



With every bed and mattress donated New Life Furniture Bank also gives a set of linens.



At the churches that partner with Family Promise, each family is given their own room with beds and linens to stay in for the week.

NOWHERE TO TURN

As student homelessness is on the rise, government and nonprofit organizations have taken steps to help families with children to get back on their feet.

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* denotes name change

Evicted from their apartment, they had nowhere to go and no form of transportation. With no family members to take them in and no one to turn to, a single mom and her two young daughters found themselves homeless.

Homelessness can be an extremely traumatic experience. Grace*, a Lakota student, found herself in this scary situation. She and her sister represent two of the 1,354 students in Butler County that were identified as homeless during the 2018-2019 school year, according to the Department of Education.

“[The scariest part about not having a home was] worrying about having a safe place to sleep and having enough food,” Grace said. “I also worried that my friends would find out and not be friends with me anymore.”

Homelessness doesn't always look like the person on the side of the street with a cardboard sign. It can be a family living out of their car, doubling up in another family's home, living in a hotel, or possibly a single mom hoping to find room for herself and her children in a local shelter. With all of these possibilities, it can be difficult for school officials to recognize student homelessness.

“There is significant under-identification of homeless students, for a number of reasons,”

Barbara Duffield, Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection, told Spark. “One reason is because children and youth who are homeless [with] their families are afraid to tell people about their situation. They don't necessarily look homeless, so there aren't obvious signs. You have to have school staff that are trained, know what to look for, and know how to ask the right questions. Part of it is just the invisibility of homelessness.”

The US Department of Education's EDFacts Initiative Data indicates most states are seeing the number of homeless students rise every year. This phenomenon is true nationally as well, with the number of identified students rising to 1,504,544 during the 2017-2018 school year. According to Jan Moore, the Assistant Director of the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), this increase is due to better identification by the school district, but some students are still going undetected.

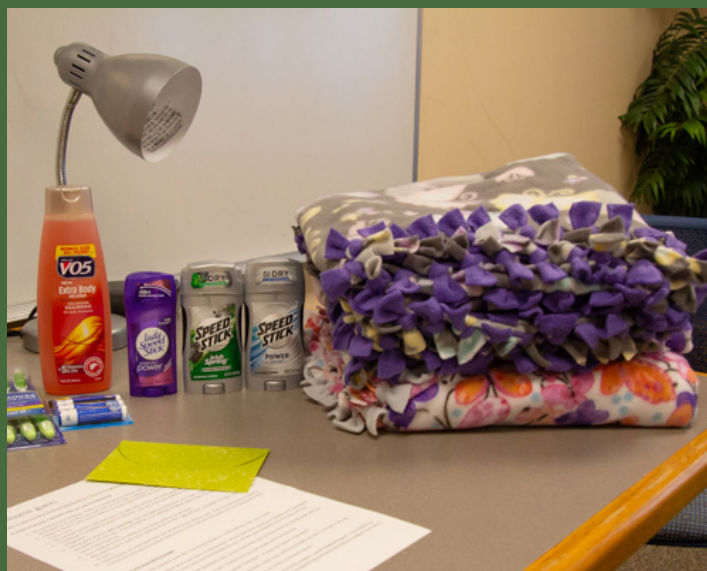
“More people understand what the law provides and requires, and school districts are better at identifying homeless students,” Moore told Spark. “Parents and students are now more aware of [their] rights and may be more likely to self-identify. Although we know even though the numbers are rising, we're not identifying every student who's experiencing homelessness.

There's still a lot of stigma, particularly with youth, around homelessness.”

According to the McKinney-Vento Act, a federal law which ensures that homeless children have equal access to the same high-quality educational opportunities as non-homeless children and youth, school districts are responsible for appointing a local liaison. The liaison is responsible for ensuring district families are aware of who it covers and that it provides nutritional programs, educational services, and ensures district-provided transportation services to the students' school of origin. Local liaisons are tasked with the responsibility of identifying homeless students and providing both academic and non-academic support. This requires them to be knowledgeable of both state and local social service agencies and community resources that provide aid to homeless students and their families.

“There is a liaison in every school district and a state coordinator at every State Department of Education, that's required in the law,” Moore said. “We work really closely with those folks to ensure that they understand what the school district and the state department needs to be doing, and provide best practices for them.”

There is a misunderstanding by the general



When families stay at the churches that partner with Family Promise they are given toiletries and sometimes hand-written letters or gifts like blankets.

population around what causes homelessness. According to Moore, many people associate McKinney-Vento eligibility and homelessness with someone who is mentally ill, has substance abuse problems, or just doesn't want to work. This stigma leads some who need the help McKinney-Vento provides to not take advantage of the programs available.

"Families and a lot of youth living on their own just don't want to be stereotyped," Moore said. "They feel like other people will know about the designation as McKinney-Vento eligible, and they don't want to let anyone know about their living situation."

When a student is identified as being homeless, the family is assigned to a School Success Liaison who helps them to get the benefits they receive through the McKinney-Vento Act. According to State Homeless Education Coordinator Susannah Wayland, the McKinney-Vento Act exists not to stigmatize students, but to promote stability in aspects that affect education.

"The minimum requirement of implementation, when a family is determined to be eligible, [is that] they automatically get nutrition services, which means they don't have to fill out an income form in order to get free breakfast and free lunch," Wayland said. "They automatically are eligible for any kind of educational support through the title one program, and that is regardless of whether they're academically in need."

According to Cari Wynne, supervisor of the Success Program at the Butler County Educational Services, success liaisons help families to find stable housing, but also make sure that they are getting food and clothing. They look at all kinds of needs, not just the obvious housing issue.

"The liaisons reach out to these families, and we try to meet with them wherever they are, so if they're in a hotel or in the shelter or wherever they might be, we sit down with them," Wynne said. "We talk to them about their situation, about their individual needs, because all families are different. Then we set off on a plan to try and help them to get the things that they need."

The McKinney-Vento Act helps to ensure that during the turbulence caused by homelessness, students can continue to go to school and in most cases, the same school that

else is turned upside down, and a part of their identity that doesn't change."

In May 2019, Lakota had 182 students who were homeless, a 13% increase from the previous school year. According to Kimberly McGowan, the Director of Federal Programs for the Lakota School District, Lakota realizes the number of homeless students continues to rise and in response has increased the number of success liaisons who play a crucial role in helping students and their families. Currently, Lakota is supported by six full-time and two part-time success liaisons.

"Once we are made aware of a concern, one of the Butler County Educational Service Center Success Liaisons contacts the family to find out more information about their situation," McGowan said. "Then, based on the responses, the success liaison contacts me to discuss. If the student and/or family is eligible under the McKinney-Vento law, we complete a form to identify them and indicate some of the support they need."

Butler County families that have children ages 18 or under who qualify as homeless can find shelter with the 3-year-old Butler Family Promise. This shelter is one of three resources that liaisons can suggest to families and according to Wynne, the need often surpasses the openings.

Family Promise operates seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and has a day center where the families can spend their time. Grace and her family were referred to Family Promise by their success liaison, who personally drove them to the day center so they could receive services. According to Family Promise Executive

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Barbara Duffield**

they have been going to. According to Duffield, these students need to be able to have some consistency, and schools are a place that can fill that void.

"Homeless students need stability in their lives. They need to have a constant source of support that doesn't change," Duffield said. "Our scholarship students tell us that school is a home, it's a family, it's a safe haven. To be able to have some sense of normalcy and have something to hold on to, when everything



New Life Furniture Bank has a wood shop where volunteers can come in and make tables and shelves that will be donated to homeless families.



When families stay at the churches that partner with Family Promise they are given toiletries and sometimes hand-written letters or gifts like blankets.

Director Linda Smith, the center is funded with donations from congregations, individuals, civic organizations, and fundraising efforts.

“While at the day center they can be looking for jobs, housing, we do case management with them, making sure that they have all their resources,” Smith told Spark. “Children can go to school from here at the day center. Federal Government law states that the children have to be transported to their home school within the county that they’re in. So they are able to catch buses from here or vans, to go to their home school.”

The families receive help while at the center so that by the time they leave they will be back on their feet. Family Promise provides skill training on financial literacy, good tenancy, smart shopping, and parenting skills all with the purpose of establishing a foundation of success for the future. Family Promise helped Grace’s mom polish up her resume and get set up with Ohio Means Jobs, who was able to assist her in obtaining a new full-time position.

“We help them set up appointments with Job & Family Services to get needed resources such as Medicaid, SNAP, and childcare vouchers,” Smith said. “Referrals are made for mental health treatment, if needed. We assist them with looking for jobs or getting them set up with Ohio Means Jobs for skill testing

and other job needs. We do trainings on good tenancy, how to deal with bullying and anti-bullying, and knowing the signs of suicide and runaways. We keep them busy working on having all the tools necessary to be successful once they leave here.”

After the Family Promise day center closes, the families are then transported to a local church that partners with Family Promise. Each congregation houses the families for a week, providing them with privacy as well as people to help play with the kids.

“Then we transport the families to a local congregation,” Smith said. “That’s where they get their dinner and snacks, breakfast the next morning, and food for lunch the next day. They get a room at the church, where they’re set up with beds and common comforts of home, and that’s where they spend the night. Each church hosts about four times a year and it’s for a week at a time.”

Volunteers play a large role in helping to setup and prepare for the families that stay at the churches. According to Tara Yunker, Director of missions and outreach at Faith Community United Methodist Church, Family Promise provides the church with a trailer with mattresses in it. They then have bedding,

pillows, drying racks, and towels to help set up the room.

“Before Family Promise came into place, families would be separated. A single mom with a teenage son would have to go to two different shelters,” Yunker told Spark. “Family Promise is the only way they’re able to stay together as a family unit instead of being separated. They are functioning as a family unit, and we are just offering them support.”

Each night, volunteers prepare dinner for the families and hang out with them in the evenings. They offer activities and play with the kids while the parents shower. Faith has a gym where the kids can play dodgeball and basketball. Volunteers also help the students with their homework so that they won’t fall behind.

“The first week we were in [the] shelter it was a bit difficult [to concentrate on school work],” Grace said. “But because we had such great volunteers at the churches where we stayed, I was able to get help with homework and had a lot of people who believed in me.”

Most churches host three to four times a year, but Faith usually hosts a fifth week when there are openings. Churches will typically host four to five families at a time, as long as there are not more than 14 individuals. This maximum is set based on how many seats the

“So many families are just one paycheck away from being homeless. We want to make it as painless as we can for them and give them dignity while they’re here.” - Tara Yunker, Director of missions and outreach at Faith Community United Methodist Church



New Life Furniture Bank has examples of what typical donations look like. This is the typical table setting for a family of two.

Family Promise bus can transport.

“It’s important for families to stay together during this difficult time,” Yunker said. “I think when people think about homelessness, they have a different perception of what it really is. So many families are just one paycheck away from being homeless, so if somebody gets in a car accident or has a medical bill. There are just so many families that are so close to being in that situation. And we want to make it as painless as we can for them and give them dignity while they’re here.”

People experiencing homelessness face a lot of stigma. According to the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2017, high school students experiencing homelessness are 2.59 times more likely to be bullied on school property or electronically compared to their stably-housed peers. More than one in three students experiencing homelessness reported being a victim of bullying at school.

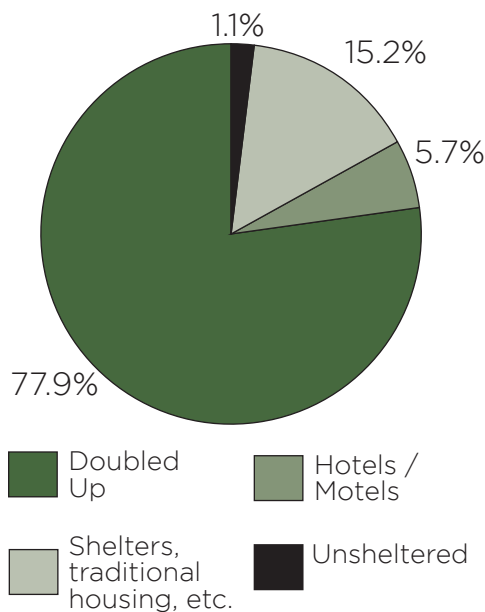
“The kids that were my closest friends were very supportive,” Grace said. “But many of the other students that found out made fun of me, they called my family losers, lazy and claimed that we were what was wrong with people living off the government, it was really hard.”

Along with stigma and obvious lack of housing, homeless families also face a lack of transportation. Grace’s family did not have a car, so they were left with no way to get to a job or to school.

“There is no public transportation in the Lakota area at all,” Wynne said. “And many times these families don’t have vehicles. So to be able to even look for a place that they might be able to find, they simply don’t have the means to travel.”

In the Lakota area there is a severe lack of

Percentage of homeless children/
youth enrolled in public schools by
type of primary nighttime residence in
2017-18



source national center for
homeless education

affordable housing, and Grace’s family faced an additional barrier: they had been evicted from their previous residence, so they were more likely to be turned down while looking for housing.

“Housing is tricky because there really is a shortage of affordable housing in this community,” Wynne said. “Finding housing based on a very limited income is really tough,

especially if they’ve been evicted and then that is on their record. Sometimes it’s hard to find landlords that will accept them. The biggest thing is the fact that people cannot afford the price of rent. Many of our folks are working full time, but are earning low wages that will never be in line with what it costs to rent even a very modest apartment.”

Grace’s family qualified for a temporary rent voucher which would assist them with rent for the first six months in a new apartment. Family Promise was then able to help Grace’s family find a new apartment three blocks from her mom’s new job, so she would be able to walk to work.

Once Grace’s family overcame the difficulty of finding housing, the next hurdle they faced was acquiring the necessities that they had been forced to leave behind. That’s where the nonprofit, New Life Furniture Bank, came into play. New Life Furniture Bank collects donations of gently used furniture and then redistributes it to homeless families who have recently moved into housing. In 2019, they helped 320 homeless families.

“Think about a mom with three little kids and a small two bedroom apartment,” Susan Flynn, New Life Furniture Bank community outreach coordinator said. “What does she need to be happy? They would get a bed, a dresser, a nightstand, a kitchen table and chairs, coffee table, an end table, a couch, and a living room chair.”

When donations are available, New Life also supplies families with a full set of linens, dishes, and kitchen electronics. Realizing many of these families do not have transportation, New Life delivers the items directly to the families’ new home.

“There are areas where you can get cheap furniture, cheap so to speak,” Flynn said. “But for a family to do that, and then buy it - often they don’t have cars or a way to buy the furniture and get it back. For us to gather it, deliver it, and help setup is huge.”

Family Promise helped Grace’s mom to secure a job and an apartment that is within walking distance of her new job as well as their local grocery store. New Life Furniture Bank supplied the family with startup furniture for their new apartment. Working with their success liaison and community resources allowed Grace and her sister to not miss anymore days of school, giving them the opportunity to succeed.

“Finding a new home was a bit bittersweet for us,” Grace said. “While we were so excited to have our own place, we were scared to live in a new neighborhood and we knew we would miss the people at Family Promise. We grew attached to the staff and the volunteers always had kind words for us and made us feel like we were good people. I am happy to say that things are going well for us and we have made many new friends in our new neighborhood.” •