

IN JUST TIMES

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**NATIONAL LAW CENTER
ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY**



*Changing Laws,
Changing Lives*

News and Commentary for
June 2014

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Dear Friends,

As the school year ends, homeless students are among the graduates in ceremonies across the country.

This [and the academic distinctions earned by some](#) is testament to the talent, perseverance and sheer determination of these young people.

But not all are fortunate enough to reach graduation. Homeless children continue to be shut out of school, simply because they are homeless-denied the chance even to strive for this milestone. [The Law Center's outreach, training, and legal advocacy](#) have broken down these barriers for tens of thousands of homeless children, making a critical difference in their lives. [Danae Vachata](#), a remarkable young woman whom you can read about below, is one of them.

School is a lifeline for homeless kids-a source of stability, meals, and basic health care-and a path out of homelessness and poverty: [education levels are directly tied to employment and salary levels](#). For homeless children and youth, access to education helps end and prevent homelessness.

This is a critical issue that the Law Center has worked on since our founding 25 years ago-and in that time, school attendance rates for homeless children have increased dramatically. But barriers remain for too many kids, and our work must and does continue.



Maria Foscarinis
Executive Director

McKinney-Vento Awards; September 30th

This June, join us in committing to help ALL homeless children fulfill their dreams-and their potential. And mark your calendars to join us September 30th to mark our own milestone.

Law Center Trains Two Hundred School Administrators on McKinney-Vento Compliance at NJ State Conference

On May 21, Law Center Attorney, Lisa Coleman, presented at the New Jersey State Education for Homeless Children & Youth Technical Assistance Conference on important lessons learned from litigation and how school administrators should best serve its 8,500 homeless students. Attendees included New Jersey district administrators, district homeless and education stability liaisons, and student services personnel charged with ensuring that students and families experiencing homelessness receive the appropriate supplemental instructional and non-instructional services to succeed academically.

The one-day conference, hosted by the Office of Title 1, New Jersey Department of Education, was the first of its kind to bring together the diverse range of school administrators that serve homeless children and youth to provide them with information about innovations and best practices in ensuring the educational rights of this vulnerable population. One attendee stated, "This was one of the best conferences that I have attended on this topic in 34 years in NJ education field."



Children Boarding Bus in New Jersey School - photo by Michael Mancuso/The Times

Homeless children and youth in New Jersey and throughout the United States thrive when their continuity of education is protected. Stability in education during homelessness is vital not only for their mental and emotional health in the short-term, but for their future ability to succeed in a competitive job market and break the cycle of poverty. Districts and states that fail to properly

and fully comply with McKinney-Vento not only harm homeless children, they place their jurisdictions at risk of litigation.

The Law Center's plenary session entitled, "How NOT to Get Sued for McKinney-Vento Noncompliance: Advancements in Homeless Education from Litigation," advised the attendees on best practices at the state and local level for implementing McKinney-Vento services for homeless children and youth. The Law Center also shared lessons learned from the missteps that others have made with respect to McKinney-Vento compliance to empower liaisons and coordinators with the legal basis to work with their administration to improve McKinney-Vento compliance in the future.

Voices of Youth

One Tuesday, June 17, at a Congressional briefing titled "Voices of Youth," twelve homeless/formerly homeless youth discussed their stories and struggles with homelessness. The facilitated discussion, sponsored by Senators Patty Murray and Lisa Murkowski, touched on the importance of federal, state, and community resources in the lives of homeless and at-risk youth.



Photo by Design Pics Inc/REX

During the question-and-answer portion of discussion, several recurring themes kept rising. Many of the youth discussed abusive relationships, mental illness, and substance abuse as key factors that led to their homelessness, while others pointed to the foreclosure crisis and having been evicted from their homes. About half of the students had lived in shelters previously, while others doubled-up with friends and relatives or stayed in cheap hotels or motels or resorted to living in their cars. While school seemed to be the only constant thing in their lives, going to school was

difficult when they had to move frequently, face challenges with transportation, and work with unsympathetic counselors and teachers. If that weren't enough, almost every student had a problem attending college, be it a problem with getting enough financial aid or finding a place to stay during breaks when college campuses were closed.

When it came to identifying key factors that helped lift them out of homelessness, most of the students relayed that a stable home, counselors who asked the right questions, and people who went above and beyond to help, pushed them out of being homeless. These people included social workers, teachers, friends, and some family. When asked what could have or should have been in place to help them earlier on, similar themes began to rise again: stable housing, more community resources geared toward homeless youth, and school counselors who care and are trained to help.

The twelve students were nothing short of inspiring and through their dialogue, key issues arose which shed light on the plight of homeless youth and the inadequate community resources meant to help. Children shouldn't have to fight so hard to attain basic rights such as housing and education, showing resilience at such a young age as they continue their every-day fight to escape homelessness. But that's the reality for so many homeless and at-risk youth across America. And while the Voices of Youth briefing had no political agenda, it seems clear that our policy priorities need to shift to focus on the well being of our youth.

Homeless College Students

The costs of going to college is tremendously high leading many students to become straddled with financial debt from student loans. But imagine having to go to college, take out loans that will become a burden AND simultaneously be homeless. It's a thought that's hard to grasp but a reality for so many youth. College is meant to be a stepping stone up the ladder toward financial stability and yet the following two stories show the fight to escape poverty through college is a harder fight than ever.



Photo by Kathy Willens/AP

Two formerly homeless college students were recently profiled in the Guardian: Jeffrey Williams and Danae Vachata, who was honored by the Law Center at our 2012 McKinney-Vento Awards event. The pair shared their stories of when they were in college, homeless, fighting to stay in school.

In order to receive financial assistance, homeless students need to prove that their independent with no family to help pay their bills. Unfortunately, the burden of having to prove independence falls mostly on the student, who has to struggle to acquire the necessary paperwork as proof.

Williams recalls, "They were telling me I needed my parents' information and I told them, 'I can't get my parents information, because they won't give me anything.'" He later had to write a letter and file an appeal regarding the school's decision. It was approved and he was recognized as an independent student, but was still forced to take out student loans to pay for the majority of his college education.

Vachata fought a similar fight with having to be recognized as an independent and prove her parents were not in the picture. In her words, "It got to the point where I had to share my childhood story with multiple people from the financial aid office, multiple people at the school. In a sense, I had to give up my privacy and I had a very scary moment when I had to portray to them why I am in this situation, why I don't have support [of my family]."



Photo by Jonathan Brady/PA

In Vachata's case, we stepped in and successfully fought the school to recognize her status. She thanks Eric Tars, Law Center's senior attorney, for contacting the school on her behalf and resolving the matter.

Williams and Vachata are not alone; many homeless youth experience challenges pursuing college, as described at the Voices of Youth briefing and also detailed in a major Law Center report, [Alone without a Home](#). The Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act, a bill introduced by Senators Patty Murray, Tammy Baldwin, and Mary

Landrieu, could help.

The bill makes it clear that unaccompanied and homeless youth are to be considered independent and they wouldn't have to have their status re-determined every year. The bill would also make it a requirement for colleges to automatically offer in-state tuition for homeless and foster youth and also a housing plan during and in-between semesters.

Call or write to your member of congress and ask him or her to support this important bill! To read more about Vachata and Williams in the recent profile of them in the Guardian, [click here](#).

McKinney-Vento Awards



Save the Date!

We're excited to announce the 2014 McKinney-Vento Awards event! This year's event is especially important to us: it marks the 25th anniversary of our founding. We will be celebrating 25 years of high impact advocacy that has changed laws and changed lives for millions, while also raising critical resources for the work ahead.

This year, we are thrilled to be honoring **Steve Smith**, wide receiver for the Baltimore Ravens, with the Stewart B. McKinney Award, for his commitment to homeless and low-income families and individuals, and **Sidley Austin LLP**, a Law Firm widely recognized for its pro bono and diversity programs, with the Pro Bono Counsel Award.

Our invited Bruce F. Vento honoree is **U.S. Senator Patty Murray**, for her leadership in advancing solutions to homelessness and commitment in the Senate. We will also honor a formerly homeless person with our Personal Achievement Award.

So mark your calendars!

Date: Tuesday, September 30, 2014

Time: Reception & Strolling Dinner: 6:00 pm - Program & Dessert: 7:00 pm

Location: The Liaison Capitol Hill: 415 New Jersey Ave NW, Washington, DC 20001

LEAP Member Profile: DLA Piper

DLA Piper has been a LEAP member since 2009 and has been invaluable to the Law Center ever since, especially in 2011, when DLA Piper and the Law Center launched [Project LEARN](#) (Lawyers' Education Access Resource Network), a program through which brief advice and advocacy assistance is provided to help homeless children stay in school.



The McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) provides important protections to homeless students to ensure their educational rights are realized. The Law Center runs a national technical assistance project to advise families and school advocates on the application of MVA in specific situations. DLA Piper volunteers assist in providing guidance on complex technical assistance inquiries, and also engage in litigation where necessary. In the past, DLA Piper volunteers have also conducted Know Your Rights presentations in communities to raise

awareness of MVA and identify families who may need Project LEARN's assistance. Last year, DLA Piper volunteers assisted 50 homeless families advocate for their children's educational rights; and also trained over 600 advocates on the educational rights of homeless children and youth with an estimated positive impact on over 4,000 homeless children and youth.

Special thanks to Anne Geraghty Helms, Evelyn Rodriquez, Barbara Trachtenberg, and Roberta Ritvo for their leadership and guidance in making this collaboration on Project LEARN a success.

Changing Laws. Changing Lives.

The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty is the only national organization providing high-level, comprehensive legal and legislative expertise resolving national homelessness issues through advocacy, advocacy training, public education, and impact litigation

www.nlchp.org