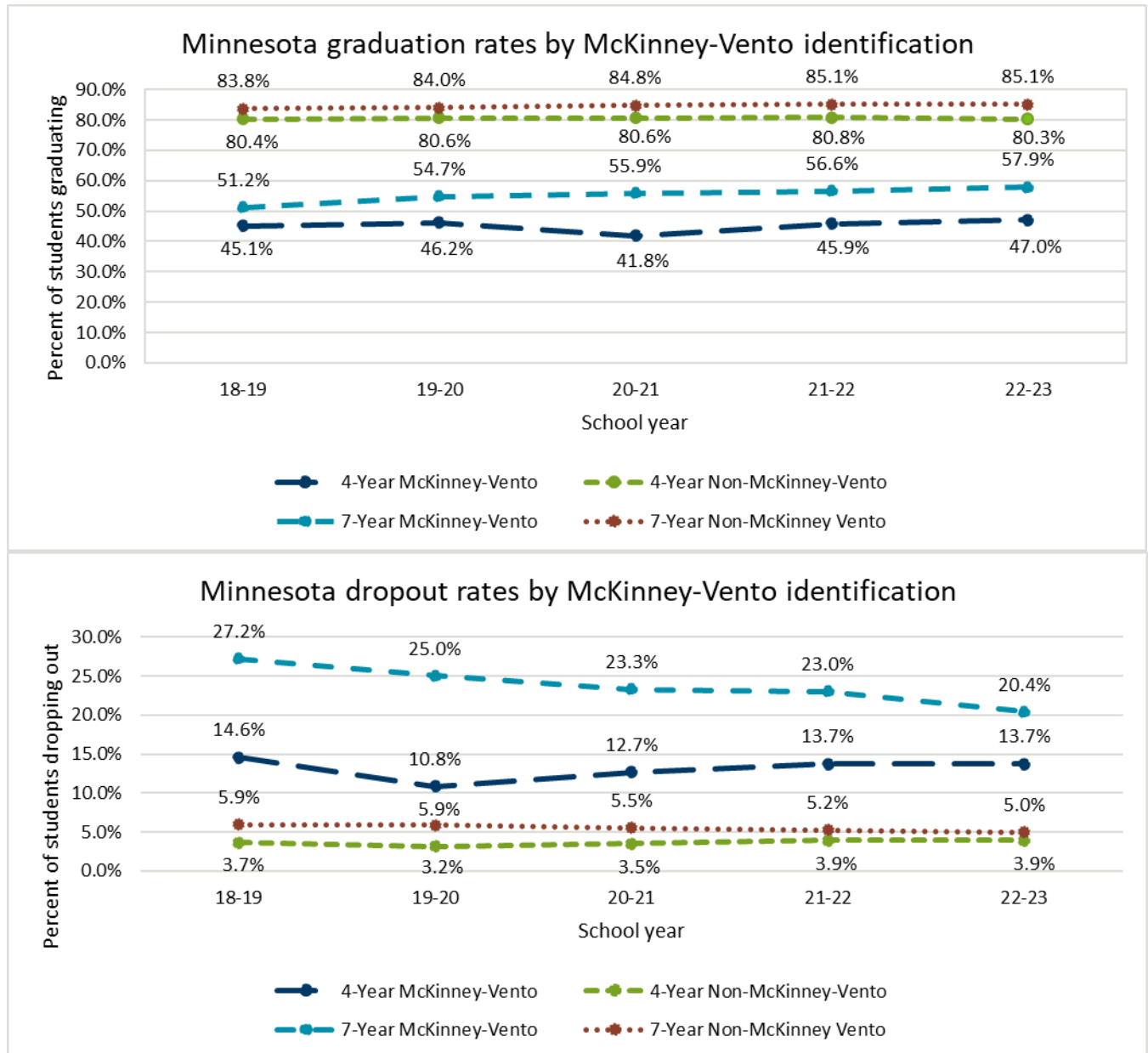


Source: MDE Student Enrollment Data, MARSS EOY 2023

Understanding the gaps in programs and services addressing youth homelessness is crucial for developing effective interventions. This data analysis reveals significant trends, such as the rising identification rates of McKinney-Vento eligible students and the disproportionate impact on BIPOC youth and English learners. These insights indicate that existing homelessness support systems may not reach or adequately address the needs of all youth in Minnesota. By identifying these gaps, MDE and other MICH agencies can tailor programs to better meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness to achieve educational success and improve life outcomes.

# Engagement Overview

In addition to the quantitative data analysis, this report identifies the gaps in programs and services for youth experiencing homelessness by analyzing stories, experiences, and feedback from people with different perspectives of the system. This approach values the insights of those directly affected by youth homelessness. Additionally, gathering a range of experiences, insights, and expertise from people with different roles or perspectives in the youth homelessness response system leads to a more comprehensive view of the complex challenges and needs of youth.

The people and organizations who provided input in the gaps analysis include state agencies, continuums of care (CoCs), and counties who administer programs and funding, Tribal Nations, community-based organizations (CBOs) and schools that provide direct services to youth and families, and the youth and families who use supportive services and programs.

**Figure 5: Gaps Analysis Communities**

**Program users**
Youth and families who use programs and services

**Providers**
Tribal Nations, CBO, and school staff who directly provide programs and services

**Administrators**
State agency, CoC and county employees who administer programs
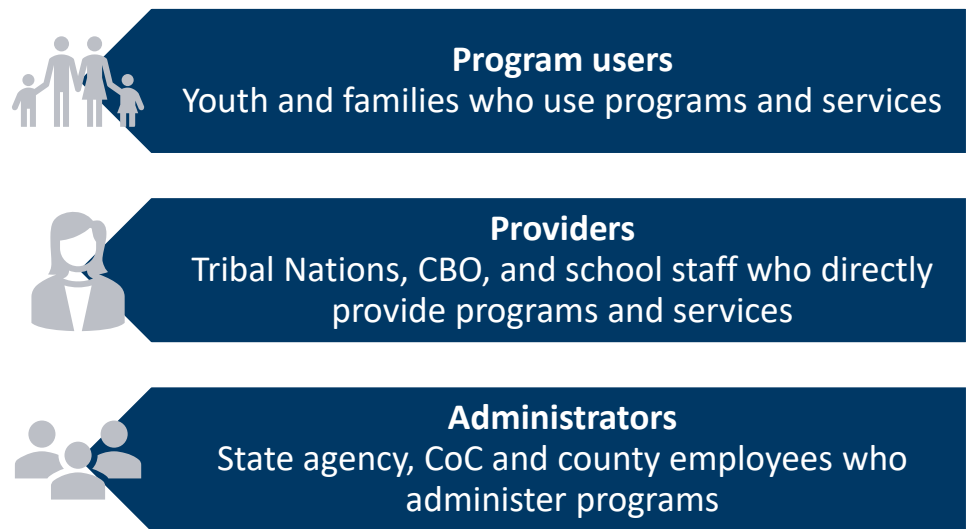
## Methods

The report examines insights from people who participated in one-on-one interviews or an online survey from June through October 2024.

People were invited to participate in 30 to 60-minute interviews in order to share their feedback on the gaps in programs and the overall homelessness response system. Interview invitations were sent to state agency representatives from the MICH Interagency Youth and Housing Working Group, CoC coordinators, Head Start coordinators, school homeless liaisons, and staff from CBOs that receive grant funding from MDE to support educational services for youth experiencing homelessness. Youth and families were identified and interviewed with help and coordination from school homeless liaisons and CBO staff.

Additionally, in consultation with the Minnesota Tribal Collaborative, an online survey was sent to tribal youth homeless liaisons to gather feedback on gaps.

44 people participated in this engagement, including 42 people who participated in interviews and two tribal youth homeless liaisons who participated in an online survey. The table below provides an overview of the different organizations interview participants represented.

**Figure 6: Engagement Participant Overview**

| Category | Number of participants | Organizations/Affiliations of participants |
|---|---|---|
| **Program users** | 12 | • Youth<br>• Caregivers of children and teenagers |
| **Providers** | 18 | • Lakeville Area Schools<br>• YMCA Youth and Family Services<br>• Minneapolis Public Schools<br>• Community Action Center<br>• Osseo Public Schools<br>• Duluth Public Schools<br>• East Side Family Services<br>• Oasis for Youth<br>• Moorhead Public Schools<br>• Families First<br>• Arch Philanthropy<br>• Rochester Public Schools<br>• MDE consultants<br>• Tribal youth homeless liaisons |
| **Administrators** | 14 | • MDE<br>• Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)<br>• Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS)<br>• Minnesota Housing (MN Housing)<br>• Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB)<br>• Office of Higher Education (OHE)<br>• Central Minnesota CoC<br>• West Central Minnesota CoC<br>• Northwest Minnesota CoC<br>• Ramsey County<br>• Heading Home Ramsey |

## Limitations

The research methods used in this report have some limitations. Forty-four individuals participated in the gaps analysis through interviews or surveys, which may not fully represent all perspectives within the homelessness response system in Minnesota. Time constraints restricted the ability to reach more people, particularly more youth and caregivers. Additionally, some populations, such as people who are English learners, are underrepresented in the engagement due to translation and interpretation challenges. These factors should be acknowledged when reviewing the findings and considering future efforts to supplement or replicate this work.

## Engagement Themes

The following sections summarize engagement themes garnered from the stories, experiences and feedback from the people who participated in the gaps analysis engagement period. The engagement results are organized into three categories to highlight the different perspectives of the youth and families, the providers, and the administrators who participated.

## 1.  Youth and Families

Twelve youth and caregivers experiencing housing insecurity participated in an interview for the gaps analysis, including:

- Nine youth between the ages of 17 and 22 and three caregivers of children and teenagers in K–12.

- Most youth are unaccompanied minors, however some live with a parent or caregiver.

- Some youth are currently living in houses and apartments with relatives or friends, some are living alone with the help of housing support, some are living in shelters or in their car, and one person said that they are living in a tent.

- Four people from the Moorhead-Fargo area, two people from Minneapolis or Saint Paul, and six people from the Minneapolis-Saint Paul suburbs.

- While participants were not asked to specify their gender, race, or ethnicity, it is estimated that approximately one-third identify as men and two-thirds as women, and an estimated three-fourths of the participants identify as BIPOC.

Some participants asked to remain anonymous. First names and ages are attributed to stories and quotations of participants who consented to share these in the report.

### Stories from Youth: Past, Present and Future

The following are personal stories from three young people: Katrina, Daeliyah, and Alan. In their own words, they describe their past, their current lives, and their plans for the future, providing context on their unique paths and the challenges they face.

**Katrina  |  17 years old  |  Moorhead, MN**

**Then:** I grew up in a smaller town. It's more friendly in smaller towns than in larger towns. I moved to Moorhead a few years ago.

**Now:** Ever since we moved here, I've had a hard time talking to other people. More anxiety or like anti-socialness, you know what I mean? I don't really talk to anybody. I kind of just come to school and do my work what I need to do. I'm not really staying anywhere specifically. I got into it with my mom like before my birthday, and I ended up basically moving out. I stay with my sister, but my sister lives like 40 minutes away from school, so pretty far. During the week when I'm in town, I either try to stay at my mom's if we're on good terms or I stay in the car.



**Next:** I've always wanted my own business. I sew clothes and I make like my own three-piece sets or dresses. For me, not having my own place to like actually put my sewing machine and stuff down, I can't do that right now. But, once I finish school, I really want to go to esthetician school or cosmetology school. But I would also like to own my own business.
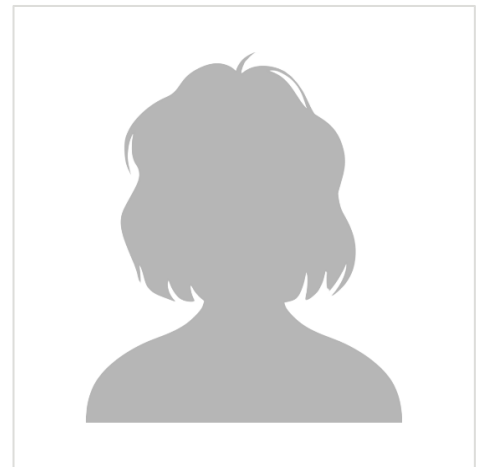
**Daeliyah | 18 years old | Saint Paul, MN**

**Then:** I loved school, especially before high school. I really enjoyed schoolwork, but then COVID hit. It was hard to stay motivated and continue with school after that. I tried school both in person and online, but it was very difficult. It started to impact my mental health, and my mental health really declined. I didn't understand anxiety or how to deal with it, and it was difficult to manage. This led to my housing insecurity.

**Now:** I mostly live with my grandma. I love going to concerts in Saint Paul. It's easy to find new artists, and I can just walk across the street to see them! It's great. I love music and go to as many concerts as I can.

**Next**: I hope to get a full-time job as a security guard at the airport. Once I have a full-time job, I'll be able to go to college. They have grants and scholarships that would really help with the costs. Eventually, I'd love to have my own place. I also love writing music, so I hope to sing my songs and create my own studio, even if it's just on my computer. Those are my biggest dreams right now. I can't wait for them to come true!
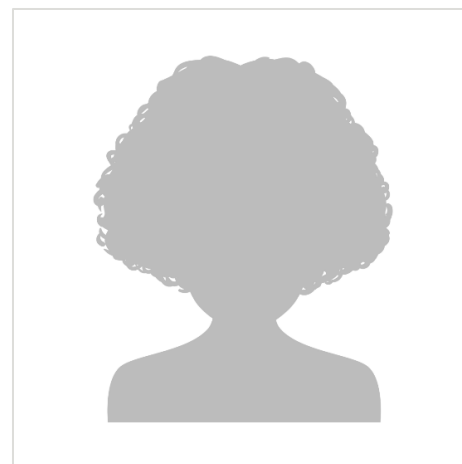
**Alan | 17 years old | Bloomington, MN**

**Then:** I grew up in Minnesota in the Bloomington area. My household has always been a bit chaotic, especially with my younger brother who has autism. It can be hard on my mental health, but I love him with my whole heart. When I was around eight, my parents separated, which led to a series of challenging events. Despite these difficulties, living in Minnesota has its blessings. My mom and I receive a lot of support, both emotionally and financially, which has been a huge help.

**Now:** Currently, life is going well. I'm at a point where I want to move out and experience independence. I need to grow up and not solely depend on my family. It's going to be a challenge, but with the help and resources available, I believe it's the best step for me. Living on my own will be a big change, but it's a necessary one. I already help with chores, but I'll need to be more disciplined about things like cooking and cleaning. Turning 18 will make accessing resources easier, as some are restricted for minors. Programs like Oasis and support from my case manager at school have been crucial.

**Next:** After high school, I plan to attend university, either in Minnesota or somewhere else in the Midwest. I'm interested in studying psychology, business, or law, possibly a combination like business law. I enjoy math and the structure of rules and policies. My goal is to continue my education and eventually obtain a degree. I hope to find a career that combines my interests and allows me to make a positive impact.
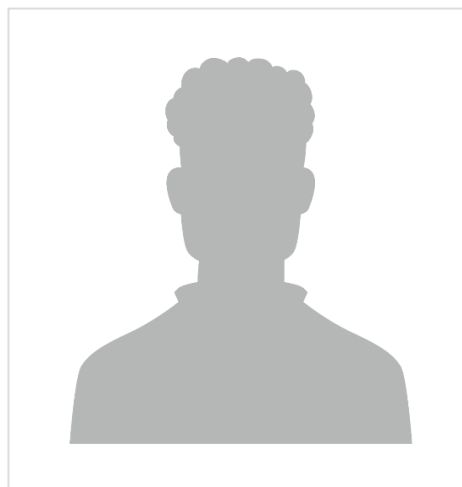
## Summary of Feedback: Voices of Youth and Families

The following section summarizes recurring themes from the interviews with youth and families navigating housing insecurity. Quotations from each participant are used to provide nuance to the themes and bridge the gap between abstract issues and their real, lived impact on youth and families. Their words highlight common themes in their stories including gaps in programs and services, barriers in accessing resources, and the impact of housing instability on education and mental health. While shared challenges emerge across stories, each quote also serves as a reminder that no single voice can capture the full experience of homelessness, and weaving these voices together aims to give a deeper understanding of the gaps in the youth homelessness response system.

*Impact on Education*

- **Educational Disruptions**: Housing insecurity makes it difficult for many to engage in school. The lack of a stable home and unpredictability in routines make it hard to focus or complete schoolwork. Many youth and caregivers reported that the psychological toll of housing instability affects their education.

  o "This instability impacts my education. I often have to work, increasing my stress levels. This can lead to either falling asleep in class or not showing up at all." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

  o "When you're in an environment, when you're, like, on edge, you don't get good rest, right? Like, if I do sleep, it's not good sleep. It makes your education and learning harder. It makes doing homework [hard]." – Vance (17 years old)

  o "It was hard for me to focus. I barely had any time to do my schoolwork because I had [thoughts like] 'Where was I going to stay?' going through my head. It really distracts me from getting stuff done, and I stopped going to school." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

  o "I've moved around a lot...I've never had a consistent school. Always jumping schools and homes with different families. The only consistency I've had with schools was third to fifth grade. Every other grade, pre-K through 12, has been at a different school." – Jasmine (17 years old)

- **Mental Health Struggles**: Mental health challenges, exacerbated by housing instability, affect students' ability to stay engaged with school. For example, Daeliyah describes in her story above how her anxiety worsened during the pandemic and affected her motivation and performance in school. Katrina also shares how her social anxiety affects how she connects with her peers at school. Other people described mental health struggles as well.

  o "I was house hopping and not knowing what to do because I was young, and I didn't have my mom or dad around to guide me and support me. I found myself self-harming." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

  o "The kids struggle with being teased at school for not having a home. So they go through bullying, but they have a social worker that they can talk to at school." – Anonymous caregiver of three children

*Gaps in Programs and Services*

- **Age Restrictions**: Several young adults said that they are not able to participate in some housing programs or receive essential resources because of age restrictions. For example, Alan, in his story above, mentions how turning 18 will increase his access to services. Some programs and services require youth under the age of 18 to provide parental permission or show that they are legally emancipated. This requirement can prevent or deter minors with complex relationships with their caregivers from receiving support.

  o "I believe there should be more resources for people under 18. It's difficult being under 18 and needing housing or other resources but requiring parental permission. I think 13 would be a reasonable age for teens to access resources without parental permission." – Aya (17 years old)

  o "A lot of resources are going to be available to me once I turn 18. Some resources can be restricted when you are a minor and they require either a letter [from a caregiver] or emancipation … if I were to tell my mom, I'm going to be legally emancipated … [She would say] 'Why? So you don't want to live here?' like, it's just unnecessary [conflict]. So age can be a setback to certain resources." – Alan (17 years old)

- **Bureaucratic Processes**: Many people said that they encounter bureaucratic barriers in programs that make accessing support time-consuming, complex, and at times, impossible. Complicated and inflexible processes can leave youth in unsafe or unstable situations, with limited options for immediate help.

Several people said that support systems need to be more adaptable to account for people's different needs and circumstances.

- o "I understand that there has to be a certain process for [seeking emancipation], but maybe it doesn't necessarily have to mean an official letter that required by the state. Instead, it's just that people don't want to live at home right now because, people are being domestically abused or they're living in an unstable household, and they just don't want to be a part of that anymore. But they can't really do anything at the end of the day because they're minors." – Alan (17 years old)

- o "So now I'm going to have this breaking period where I'm in an unsafe house where I can't do my schoolwork properly. My living conditions aren't met, and I'm stuck here because I can't get on another waiting list since I'm 'housed.' So now I have to move everything out. I have to restart the process again." – Vance (17 years old)

- o "I wish there was a way around the system. Like for me, I was able to move out by myself with a lower income, but that doesn't mean I'm homeless or living in my car. I'm living in a home right now. I'm living by myself. I wish there were more resources for that, where it's not an emergency situation, but it's still a situation that you don't want to be in." – Jasmine (17 years old)

- **Lack of Communication:** Poor communication from supportive service providers and program administrators leads to confusion among youth and families about the available resources, frustration, and feeling disrespected. The caregivers that were interviewed particularly said that inconsistent follow-ups and unclear guidance left them feeling dismissed and overlooked at critical times.

  - o "We were told to call a number to get resources and we were kind of given the runaround. We called and we were told that they were going to call us back, but we were never called back. One person told us to go to an agency and that they would help us get housing case management. We went there. We did their assessment. It took us an hour to do their assessment. They told us that they were going to help us get case management within the week. We waited two weeks. We called back. They said they were going to return our call the following week, because they were short staffed, which we understood, but we never got our call back. So we called again, and I left a message, but they never answered. I texted and I said that we're waiting to hear from them, and I have yet to receive a message back. It's an agency that we were sent to that was supposed to help us with housing. We did everything that they asked us to." – Anonymous caregiver of three children

  - o "[I would tell social workers] we're human beings. Put yourself in our shoes. We have feelings too … It's like they're setting us up for failure. They're supposed to help, but not a lot of social workers seem to want to help. Like this one social worker I've been talking to tells me that there's no funding and she can't do anything ... It took Lacey from Indian Ed to contact her, and then all of a sudden, I have a case manager and everything's starting to move. Why did it take that? Like, I've been trying for two weeks. Why did it take a teacher to reach out get stuff moving?" – Anonymous caregiver of one child

- **Lack of Outreach**: Some youth said that they missed out on help and resources early on, simply because they were unaware that programs exist. Nearly everyone said that they learned of support services and programs only through school staff or caseworkers. Some suggested that there needs to be more proactive and youth-friendly marketing and outreach for programs.

  - o "If it weren't for my school counselor recommending me to Oasis, I would have never known about it. I'm glad there are programs helping minors; however, I wish that it was more accessible to youth. If I were to see a flyer of a program, I might not be interested in it, but if someone were to talk to me about the number of programs that the county offers, I feel like more youth would

be like, *oh, maybe I do qualify for this program* … Sometimes you don't even know these [programs] exist until someone tells you. Nowadays we use our phones a lot, so maybe creating advertisements on Instagram and social media to promote [to youth]." – Alan (17 years old)

- **Other Gaps:** People also discussed needs and resources beyond housing, such as internet access, food, and reliable transportation. Limited access to essentials like the internet for schoolwork, sufficient food, and reliable transportation further complicates their efforts to meet educational, work, and family responsibilities. Youth and families in Greater Minnesota regularly mentioned challenges with transportation, long travel times, and relying on their car. For example, Katrina mentioned that she likes to stay with her sister when she can, but it's a long distance from her school.

    o **Internet access:** "My housing doesn't have internet, so I have to travel to do all of my schoolwork." – Vance (17 years old)

    o **Food:** "There have even been times I didn't have enough food." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

    o **Transportation**:

        ▪ "I'm also concerned about transportation. How can I get my kids to their after-school programs and school if we're in a shelter?" – Anonymous caregiver of three children

        ▪ "Transportation is by bike, even with my kid … sometimes our feet hurt. My legs are killing me right now from biking." – Anonymous caregiver of one child

### *Housing and Shelter Challenges*

- **Credit and Legal Barriers**: Caregivers mentioned that legal and credit issues pushed their families into homelessness by making it harder to find and keep housing. Both credit and legal histories are critical factors in securing housing, as credit scores and criminal records are commonly used as screening tools by potential landlords. One person inferred that their arrest prompted their landlord to push them out of their apartment by raising the monthly rent. Another person said that their credit score makes it difficult to find housing.

    o "After I got arrested, they said they wouldn't renew my lease… Well, they said they would renew it for another $300 a month." – Anonymous caregiver of one child

    o "The reason why it was so difficult for me to find housing was my credit score. Credit score is the biggest thing, and I don't know why, but ... everywhere you go, they want you to have a good credit score, and my credit score was not good enough. They want you to have ... at least 600, 650 credit score ... they could lower their credit score at least." – Anonymous caregiver of three children

- **Limited Shelter Space:** Many people reported that shelters are full, and some said that they have tried to stay in shelters but have been turned away because there was no space for them. As a result, many youth and families reported that they have stayed in their car and one person said they live in a tent.

    o "There's one [family] shelter but it's really full. It's hard to get into. My stepson works late, and they require that you have to be in at a certain time. Not only that, but it primarily houses just moms with the kids, only part of it houses families [with a father] … And then other shelters are just not good. Too many drugs." – Anonymous caregiver of three children

    o "There's no room [in shelters] right now ... I called the shelter, and they told me that they couldn't help me unless I was abused." – Anonymous caregiver of one child

- **Restrictions at Shelters**: Many people shared that the strict rules and eligibility requirements at shelters can be inflexible for the needs of youth and families. Rigid requirements, such as curfews, family unit policies, and age restrictions, can prevent youth from staying at shelters even when home environments are unsafe.

- o "The hardest part of the shelter is sustaining the routine I had developed for my kids. They are part of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, but the shelter has the rule that families must enter and leave together. The big sister comes and picks up my child, but I have to leave with my child, so I [have to make sure that I] don't have anywhere to be." – Anonymous caregiver of three children

  - o "I realized that [staying with] my mom was definitely not a safe household for me to be in. And I asked the school. I was like, 'Hey, you guys know any shelters nearby?' And then they were like, 'There's this one, but you can't go until you're 16.' And I was 14 at the time, so I had two years, and I was like, 'Wow, really?'" – Aya (17 years old)

- **Safety Concerns**: Several people mentioned safety concerns with affordable housing and shelters, and particularly that youth and children may be exposed to drugs or vulnerable to dangers.

  - o "Even though I had a two-year housing voucher, the only places that will take it are in bad neighborhoods that scare me to go outside at night by myself. I don't want to bring my kid to those places." – Anonymous caregiver of one child

  - o "The area [where the shelter is located] is so dangerous that when I am there, I'm not having good living conditions in order to learn better. So that's definitely impacting [my] education." – Vance (17 years old)

## Support Systems

- **Family**: Families play a crucial role in the experiences of youth facing homelessness. For example, Daeliyah, Alan, and Katrina described relationships with some family members that have been a positive aspect of their lives and brought them greater stability, and relationships with other family members that have been challenging and brought instability. Many youth indicated that they were pushed into homelessness and housing instability due to family conflict or unsafe home environments. They described strained relationships with parents and other family members, often due to abuse, addiction, or unresolved mental health issues. However, people also talked about family being an important lifeline and seeking help and stability from family members with more stable housing.

  - o "He [My father] needed to get me out of the house at the time because he was getting some exchange students coming in." – William (22 years old)

  - o "I lived with my grandma for a long time, since I was young, with my siblings. She had custody of us. My earliest memory is of her driving a school bus and us sitting on the bus while she worked, talking to the kids she drove. After she started using drugs, my sister and I moved to my mom's and started house hopping between relatives and family members in Minneapolis. We eventually became homeless." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

  - o "I don't want to lose contact with my family just because I'm not on good terms with my dad ... I really want to be a part of their [my siblings] lives … I can't really imagine going about it." – Aya (17 years old)

  - o "My cousin is 19, so if she gets a place, I'm planning to stay with her." – Katrina (17 years old)

  - o "My stepdad was an alcoholic and a smoker, and I didn't feel comfortable being at home with the way he acted. I went to live with my grandma, but she struggles with mania and has been hospitalized for it, which was a concern while I lived with her." – Jasmine (17 years old)

- **Support Systems**: School homeless liaisons, social workers, and community organizations are crucial in helping youth and families experiencing housing insecurity access resources and get help. Nearly every person interviewed talked about how important a person or organization has been in helping them meet their physical, emotional, and educational needs. For example, Alan said in his story above that Oasis for Youth and his school caseworker have been critical in his life.

- o "I felt completely at ease there [at The Bridge for Youth]. I would say it was really shocking to feel so at ease … And so, I think that was such a great space for me, like in that time when I needed to figure out myself. I would say I only got to be there for a day before, like my mom or my auntie [took me out of the shelter]. But the time that I was there I felt like I just felt so accepted." – Daeliyah (18 years old)

- o "Oasis for Youth has helped me a lot. My school counselor recommended them after I told her about my dad wanting me to grow up too fast … I received a $1,000 grant from Oasis, which I used for art supplies like sketchbooks and a drawing tablet to build my portfolio." – Aya (17 years old)

- o "You know, what helped us out was Amy [School social worker]. I can say that was the only help that really kept us going, you know, everywhere else that we turned we really felt like giving up, like, you know, throwing in the towel! She really helped us out with snacks, food, gas, blankets, and laundry detergent … Having people like Amy in the schools that support families with their housing is helpful. If they [MDE] could get more people like her, I mean, social workers like that, it would do a lot for people." - Anonymous caregiver of three children

- o "Things are going great. A social worker, Melissa, helped my mom get into a housing program. We found a place at the beginning of July and moved in at the end of July … I talk to my social worker, Melissa, my therapist, Miss B, and Rebecca, a nurse, all of whom have helped me a lot, providing me things I need." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

- o "Oasis has helped me a lot. They've helped me with Instacart orders … give me gas cards … they've been able to help me keep going to school, to be able to get places that I need to go. I'm really grateful. There's so much need, so I'm glad there are people dedicated to provide services and help." – Jasmine (17-year-old)

- o "Amy and Lacey [School social workers] … they're going to bat for me … if it wasn't for those two, I pretty much wouldn't be half as far as I am." – Anonymous caregiver of one child

### *Desire for Higher Education and Fulfilling Careers*

- **Long-Term Goals**: Despite facing immediate challenges related to housing instability, many people, like Alan, Daeliyah, and Katrina, shared plans, and excitement for pursuing higher education and careers. However, the difficulty in finding stable housing has delayed these goals for some, particularly as they struggled with the immediate need for safety and shelter.

  - o "I want to go to college and get my bachelor's degree. I've applied to four colleges and have been accepted into two so far. I'm interested in graphic design, book illustration, or creative writing." – Aya (17 years old)

  - o "I would love to become a nurse. I want to be a traveling nurse or do anything in the medical field. I just want to know that I'm helping others." – Anonymous youth (17 years old)

  - o "I've always wanted my own business. I sew clothes and I make my own three-piece sets and dresses. For me, not having my own place to put my sewing machine and stuff, I can't do that right now." – Katrina (17 years old)

  - o "I'm on track to graduate early this December! I plan on going to Normandale Community College and getting my RN associate degree. If that goes well, then probably my bachelor's … I love to help people, and I want to be a registered nurse." – Jasmine (17 years old)

  - o "I'd like to look into schooling to become a mechanic, since I will need to know about my vehicle at some point anyway, and I can get paid doing it!" – Anonymous caregiver of one child

## 2. Providers

People who work directly with youth and families experiencing homelessness offer crucial insights into the gaps, challenges, and opportunities for improvement within the homelessness response system. These front-line workers, including school homeless liaisons, community-based organizations (CBOs) employees, tribal youth homeless liaisons, and MDE consultants, interact regularly with youth and families affected by housing instability and their feedback provides a practical perspective on the gaps in programs and services. This section summarizes their collective feedback. More details about the participants and their feedback are provided in the Phase 1 Engagement Summary in Appendix B.

### Summary of Gaps

- **Inflexible Funding:** Many providers emphasized the lack of funding, particularly flexible funding to meet the diverse needs of youth and families, including transportation and mental health services.

- **Restrictive Eligibility:** Current eligibility requirements for programs like McKinney-Vento and Coordinated Entry are restrictive, limiting access for many youth and families to essential resources.

- **Lack of Training and Technical Support:** A need for more standardized, accessible training for school staff to better recognize and address homelessness issues.

- **Lack of Communication:** Competition for limited funding opportunities contributes to disconnection among providers; however, many people are seeking more opportunities for communication and collaboration with other providers and administrators in the homelessness response system to better coordinate efforts and resources.

- **Staffing and Capacity Issues:** People highlighted the need for increased staffing and capacity to adequately support youth experiencing homelessness, especially given their complex needs.

- **Challenges Faced by New Americans:** Language barriers, cultural sensitivities, and fear of institutions create additional hurdles for New American families in accessing resources.

- **Limited Housing and Shelter Space:** The shortage of shelter space and affordable housing were noted as significant barriers for families experiencing homelessness.

- **Transportation Needs:** Transportation is a persistent challenge, especially in rural and suburban areas lacking public transit options.

## 3. Administrators

Employees from state agencies, Continuums of Care (CoCs), and county administrations play an essential role in Minnesota's homelessness response, overseeing programs, distributing funding, and managing resources for youth and families experiencing homelessness. These administrators face challenges in creating an efficient support system that meets the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, especially when funding limitations, rigid eligibility criteria, and disconnected data systems complicate program implementation. Their perspectives highlight where system reforms, increased funding, and enhanced coordination could address gaps for youth and families. This section summarizes their collective feedback and reiterates several of the findings from the providers' engagement above. More details about the participants and their feedback are provided in the Research Summary in Appendix A.

### Summary of Gaps

- **Underfunded Programs:** Many programs lack sufficient funding to meet the needs of youth across Minnesota.

- **Restrictive Eligibility:** Strict eligibility criteria in some programs exclude families who still require support.

- **Lack of Data:** Lack of data on youth and families experiencing homelessness and fragmented data systems prevent comprehensive tracking and reporting, affecting resource allocation.

- **Inflexible Funding:** Rigid funding restrictions hinder the ability to tailor resources to specific local or individual needs.

- **Staffing and Capacity Issues:** Staffing shortages make it challenging to implement programs effectively.

- **Lack of Communication:** Poor coordination between agencies, schools, and providers limits the reach and effectiveness of programs.

- **Inconsistency in Program Implementation:** Variability in how programs are applied across the state leads to uneven access to services for youth and families seeking support.

- **Limited Housing and Shelter Space:** The lack of affordable housing options creates a bottleneck for youth and families needing stable shelter.

- **Infrastructure Challenges:** Some providers lack necessary facilities to implement programs, especially food and nutrition programs, which need sufficient storage and refrigeration.

- **System Complexity:** Navigating the homelessness response system is difficult, especially for youth who may lack familiarity with bureaucratic processes.

- **Mistrust in Government:** Many youth, particularly those from marginalized communities, harbor distrust of institutions, which may hinder their engagement with available services.

- **Identifying Youth:** Youth experiencing homelessness are often transient or couch hopping with friends and family, making them particularly challenging to identify and reach.

- **Needs in Rural Areas:** Rural communities face unique challenges, including fewer service providers and significant travel distances, limiting access to support for youth and families.

## Recommendations

Engaging youth, families, service providers, and administrators on the gaps in the youth homelessness response system also prompted them to consider solutions. The following are recommendations from the people interviewed on ways to improve the system and address gaps for youth and families experiencing homelessness.

- Expand and make funding more flexible to support diverse needs, including operational costs for service providers and targeted assistance for transportation, housing, and mental health services.

- Develop a centralized, comprehensive data system to better track youth and family homelessness, allowing for more informed decision-making and resource allocation.

- Provide more funding and focus on preventive strategies that address early signs of housing instability, such as increasing investment in family support programs and credit building programs.

- Increase staff capacity for schools and organizations directly serving youth and provide resources to support retention and reduce burnout among caseworkers and other support staff.

- Offer more comprehensive training for school staff to identify and assist youth and families experiencing homelessness effectively. This could include creating standardized onboarding and ongoing professional development on homelessness.

- Streamline program application processes, especially for unaccompanied youth who are unfamiliar with bureaucracies, to help address needs more quickly and reduce fear, frustration, and confusion.

- Simplify eligibility requirements, particularly age restrictions, to make programs more accessible to youth in need. Enable youth under 18 to access critical basic needs without parental consent, especially in cases of family instability.

- Strengthen communication channels among schools, agencies, and CBOs to improve coordination, share resources, and deliver a more cohesive support system for youth and families experiencing homelessness.
- Expand youth-focused advertising and outreach, possibly through social media, to improve accessibility and awareness of available resources.
- Expand youth and family focused counseling, mental health, and addiction support services, and more opportunities for youth to connect with supportive adults or mentors who understand their experiences.
- Involve youth and families in program decision-making to ensure programs and services address their specific needs and challenges.

# Conclusion: Recurring Systemic Gaps

Feedback on programs and services for youth experiencing homelessness revealed several recurring gaps across perspectives of youth, families, providers, and administrators. These gaps include:

### 1. Restrictive Eligibility Requirements

Many youth under 18 said that they face challenges in accessing resources, often due to requirements for parental consent or proof of emancipation. Providers also noted rigid eligibility rules, such as for the McKinney-Vento program, that exclude youth in need. These strict rules can leave vulnerable youth without safe alternatives, affecting their physical and mental well-being as they are left in unstable or unsafe environments without support.

### 2. Funding Limitations and Inflexibility

Both providers and administrators said that inadequate and restrictive funding limits their capacity to address diverse needs, such as transportation, mental health services, and emergency housing. Youth and families meanwhile discussed gaps in basic needs like internet access, food, and transportation, which could be supported by flexible funding.

### 3. Lack of Communication and Outreach

Youth and families reported confusion about available resources due to poor communication from service providers, while providers and administrators expressed a desire for better interagency collaboration to coordinate resources more efficiently.

### 4. Transportation Barriers

Transportation barriers are particularly challenging for rural and suburban youth, as public transit options are often limited. Additionally, long driving distances and limited supportive services providers in rural communities were mentioned by both youth and families and providers.

### 5. Insufficient Housing and Shelters

A shortage of youth- and family-friendly shelters and affordable housing was frequently mentioned by youth and families, providers, and administrators. People said many shelters have restrictive policies, such as curfews or family-based entry rules, which can deter youth from using them or cause disruptions for families.

### 6. Insufficient Mental Health Services

Several youth discussed the toll that housing insecurity has on their mental health. Additionally, many providers and administrators said that mental health services focused on youth are lacking and underfunded.

### 7. Staffing and Capacity Issues

Providers are often overextended, and both providers and administrators emphasized the need for increased staffing to manage the complex needs of homeless youth. Consistent support from caseworkers and school staff was noted by youth and families as essential, but according to providers, quite limited due to high caseloads and burnout.

### 8. Complex Bureaucratic Processes

Youth and families, providers, and administrators frequently reported that people struggle with the complexity of application processes and navigating bureaucratic support systems, which can lead to delays or discourage them from seeking help.

## Next Steps

In conclusion, this analysis suggests systemic gaps in the support systems for youth and families experiencing homelessness impact their stability and access to essential resources. Gaps like restrictive eligibility criteria, inadequate funding, and limited communication affect the efficiency and effectiveness of support programs and services. Addressing these gaps requires a collaborative effort among the homelessness response system to ensure that youth and families have access to the resources they need. Recommended next steps for MDE to address these systemic gaps include:

- Share and discuss the report findings with individuals and organizations in the homelessness response system, including youth, families, service providers, administrators, and policymakers, to build a shared understanding of the gaps and foster collective action.

- Engage individuals and organizations to help prioritize gaps based on impact, feasibility, and opportunities for immediate action.

- Determine the individuals and organizations that need to be part of developing the solutions.

- Collaborate with these individuals and groups to develop solutions.

- Conduct further research on gaps in programs and services for youth and families experiencing homelessness, focusing on groups with limited participation in this effort, such as English learners.

These steps will help lay the foundation for a more efficient and effective system to support youth and families experiencing homelessness.

# Appendix A: Gaps Analysis Research Summary

## Gaps in Programs for Youth and Families Experiencing Homelessness

October 21, 2024

## Introduction

In 2023, the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness (MICH) formally adopted the Crossroads to Justice Plan to coordinate enterprise-wide strategies around homelessness. As part of this plan, Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), a MICH member, is tasked with conducting a Gaps Analysis to identify where programs and services surrounding youth experiencing homelessness in Minnesota are disconnected, inadequate, or missing.

### Gaps Analysis Overview

The gaps in the homelessness response systems are primarily identified through a series of interviews with stakeholders and supplemented with data. Stakeholders in the youth homelessness response system include state agencies, continuums of care (CoCs), and counties who administer programs, the tribes, community-based organizations (CBOs) and schools that deliver programs, and the families and youth who use programs.

**Research Summary**

- **Key question**: What are the gaps within programs and the overall homelessness system to address the needs of youth experiencing homelessness?
- **Methodology**: 1) Interviews with MICH state agencies, CoCs, and counties, and 2) MDE data on homelessness

**Community Engagement Summary**

- **Key question**: What are the biggest challenges, unmet needs, and gaps for youth experiencing homelessness?
- **Methodology**: Interviews with tribes, CBOs, schools, families and youth

**Gaps Analysis Report**

- Brings together the research and community engagement findings to provide a comprehensive overview of the gaps in the homelessness response system for youth

**Figure 7: Gaps Analysis overview**

The Gaps Analysis will primarily examine gaps in the MICH agencies' programs for youth and families experiencing homelessness but will also include other programs that stakeholders discuss in the interviews.

### Research Summary Overview

Programs and services that address youth homelessness provide essential support and resources to vulnerable young individuals, helping them achieve stability and avoid long-term homelessness. These programs offer housing, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, enabling youth to develop the skills needed for a successful future. Gaps in these programs leave youth without crucial support, increasing their risk of long-term homelessness, exploitation, and negative health and wellbeing outcomes.

The purpose of this research summary is to identify trends in data about youth experiencing homelessness in Minnesota and define the gaps in programs addressing youth homelessness according to MICH, CoC, and county representatives.

## Research Questions

This research summary aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the current state of youth homelessness in Minnesota?
2. What are the gaps within programs to address the needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness and at-risk of homelessness?
3. What are gaps in the overall homelessness response system to address the needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness and at-risk of homelessness?

## Methodology

The research summary analyzes:

1. **Data on youth homelessness**. The research summary analyzes MDE McKinney-Vento program data on Minnesota students, kindergarten through grade 12, experiencing homelessness to identify trends, educational outcomes, and where gaps may be occurring. MDE collects statewide data on students enrolled in public schools. The data will analyze trends over five years as well as the most recent data from the 2022–23 school year.
2. **Interviews**. The research summary also categorizes feedback and themes from interviews conducted in June and July 2024 with representatives from MICH state agencies, CoCs, and counties on the gaps in existing programs and the gaps in the overall homelessness response system to address the needs of youth and families. Stakeholders were invited to participate in a 30-minute interview. Invitations were sent to representatives from the MICH Interagency Youth and Housing Work Group and the CoC coordinator contact list. Nineteen people were invited to participate in interviews, and 14 people participated. Table 1 provides a summary of the organizations interviewed for the research summary.

**Table 1: Participant organization summary**

| Organization |
| --- |
| Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) |
| Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) |
| MDE |
| Minnesota Housing (MN Housing) |
| Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB) |
| MDH |
| Central MN CoC |
| Northwest MN CoC |
| Ramsey County |
| Heading Home Ramsey |
| Office of Higher Education (OHE) |

# The Current State of Youth Homelessness

The Minnesota Legislature defines "homeless youth" as a person 24 years of age or younger who is unaccompanied by a parent or guardian and is without shelter, whose parent or legal guardian is unable or unwilling to provide shelter and care, or who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.[1]

Youth homelessness remains a pressing and complex issue affecting communities across Minnesota. Despite efforts by agencies, CBOs, and other stakeholders, young people continue to experience homelessness. Current data and feedback from stakeholders indicate that while some progress has been made in addressing this issue, gaps in programs and support systems still exist.

## Student Demographic Data

To assess the current state of youth homelessness in Minnesota, we analyzed MDE data on students enrolled in public schools from early childhood or kindergarten through grade 12 over five years, 2018–23. MDE's definition of "homeless children and youths"[2]:

Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and includes children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals; children and youths who have 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; children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and migratory children.

Most youth in Minnesota are enrolled in public schools; however, there are limitations with this data including youth enrolled in private schools, homeschooled, dropped out, or graduated. Additionally, the data on youth experiencing homelessness are students in MDE's McKinney Vento program. Youth must first be identified by school staff and the District Homeless Liaison as being housing insecure to be part of this program, so this data does not include youth who have not been identified. However, this data is collected through a statewide centralized system and provides a reflection of the current state of youth homelessness across Minnesota.

Key takeaways from the McKinney-Vento data analysis:

- Since the 2020–21 school year, the percent of students in the McKinney-Vento program has been on the rise.
- Over the last five school years, the percent of McKinney-Vento students who are black, indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) has been disproportionate to their share of the total student population.
- North American Indian, Pacific Islander, and other indigenous peoples students are disproportionately in the McKinney-Vento program compared to their total student population statewide.
- The percent of Other Indigenous Peoples students who are in the McKinney-Vento program nearly doubled between the 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years.
- The percent of students in the McKinney-Vento program who are English learners is growing rapidly.
- Students in grades 6-8 have consistently had the lowest McKinney-Vento program enrollment compared to other grades over the last five years.

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[1] Minnesota Legislature definition of homeless youth. Minnesota Statutes 2024, section 256K.45 (c)

[2] USC 42, §11431 definition of homeless children and youths. McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001

- As of the 2022–23 school year, the Twin Cities CoC regions (Hennepin and Ramsey) have the highest rates of students in the McKinney-Vento program, followed by the Northwest, West Central, and Northeast regions.
- Over the last five school years, the graduation rate for students in the McKinney-Vento program is increasing and the dropout rate is decreasing. However, students in the McKinney-Vento program are just over half as likely as students not in the program to graduate from high school and four times more likely than their peers to drop out.

Addressing youth homelessness is important because housing status is closely linked to academic success and long-term outcomes. Based on these key findings, the McKinney-Vento data shows that youth who are English learners and/or youth of color, particularly North American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Other Indigenous, may have needs that are not being met by programs to address youth homelessness. Additionally, youth may have different needs or experience different gaps depending on their location or region in the state. The next steps of the gaps analysis will explore the gaps in more depth for youth who are English learners, immigrants or refugees, youth of color, and youth in different regions.

The detailed findings from the data analysis are provided in the Appendix at the end of this summary.

## Programs and Services

The existing programs and services to support youth experiencing homelessness in Minnesota range from emergency shelter and transitional housing to education, employment, and mental health services. These programs aim to offer comprehensive assistance that addresses the various needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness.

Table 2 lists the existing programs reported by 14 government and CoC representatives during interviews or the environmental scan. Many of the following programs are administered by MICH state agencies and aim to support youth and families experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. Some programs serve individual adults, youth, and families. They are listed here because stakeholders regularly reported that they contain gaps that affect youth. The table also documents strengths and gaps or opportunities that the stakeholders identified. Some programs do not have strengths or gaps listed because interviewees did not have knowledge of these programs to report them.

Themes from the interviews on the gaps in programs to address the needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness include:

- **Underfunded programs**. Many programs are reported to have insufficient funding to address the needs on the ground across the state. Programs that interviewees reported are underfunded include Safe Harbor Minnesota, Homeless Youth Act (HYA), McKinney Vento, Homework Starts with Home, Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students (EAPS) Grant Program, Successful Transition to Adulthood for Youth (STAY) program, Minnesota Youth Program, Youthbuild Program, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Young Adult Program.
- **Restrictive eligibility requirements.** Some programs are reported to have restrictive eligibility requirements for youth, families, and service providers seeking funding. Early Learning, Head Start, and Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program are said to have strict income eligibility requirements for families that remove them from the programs while they still in need of support. Likewise, the school districts' McKinney Vento funding is dependent on the number of students who are identified as housing insecure, but it does not include early learning students. This student requirement makes some school districts ineligible for additional funding. The STAY program is also reported to have restrictive eligibility for housing assistance, and they can only provide to youth who age out of the foster care system at 18 or older.

- **Lack of data, and disconnected data systems.** Some people said that a lack of accurate and centralized data on youth and families experiencing homelessness affects the program funding and ability to ensure programs are addressing needs. Several programs are reported to have issues identifying youth experiencing homelessness including Safe Harbor Minnesota, Early Learning, Head Start, McKinney Vento, Title I, Part A Homeless Set Aside, and EAPS Grant Program. Some programs like EAPS do not have a centralized database to know the scope of college students experiencing homelessness across the state. Others like Early Learning, Head Start, McKinney Vento, and Title I, Part D Prevention, and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent or At-Risk have disconnected data systems, making it difficult to get the actual number of youth, from birth to transition age, experiencing homelessness and understand the scope of issue. Coordinated Entry is reported to possibly have underreported data due to inconsistencies among service providers adding people to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database.
- **Inflexible funding.** Some people said that programs can lack flexibility to meet the unique and diverse needs of people experiencing homelessness and support the operations and administrative costs of service providers. For example, people said McKinney Vento cannot be used to help students beyond school and educational support. Additionally, some said that restrictions to use funding for administrative and operations costs can contribute to high caseworker burnout and inadequate staff support for programs such as McKinney Vento and food and nutrition programs.
- **Limited staff capacity and time**. Some programs are reported to have challenges with implementation because of limited staff capacity and time of schools and supportive services providers. Safe Harbor Minnesota, McKinney Vento, Shelter Link to Mental Health, food and nutrition programs, Hunger Free Campus, and Coordinated Entry are programs that people identified as being challenging for staff to implement. Safe Harbor's Regional Navigators are supporting large caseloads in large geographic regions. McKinney Vento is lacking technical support directly in schools for counselors, teachers, and staff to help students in accessing community resources, and the Homeless Liaisons at the school districts are at full capacity. Shelters seeking or receiving funding for the Shelter Link to Mental Health sometimes struggle to find therapists to partner with or therapists leave partway through the program. Staff at schools, libraries, and colleges can struggle to implement food and nutrition programs in addition to their regular workload. And some service providers and direct outreach staff can struggle to manage the data entry required for the Coordinated Entry system in addition to meeting the emergency needs of youth.
- **Lack of communication**. People commonly reported gaps in programs related to a lack of communication among agencies, schools and service providers, landlords, and youth and families. People said that Safe Harbor Minnesota and other MDH youth health programs, Early Learning, Head Start, McKinney Vento, Title I, Part A Homeless Set Aside, and EAPS Grant Program have challenges identifying and reaching youth and families who are experiencing homelessness. People also discussed that housing programs, like HYA, struggle to find and work with landlords who are willing to house unaccompanied youth or families without documentation. Education and awareness around McKinney Vento and Title I, Part A Homeless Set Aside is said to not be reaching teachers and school staff in some areas across the state. Also, Local Homeless Prevention Aid and Coordinated Entry, in some cases, are also reported to be lacking in communication with supportive service providers.
- **Inconsistency with program implementation across the state**. Some people reported that programs are inconsistently implemented across the state, which affects how much support youth and families will receive. Programs like McKinney Vento, Local Homeless Prevention Aid, and Coordinated Entry are said to be inconsistent. The staff in schools connect students to McKinney Vento support, but sometimes they are unfamiliar with the program or issues and awareness around homelessness. Some counties are not communicating with service providers and schools on how to access Local Homeless Prevention Aid funds or how they are using the funds. Some Coordinated Entry systems are lacking effective collaboration among CoCs, counties, and service providers in their region to help connect families and youth to resources.

- **Not enough affordable housing and shelters**. There is not enough housing and shelters to keep up with the number of youth and families experiencing homelessness. People said housing programs like HYA, Safe Harbor Shelter and Housing Funding, and Coordinated Entry are restricted in supporting youth and families because there is not enough affordable housing and shelters across the state.
- **Other infrastructure challenges**. In addition to not enough housing, some people also reported infrastructure challenges for food and nutrition programs. For example, some groups, like libraries, that could apply for the MDE food and nutrition programs lack space or refrigeration to store food. Also, the Hunger Free Campus program was reported to have potential structural challenges, like campus food shelves being closed on the weekends and during holidays.

**Table 2: Minnesota programs to address youth homelessness**

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **MDH** | Safe Harbor Minnesota | Program to provide support services, shelter, and housing for youth under 24 who have been sexually exploited or trafficked. | • Hired public health and homelessness consultants, an advisory team with lived experiences with homelessness, that provide advice and guidance to MDH staff on making their programs more inclusive.<br>• Received an increase in funding in recent years. | • The Regional Navigators is underfunded – 12 navigators across the state and they are covering large geographic areas.<br>• Need culturally specific supportive service providers across the state, particularly LGBTQ, male-focused, and American Indian/Native American, Hmong, and Latinos culturally specific services.<br>• Reaching older youth (age 16-24) who are not attending a school. |
| **MDH** | Various maternal, child and youth health programs | MDH oversees several children and family health programs and Title V federally funded grant programs that serve youth broadly including Adolescent Suicide Prevention Program, Healthy Teen Program, Child & Teen Checkup Program, Family Home Visiting, and others. | • MDH receives guidance from the public health and homelessness consultants on how to make programs more inclusive.<br>• Intentionally prioritizes youth and families experiencing homelessness for program eligibility. | • Reaching older youth<br>• Staying proactive in addressing the evolving need of youth, for example, increasing STI and HIV rates, increasing substance abuse problems, etc. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|--------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|
| DHS | Homeless Youth Act (HYA) | DHS administers HYA flexible funding that can be used for the continuum of services for youth experiencing homelessness. | • Received an increase in funding from the state legislature in recent years.<br>• Funding flexibility helps to cover administration and operations costs for providers including staff salaries, training stipends, etc. | • Program is underfunded as there are more needs than what this funding provides.<br>• Not enough affordable housing across the state.<br>• Finding landlords to house unaccompanied youth, keep rents low, and reduce barriers for people applying for housing. |
| DHS | Shelter Link to Mental Health | Grant program for recipients of HYA or Safe Harbor Housing funding to integrate mental health services into shelters and emergency housing. | • Funding designated to address mental health needs. | • Shelters are unable to find mental health providers to work in youth shelters. |
| DHS | Safe Harbor Shelter and Housing Funding | Funds shelters and housing for youth who have experienced sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. | | • Not enough affordable housing and shelters across the state. |
| DHS | Diversionary Work Program & Minnesota Family Investment Program | Four-month program that helps low-income parents or guardians with children move out of poverty through work. | | |
| DHS | Successful Transition to Adulthood for Youth (STAY) Program | Program offers independent living services to eligible youth ages 14 up to age 23. who are currently or were formerly in foster care. | • Flexible federal funding to provide individualized services to eligible youth.<br>• Teaches skills to youth in different life areas to succeed as they move into adulthood and leave child welfare services. | • Underfunded in that we can only serve about one-third of eligible youth.<br>• Restricted eligibility for housing assistance - Can only provide to youth who age out of the foster care system at 18 or older. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|--------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|
| **DHS** | Homeless Youth Cash Stipend Pilot Project | A two-year pilot project providing stipends to youth who are housing insecure. | | |
| **MDE** | McKinney Vento | Program for students who are experiencing homelessness to maintain education stability. | • Reaching youth where they already are at schools.<br>• Dedicated staff, District Homeless Liaisons, to help identify and connect students experiencing homelessness with support and resources.<br>• District Homeless Liaisons have relationships and knowledge of the local community and community organizations. | • Limited funding administered to schools.<br>• Funding can be restrictive to address students' needs beyond education.<br>• Restrictive eligibility requirements for school districts to receive adequate funding – for example, children in Early Learning and Head Start programs are not counted toward number of homeless youth.<br>• Schools lack staff time and capacity to adequately address the needs of students experiencing homelessness.<br>• Some schools lack the staff knowledge and awareness of issues regarding homelessness, identifying students experiencing homelessness, and how to support a student experiencing homelessness. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **MDE** | Title I, Part A Homeless Set Aside | Funding within Title I, Part A, provided to schools to remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success for homeless students. | • Applies to all school districts receiving Title I, Part A funding.<br>• Supports youth experiencing housing instability to receive comparable Title I, Part A services and other supports to address associated needs.<br>• Flexibility of allowable expenditures.<br>• Local decision to determine amount of set-aside with required minimum amount. | • Under identification of youth experiencing homelessness.<br>• Opportunity to communicate better with families to determine, understand and support needs. |
| **MDE** | Title I, Part D, Prevention, and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent or At-Risk | Provides funds for educational and academic services for youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk. | • MDE is actively working on collecting and improving reliability of data on youth in Neglected and Delinquent sites. | • Limited and incomplete data on the Neglected and Delinquent sites in school districts.<br>• Disconnected data on student enrollment in public schools and Neglected and Delinquent sites – for example, data may only show students enrolled in school of origin, so records for Neglected and Delinquent sites may be underreported. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **MDE** | Various food and nutrition programs | Programs like Summer Food Service Program and Child and Adult Care Food Programs that provide food and meals to youth in low-income communities. | • Reaching people where they are already gathering like schools, daycares, community centers, libraries, etc. | • Limited staff time and capacity to coordinate food program in addition to regular work duties.<br>• Some groups that could apply for the program lack the infrastructure need, like refrigeration. |
| **MDE** | Early Learning Scholarships Program | Scholarship program for children up to four years of age who are experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness to attend early learning programs. | | • Identifying children and families early,<br>• Integrating housing programs into early learning programs,<br>• MDE's database for early learning and K–12 students are separate causing disconnection in data and resources for the separate groups. |
| **MDE** | Head Start and Early Head Start | Program to connect families of children under five years of age who are experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness to early education, health, and community services. | | • Identifying children and families early.<br>• Integrating housing programs into early learning programs.<br>• Income eligibility for people to receive help is restrictive – have to turn people away from the program because their income is too high. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Minnesota Housing** | Family Homeless Prevention and Assistance Program | Short-term rental assistance for families who are at-risk of homelessness. | • Provides support to families before they are homeless. | • Housing support for families ends after 24 months and there are some cases where families need assistance for more time.<br>• Income eligibility for people to receive help is restrictive, particularly for youth who may have a minimum wage job, but limited savings built up |
| **Minnesota Housing** | Homework Starts with Home | Provides supportive services to find and keep housing for families with youth between pre-K and grade 12. | • Provides housing support for families for the entire time that their student is in school. | • Limited funding for the program – can only fund a few projects across the state. |
| **DEED** | Minnesota Youth Program | Provides work experience and work readiness training youth ages 14 to 24 who lack academic and "applied skills" considered critical for current and future workplace needs. | • Paid work experiences for youth to explore careers.<br>• Educational support to earn HS diploma or GED. | • Limited funding available to Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs). |
| **DEED** | Youthbuild Program | Provides specialized training for youth who are at risk for not completing their high school education. | • Paid work experiences for youth to explore careers.<br>• Educational support to earn HS diploma or GED.<br>• Opportunities to connect with pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. | • Limited funding available to establish new and/or support existing programs. |
| **DEED** | Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Young Adult Program | Provides youth experiencing homelessness or at-risk of homelessness with year-round employment and training services. | • Paid work experiences for youth to explore careers.<br>• Educational support to earn HS diploma or GED. | • Limited funding based on a federal formula relying on adult unemployment data that is outdated and needs revision. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|--------|---------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|
| **OHE** | Emergency Assistance for Postsecondary Students (EAPS) Grant Program | Grant program that provides funding for colleges to support students experiencing food and housing insecurity. | • Provide flexible emergency assistance stipends to students ranging from $500 to $1,500 | • Limited funding for the program – can only fund a few colleges across the state.<br>• Lack of data on college students experiencing homelessness to show need to program funding.<br>• Stipends to help students with rent and basic needs tend to be less than the cost of living. |
| **OHE** | Hunger Free Campus | Grant program that provides funding for colleges to operate on on-campus food pantry. | • Colleges tend to have infrastructure, dining hall or cafeteria, to support a food pantry. | • Some colleges report challenges with refrigeration and storage of food.<br>• Limited food pantry access during the weekends or holidays when college campuses are closed. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **DPS** | Youth Intervention Programs (YIP) | Provide services for youth including truancy prevention, academic assistance, behavioral interventions and counseling, mentoring, juvenile justice system diversions and restorative justice, afterschool activities, career exploration and life skills classes, and emergency youth shelter. | • Programs may be the one constant in a child's life that may otherwise be unpredictable and very hard.<br>• Activities around living skills, career opportunities, connections to community resources, and culturally specific programming.<br>• Exposure to and opportunity for youth to connect with caring adults and role models.<br>• Many programs include a family engagement component to be inclusive of families/caregivers. | • Statutory cap on the award amount.<br>• Statutory match requirement. |
| **Department of Revenue** | Local Homeless Prevention Aid | Program to keep families from losing housing and helping those experiencing homelessness find housing. | • One-time flexible funding provided to every county across the state to address child and family homelessness. | • Need more flexible funding than the one-time amount.<br>• Counties are inconsistently using funding across the state.<br>• Lack of communication with schools and service providers about accessing these funds for youth and families. |

| Agency | Program | Description | Strengths | Gaps or Opportunities |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CoC** | Coordinated Entry | A coordinated system to match people with housing in different programs that prioritizes placing youth and families in housing. Service providers add people on a coordinated entry priority list to get into housing with Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) database. | • Youth and families are a priority for program eligibility. | • Not enough housing – people are waiting on priority list for a long time.<br>• Some service providers are inconsistent with registering youth on the priority list.<br>• Having an HMIS database is not required of service. providers to receive funding<br>• Cost of the HMIS license for providers can be a barrier and many only buy one license for their organization.<br>• Staff lack time to add people to the HMIS database.<br>• Lack of housing options for people in coordinated entry.<br>• Need more supportive housing options for youth to help develop life skills. |

## Overall Homelessness Response System

In addition to gaps in programs to address the needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness, interviewees also shared the gaps and needs that they see in the overall homelessness response system for youth. The following are system challenges and gaps that interviewees regularly reported, but are not specific to a program:

- **Complexity of the system.** The homelessness response system is complex and difficult to navigate, especially for youth, who are less familiar with institutions, processes, and paperwork.
- **Mistrust in government and adults.** Fear of using programs, particularly for youth who are people of color and immigrants or refugees. Youth can benefit from peer mentorship and support, which can be more effective than help from an adult caseworker who may not have lived experience with homelessness.
- **Homeless youth can be difficult to identify.** Youth experiencing homelessness may stay with friends or extended family members, move frequently, and they may be fearful or uncomfortable talking to an adult, making them a particularly difficult group to identify.
- **Needs in rural communities.** There are different challenges in rural areas to address homelessness, including geographic distances, lack of community-based services, and limited workforce pool for service providers.
- **Innovative housing and support solutions.** Need for more communal, innovative, and non-traditional housing models, to help unaccompanied youth develop life skills and meet their emotional health needs.
- **Mental health and substance addiction services.** While there are some programs, there is insufficient mental health support for youth experiencing homelessness. Need for more youth-focused addiction and mental health services, with current support often pushing youth into adult programs.
- **Youth engagement**. Youth need to be brought to the table and involved in decision-making and implementation of programs to address their needs.

# Conclusion

The data analysis and stakeholder interviews for the research summary reveals some shortcomings in Minnesota programs for youth and families experiencing homelessness. Data shows youth homelessness is growing in Minnesota, particularly for youth who are English learners and youth who are people of color, and the interviews identified systemic gaps in existing programs, including underfunding, restrictive eligibility requirements, insufficient data, miscommunication, inflexible funding, limited staff capacity, and inconsistent program implementation.

Next, our team will explore the biggest challenges, unmet needs, and gaps for youth experiencing homelessness through a series of interviews with service providers from Tribal Nations, CBOs, and schools, and families and youth. We will synthesize the findings from this research summary and the next phase of interviews into a final Gaps Analysis Report that will provide a comprehensive overview of the gaps in the homelessness response system for youth and families.

# Appendix: Data Analysis

This appendix provides a detailed analysis of the MDE data on students experiencing homelessness between 2018–23.

## Housing Insecurity Rates

Over the last five school years, on average 1.6% of Minnesota students are in the McKinney Vento program and experience housing insecurity. In the latest school year, 2022–23, 17,744 students or 1.8% of students statewide were in the McKinney-Vento program. Since the 2020–21 school year, the percentage of students in the program has increased. The decrease in the number of students in the program during the 2020–21 school year may be attributed to COVID-related changes, including distance learning, eviction holds, reduced contact with students, relief funds, rent stabilization in select counties, and the expansion of shelter space.

**Figure 2: Statewide McKinney-Vento rates, 2018–23**
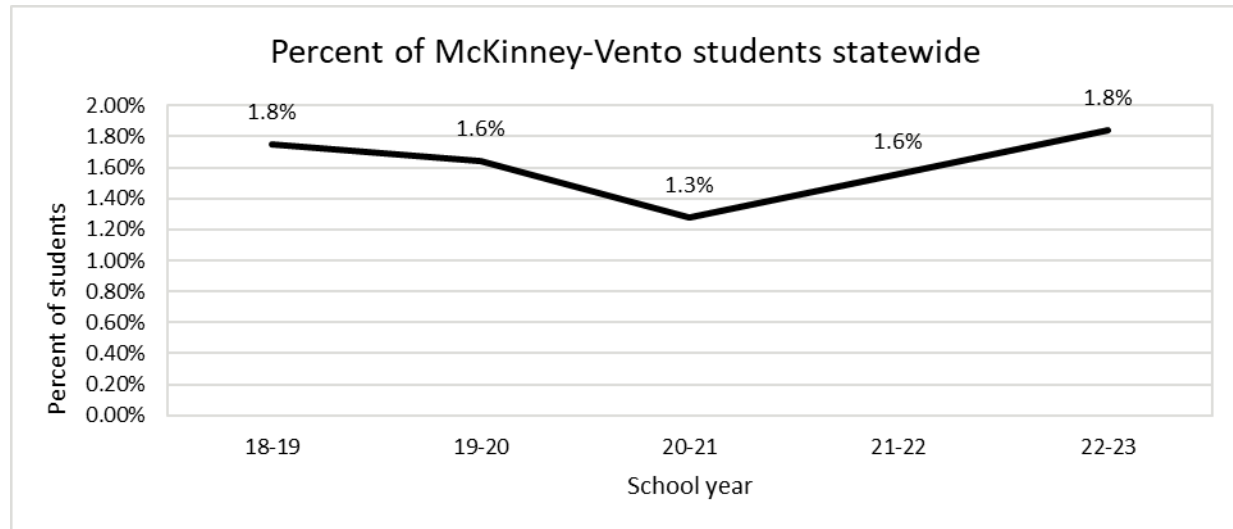


## Race/Ethnicity

Over the last five school years, the percentage of McKinney-Vento students who are BIPOC has been disproportionate to their share of the total student population. As of the latest school year, 2022–23, 77.7% of students in the McKinney-Vento program are BIPOC.

**Table 3: Statewide rates of McKinney-Vento students who are people of color, 2018–23**

| School year | Total students enrolled through the entire school year | Total students who are BIPOC | Percent of students who are BIPOC | Total McKinney-Vento | McKinney-Vento who are BIPOC | Percent of McKinney-Vento who are BIPOC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-19 | 979,600 | 307,603 | 31.4% | 17,165 | 13,017 | 75.8% |
| 19-20 | 972,463 | 316,521 | 32.5% | 15,959 | 12,174 | 76.3% |
| 20-21 | 952,205 | 318,094 | 33.4% | 12,132 | 9,227 | 76.1% |
| 21-22 | 965,285 | 323,494 | 33.5% | 15,052 | 11,650 | 77.4% |
| 22-23 | 963,306 | 330,451 | 34.3% | 17,744 | 13,788 | 77.7% |

Over the last five school years, North American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Other Indigenous Peoples students are disproportionately in the McKinney-Vento program compared to their total student population statewide. This does not necessarily mean that students of other races and ethnicities do not experience higher levels of housing insecurity, just that they are not identified or eligible for the McKinney-Vento program. Additionally, the percent of Other Indigenous Peoples students who are in the McKinney-Vento program nearly doubled between the 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years even though their percent of the total student population only grew by 0.01%. Other Indigenous Peoples includes students who meet the federal definition of American Indian or Alaska Native but not the state definition of American Indian, which means they identify only with Indigenous peoples from Central and South America.

**Table 4: Percent of students statewide by race/ethnicity in McKinney-Vento, Part 1**

| School year | Percent of McKinney Vento - North American Indian | Percent of Total Students - North American Indian | Percent of McKinney Vento - Asian | Percent of Total Students - Asian | Percent of McKinney Vento - Black | Percent of Total Students - Black | Percent of McKinney Vento - Hispanic | Percent of Total Students - Hispanic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-19 | 7.6% | 2.7% | 0.7% | 6.8% | 6.8% | 11.3% | 3.0% | 9.4% |
| 19-20 | 7.8% | 2.9% | 0.7% | 6.9% | 6.0% | 11.3% | 2.8% | 9.7% |
| 20-21 | 6.2% | 3.1% | 0.5% | 7.0% | 4.3% | 11.7% | 2.2% | 9.8% |
| 21-22 | 6.7% | 3.2% | 0.8% | 6.9% | 5.3% | 11.7% | 3.1% | 10.2% |
| 22-23 | 6.5% | 3.3% | 0.7% | 7.0% | 6.1% | 11.7% | 4.2% | 10.6% |

**Table 5: Percent of students statewide by race/ethnicity in McKinney-Vento, Part 2**

| School year | Percent of McKinney Vento - Multiple Races | Percent of Total Students - Multiple Races | Percent of McKinney Vento - Pacific Islander | Percent of Total Students - Pacific Islander | Percent of McKinney Vento - White | Percent of Total Students - White | Percent of McKinney Vento - Other Indigenous | Percent of Total Students - Other Indigenous |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18-19 | 3.5% | 4.1% | 4.7% | 0.1% | 0.7% | 65.5% | 8.2% | 0.0% |
| 19-20 | 3.0% | 4.4% | 3.5% | 0.1% | 0.7% | 64.6% | 5.8% | 0.1% |
| 20-21 | 2.1% | 4.6% | 3.3% | 0.1% | 0.5% | 63.6% | 5.6% | 0.1% |
| 21-22 | 2.5% | 4.8% | 3.1% | 0.1% | 0.6% | 62.9% | 3.5% | 0.1% |
| 22-23 | 2.9% | 5.0% | 4.1% | 0.1% | 0.7% | 62.2% | 6.6% | 0.1% |

## English Learner

MDE does not collect data on the country of origin for students, but English learner data may also indicate that the student was born outside the United States. As of the 2022–23 school year, 8.4% of students in Minnesota were English learners. However, 17.9% of students in the McKinney-Vento program were English learners.

As shown to the graph below, the percent of students statewide who are English language learners is growing gradually; however, the percent of students in the McKinney-Vento program who are English learners is growing much more rapidly in comparison.

**Figure 8: Percent of English learners, 2018–23**



Percent of students statewide who are English learners

- Percent of students who are English learners
- Percent of McKinney-Vento students who are English learners

| School year | Percent of students who are English learners | Percent of McKinney-Vento students who are English learners |
|---|---|---|
| 18-19 | 7.6% | 10.2% |
| 19-20 | 7.9% | 10.4% |
| 20-21 | 7.7% | 11.1% |
| 21-22 | 8.1% | 15.2% |
| 22-23 | 8.4% | 17.9% |
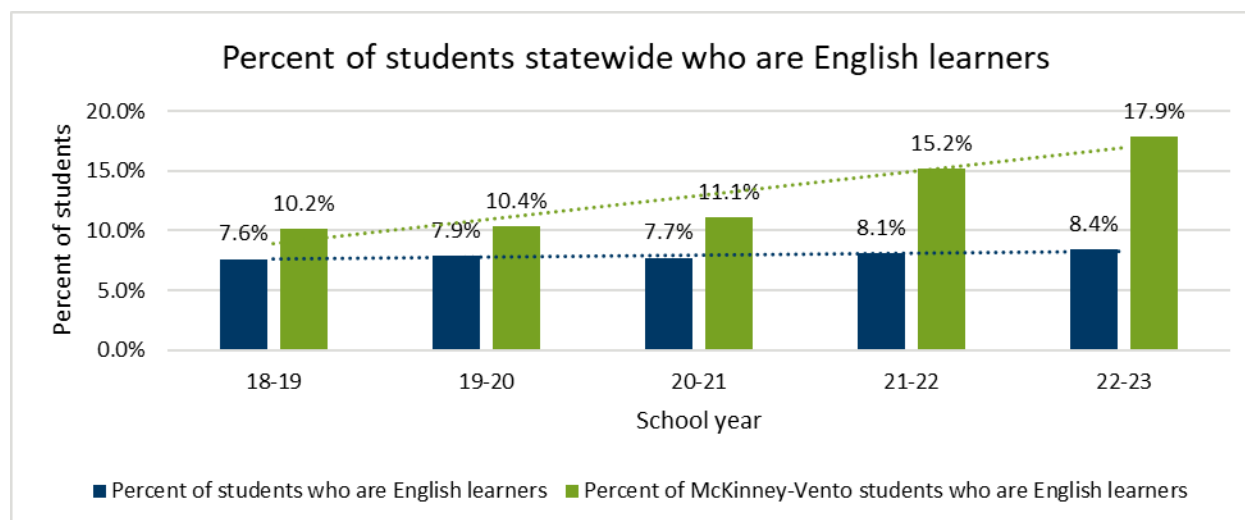
## Grade

The percent of McKinney-Vento students by grade over the last five years is consistent with the overall percent of McKinney-Vento students statewide. However, students in grades 6–8 have consistently had the lowest enrollment in the McKinney-Vento program compared to other grades over the last five years. The percent of McKinney-Vento students in kindergarten or early childhood, grades 1–5, and grades 9–12 over five years have been similar.

**Figure 4: Statewide percent of students in the McKinney-Vento program by grade, 2018–23**



Percent of McKinney-Vento students statewide by grade

| Grade | 22-23 | 21-22 | 20-21 | 19-20 | 18-19 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grades 9-12 | 2.1% | 1.9% | 1.5% | 1.9% | 1.9% |
| Grades 6-8 | 1.9% | 1.6% | 1.2% | 1.6% | 1.7% |
| Grades 1-5 | 2.1% | 1.7% | 1.4% | 1.8% | 2.0% |
| Grade K or Early Childhood | 2.1% | 1.7% | 1.4% | 1.9% | 2.0% |
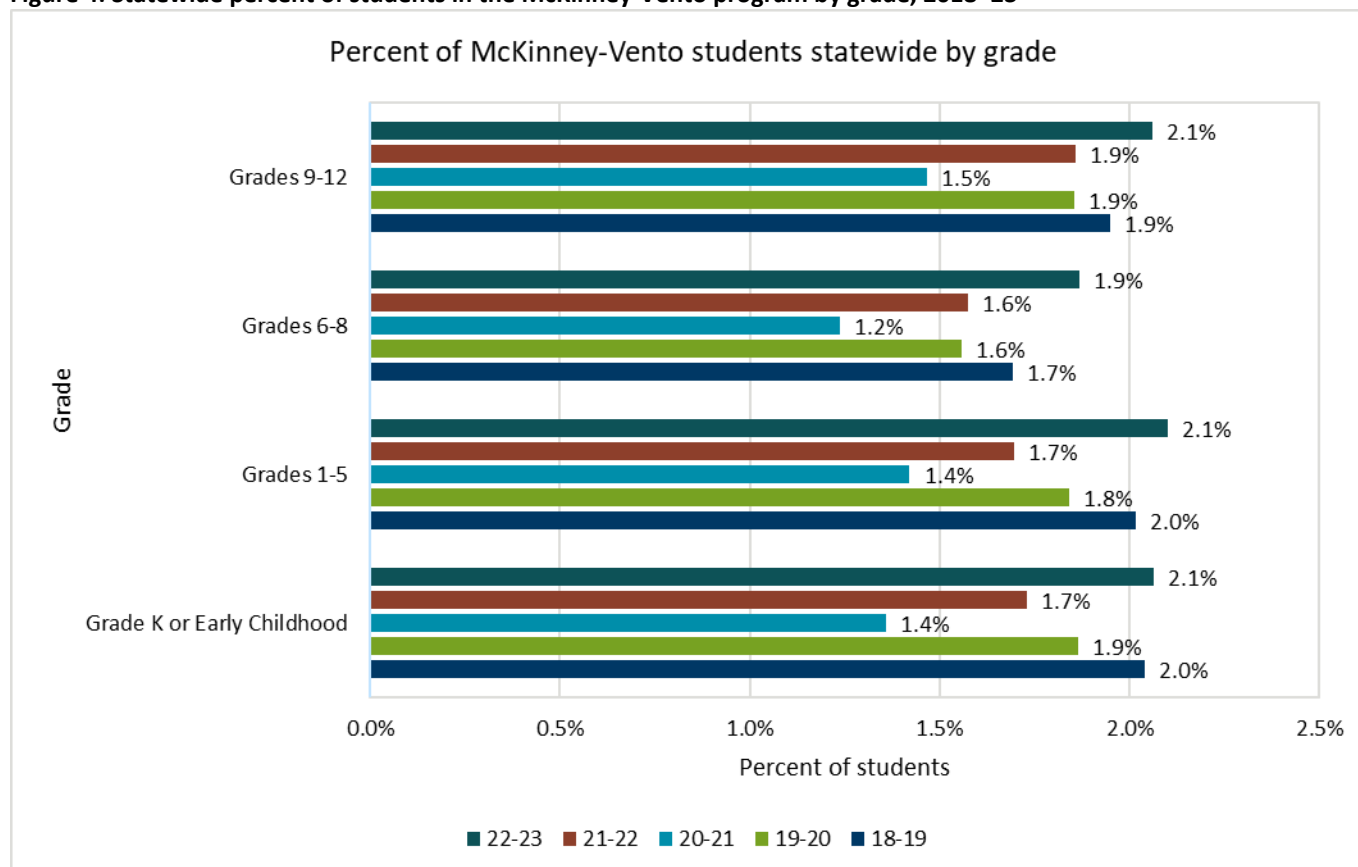
## Region

Minnesota has [Ten Continuum of Care (CoC) regions](#), which are regional planning bodies that work to reduce homelessness by coordinating housing and supportive services in their region. To understand how homelessness affects youth across the state, we analyzed McKinney-Vento data for schools in each of the ten CoC regions.
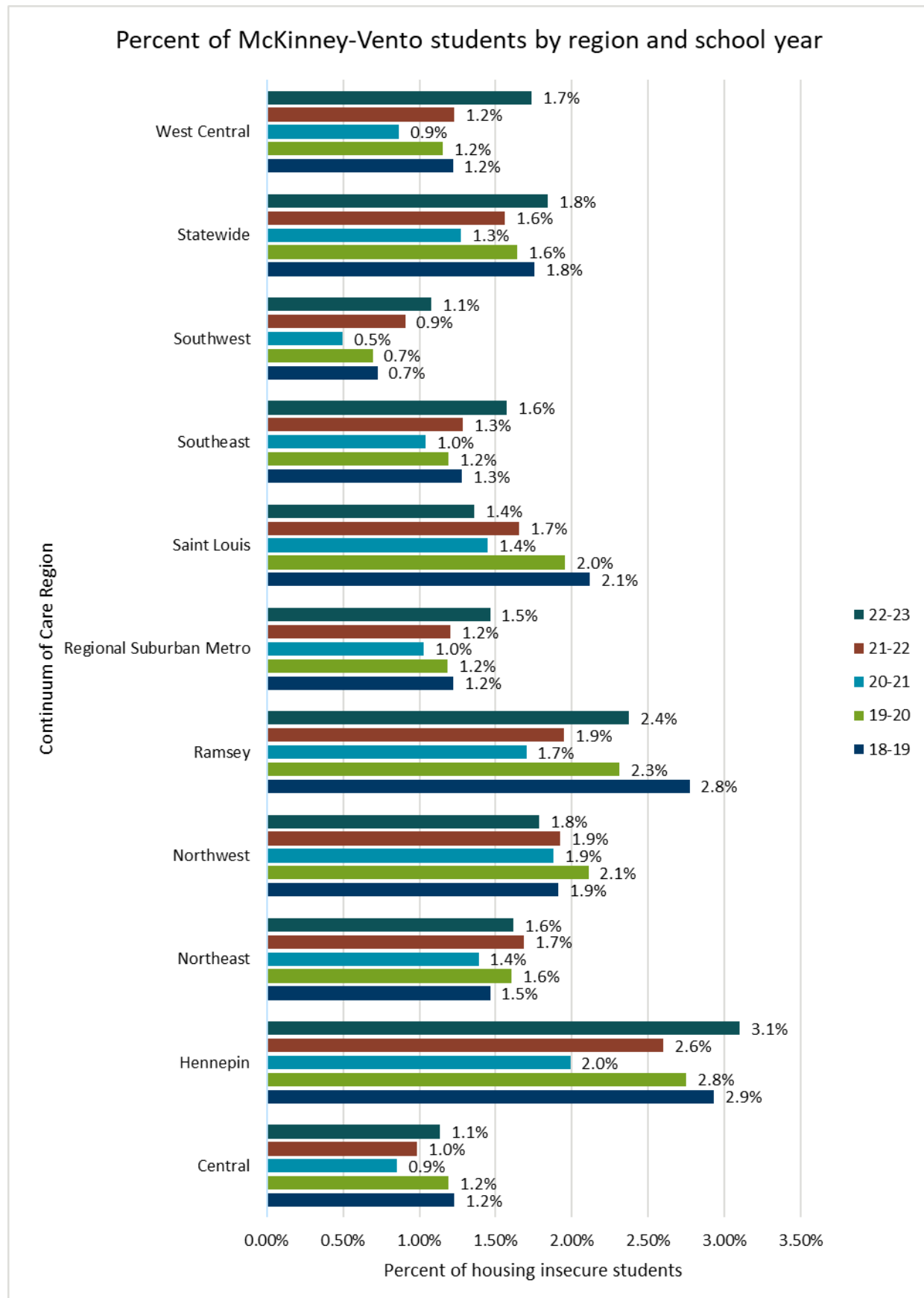
Reflecting the statewide trend, most CoC regions including West Central, Southwest, Southeast, Regional Suburban Metro, Ramsey, Northeast, Hennepin, and Central have seen rising McKinney-Vento rates since 2020. However, Saint Louis (1.4%)  and Northwest (1.8%) rates of students in the McKinney-Vento program have been trending down. As of the 2022–23 school year, the Twin Cities regions (Hennepin (3.1%) and Ramsey (2.4%)) have the highest percentages of students in the McKinney-Vento program, followed by Northwest (1.8%), West Central (1.7%), and Northeast (1.6%). The regions with the lowest percentages of students in the McKinney-Vento program are: Southwest (1.1%), Central (1.1%), Regional Suburban Metro (1.5%), and Southeast (1.6%).

**Figure 9: McKinney-Vento rates by CoC regions, 2018–23**



Percent of McKinney-Vento students by region and school year

Legend:
- 22-23
- 21-22
- 20-21
- 19-20
- 18-19

Y-axis: Continuum of Care Region
X-axis: Percent of housing insecure students

**West Central**
- 22-23: 1.7%
- 21-22: 1.2%
- 20-21: 0.9%
- 19-20: 1.2%
- 18-19: 1.2%

**Statewide**
- 22-23: 1.8%
- 21-22: 1.6%
- 20-21: 1.3%
- 19-20: 1.6%
- 18-19: 1.8%

**Southwest**
- 22-23: 1.1%
- 21-22: 0.9%
- 20-21: 0.5%
- 19-20: 0.7%
- 18-19: 0.7%

**Southeast**
- 22-23: 1.6%
- 21-22: 1.3%
- 20-21: 1.0%
- 19-20: 1.2%
- 18-19: 1.3%

**Saint Louis**
- 22-23: 1.4%
- 21-22: 1.7%
- 20-21: 1.4%
- 19-20: 2.0%
- 18-19: 2.1%

**Regional Suburban Metro**
- 22-23: 1.5%
- 21-22: 1.2%
- 20-21: 1.0%
- 19-20: 1.2%
- 18-19: 1.2%

**Ramsey**
- 22-23: 2.4%
- 21-22: 1.9%
- 20-21: 1.7%
- 19-20: 2.3%
- 18-19: 2.8%

**Northwest**
- 22-23: 1.8%
- 21-22: 1.9%
- 20-21: 1.9%
- 19-20: 2.1%
- 18-19: 1.9%

**Northeast**
- 22-23: 1.6%
- 21-22: 1.7%
- 20-21: 1.4%
- 19-20: 1.6%
- 18-19: 1.5%

**Hennepin**
- 22-23: 3.1%
- 21-22: 2.6%
- 20-21: 2.0%
- 19-20: 2.8%
- 18-19: 2.9%

**Central**
- 22-23: 1.1%
- 21-22: 1.0%
- 20-21: 0.9%
- 19-20: 1.2%
- 18-19: 1.2%

## Graduation and Dropout Rates

A student's enrollment in the McKinney-Vento program is closely linked to their academic outcomes. We examined four- and seven-year graduation rates for high school students. For some students, the seven-year graduation rate is the most appropriate to reflect students' successful graduation. Students who are in the McKinney-Vento program are less likely than their stably housed classmates to graduate high school in four or seven years and more likely to drop out. On average over the last five school years, students statewide experiencing housing insecurity are just over half as likely as their stably housed peers to graduate from high school in four years. However, graduation rates for unstably housed and stably housed students has been rising over the last five years.

**Figure 10: Statewide Four-year and Seven-year graduation rates, 2018–23**
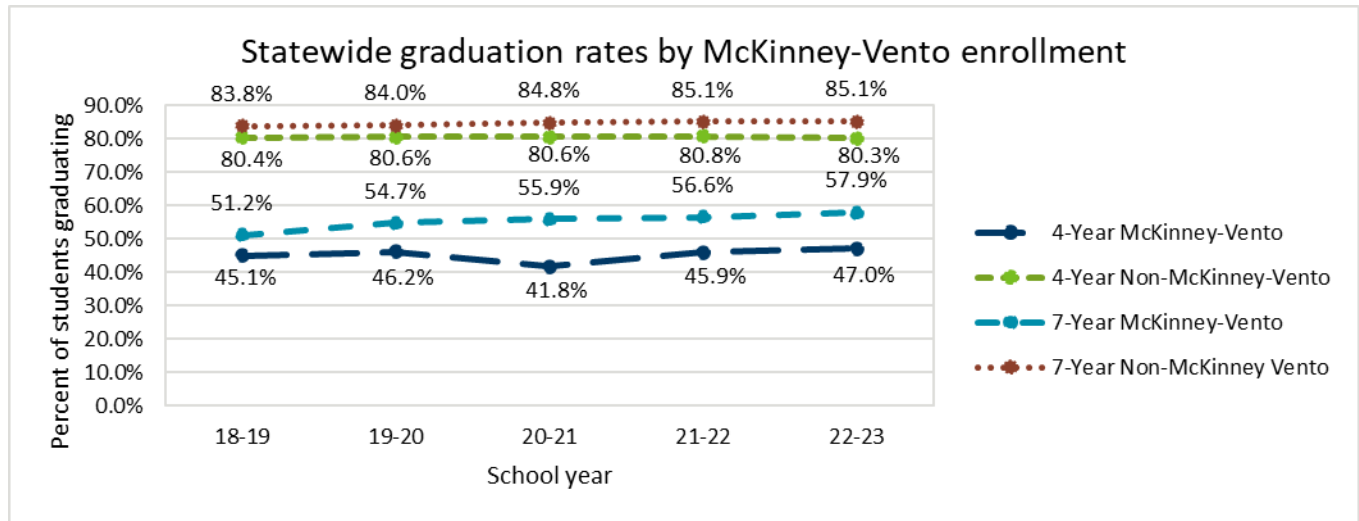


Likewise, dropout rates for McKinney-Vento and Non-McKinney Vento students have been declining over the last five years. However, students who are in the McKinney-Vento program are on average four times more likely than their non-McKinney Vento students to drop out of high school within four or seven years.

**Figure 11: Statewide Four-year and Seven-year dropout rates, 2018–23**
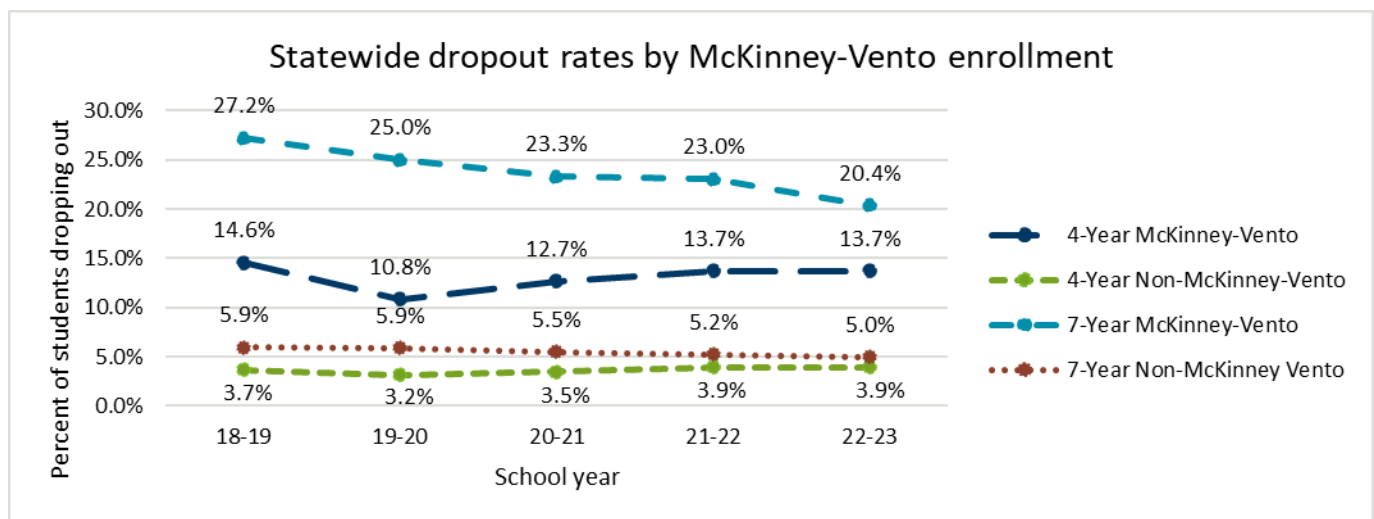
The sum of the dropout and graduation rates do not equal 100% because students may also be enrolling in the following school year, stopping high school in their graduation cohort, or their status in the public school system may be unknown.

# Appendix B: Gaps Analysis Phase 1 Engagement Summary

8/5/2024

## Introduction

In 2023, the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness (MICH) formally adopted the Crossroads to Justice Plan to coordinate enterprise-wide strategies around homelessness. As part of this plan, Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), a MICH member, is tasked with conducting a Gaps Analysis to identify where programs and services surrounding youth experiencing homelessness in Minnesota are disconnected, inadequate, or missing. MDE hired Bellwether Consulting and Humanize MN to conduct the Gaps Analysis which includes two phases of community engagement.

This is a summary of the first completed phase of the two engagement phases of the project. The summary highlights the questions we asked, people and organizations interviewed and the major themes that emerged from these initial interviews with engagement participants.

## Engagement Goals

- Gather input on the limitations and gaps of current efforts, resources, and programs that are deployed by all partners to address youth homelessness.
- Document the stated reasons for resources that have not been utilized.

## Engagement Timeline

- Phase 1: May – August 2024
- Phase 2: August – October 2024

## Interview Questions

The consultant team created a list of questions for the interviews with school district liaisons, nonprofit organizations, and tribal government staff who work with youth and families experiencing homelessness. The interview questions were provided to interviewees ahead of time and were also read during the interviews. Follow up questions were asked based on the natural flow of the conversations.

1. What is working well with the current youth homelessness response programs?
2. What are some of the limitations of the current youth homelessness response programs?
3. What are some things that may prevent youth and families from accessing existing resources?
4. What are potential ways to resolve the current issues and limitations of youth homelessness response programs?
5. What are some locations where we may be able to find youth and families who experience homelessness?

## People and Organizations Interviewed

The consultant team reached out to twenty-nine people for interview requests. Out of the 29, 16 people responded with their interest and availability. Those 16 interviews were completed between May through early August 2024. Five of those interviewed represented public schools. Another seven interviewees represented

nonprofit organizations that receive grant funding from MDE to support education services for youth experiencing homelessness. Two responses were received from MICH and MDE consultants. And one interviewee represented a Head Start program.

The consultant team also invited five additional representatives from school districts in the Continuum of Care regions who were not covered in the first round of interviews. This was done to ensure there was a balanced representation of people and perspectives from different parts of the state. As of August 2, 2024, one person responded to our interview requests.

Below is a complete list of the organizations that were interviewed as part of the phase one project engagement.

1. Minneapolis Public Schools
2. Lakeville Area Schools
3. Moorhead Public Schools
4. Duluth Public Schools
5. Osseo Public Schools
6. Rochester Public Schools
7. East Side Neighborhood Services
8. Community Action Center
9. YMCA Youth and Family Services
10. Oasis for Youth
11. Arch Philanthropy
12. MDE Consultant
13. MICH Consultant
14. Families First HeadStart

# Phase One Engagement Themes

The consultants conducted eleven interviews and identified several major themes. These themes include the need for increased funding, transportation barriers, staffing challenges, and the need for increased involvement from MDE.

## Schools and Community-Based Organizations

This section outlines recommendations from school district homeless liaisons and employees of CBOs to MDE. It begins with a summary of successful practices that should be continued, followed by areas for improvement.

### What is Going Well

**Providing Funding and Resources**

Several people acknowledged that MDE administers funding and resources that have been beneficial in supporting students experiencing homelessness. For instance, people noted the positive impact of MDE grants in enabling organizations like Oasis for Youth and East Side Neighborhood Services to expand their programs and provide essential services such as food assistance, technology access, transportation support, and creative arts therapy. Additionally, interviewees mentioned the availability of McKinney-Vento subgrants, although they also pointed out the challenges districts face in meeting the eligibility criteria for these funds.

**Collaboration, Information Sharing**

People recognized MDE's role in facilitating collaboration and information sharing among stakeholders involved in addressing student homelessness. They specifically mentioned the Minnesota Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (MAEHCY) monthly meetings for district homeless liaisons, as a valuable platform for sharing resources, discussing challenges, and fostering a sense of community among professionals. The existence of a dedicated listserv for liaisons, enabling them to connect with peers and state representatives for support and guidance, is also highlighted as a positive aspect of MDE's efforts.

**Promoting Awareness and Training**

Interviewees acknowledged that MDE provides some level of training and resources to increase awareness of student homelessness among school staff. For example, one person mentioned that MDE offers TransACT forms, although they also point out that these forms can be difficult for families to understand. This suggests that while MDE is making efforts to provide information, there is room for improvement in terms of clarity and user-friendliness.

**Advocating for Equitable Funding**

People commended MDE's advocacy efforts in securing more equitable distribution of funding for homelessness response programs. They cited the example of a revised grant program that allocates funds based on need, as a result of advocacy by liaisons and data-driven arguments. This indicates that MDE is responsive to feedback from the field and actively works to address funding disparities.

## Opportunities for Improvement

**Provide More Comprehensive and Accessible Training on Student Homelessness**

People highlighted the need for more comprehensive training and support from the MDE for school staff at all levels, including teachers, front office personnel, and transportation providers. They expressed that trainings should focus on recognizing the signs of student homelessness, understanding the educational rights of these students, and connecting them to appropriate resources. Others emphasized that the current training system often leaves front-line staff ill-equipped to recognize and address student homelessness, advocating for standardized, mandatory onboarding training covering these aspects. In addition, it was recommended that MDE develop more user-friendly resources, such as simplified explanations of complex forms and procedures, to better assist families in understanding their rights and navigating the support systems available to them.

**Improve Communication and Collaboration Among Stakeholders**

Several people expressed a desire for MDE to take a more active role in fostering communication and collaboration among districts, schools, community organizations, and government agencies. They suggested that MDE establish platforms for sharing best practices, disseminating information about available resources, and coordinating services to avoid duplication and streamlining support delivery. Interviewees also stressed the importance of consistent and clear communication channels between MDE and local districts, with designated points of contact to ensure timely and efficient exchange of information.

**Increase Flexible Funding**

Throughout the interviews people consistently identified inadequate funding as a major obstacle to effectively addressing student homelessness. They suggested that MDE advocate for increased and more flexible funding for homeless education programs, with a specific focus on addressing transportation barriers, expanding access to mental health services, and supporting the unique needs of specific student populations such as new immigrants and unaccompanied youth.

**Advocate for Policy Change**

People also recommended MDE push for policy changes that reduce barriers to accessing resources, such as revising overly strict eligibility requirements for programs like Coordinated Entry and addressing systemic issues that disproportionately impact certain communities.

**Develop a Statewide Approach Centered Around Prevention and Early Intervention**

Interviewees advocated for a more proactive, statewide approach to student homelessness, with a greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention strategies. They proposed that MDE work with schools and community partners to implement programs that identify and address the early warning signs of housing instability and provide timely support to prevent families from falling into homelessness. This includes advocating for increased investment in early childhood education and family support programs, recognizing their role in fostering long-term stability and breaking the cycle of poverty.

**Increase Direct Support to Districts**

People interviewed expressed a need for MDE to provide more direct support to districts in implementing effective homelessness response programs. They suggested that MDE offer more hands-on guidance, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities to help districts develop and implement comprehensive strategies tailored to their specific needs and community contexts. People emphasized the importance of MDE providing clear expectations, guidelines, and best practices for supporting students experiencing homelessness, along with ongoing support and monitoring to ensure program effectiveness and compliance with relevant laws and regulations.

**Staffing and Capacity Challenges**

People consistently underscored the critical need for increased staffing and capacity among organizations serving homeless youth. While MDE funding allows for some additional staff, the overall consensus is that funding constraints significantly limit organizations' ability to hire and retain qualified personnel. This shortage of staff is particularly problematic given the complex needs of homeless youth, who often require individualized support and advocacy.

## Tribal Nations

In consultation with staff from Minnesota Tribal Collaborative, the consultant team sent interview requests and short survey questionnaires to a list of tribal youth homeless liaisons from the different tribal governments in Minnesota. The survey was also shared with tribal staff during an in-person staff meeting hosted by Boise Forte at Fortune Bay Resort and Casino. We received two responses to our survey questions from this gathering. Here is a summary of those survey responses.

- Tribal survey respondents mentioned Local Homeless Prevention Aid (LHPA) tribal set-asides are helping families with children remain housed.
- Tribal survey respondents saw the limitations of the current homeless response programs include insufficient resources to provide outreach, early learning, and other educational programs to follow families and children who are homeless. They mentioned when families are housing insecure, the children's education may be overlooked because families are focused on surviving.
- Respondents reported barriers for youth to access existing resources include a lack of understanding and knowledge of the resources that are available to families. This especially affects families in new school districts when they move to find housing. Respondents also mentioned there is no consistency in programming in different service areas.

- Tribal respondents offered potential solutions to the current limitations of homeless response programs like more funding and providing a network of services that move across school districts and service areas, with additional support for education in schools and pre-schools.
- Finally, tribal respondents offered a few different meaningful ways to support children and youth experiencing homelessness. Their recommendations include meaningful case management and building connections with adults and specialized, well-trained staff to work specifically with children. They also underlined some families have a hard time asking for assistance for fear of having their children taken away from them. The connection to a consistent staff member who knows the family and has a trusted relationship with them will make it easier for fearful families to open up to ask for help.

## Systemic Barriers

The following section lists systemic barriers and challenges homeless children, youth, and their families face. These barriers and limitations were frequently mentioned in many of our interviews no matter who the interviewee was.

### Challenges Faced by New Americans

New Americans face significant challenges in accessing resources and support, often stemming from systemic barriers and a lack of culturally appropriate services. People highlighted language barriers as a major obstacle, preventing families from effectively communicating with school staff and accessing crucial information about available resources. Many families, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, experience fear and mistrust towards institutions due to previous negative experiences or concerns about immigration consequences. This distrust can prevent them from seeking help or disclosing their housing instability, further isolating them from potential support systems. The absence of readily available translated materials and culturally sensitive outreach efforts exacerbates these challenges, hindering their ability to navigate complex systems and access essential services.

### Transportation as a Major Barrier

Interviewees consistently identified transportation as a significant obstacle for homeless youth in accessing essential services, education, and opportunities. The lack of reliable and affordable transportation, especially in suburban and rural areas with limited public transportation options, is a recurring theme. For example, while MDE funding provides some assistance with transportation costs, people suggested that more comprehensive solutions are needed. These include expanding public transportation routes and hours, particularly during evenings and weekends.

### Limited Shelter Space and Short Application Deadlines

There is a shortage of available space in homeless shelters. Some interviewees noted that there are often long waiting lists for families, and when openings do occur, there are very short deadlines to apply. This creates a significant barrier for families experiencing homelessness, who may struggle to navigate the application process quickly, especially if they lack stable access to communication or transportation.

## Next Steps

After concluding phase one of the project engagement, the consultant team will start phase two of the project engagement. The purpose of phase two engagement is to gather input about resources and gaps of current homelessness programs and resources by interviewing children, youth, and families who are impacted by homelessness.

Participant recruiting approach and strategies informed by what we learned from phase one, engagement questions, and a detailed compensation plan will be developed and shared in a separate document.

The timeline for this phase of the project engagement will start in August and continue through October 2024.