



Building School-Housing Partnerships for Families Experiencing Homelessness

Las Cruces, NM, and the LCPS Project Link Homeless Education Program

Overview

Situated in a community with one of the lowest household incomes in the country and a poverty rate nearly double the national average, the Las Cruces, New Mexico Public Schools (LCPS) serve approximately 29,000 students — 78% of whom are Hispanic — across 36 schools in pre-K through 12th grade. Approximately 40 miles north of the US-Mexico border, Las Cruces is an urban town serving both urban and rural areas. LCPS reported a total of 684 students identified as experiencing homelessness at some time during the 2015-2016 school year. During the first quarter of the 2016-2017 school year, the school district identified 410 students experiencing homelessness. Approximately 90% of the students identified as experiencing homelessness are Hispanic, 3% are African-American, and 3% are Native American, compared to the general student population where 78% of students are Hispanic, 3% are African-American, and 1% are Native American.

Las Cruces is also one of the more than 30 communities and two states that have been confirmed by the federal government as having ended Veteran homelessness, giving the community a unique opportunity to capitalize on the momentum and success created around those efforts in order to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Leading the call to address those needs and to elevate attention and awareness of the challenges facing this population is the LCPS Project Link Homeless Education Program. Project Link focuses on a broad-based community response to address homelessness, especially among the population of youth experiencing homelessness on their own (unaccompanied youth).

Approximately five years ago, the growing need to address the issue of family and youth homelessness in the community spurred the school district into action, resulting in a multi-sector coalition that supports collaborative partnerships across a range of public and private stakeholders. From the onset, the LCPS Project Link Homeless Education Program invited as many community organizations and political leaders as possible – ranging from agencies and service providers to local and state representatives – to highlight the barriers facing students experiencing homelessness, particularly unaccompanied youth, and to collectively identify solutions.

The work in Las Cruces to end Veteran homelessness highlighted the importance of having active participation by local leaders. Active involvement by a representative from the state senator's office early in the development of the coalition contributed to community stakeholder engagement and willingness to partner with Project Link. Having an interim school superintendent who was very supportive of Project Link from the beginning also helped to raise awareness of the need for a coordinated response to family and youth homelessness and is keeping this issue on the agenda of local leaders.

Target Population

Students identified by the LCPS McKinney-Vento Program (Project Link Homeless Education Program).

Key Partners

Community partnerships are critical to the ability of Project Link to meet the needs of students and families. One of the strongest partners is a community-based daycare program for families experiencing homelessness, giving Project Link an additional voice to elevate attention to the issue of family and youth homelessness. This includes participation with the local Continuum of Care (CoC), supporting a coordinated response that streamlines the process for referring families to services. Other partners include the child welfare system and runaway and homeless youth service providers. In order to expand the coalition to a more regional approach, Project Link invited neighboring school districts to participate, adding to the breadth of participants and access to networks of supports for families and youth. This led to Project Link being viewed as a ‘hub’ and central resource for school districts and the CoC.

An active partner within the school system is the school district’s attendance department. Students experiencing homelessness comprise only a relatively small percentage of the overall students identified through the attendance department. Project Link has been able to engage with youth and families to strengthen school stability and attendance among students experiencing homelessness.

Key Strategies

Project Link’s key strategies focus on convening family and youth stakeholders to increase understanding and awareness of the target population, service needs, and challenges and barriers. Stakeholders also identify solutions where the array of programs and resources contributes to a coordinated systems approach to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness and their families. This means engaging as many stakeholders in the community as possible. An example of this collaboration is the “one stop shop” with Jardin de los Ninos, a daycare; Casa de Peregrinos, a food bank; El Caldito, a soup kitchen; and St. Luke’s Clinic, a health services provider, all housed on one campus to provide their services and resources. By highlighting the issue of student homelessness as more than a school concern, Project Link has seen success in how stakeholders are building networks of support and working together.

Key Lessons Learned

- Schools do not have the capacity to meet all the needs of students and their families on their own. The school district plays a big role, but preventing and ending homelessness among children, youth, and families requires a community-wide approach that engages a broad array of stakeholders.
- Acknowledging and recognizing the prevalence of students experiencing homelessness is critical to building broad-based support and increasing access to needed resources.
- Communities need an array of housing assistance (prevention, emergency housing, supportive housing, rental assistance, and public housing), as well as the services that are necessary to keep families and unaccompanied youth housed. Resources must include mainstream and non-targeted resources as well as the targeted homelessness assistance resources. For more information, see the recently published guidance from USICH on [Enlisting Mainstream Resources and Programs to End Homelessness](#).
- It is important to share information and be visible in the community — the Project Link program seeks every opportunity to engage a broad range of stakeholders including the local school board, community agencies, and service providers, to ensure they understand the challenges and barriers faced by students experiencing homelessness and to give a voice to the population. This has led to extensive support for Project Link and increased outreach by community partners.

- Partnerships matter – take time to build and maintain relationships!
- Awareness and understanding are critical — look for the opportunities to highlight who the population is and the strategies that work. This includes destigmatizing the experience of homelessness and helping to show the impact of homelessness on student performance and educational outcomes.

Outcomes

During the 2015-2016 school year, Project Link served 684 students. In the 2016-2017 school year, Project Link has served 410 students so far.

Housing

- Project Link refers 100% of families to community resources and built multiple, collaborative partnerships to provide access for families to needed services including the CoC, housing programs (e.g., housing for migrant populations) as well as private landlords, healthcare, and wraparound mental health and school-based clinics.

Education

- School attendance across LCPS consistently increased over the past five years, including among students experiencing homelessness thanks to the collaboration with the LCPS attendance department.
- For the majority of students served through Project Link, school mobility stayed to a minimum due to efforts to maintain students in their school of origin.
- Project Link provides bus passes (utilizing public transportation) for students as needed, and school bus transportation (outsourced by the District) is built into the budget for the school of origin. Efforts to keep students in their school of origin helped to ensure transportation costs did not increase for students experiencing homelessness.
- School graduation rates for youth experiencing homelessness are increasing as drop-out rates decrease. Of the approximately 30 to 40 unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness who were identified last year and eligible to graduate, 29 graduated. This is contributing to a break in the intergenerational cycle that many of these youth have experienced as they become the first in their family to complete high school.

Looking Ahead

Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

The increasing numbers of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness identified by schools informed how Project Link connects students to institutes of higher learning. Efforts focus on identifying available resources and supports for students prior to their senior year of high school, ranging from financial aid to campus-based resources for students experiencing homelessness through New Mexico State University. [Learn more about supporting college access and success for youth experiencing homelessness.](#)

Building Capacity

Accessing affordable housing continues to be a challenge for Las Cruces and for communities across the country. Project Link works to raise awareness of the impact of a lack of housing on efforts to end homelessness. Building capacity to provide safe and affordable housing requires a commitment and investment across multiple stakeholders at the local level. In Las Cruces, using the Southern New Mexico Homeless Coalition to mobilize stakeholders is a step to keep the community updated on the challenges facing families experiencing homelessness and the need for increased access to affordable housing.