Leveraging Systems Navigators to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness

This National Center for Homeless Education brief

- provides information on what systems navigators are and the role they play in supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness;
- explores how local educational agencies (LEAs) leverage the systems navigator role as a helpful resource for meeting the needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness; and
- provides examples from communities and LEAs that have expanded their services and coordination by hiring systems navigators.

Systems Navigation: An Innovative Approach to a Complex Issue

Based on recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, public schools identified roughly 1.1 million students experiencing homelessness in the 2020–2021 school year (NCHE, 2022). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento Act) defines children and youth experiencing homelessness as those without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)(A)). Homelessness creates educational barriers, including educational disruptions, higher rates of absenteeism and dropping out, and a decreased ability to focus on studies due to stress and trauma. The education, housing, and healthcare systems, to name a few, can be extremely difficult to navigate, and especially so for families or a young person experiencing homelessness, who must navigate many of these systems at once and under distress. Local educational agencies (LEAs) also face challenges to independently and directly meet the diverse needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, the roots of homelessness are deeply tied to systemic racism in education, housing, criminal justice, child welfare, and labor markets (Edwards & Noguera, 2022). This presents an extra layer of challenge that students of color experiencing homelessness must face in navigating these systems. LEAs increasingly look to the systems navigator role to address these needs, and LEAs have funded these roles using a variety of funding streams.

Who are Systems Navigators?

Systems navigators help LEAs meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness and decrease barriers to their education by connecting them–and often their families–to resources and community organizations that can provide wraparound services. Depending on their expertise or background, systems navigators might have specific focus areas (e.g., housing, healthcare); they may coordinate across multiple systems; or they may serve a specific population (e.g., families, unaccompanied homeless youth,

older youth, or younger children). Various staff (e.g., state educational agency (SEA) staff, LEA and school attendance staff, social workers, and school counselors) might do systems navigation as a part of their roles.

The Origins of Systems Navigation

Systems navigation became an official role title in the 1990s in association with the American Cancer Society, and later became entrenched in U.S. healthcare law (Manderson et al., 2012). In general, systems navigators in healthcare identify the needs and strengths of patients and families, then address barriers to accessing resources and services by working collaboratively with other agencies. While systems navigators began in healthcare, the education field is adopting these roles to support students experiencing homelessness in making their way through the education system.

Healthcare systems navigators support patients and families by providing:

- Coordination of services
- Support
- Information and referral
- Advocacy
- Empowerment
- Follow up

(Mental Health Association of Frederick County and Center for Nonprofit Excellence)

Systems Navigation to Support Youth and Families Experiencing Homelessness

LEAs and communities increasingly engage systems navigators to help students and their families access resources that enable students to attend and fully participate in school academically and socially. Some LEAs hire a systems navigator directly; others collaborate with systems navigators in the broader community. The examples that follow highlight how three communities use systems navigators to partner with community organizations and provide support for unaccompanied youth and families experiencing homelessness.

Suburban Cook County, Illinois

Suburban Cook County, which comprises all of the regions in Cook County that surround Chicago and has a population of over 2.5 million people, uses systems navigators to connect young adults experiencing homelessness to housing and other resources. The Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County is the lead agency for Cook County's Continuum of Care (CoC), a network of 100+ organizations and individuals working to end homelessness in Chicago. The Alliance to End Homelessness works with the county's systems navigators to organize homelessness efforts for Cook County, allocating funding across 40 agencies with a staff of 18. There are six navigators across Suburban Cook County, though only two positions are currently filled. These navigators help 18–24-year-olds experiencing homelessness access programs and resources, providing:

- an entry point into the Alliance's services through outreach and referrals;

- individual assessments of need;

- help find transitional housing and other resources based on individual needs;

- connections to programs that support resume-building;

- finding transportation to family members with whom they can stay temporarily; and

- funds for car repairs.

The county's south and west sides have been historically under-resourced, so the systems navigators collaborate with each other to expand access to the whole county's resources. The systems navigators also collaborate directly with McKinney-Vento liaisons to ensure efforts are collaborative.

The Continuum of Care received Youth Housing Demonstration Project (YHDP) funding in 2019 and used these funds to hire systems navigators in October 2020. [1] The county is identifying other sources of funding–private funders, community block grants, outreach grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and others–that could support the positions in the future. The county hopes to fully staff all six systems navigator positions, and support ongoing collaboration with other organizations, including the county's Youth Action Board.

"Systems navigation should never be a funnel into one resource." –
Suburban Cook County

Waco, Texas

In Waco, Texas, a city with a population of close to 150,000 people, the DOBEY Drop-In Center (DOBEY Center), which receives YHDP funding to support young people experiencing homelessness, houses the systems navigator, who helps find housing for young people. The Waco Independent School District and the system's navigator at the DOBEY Center have recently begun to combine efforts to track and ensure that the LEA supports the academic needs of students experiencing homelessness, while the students get the housing support they need from the navigator. The systems navigator builds relationships with local property managers and landlords as well as community-based organizations, so that the DOBEY Center and the LEA can coordinate housing and other support for students experiencing homelessness.

Continuum of Care funding will continue to support systems navigation in Waco, and the systems navigator and the LEA plan to continue to strengthen their relationship with each other while also fostering deep connections with the broader community in order to best serve youth experiencing homelessness.

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1 The Youth Homeless Demonstration Program (YHDP) is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Communities receiving a YHDP grant implement a coordinated community approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness. For more information, visit https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/spm/gmomgmt/grantsinfo/fundingopps/fy21_yhdp.

"Systems navigation is making connections to the right resources for the right people at the right time." – Waco ISD

San Diego, California

San Diego has a population of over 1.3 million people. Both the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) and a youth services organization offer systems navigation to youth and their families experiencing homelessness.

The Educational Liaison/Youth Service Navigator with the SDCOE works in tandem with the LEAs in the county to serve students identified as unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. The academic support, services, and resources the navigator provides include:

- cross-system referrals to housing, mental health, and basic needs supports;

- assistance with enrollment, placement issues, discipline, special education, and other services in compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act;

- post-graduation pathways and support; and

- facilitation of collaboration between service providers and LEA personnel.

This navigator role is part of HOPE (Homeless Outreach, Prevention & Education), SDCOE's initiative to provide homeless education services. The goal of HOPE is to ensure students experiencing homelessness receive the community supports they need, leave school with a high school diploma or equivalent and a post-graduation pathway, and experience at least one supportive connection with a caring adult. The effort is partially funded through a HUD grant from the Regional Taskforce on the Homeless San Diego, and is a joint effort of the SDCOE, Foster Youth and Homeless Education Services, and the San Diego Unified School District.

San Diego Youth Services also provides systems navigation similar to SDCOE, with the addition of connecting youth experiencing homelessness to mental health services to empower them to be self-sufficient.

Considerations for Systems Navigation

Systems navigators create a bridge that connects youth experiencing homelessness, their families, their case managers, and others supporting them to the many available resources that exist in communities, developing trusting relationships with youth, the communities they live in, and the schools they attend in the process. As other LEAs explore adding a systems navigator role to their staff, the examples above highlight some important learnings to consider:

- There are many approaches to systems navigation and systems navigators can be housed at various levels in the system: the SEA, the LEAs, or one of the LEA's community partners. LEAs

should adapt the role of systems navigator so it best fits their specific context and needs. LEAs should also check whether their SEA has a systems navigator, who may offer additional support and resources, as well as opportunities to collaborate.

- Building and sustaining relationships is a key aspect of the systems navigator role. Systems navigators must build ongoing and trusting relationships with community organizations, housing entities, and others to ensure that youth experiencing homelessness have access to the supports they need.

- Systems navigation requires a special set of skills:
  - the ability to build and sustain trusting relationships with students experiencing homelessness and their families
  - the ability to build and sustain effective relationships with community-based organizations and other community resources
  - the ability to navigate federal, state, and local laws while providing youth experiencing homelessness and their families access to resources to which they wouldn't have otherwise been connected

Because this is a special set of skills, the systems navigator role can be difficult to fill but is incredibly important in providing crucial support to youth experiencing homelessness and their families. Some LEAs are also developing systems navigation applications, which can be helpful tools in supporting systems navigators in fulfilling their role.

- Funding, particularly YHDP and ARP-HCY funding, can be used to fund systems navigation in the short-term but this funding is not necessarily sustainable for the long-term. LEAs and localities should look for ways to fund systems navigators from within their existing budgets and investigate other funding options, such as identifying local funders with more on-going and sustainable commitments to the local community.

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