

Module 4: Determining a Family's Homeless Situation

Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness

An Interactive Learning Series for Early Childhood Professionals

Welcome

This module is intended for professionals in Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care, including early childhood and school-age child care providers, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agency (or designated entity) staff, and other key stakeholders. It is intended for use at the program and systems levels.

Module Features

Before you get started, take a moment to review the features of this module. Select the numbered buttons on this page to learn more about each feature. When you are finished, choose "Next" to continue.

Select the **Menu** tab to:

- See a drop-down list of the module's contents
- Jump to a particular section by selecting its title
- Check your progress by selecting "Completion Status"
- Access your Certificate of Completion once you have completed all module sections

Select the **Transcript** tab to open a printable text version of this module.

Choose the **Resources** tab for a list of helpful resources.

Select the **Federal Policies** tab for links to sections of federal legislation and regulations related to family homelessness.

The **page numbers** show how many pages you have completed in a specific section, and how many you have left to complete.

Select the **"Play"** button to play the narration on each slide.

Select the **"Pause"** button to pause the narration on each slide.

Choose **"Previous"** to return to the previous slide.

Choose **"Next"** to go to the next slide.

Module Instructions

- Each module takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. You can spend as much or as little time as you like on a module, depending on your level of experience.
- If you are using your own computer, you can stop a module and come back to it later; the program will remember where you left off. However, if you are using a computer that others will also use to access the learning series, plan to finish the module in one sitting.
- Select the Transcript tab to download or print the text of the module.
- Select the Federal Policies tab for direct links to the federal legislation and regulations referenced in this module. You can bookmark these links for future reference.
- Select the Resources tab to view the full list of reference citations and helpful resources. A number at the end of a sentence indicates a reference citation.
- When you select a link within the module or through one of the tabs, the page will open in a new tab. To return to the module, select the module tab.
- When you finish all sections of this module, you can download a Certificate of Completion.

Introduction to Module 4

This module explores how to determine a family's homeless status* through strengths-based conversations.

In this module, learn about:

- Determining if a family's situation meets the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's definition of "homeless" children and youth
- Using respectful and strength-based strategies to determine a family's homeless status

*Throughout this module, the word "status" is used to convey an eligibility determination.

Determining a Family's Homeless Situation

Children and families experiencing homelessness benefit from early childhood programs, school-age child care, and other community services. Professionals in these programs can partner with families to help them access services respectfully and efficiently.

Families strive to care for their children and support their well-being, healthy development, and capacity to learn. Families experiencing homelessness may face challenges that increase parenting stress and negatively impact their family well-being. These challenges need special attention and great sensitivity.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Final Rule require use of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's definition of "homeless children and youth." It is included in Section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 U.S.C. § 11435a(2)], hereinafter referred to as the "McKinney-Vento Act's definition."

Explore the Federal Policies tab for more information about HSPPS and CCDF.

Professionals in Head Start, Early Head Start, CCDF Lead Agencies or designated entities, and programs funded by CCDF subsidies determine a family's homeless status using the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless" children and youth. The aim is to learn about the family's living situation to make the appropriate eligibility determination for each family.

Families whose living situation aligns with the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless" may be eligible for services and supports related to early childhood or school-age child care and additional assistance. Children and families who become homeless and are already enrolled in programs may be eligible for additional supports and services.

Steps for Determining a Family's Homeless Situation

Follow these four steps to determine a family's homeless status for Head Start, Early Head Start, and CCDF-funded programs that serve young and school-age children:

- Prepare for conversations with families.
- Learn about each family and their living situation.
- Analyze the family's situation to see if it meets the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless."
- Use your program's or agency's protocol to follow up with parents regarding eligibility for services.

Step 1: Prepare for Conversations with Families

Staff are often in a position to have conversations with families about their living situation. Whether these conversations are pre-arranged or unplanned, it is always good to be prepared by taking the following steps:

- Review and understand the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless."
- Learn more about the effects of homelessness on children and families.
- Adopt a strengths-based approach toward all families.
- Develop and use active listening skills that demonstrate compassion and respect.
- Reflect on the family's perspective and be sensitive to their feelings.

- Reflect on personal or professional experiences that may impact your practice.
- Talk with a peer or supervisor about your questions or concerns.

Explore the Resources tab for helpful materials to enhance communication with families.

Step 2: Learn About the Family and Their Living Situation

Families Seeking Services

As families apply for Head Start, Early Head Start, or programs that receive CCDF subsidies, it is important to gather enough details about the family's living situation and housing conditions to determine services for which they may be eligible. Families who are seeking early childhood or school-age child care may not know that their living situation could affect their access to these services.

This involves respectfully asking questions to collect relevant information. Families may be uncomfortable discussing personal matters, including whether they are able to provide a stable home for themselves and their children. They may fear being judged or be worried about child welfare involvement.

Consider the following ways to have these sensitive conversations:

- Talk with the family in a quiet, private space
- Share your commitment to problem-solving with the family
- Consider questions carefully; for example:
 - Request permission to ask questions
 - Avoid unnecessary questions that may cause embarrassment
 - Explain the reasons for your questions
- Show respect by conveying that you see the parents as the experts on their family
- Develop and apply active listening skills that demonstrate compassion and respect
- Use "people-first" language such as "family experiencing homelessness" versus "homeless family"
- Be conversational so that families do not feel interrogated

Explore the Resources tab for helpful materials to enhance communication with families.

Enrolled Families Who Become Homeless

Families who are already attending programs may unexpectedly experience housing instability or homelessness. Staff have an important role as partner to parents and families. Therefore, you may be in a unique position to notice changes in family members that might signify a new living situation. Families may be more likely to share this information if you have an established relationship, a history of problem-solving together, and they trust that you will support them through the stress.

Certain unexpected behaviors or patterns may indicate housing instability or homelessness. For example, parents may:

- Be less available and their schedules may be less consistent
- Have trouble providing basic care items such as diapers, changes of clothes, or medications
- Change contact information or addresses frequently or ask not to be contacted at home

Explore the Resources tab for more information about how to recognize possible signs of housing instability or homelessness.

Children's behavior may also seem different to you. For example, children may:

- Have a harder time separating or be more emotional
- Seem more tired and irritable
- Create new play themes or tell stories that surprise you
- Share information about their living situation

Of course, these behaviors may reflect another change in a child's or family's life and not indicate homelessness. Early childhood or school-age child care professionals can work with families to understand their situation and determine whether additional services would be beneficial.

Young children often share what they are experiencing with caring early childhood professionals, especially when the adult is consistent and provides a safe place in the child's life. They may make comments or ask questions that indicate a change. Professionals may need support to respond when comments and questions emerge.

Explore the Resources tab for more information about how to have sensitive conversations with children.

If you are concerned that a family may be experiencing housing instability or homelessness, be prepared to gently ask families if their living situation has changed. You may ask questions or make comments such as:

- You seem more tired lately; is everything okay?
- I noticed your child has been crying at drop-off this week.
- Your sister seems to be helping out a lot lately.

Depending on the family member's answer, consider following this up with, "Has anything changed recently?" If a parent or family member trusts you enough to offer details about their living

circumstances, remember to ask their permission before sharing anything with other program staff or community partners.

Step 3: Analyze the Family's situation Using the McKinney-Vento Act's Definition of "Homeless"

After speaking with a family, consider what you have learned about their living situation. Determine whether the child's "primary nighttime residence" is "fixed, regular, and adequate," as outlined in the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless."

Explore the Federal Policies tab for more information or [view the definition](#).

The McKinney-Vento Act's definition provides clear examples of housing situations that meet the definition of homelessness. Remember, you can review examples in Module 3.

During your conversation with the family, did you learn that their living situation meets one or more of the circumstances below? Children and families:

- Are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.
- Are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations.
- Are living in emergency or transitional shelters.
- Have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.
- Are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.
- Are migrant or seasonal workers who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described in any of the previously mentioned categories.

Explore the Federal Policies tab for more information or [view the definition](#).

If you find that you need additional information to determine the family's housing situation, consider using the Decision-making Tool to Determine if Families Are Experiencing Homelessness. It offers questions to explore with families to determine if their living conditions meet the definition of "homeless." You may also use it with families whose living situation has changed and are currently accessing services.

If you are still unsure whether a family's living situation meets the criteria for homelessness, consider the following options and resources:

1. Read Best Practices in Homeless Education Brief Series: Determining Eligibility for McKinney-Vento Rights and Services.

2. Contact your state educational agency's (SEA) McKinney-Vento liaison. To find the contact information for your SEA liaison, search the State Coordinators for Homeless Education.
3. Contact the National Center for Homeless Education's helpline at 1-800-308-2145 or homeless@serve.org.

Step 4: Follow Up with Families

Once you have determined that a family's situation meets the homelessness criteria, you can proceed with your program or agency's application process. This includes collecting information for verification or eligibility that is needed. You may follow up with a family to share any additional services that may be available because of their current housing situation.

Professionals can expect each family to react to this news differently. They may feel a range of emotions, including hope, sadness, relief, anger, shame, and gratitude. Being open, sensitive, and compassionate may encourage parents to share their reactions and be willing to work with you to plan for next steps.

It can be challenging to know how to respond to families if they become emotional. Consider using specific strategies such as listening without interrupting, reassuring them of your support, and asking for permission to ask questions. Learn more about these strategies in Module 7.

For more information on speaking with families about difficult topics, review *Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?*

Practice Scenarios

Practice what you have learned about determining a family's homeless status in a strengths-based way. Examine a real-life scenario and decide whether the family's circumstances meet the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless."

Notice the use of strengths-based strategies to convey respect and sensitivity. Review the summary statement at the end of the scenario about whether or not the family is experiencing homelessness according to the McKinney Vento Act's definition.

Each scenario offers useful guidance for professionals in Head Start, Early Head Start, or CCDF-funded programs that serve young and school-age children. After you review the scenario that best fits your program, we encourage you to review the other scenario for practice.

Choose the version below that most closely aligns with your interests.

Head Start and Early Head Start

Child Care and Development Fund

You will need to complete at least one of the scenarios to access your certificate of completion.

Head Start and Early Head Start Practice Scenario

Explore a realistic Head Start and Early Head Start scenario. Consider how it might compare to families you encounter in your work. Remember that each family's situation is unique.

To complete the practice scenario and determine the family's homelessness status:

- Review the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless" for children and youth
- Review the "Decision-making Tool" to determine if a family is experiencing homelessness
- Consider the circumstances of this scenario
- Discuss the situation with a colleague, if possible
- Choose your answer and read the feedback
- Read the feedback to the other answers to learn more

When you assess the family's situation, ask yourself:

- Are they living in a homeless situation?
- Do they have a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence?
- Do they live in circumstances described in the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless?"

Explore the Federal Policies tab for more information or view the definition. Explore the Resources tab to review information about decision making.

Select the "Next" button to begin the scenario.

Head Start and Early Head Start Practice Scenario, cont.

Beatriz

Beatriz, age 4, lives with her mother, Natalia Sanchez. Ms. Sanchez is looking to enroll Beatriz in Head Start.

What follows is a conversation between Ms. Sanchez and you, a family resource specialist named Carmen who is working in a Head Start program. As you read the scenario, you will have opportunities to pause and choose the most helpful response from a list of options. You will receive feedback about your responses.

In real-life situations, you can use similar questions and responses in your conversations with families.

Ms. Sanchez arrives at the center and says: I hope to get my daughter enrolled in Head Start so I can start working.

You say: Please have a seat here, Ms. Sanchez. I am happy to meet you. My name is Carmen. Can you tell me more about what you are looking for?

Introducing yourself shows respect and helps build rapport.

Ms. Sanchez takes a seat and responds: I hope my 4-year-old, Beatriz, can be in your program. She was in Head Start and Early Head Start in Texas for a little while. She liked going there and learned a lot, and the program helped me too.

We just moved here two months ago. We are staying with a friend and her family right now. It is crowded, and I feel like we are imposing on them. A hotel nearby has part-time work available, but I can't start until I have somewhere good for my daughter to go while I work. I want her to have a chance to keep learning and make some new friends in a safe and caring place.

What Might You Say Next? Select from the following options:

1. Thank you for coming in today. I can help you with your application for Head Start; but first, I need to know more about your living situation. Can we talk about that?
2. I am hoping I can help you. May I ask you a few questions about your living situation? If I understand the situation better, I may be able to help.
3. Thank you for coming in today, Ms. Sanchez. I understand that you would like to enroll Beatriz in Head Start. You mentioned that you are staying with friends. Would it be alright if I ask you a few questions about your living situation? This will help me figure out how I can best help you with enrollment.

Response 1:
This response is somewhat helpful. The opening statements are welcoming. However, this response puts your need to know more about their living situation ahead of her expressed need for early childhood services. This response doesn't explain why you are asking about their living situation. This may make Ms. Sanchez feel uneasy. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.
Response 2:
This response is somewhat helpful. Asking permission before asking more questions is helpful. However, the immediate focus on their living situation rather than her expressed need to enroll her child in Head Start may make Ms. Sanchez feel uncomfortable. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.
Response 3:
This response is most helpful. The opening statements are welcoming and affirm that you've been listening. They show that you are responding to her immediate concerns. Referring to each family member by name shows care and respect for the family. Asking for permission before exploring their living situation may help Ms. Sanchez feel more comfortable answering.

Ms. Sanchez responds: Thank you, I appreciate your help. What do you want to know?

What might you say next? Select from the following options:

1. I understand that you are staying with friends while you try to get work. Do you mind telling me a little bit more about your living arrangement?
2. You mentioned that you are living with friends while you try to get work. Are you living with your friends due to economic hardship?
3. What is the reason you moved in with your friends? I heard you say that you are staying with them while you try to get work.

Response 1:
This response is the most helpful This response acknowledges Ms. Sanchez’s earlier comments and then, with her permission, seeks to clarify the reason Ms. Sanchez and her children are living with her friends.
Response 2:
This response is somewhat helpful. This response is somewhat helpful. This response acknowledges Ms. Sanchez’s earlier comments. However, the question presumes that Ms. Sanchez and her child are staying with friends due to economic hardship. Questions should be free from assumptions. Also, the term, “economic hardship” is professional jargon. Plain language would make your question easier to understand. For example, “Are you living with friends until you can afford you own place?” However, as posed in this response, the question can be answered, yes or no. Open-ended questions are helpful for finding out more information. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.
Response 3:
This response is somewhat helpful. This response is somewhat helpful. This response acknowledges information Ms. Sanchez shared and seeks to build on it. The question is open-ended, but rather direct and may make Ms. Sanchez feel uneasy.

Ms. Sanchez responds: We moved in with my friends because I couldn’t afford rent. I am so grateful that we can stay there, but I feel uncomfortable, like we are invading their space. We all try to do our best, but it is difficult. I need child care so that I can work, and we can get a place of our own.

What just happened? (Summary)

You asked non-judgmental, open-ended questions and explained why you were asking them. This helped make Ms. Sanchez comfortable and she offered more information. The details she provided indicates that, due to economic hardship, she and her child are staying with friends.

Their living situation meets the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless" status, which includes "children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason..."

Consider the following:

- What similar strengths-based strategies have you used with families?
- How could you use similar responses and questions in your conversations with families?
- How would you follow up with Ms. Sanchez?

Child Care and Development Fund Practice Scenario

Explore a realistic CCDF scenario. Consider how it might compare to families you encounter in your work. Remember that each family's situation is unique.

To complete the practice scenario and determine the family's homelessness status:

- Review the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless" for children and youth
- Review the "Decision-making Tool" to determine if a family is experiencing homelessness
- Consider the circumstances of this scenario
- Discuss the situation with a colleague, if possible
- Choose your answer and read the feedback
- Read the feedback to the other answers to learn more

When you assess the family's situation, ask yourself:

- Are they living in a homeless situation?
- Do they have a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence?
- Do they live in circumstances described in the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless?"

Explore the Federal Policies tab for more information or view the definition. Explore the Resources tab to review information about decision making.

Select the "Next" button to begin the scenario.

Child Care and Development Fund Practice Scenario, cont.

Jeremy

Jeremy, age 4, lives with his father, John Thompson. Mr. Thompson is looking for an early care and education program for his son.

What follows is a conversation between Mr. Thompson and you, an early childhood professional named Teresa. You may work in a child care program, a child care resource and referral agency, or CCDF Lead Agency or designated entity. As you read the scenario, you will have opportunities to pause and choose the most helpful response from a list of options. You will receive feedback about your responses.

In real-life situations, you can use similar questions and responses in your conversations with families.

Mr. Thompson begins with these comments: Hi. My name is John Thompson. I need to get my son, Jeremy, into a child care or preschool program of some kind. I've been missing work recently because I don't have anyone to take care of him. I want to find a program that can help me make sure he's ready for kindergarten next year, too.

You say: Welcome, Mr. Thompson; my name is Teresa. Would you like to have a seat here, please, so that we can talk a little more about the kind of program you are looking for?

Introducing yourself shows respect and helps build rapport.

As Mr. Thompson takes a seat, you say: You mentioned that Jeremy will start kindergarten next year, and that you are looking for child care so that you can work. You'd also like a program that can be your partner in helping Jeremy be prepared for school. Have I got that right?

Repeating back what Mr. Thompson shared with you demonstrates that you were listening and that you understand his immediate need. This is an active listening strategy.

Mr. Thompson responds: Yes. I want Jeremy to learn and be around other kids his age. And, I'm not going to be able to pay the rent if I have to keep taking off work to stay home with him. Honestly, I wouldn't mind moving. I hate where we are living, nothing works; but right now, I just need to find a program for Jeremy.

What might you say next? Select from the following options:

1. You mentioned that you don't like where you live. What did you mean by that?
2. You mentioned that nothing works where you live. Is your housing sub-standard?
3. I understand your need to get Jeremy into a good program. You came to the right place for help with that. You mentioned that you are unhappy with your living situation and that you would be interested in changing it. If you would like, we may be able to connect you with

help on that, too. It could make a difference in what kinds of child care or preschool services are available to you and your son. May I ask you a few questions about where you live?

Response 1:
This response is somewhat helpful. This response shows that you were listening when he mentioned being unhappy with where he and Jeremy are living. Using open-ended questions is a good way to find out more information. However, this response doesn't explain why you are asking about their living situation and, as a result, he may feel that you are prying. This response also does not address his immediate concern, finding a program for his son. This response may make Mr. Thompson feel uneasy. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.
Response 2:
This response is not very helpful. It opens by affirming something Mr. Thompson shared; however, the first question uses a specialized term, "sub-standard," which may not be easily understood and could come across as judgmental. Open-ended questions in plain language are more useful for helping families feel comfortable talking about their living situations. Failing to acknowledge Mr. Thompson's interest in finding a program for Jeremy before talking about their living situation might also cause Mr. Thompson to feel uneasy. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.
Response 3:
This response is most helpful. This response affirms his immediate need, a program for Jeremy. It explains why you are asking about their living situation and connects your inquiry with his immediate concern. It also addresses his secondary concern, his unhappiness with their living situation. Seeking permission before asking more questions about their housing may help Mr. Thompson feel more comfortable answering

Mr. Thompson nods and says: Okay.

You thank him and say: You mentioned that nothing works. Could you please tell me more about what you mean by that?

Mr. Thompson responds: Nothing in our trailer works like it should. The heater doesn't keep the place warm and I worry about it catching fire. The way the lights flicker, I'm worried the wiring is bad too. I've told the landlord a bunch of times and he does nothing, but I don't have the money to move. How does any of this make a difference about child care or preschool for Jeremy?

What might you say next? Select from the following options:

1. It sounds like the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act might apply to your family. It is a law that we can use to determine if your family qualifies for priority access to services.
2. I wanted to ask because you could be classified as homeless, which could mean increased access to some services.

- 3.** That's a good question, Mr. Thompson. First, thank you for sharing more about why you are unhappy with the conditions of your trailer. Child care programs are committed to supporting families who may be experiencing difficulties with housing and living situations. From what you told me about your trailer, it sounds like your housing situation could help to qualify you for access to educational programming and other services for Jeremy.

<p>Response 1:</p> <p>This response is not very helpful.</p> <p>While referring to McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act can be useful information, it can also sound abstract and may be too much information too quickly. Mr. Thompson may think you are implying that he has done something wrong when you mention the law and may regret telling you about his housing status. This may make him less willing to share critical information that will help you to determine if he qualifies for homelessness status. Also, it is more respectful to say that the law applies to a family's living conditions or housing circumstance rather than the family itself. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.</p>
<p>Response 2:</p> <p>This response is somewhat helpful.</p> <p>This response explains why you are asking; however, using the word “homeless” could halt the conversation. Mr. Thompson may not consider his family homeless since they are living in a trailer, even though their living conditions meet the definition. He may feel that you are judging him and be reluctant to share more information moving forward. A response that approaches the issue with language that more closely represents what Mr. Thompson is likely to believe about his situation would be more helpful. Review the other options and select again to find the most helpful response.</p>
<p>Response 3:</p> <p>This response is most helpful.</p> <p>This response begins by validating Mr. Thompson's question. It explains the importance of clarifying the living situation in a neutral and respectful manner. Your common goal at this point is to get immediate access to relevant child care services. As the conversation proceeds, you may identify an appropriate time to share more detailed information about the law and homeless status.</p>

What Just Happened (Summary)

Your respectful responses and open-ended questions helped Mr. Thompson feel more comfortable sharing information with you about his family's housing conditions. The details he shared indicate that the conditions of their trailer qualify as sub-standard housing. Their living circumstance meets the McKinney-Vento definition of "homeless," which includes "children and youths who are living in... substandard housing."

Indicators of sub-standard housing described by Mr. Thompson are cited by Housing and Urban Development, 24 CFR § 5.425 Federal Preference: Substandard Housing.

- (a) (5) Does not have electricity, or has inadequate or unsafe electrical service;
- (a) (6) Does not have a safe or adequate source of heat.

Consider the following:

- What similar strengths-based strategies have you used with families?

- How could you use similar responses and questions in your conversations with families?
- How would you follow up with Mr. Thompson?

Completion Status

To complete Module 4, review all sections listed below. If a section is not checked, use the Menu tab to return to that section.

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- ✓ Determining a Family's Homeless Situation
- ✓ Steps to Determining a Family's Homeless Situation
- ✓ Practice Scenarios: Head Start and Early Head Start or Child Care and Development Fund

Once all sections are checked, select the "Next" button to continue to your Certificate of Completion.

Certificate of Completion

Congratulations! You have completed Module 4: Determining a Family's Homeless Situation

To access your certificate, select the "Open Your Certificate" button. A PDF document will open in a separate tab. Enter your name and the date on the certificate. Print or save the certificate to your computer.