



Joseph E. Rafferty
Senator, District 34

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Testimony in Support of LD 384

An Act to Prevent Student Homelessness

Good morning Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Select Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Joe Rafferty and I proudly represent the people of Senate District 34 including Berwick, North Berwick, Wells, Kennebunk and Kennebunkport.

I am here today to present LD 384, "An Act to Prevent Student Homelessness." This bill would provide essential support to our most vulnerable students who are experiencing housing instability.

In our state, over 73% of evictions occur as a result of less than \$1,300 in outstanding costs, which highlights the precarious financial situations that many families in Maine are facing.

Children are experiencing homelessness at increasing rates in our state. In the 2023-2024 school year, there were over 5,000 homeless students in Maine schools.

We've learned from the recent past. During the Covid-19 years, the American Rescue Plan created a fund for Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, specifically for Homeless Children and Youth. That program's expiration led to LD 1609. A Pilot Program over the last two years with an appropriation of \$1,500 million dollars through DOE. That Pilot Program has ended.

I shared an electronic copy of the mandated study of the Pilot with the committee on Sunday via email. I think I have some hard copies here for you as well.

This bill, LD 384, is the exact bill that came out of the 131st Legislature with unanimous support of the Joint Select Committee on Housing. The difference being that it is no longer a Pilot Program but meant to solidify those funds moving forward.

This fund would be available to school leaders in their efforts to provide resources for families in need, up to \$750 per student, for such needs as back rent, utilities payment, repairs, short emergency hotel stays beyond the two nights schools can offer, security deposits, transportation expenses, and miscellaneous wrap-around services.



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It is hard for us to understand what being homeless looks like. Having gone through this experience with a family in my own district, I can tell you it's ugly. No one, especially children should go through this, particularly resulting from things they have absolutely no control over.

Statewide, according to the Pilot Program review, SAU's reported at least 844 students received support across all 16 counties.

This fund has proven to have a significant impact on our ability to prevent student homelessness and ensure that our most vulnerable students have access to the resources they need to succeed in school. The use of funds would be reported in the same way liaisons currently report throughout the pilot. It adds no additional burden on school administrators.

Earlier this session, I was in this room working with teachers from around the State for a program giving them a feel for the work we do. We were simulating a Public Hearing as well as a Work Session. During a Q & A at the end, I was asked what was the most important bill that I've sponsored? Without hesitation, I answered the bill to prevent student homelessness. When I explained what that was, several thanked me because they were aware of the impact it had in their school.

As someone who cares deeply about the education and well-being of our students, I urge you to support LD 384. By providing schools with the resources needed to serve every student when their family is facing a crisis situation caused by housing instability, we can prevent student homelessness and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I will take any questions you might have.

Senator Joe Rafferty SD 34



Date Due: July 1, 2024

Source of Report: LD 258 – Public Law Chapter 412; Part KKKK, Sec. KKKK-2 (p. 366)

Topic: Report on pilot program to help students avoid homelessness

Context

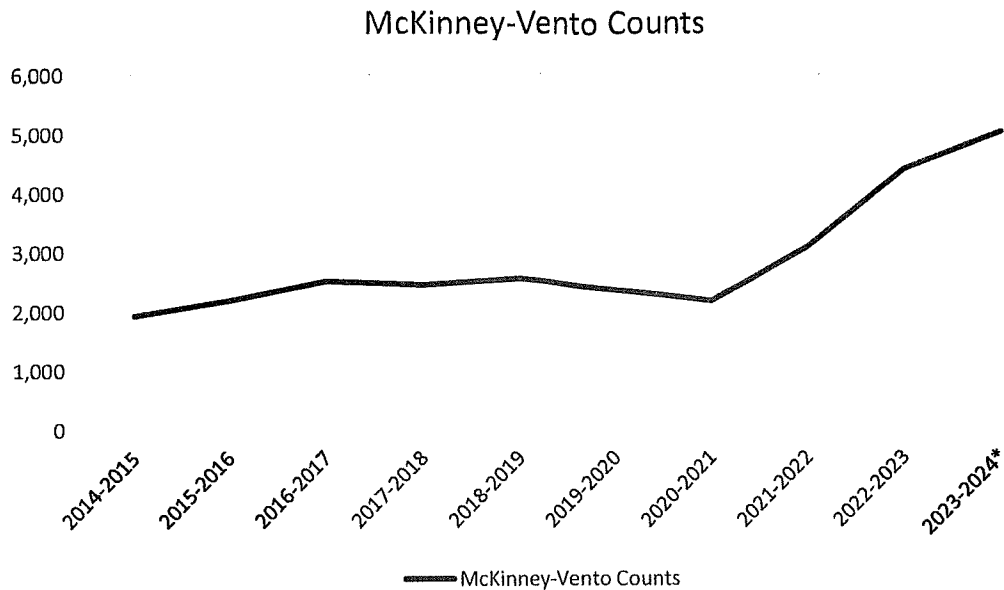
Public Law 2023, Chapter 412, the biennial budget, established the Pilot Program to Prevent Student Homelessness (Pilot Program), a two-year pilot program to help prevent student homelessness, administered by the Maine Department of Education (DOE) in the Office of School and Student Supports (O3S). For the duration of the pilot years, McKinney-Vento liaisons throughout Maine have access to up to \$750 per student for housing-related needs such as rental assistance, utilities, and critical home repairs to help a student avoid homelessness.

This report was requested after one year of implementation of the Pilot Program to determine its effectiveness. The timeline of this work is July 1, 2023 to July 1, 2024.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, first authorized in 1987 and most recently reauthorized in 2015, established the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program and is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The DOE and Maine schools follow the provisions of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This law helps students whose housing situations are impacting their education. All students are guaranteed the right to a free, appropriate, public education. They can remain enrolled in the schools they have been attending even if they are temporarily staying out of the district but also have the right to enroll in their new school of residence. McKinney-Vento protections apply to all public school students, pre-K through grade 12 who “lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence”, including children and youth:

- Sharing housing due to loss of housing or economic hardship
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate housing
- Living in emergency or transitional housing
- Abandoned in hospitals
- Having a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, regular sleeping accommodations
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations
- Migratory students meeting the descriptions above

Children are experiencing homelessness at increasing rates in our state. This includes shared and temporary housing situations due to loss of primary housing, staying in hotels or motels, homeless shelters, and unsheltered living situations. In the 2023-2024 school year, there were over 5,000 homeless students in Maine's schools, continuing a trend of increased homelessness since 2020. As Maine continues to experience an acute and well-documented housing shortage, there are significant negative impacts on Maine's vulnerable children.



Source: National Center for Homeless Education, Data Collection and Reporting
 *2023-2024 Data is through May 1, 2024

The intent of the Pilot Program is to provide additional resources to McKinney-Vento liaisons throughout Maine to help students in danger of homelessness in addition to providing support for students already experiencing homelessness. Emergency assistance was provided for services authorized for funding under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, in addition to assistance for other housing-related needs such as rental assistance, utilities, critical home repairs, and other assistance that can help a student avoid homelessness. School administrative units (SAUs) and McKinney-Vento liaisons were explicitly directed that this funding was to be used for emergency needs and work to prevent student homelessness. The funding had to be used for direct payment to a vendor for a service, such as a landlord or utility company and requires invoices. This funding could not be distributed directly to families or students.

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (per Title IX, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act) authorizes the allowable usages of McKinney-Vento local educational agency subgrant funds. Other allowable uses include:

- Housing-related needs, rental assistance, security deposits, hotel/motel stays
- Utilities, heating, electricity, water
- Critical home repairs, fixing broken windows, roof repair, floor repair, a working kitchen, plumbing, electrical, or other health and safety home repairs, provision of potable water and sewer, energy conservation, removal/mitigation of lead-based paint, asbestos, radon, or other hazardous material, and removal/mitigation of pests, vermin, or mold.
- The provision of assistance to defray the excess cost of transportation for students where necessary to enable students to attend the school selected.
- The provision of other extraordinary or emergency assistance needed to enable homeless children and youths to attend school and participate fully in school activities. Examples may include car repairs if the student is residing in the vehicle, or the vehicle is the primary method the child is transported to/from school, or furniture if the housing would otherwise be determined inadequate under the definition of McKinney-Vento, for example, the child did not have a bed.

Signe Lynch and Amelia Lyons Rukema served as the McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, Susan Lieberman served as facilitator of the Regional Meetings, and Hannah Ryde served as primary invoice reviewer through the Maine Department of Education.

Actions

During July and August 2023, the team conducted internal DOE meetings and meetings with the developer of Grants4ME to establish the platform for the management and coordination of the Pilot Program. Collaboration with the SAUs and the Maine School Management Association informed the implementation of the pilot's structures.

Outreach was conducted through as many avenues as possible in advance of and during the 2023-2024 school year to promote and encourage SAUs to participate in the pilot. Promotion of the Pilot Program took place in a variety of ways and focused on both promotion to district and school leaders, and in more targeted ways for McKinney-Vento liaisons and collaborating organizations deeply involved in homelessness prevention work. It was highlighted at the Maine Educators' Summit in August 2023 in Augusta, a DOE Priority Notice was written and disseminated to all those on the DOE listserv, and DOE communications through media were also conducted. Shared successes from SAUs were posted and dispersed widely through newsletters, in-person meetings, and email communications. These broad communications helped to highlight and promote the work and encourage SAUs to participate in the Pilot Program.

The training and informing of direct practitioners was also done through numerous avenues. Regular convenings of McKinney-Vento liaisons and collaborating departments enabled efficient training and dissemination of Pilot Program information to those directly involved in the work. This included incorporating critical information about the pilot into required annual trainings for all Maine McKinney-Vento Liaisons by the McKinney-Vento Specialist at the Maine DOE, fall and spring convenings of McKinney-Vento Regional Meetings, and monthly newsletter communications that incorporated reminders, resources, and FAQs related to use of the funds.

Collaboration with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, (DHHS) the Maine Department of Labor (DOL), Statewide Homeless Council, Homeless Youth Providers, and other Community-Based Organizations encouraged greater awareness. To further support SAUs in implementation the DOE provided resources and information on its website, linked here: <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/safeschools/counseling/highmobility/homelessed/statepilot>.

Beginning on October 25, 2023, SAUs were notified about their award status and provided the option to receive or decline funds. Applications to receive Pilot Program funds were due on January 5, 2024, using the Grants4ME platform. Allocations were determined based on the number of McKinney-Vento students identified by the SAU the previous academic year. All SAUs were provided with a minimum of \$750 to access emergency assistance. Any funds from SAUs that declined to participate in the Pilot Program were then evenly reallocated to the SAUs that opted into the program. Recipients of grant awards were required to complete a report on activities and metrics by June 1, 2024.

In total, 149 SAUs participated in the Pilot Program to Prevent Student Homelessness. Funding amounts were determined based on the number of homeless students in an SAU or school. SAUs with the largest awards were:

- Portland: \$260,049.92
- South Portland: \$137,838.96
- Lewiston: \$92,517.76
- Auburn: \$61,574.32

A comprehensive list of SAUs and the amount allocated to them is in the Appendix.

Through the Pilot Program, at least 844 students received support as reported by SAUs in Grants4ME. Funds were allocated in all 16 of Maine's counties, representing the prevalence of homelessness throughout Maine.

Robust participation in this program illustrates the staggering need of SAUs for funding to support students most at risk. Due to the flexibility of the funding, the students' quality and stability of life was improved through funding for rental assistance and ancillary housing costs, including electricity and heat assistance. School leaders recognized that the immense need in their community was insurmountable without additional funding. The \$1.5 million was allocated quickly and fully into the appropriate sections, whether that was rental assistance, critical home repairs, utilities, or other allowable uses under McKinney-Vento.

A significant portion of pilot funding provided transportation for students experiencing homelessness to remain in their school of origin. The federal requirement to provide transportation for students experiencing homelessness has an unpredictable and often burdensome fiscal impact on SAUs. Local budgets cannot anticipate the upcoming year's number of students who may experience homelessness, the distances they may temporarily reside in, or what school will be in each child's best interest. This funding allowed schools to be able to do what is best for each student, regardless of the predetermined budget available through local funds.

The infusion of flexible funding into the McKinney-Vento program allowed Maine to create an extra layer of support for students who live in these unstable situations, and to prevent additional children from experiencing such situations.

In addition to the direct tangible benefit that the Pilot Program had on students at great risk of homelessness, there were numerous additional benefits. As families became more aware of their status under McKinney-Vento, and the support available to them, the DOE in turn saw an increase in the accuracy of our reporting. This pilot also led to increased collaboration and partnerships between School Administrative Units and their local General Assistance offices, Community Action Programs, and other area resources, providing supplemental benefits to SAUs in serving its students with the greatest and most intractable needs.

Conclusion

The Pilot Program to Prevent Student Homelessness has helped keep at least 844 children and families housed. This foundational human need, being met, allowed students to have a greater opportunity for success in their education. Children in Maine have been displaced for a multitude of reasons and reflects some of the myriad challenges homeless youth in our state face. In each of these situations, funding from the Pilot Program helped to alleviate the burden on children in our communities. Through this program, we have minimized the number of adverse childhood experiences that our young people experience in their childhood, and subsequently better setting them up for success.

Contact

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The preparation of this report utilized approximately 30 staff hours, and was prepared by the following participants:

- McKinney-Vento Specialist, Office of School and Student Supports
- Interim Climate Culture Resilience Team Coordinator
- Legislative and Constituent Services Specialist, Policy and Government Affairs
- Director, Policy and Government Affairs

Appendix

2023-2024 Pilot Program Allocations