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HEADLINE: Ruling lets homeless students stay in school

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For 15 years, Susan Donnan has been leading efforts to provide shelter for homeless families in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

And in her years as executive director of the Interfaith Hospitality Network, she has never had a problem. That was until last year.

According to Donnan, IFHN started a program in Washington in 1995.

Three years ago, it started a second program in Crafton, and that's where problems arose in October 2009, when Carlynton School District officials sought to remove four homeless children from its schools, claiming the family didn't actually live in the district.

Although the school district was supported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Donnan reported the conflict to national homeless advocates. Subsequently, a lawsuit was filed by the Education Law Center-Pennsylvania and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, citing the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act.

McKinney-Vento was enact-

ed in 1987 to address the needs of homeless children. It mandates that all children who are homeless are legally entitled to immediate enrollment in a new school wherever they are living and that they can continue to attend that school for the duration of homelessness, or, if permanently housed, until the end of the academic year.

On Monday, it was announced that a settlement was reached in the lawsuit, ensuring the continued enrollment of homeless children in school and significantly revises state policies to better protect the rights of homeless students.

"The economic crisis has forced many Pennsylvania families out of their homes, but it should not force children out of school," said Nancy Hubley, an attorney for the Education Law Center, in a news release.

The state has issued a directive telling school districts that homeless children who do not always sleep in the same district can enroll in any district in which they regularly receive services, conduct their daily activities, stay overnight on a recurring basis or have some other substantial connection.

The children in question became homeless last April when their father lost his job and the

family was evicted from its home. Donnan said the children were enrolled in the Carlynton School District because that's where they spent most of their days. At night, the family, through IFHN, stayed with host churches in four different school districts.

"Homeless families' overnight accommodations often come in whatever form the family can find for that night. The new state guidance emphasizes that schools need to meet families where they are to ensure their children's education doesn't suffer," said Eric Tars, children and youth attorney at NLCHP.

In Pennsylvania, more than 43,000 children were recognized as homeless. More than 25,000 of those children are in kindergarten through 12th grade, according to the "America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness," a 2009 report from the [National Center on Family Homelessness](#).

Donnan said there are 150 IFHN networks across 40 states. And this was the first problem that any of the networks have incurred, she stated.