

**Testimony of Denise Ross
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**Before the
Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions**

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Thank you, Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and Members of the Committee, for providing me with an opportunity to speak to you on behalf of homeless children and youth across the country.

I currently serve as the Supervisor for the Homeless Education Program for the Prince George's County Public School System in Maryland. Our school system, like most jurisdictions, has experienced growth in our homeless student enrollment over the past few years. Currently, there are over 2,500 homeless children and youth enrolled in our schools. This is approximately a fourteen percent increase over the past three years.

Homeless children and youth have unique needs. They encounter educational barriers when these needs are not understood, or when federal law - the McKinney-Vento Act - is not implemented fully. Homeless children and youth are embarrassed about where they live. They don't understand why they are homeless, or why their circumstances do not improve. They move from place to place, worried about where they will live next and what school they will

have to attend. Often times, they are hungry and wondering whether they will have food to eat. They often lack sleep because they are in a crowded place with other people they don't know. They lack basics such as clothing and school supplies.

Unaccompanied homeless youth confront these difficulties without a parent, guardian, or any caring adult, most often because they are fleeing abuse or neglect at home. Homeless children and youth are often sad and scared, but they can feel safe and secure at school. School is also where they can obtain the education to help them escape poverty and homelessness as adults.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is an anchor for homeless students in many ways. It allows these vulnerable youngsters to have immediate school access and school stability during their time of transition. In my work as school district homeless liaison, I see the power of these policies on a daily basis. I conduct trainings on the McKinney-Vento Act each year to make sure our school personnel know their responsibilities. Our program provides homeless students with vouchers or gift cards for clothing, uniforms, shoes, school supplies, personal hygiene items, eye exams and glasses, if prescribed. We also provide after-school academic support services with McKinney-Vento grant funds in a local elementary school and at a homeless shelter for women and children. We know that if you equip the students with these necessities, it

will enhance their desire to attend school, and improve their academic performance. We provide many other services, working closely with community agencies to make referrals and coordinate activities.

Most importantly, the majority of our homeless students attend the same school that they were attending when they lost their housing, thanks to our school district's commitment to fulfilling our legal obligation to provide the transportation required for a stable school experience.

Despite progress over the past years, many barriers to the education of homeless children and youth remain. Some of the primary challenges include the following: 1) difficulty identifying homeless students; 2) lack of dedicated staff time and resources; 3) determining the best educational placement; 4) the logistical and financial challenges of transportation; 5) lack of clarity in the Title I Part A set aside for homeless students; and 6) meeting the needs of special populations, such as preschool children, unaccompanied homeless youth, and children and youth in foster care.

1. Difficulty Identifying Homeless Students. The educational needs of homeless students cannot be met if these students are not identified. Yet homeless students are often invisible. A homeless parent, when asked by a reporter what she wanted to say to the public, responded, "You can't judge a book by its cover." In other words, you can't

always tell just by looking at someone whether or not that person is homeless. Even with the more than 2,500 homeless students we have identified in our county, we know that there are more out there, unseen and not served. Reauthorization should address the need for increased outreach and identification of homeless children and youth by increasing the authorized funding level, so that more school districts have the resources to hire the staff to find and assist homeless students. Reauthorization also should require that homeless liaisons and school staff participate in professional development. This professional development will result in a heightened awareness and thereby improve identification efforts.

2. Dedicated Staff Time and Resources. School district homeless liaisons are essential for effective implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. McKinney-Vento liaisons and school staff are often the only source of advocacy and support for homeless students. However, homeless liaisons face a number of challenges. They are often unable to devote sufficient time to carry out their duties, due to the many hats they wear. In fact, in the majority of school districts, the liaison is merely a title. This problem is related in part to the low funding level of the McKinney-Vento program; only 9% of school districts receive McKinney-Vento Act funds. Fortunately, thanks to the support of the Prince George's County Public School District, our homeless program has four full-time positions. We need each and every person on our staff to ensure that our students are

served. Reauthorization should require that homeless liaisons have sufficient capacity to perform their mandated responsibilities.

3. Determining the Best Educational Placement. School districts are required to keep homeless children and youth in their original school, to the extent feasible, unless staying in this school is against the wishes of the parent or guardian. In my experience, school stability is usually in a child's best interest; in fact, over 70% of our homeless students stay in the same school. Unfortunately, I have witnessed different school districts interpret this policy in different ways. Sometimes, they base what is feasible on cost and convenience, rather than on what is truly in the best interest of the child. Reauthorization should require that "best interest" determinations be individualized and child-centered, and that they take into account a number of important criteria, such as the age of child, safety of student, and time remaining in the school year. School districts should presume that staying in the school of origin is in the child's best interest, unless an individualized determination supports a school move, or unless the parent, guardian, or youth wish to change schools. This policy will allow flexibility to meet individual needs, but strengthen and promote school stability.

4. The Logistical and Financial Challenge of Transportation. The primary purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act is to limit disruption in children's education when they suffer the loss of housing. Transportation is essential to achieve this purpose. Yet the cost of providing transportation is very high. The Prince George's County Public School District

steps up to the plate in providing transportation, but we do so at a very high cost. The cost of transportation has caused other school districts to fail to identify homeless students, or to force school moves that are not in children's best interest. Reauthorization should support the transportation provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act by addressing these funding issues. In addition, while the Prince George's County Public School District tries to follow the letter and the spirit of the law, we are challenged by other school districts that are not providing prompt or timely transportation services. This creates a barrier to immediate or continued enrollment and attendance. In addition, some school districts misinterpret the school of origin transportation requirements. They discontinue transportation to the school of origin if the student obtains a regular, fixed, and adequate nighttime residence during the school year. This practice pulls the rug out from underneath homeless children and youth just as they are finally achieving some stability in their lives; once again, it uproots their education. Reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act should clarify that transportation to the school of origin must be provided until the end of the school year if a child or youth obtains housing, if it continues to be in his or her best interest to continue to attend there.

5. Lack of Clarity in Title I Part A Set asides. We are fortunate to be among the nine percent of all school districts nationwide that receive a McKinney-Vento sub grant. This year, our homeless education program is supported by a \$60,000 McKinney-Vento grant, a \$113,000 ARRA homeless education grant, and \$85,000 from the Title I, Part A homeless education set aside. The contribution of Title I Part A is essential for our

program to continue services. Yet our district, like many others, would benefit from greater clarity in determining the amount of the set aside, as well as more flexible uses of

these funds. Reauthorization should address both of these issues; especially since the Title I Part A set aside is the primary funding source available to school districts to support their homeless children and youth.

6. Meeting the Needs of Special Populations. Some children and youth have special circumstances, and require specific policies. Young children experiencing homelessness are often shut out of early childhood programs as a result of their mobility, never reaching the top of the waiting list. The McKinney-Vento Act should be amended to increase homeless children's access to and stability in the early childhood programs. In addition, youth who are homeless and on their own face the trauma of homelessness without the support of a parent or guardian. They are often disengaged from school and behind in credits. Reauthorization should address their unique needs and ensure that they have a chance to make up what they missed due to homelessness. Finally, children and youth in foster care also experience high rates of mobility and educational hurdles. Reauthorization should create a separate, dedicated education program for children and youth in foster care that allows them to stay in the school of origin when it is in their best interest, or immediately enroll in a new school. This program should maximize the collaborative role and the resources of child welfare agencies, so that both agencies have clear, distinct, and appropriate responsibilities.

In closing, I would like to share a story about a single homeless mother with two children. One child was in elementary school, and the other was in middle school. The mother lost her government job, and, as a result, lost her housing. She and her two children stayed with family or friends for a period of time in stressful, unstable arrangements. The family moved at least three times, but thanks to the McKinney-Vento Act, the children remained at the same school that they had attended prior to becoming homeless. Each time the mother's living arrangements changed, homeless liaisons assisted her with completing required documents to allow for continuity with transportation. Her children were able to receive free meals (breakfast and lunch) at school. The elementary student was on the honor roll. However, the middle school student's grades gradually fell below average. His grades were not a reflection of his ability. They were a direct result of his inability to concentrate on studying. He was consumed with figuring out where they would be living when he got out of school. Being a teenager, he was also angry and embarrassed by their living arrangements. The mother and her children eventually obtained a spot at a local shelter in a neighboring jurisdiction. She requested that the students finish out the school year in Prince George's County Public Schools. We determined that this school placement was in her children's best educational interest, so transportation was arranged, and the students finished out the school year in Prince George's County. Today, the mother has obtained housing. She also completed a Culinary Arts program. Both children are attending school in the

neighboring jurisdiction and doing well. This mother called our Homeless Program a “blessing” to her in her time of hardship.

This story may have ended quite differently if the Prince George’s County School District did not have the willingness, ability, and resources to implement the law. Too often, stories like this, and many other stories of even greater hardship, do end differently. Too many homeless children and youth are not identified, enrolled, or attending school. Too many homeless children and children in foster care continue to change schools over and over again, each time losing instruction, losing friends, and eventually losing their connection to school entirely by dropping out. Education is one of our strongest weapons in the fight against adult homelessness. But homeless students, and students in foster care, need additional supports if they are to be able to participate successfully in any educational program. The McKinney-Vento Act has a strong history, but too many barriers remain. I ask the Committee to strengthen and expand the McKinney-Vento Act program for homeless children and youth, and to create similar opportunities for children and youth in foster care through a separate program that is dedicated to their unique needs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my experience and views.