



Building School-Housing Partnerships for Families Experiencing Homelessness

Mobile, Alabama, and the MCPSS Homeless Education Program

Overview

Situated in the third most populous city in Alabama, the Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) serves approximately 59,000 students across 89 schools in both rural and urban areas. Approximately 10% of enrolled students are identified as experiencing homelessness at some point during the school year. During the first quarter of the 2016-2017 school year, the MCPSS Homeless Education Program served 3,371 students. Approximately 60% of the students identified as experiencing homelessness are children of color compared to 40% in the general student population.

In September 2015, Mobile was confirmed by the federal government as having ended Veteran homelessness, providing the community with the momentum to further accelerate efforts to end homelessness among children, youth, and families. The work to end Veteran homelessness highlighted the importance of a coordinated response that engages all level of government, as well as private and public partners. The MCPSS Homeless Education Program is leading efforts to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness through that coordinated community response.

The MCPSS Homeless Education Program is an active participant on the Continuum of Care (CoC) board, advocating for and helping to elevate understanding and awareness of the challenges impacting students experiencing homelessness and continuing to draw attention to the need for a community-wide response. Efforts to address the needs of students and families identified through the Homeless Education Program were bolstered through grant funding from BB&T bank in November 2015, providing an infusion of flexible funding that has allowed for a wraparound approach to meeting the needs of the whole household, supplementing targeted Title I and McKinney-Vento funding as well as CoC funding. Many families of the students identified as experiencing homelessness have various needs, including employment-related needs (e.g., retooling job skills), transportation for students and parents, and housing-related expenses (e.g., back rent, unpaid utilities). Access to grant funds provides the Homeless Education Program with flexibility to address an array of needs, helping to stabilize families as they move to permanent housing situations.

Target Population

Students identified by the MCPSS Homeless Education Program

Key Partners

Through the CoC, the Homeless Education Program partners with both mainstream and community-based organizations to provide access to a range of wraparound services, including employment assistance and legal, mental health, and medical services. In addition to the collaborative partnership with the CoC, the MCPSS Homeless Education Program has established a partnership with the BB&T Homeless Outreach Program. Grant funding from BB&T has enabled the Homeless Education Program to use a graduated financial assistance model to rapidly resolve homelessness for households as they are identified and referred for services.

Key Strategies

The MCPSS Homeless Education Program is better able to serve the students and families identified as experiencing homelessness through its close partnership with the CoC and participation in the community's coordinated entry system. In addition to participating in the coordinated entry process, the local education liaisons regularly attend CoC meetings and participate in coordination of referrals and services. MCPSS also has a memorandum of understanding with the CoC lead agency regarding coordination of case management services for students in families who are being served within the homelessness assistance system. The current CoC Board president is a McKinney-Vento local education liaison. When the Homeless Education Program identifies a family or student, the CoC's coordinated entry outreach team is notified in order to expedite entry through a coordinated referral and assessment process. Families with children who present for assistance through the community's coordinated entry system are referred to the homeless liaison assigned to their child's school. If the child is not currently enrolled in school, the Homeless Education Program facilitates enrollment and coordinates with the coordinated entry outreach and case managers to ensure daily school attendance.

Through their close collaboration, the CoC and the Homeless Education Program are able to capture data on the households and services being accessed, helping to inform community understanding of the level and scope of need among families and youth experiencing homelessness. Where CoC funding cannot be used to support services for families, the BB&T grant funds provide a mechanism for immediately addressing the needs of families through the Homeless Education Program, ensuring low-barrier access to services.

Reflecting the challenge of many communities across the country, revitalization of neighborhoods and available housing stock in and around Mobile has had a significant impact on the ability of families to access safe and affordable housing. A key strategy in the successful effort to end Veteran homelessness has focused on landlord engagement and this will continue to be a critical component as the community advances efforts to end homelessness across all populations, including families and youth. The MCPSS Homeless Education Program leverages access to supportive case management as a 'selling' feature for landlords to build strong relationships and encourage their participation in developing available housing for families identified through the school system.

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 has a big role to play, but preventing and ending homelessness among children, youth, and families requires a community-wide approach that engages a broad array of stakeholders.
- Data matters. Tracking referrals through coordinated entry, including the kinds of housing and services they are accessing, provides the community with greater understanding of need and where resources should be targeted to best meet the needs of priority populations, including families with children and youth.
- Coordination, not duplication! A key strategy in Mobile has been to reduce duplication of services and to increase coordination among the different systems that serve families and youth. Bringing targeted homelessness assistance resources to the table with the larger array of mainstream and non-targeted resources provides a more robust and coordinated response.
- Collaborative partnerships are essential — building and maintaining relationships is a critical component of advancing community-wide efforts to end homelessness.

- Awareness and understanding are key. As an active participant and leader in the local CoC, the Homeless Education Program has been able to advocate for the student population and draw attention to the needs of youth and their families.

Outcomes

- By the end of the 2015-2016 school year, the Homeless Education Program had served 4,292¹ students.
- To-date during the 2016-2017 school year, the Homeless Education Program has served 3,371 students.

Housing

The MCPSS Homeless Education Program received BB&T grant funds in November 2015. As of October 2016, 57 families (153 students) have been housed through rapid re-housing; approximately 91% remain housed.

Education

- The Homeless Education Program has seen an increase in school attendance and a decrease in the rate of school mobility among the target population, meaning students are more likely to remain in their school of origin.
- School graduation rates for youth experiencing homelessness are around 90.5%. This success is largely the result of targeted efforts by the Homeless Education Program to focus on students, especially high school juniors and seniors, to ensure they are on track to graduate on time. Students also receive support to facilitate the post-secondary transition.

Looking Ahead

Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

MCPSS has experienced an increase in the number of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. Through the CoC, the community received dedicated rapid re-housing funding for unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness (16-22 years). Rapid re-housing for youth will be a new approach for the community and one where the Homeless Education Program will be part of the program implementation.

Building Capacity

With the increase in employment opportunities, many neighborhoods in Mobile are being revitalized, and as a result, increasing numbers of very low-income families are being displaced and the overall affordable housing stock is being depleted. Although the relationships that the CoC and Homeless Education Program have made remain strong, efforts to secure housing units are still strained. Efforts to identify additional units of affordable housing and flexible funding to support families' transition from shelter to permanent housing continue to be a priority for the community. The positive outcomes from the interventions funded through the BB&T grant help to demonstrate the impact of stable and permanent housing.

¹ The current numbers reflect an undercount due to data quality issues resulting from software updates to the database. Efforts are underway to correct the data and reflect the more accurate numbers tracked by the Homeless Education Program.