

# AMERICA'S YOUNGEST OUTCASTS

## ON THE GROUND:

### HOW MCKINNEY-VENTO LIAISONS HELP CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

*Throughout the Report Card, we highlight ways that communities are addressing particular aspects of child and family homelessness. We encourage you to use these case studies to you think about how to improve children's situations in your community. For more case studies, visit [www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org](http://www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org).*

A stable place to attend school can help mitigate the impact of homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires that each school district identify someone to serve as a liaison between homeless students and the school system. Liaisons are responsible for identifying homeless students, enrolling them in school, connecting them to services to help them succeed, and working with parents to understand their child's educational rights. Many liaisons nationwide play an integral role in identifying children who are homeless. They are a critical link in helping students access the tools they need to be successful in school. Below are examples of liaisons' work in California and New Mexico.

- The West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD), located in Richmond, California, faces significant challenges. Richmond has been identified as one of the most dangerous U.S. cities and many students come from poor neighborhoods. Amidst these challenges is WCCUSD's Families in Transition program, run by the district's McKinney-Vento educational liaison. The FIT program works intensively and collaboratively with the local community. "They are our eyes and ears," explains Jeri Cohen, Project Coordinator. "Sitting in the office won't teach me anything. The community needs to know me and I need to know them." These collaborations give FIT staff a wide range of options for referring families who are homeless and as they exit homelessness, and include the Title I Office, various government agencies (e.g., Congressional representatives, county officials, the mayor's office, and departments of public health, mental health, and child and family services), and non-profits. The FIT program's outreach worker is located in a community-based organization in the center of the city, which enables him to meet easily with families. Whenever possible, he connects with people in person rather than over the phone or mail – even if it is to deliver bus tickets or new information. This personal contact enables him to establish and maintain strong relationships in the community, where he also lives. Outreach efforts are targeted directly to families as well as to those who may encounter families experiencing homelessness. Once students are identified, the FIT program monitors children's attendance and grades so that they can talk with parents if a child is struggling.
- Albuquerque is one of the largest school districts in the country and the city itself is New Mexico's largest. Over the past 15 years, the APS Title I Homeless Project has created formal partnerships (through MOUs) with community agencies that provide case management, health services (including dental care), and crisis intervention. While most of the funding for their work comes through Title I and a McKinney-Vento subgrant, the team has also written numerous grants to supplement their program. These grants help them offer summer programs, a career program for middle-schoolers, and a twice-weekly tutoring program that includes transportation back to where they are staying and discounted dinner provided by a local restaurant. In response to a high drop-out rate between ninth and tenth grades, they also created a support group for ninth-graders. Last year, nearly all of their high school students who were homeless graduated. "When we began this work, we went to the community and started talking about the needs of our students," says Helen Fox, Title I Homeless Project Liaison. "The community has been tremendously supportive."

West Contra Costa Unified School District and Albuquerque Public Schools are just two examples of ways that liaisons have worked with their communities to improve the educational experiences of their students. Outreach and community partnerships have played an integral role in these efforts.