



Episode 18 – Voices of Advocates for Students Experiencing Homelessness Transcript

Matt Butensky:

You're listening to the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. In this special episode, we're stepping away from our usual format to bring you powerful messages of homelessness and hope in recognition of Pennsylvania's annual education for children and youth experiencing homelessness, Student Homelessness Awareness Week.

Observed each November, most recently from the 11th to the 15th in 2024, this week shines a light on the critical importance of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. It highlights the efforts to provide stability, consistency, and support to children and youth experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania.

Today, you'll hear recorded messages from some of Pennsylvania's most dedicated advocates for students experiencing homelessness. Through their voices we invite you to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges these students face, the life-changing resources they need, and the vital impact we can all make together.

Jada Geist:

Hi, my name is Jada Geist. I'm a junior at the University of Pittsburgh studying psychology and I wanted to share a bit about my experiences in high school.

One of my teachers was very committed to helping me apply to scholarships during my senior year of high school. She sent me a few, but the only one I got an interview for was through a local nonprofit called The Homeless Children's Education Fund, or HCEF, that works with unstably housed students in Pittsburgh.

The scholarship was called the Hope Through Learning Award. It was weird applying for things where homelessness was a requirement. I've spent years fearing that people would find out that my family was poor, so it was hard for me to accept this help and see my hardships as an opportunity to find a better support system.

We moved a lot when I was growing up, but I first experienced homelessness when I was in ninth grade. I didn't really consider myself homeless at the time because I didn't live on the

streets or in a homeless shelter. I sort of suppressed all the negative things that were happening to me to deal with the almost inhumane living situation.

My family and I were forced to live in our cousin's small, unfinished basement. It was me, my mom, my two brothers, and my dog. The winters were unbearable due to the lack of heating and the environment was pretty depressing due to the lack of windows.

Eventually, my mother turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with these adversities. This led to my family getting kicked out of my cousin's basement and we all had to split up. My aunt let me stay with her, but that didn't last long due to her daughter's mental health problems. I was eventually asked to leave there and that led to me, a 16-year-old, having to figure out where to go all by myself.

My mom gave up and never found a new place for us to all go back to like she promised. Her priorities were not in the right place due to her addiction. I eventually had to cut off all contact with her and the only place I could turn to at that point were my friends. I told my best friend at the time my situation. I didn't go into all the details, again out of embarrassment, but she told her mom and they took me in. That was the thing that really saved me. I felt so alone up until this point because I was hiding everything from everyone. Moving in with my friend and her family gave me so many opportunities.

I finally told my school what was going on and they connected me with a social worker and a therapist, and that inspired me to pursue mental health counseling as a career. But I didn't know all of the resources available until I had to know. I had to face all of these stressors and the fear of being homeless while never considering the fact that there was help out there.

After winning the Hope Through Learning Award and attending the luncheon with other scholarship winners, it was nice to see that there were kids with similar stories. It made me feel less alone and more comfortable opening up to people. It made me realize we have to talk about our experiences so other kids do not feel the same shame around something that's not their fault.

The hardest part of being homeless is how isolating it feels. Not even my closest friends at the time knew what I was going through, and I felt like I had to act like everything was okay all the time. But it is okay not to be okay and ask for help. We do not have to carry the burden alone. Homelessness should not be seen as a taboo subject.

Awareness needs to be spread to understand that it comes in many forms and that it's okay to get help. We need to make sure that there are enough resources and that these resources are known. Having the opportunity to get higher education was the most impactful thing in my life. It gave me hope for a better future.

None of my family went to college and my brother didn't even graduate high school, so I didn't know it was possible for someone in my situation to succeed. Receiving the Hope Through Learning Award and getting connected to HCEF gave me the reassurance that I can succeed if I focus on getting a degree. I think it's important for other homeless youth to know that they can have a support system and that they're not forgotten.

I'm now part of a new collegiate advocacy committee through HCEF where we are striving towards making changes on a legislative level. It's nice to be a part of something where my story can make an impact on something bigger than myself. We're still just getting started, but I think this committee has the potential to do some really great things.

HCEF has inspired me to want to make a difference in other people's lives. They have helped me a lot on my journey and made an impact on so many others. They made me want to do the same. I share my story with you now to stress the importance of education and support for homeless youth. We start at a major disadvantage, so we really have to make sure that there are enough programs and funding out there to break this cycle.

A lot of people suffer silently, but we need to raise awareness so that there's not another little girl that feels like she has to carry the burden alone. Many homeless youth do not speak up, not because they don't want to, but because they feel like they have to hide in the shadows. It's not fair to expect homeless youth and children to be able to know their potential to succeed when they're focused on surviving. We have to work collectively to fix this problem. Thank you.

Doris Hageman:

Hello, I'm Doris Hageman, the Director of Student Services with Cumberland Valley School District. This is an every district problem. This is a situation that is urban, that is rural, that is suburban. Make no mistake about it. Somewhere in the district where you live, there are students experiencing homelessness.

We keep talking about the statistic of over 47,000 students in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and those are the students we know. We know that this is underreported for a variety of reasons. But it's not just a statistic. These are children, children with gifts and talents and strengths and dreams, and very often it is the school district that they know that is their sanctuary at a time when everything seems to be changing, at a time when they don't know who they can talk to. Sometimes it is their parents and families who reach out to us, and they are involved, and they have dignity, and they have temerity and they have so much resiliency.

So, what does it look like for a school district when we find out a student is homeless? Sometimes it's our cafeteria worker who notices a different pattern. Sometimes it's our custodians who reach out because a student mentions something that a custodian overhears. And we know the significant role that our educators, our school nurses, our school counselors, our school administrators, and our beloved school social workers play in supporting these students. But it is an everybody issue. It is an issue that we must lean in to to support these students.

In the meantime, as my friend Sonia Pizzi says, our regional three coordinator, I will be your voice. We will not be quiet about this as the numbers continue to grow, and the heartbreak grows as well. But there is hope.

I think about individual students my team has worked with who have now gone on to college, who have graduated, and who have turned around and are now working in human services themselves to give back. And I think about a student who said, and I paraphrase, everything has

been taken from me, but not my diploma. That is the power of public schools. That is why we show up every day, and that is why we will continue to be their voice. Thank you.

Lisette Rivera:

Greetings, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about an issue that is the heart of our work. My name is Lisette Rivera, and alongside me is my colleague, Patricia Mayla. Together, we are the families and transition coordinators for the school district of Lancaster.

Our mission is clear, to ensure that all students, regardless of their housing status, have access to a quality, equitable education. The McKinney-Vento Act is a vital part in that mission, and we believe that the funding to support it is not just a financial issue, but a moral one.

Last year, the school District of Lancaster identified 856 students experiencing homelessness. But what that number doesn't capture is the full impact: other siblings, parents, and guardians. When we say 856 students, we're talking about entire families, easily tripling that number. These families are in crisis and their children face multiple barriers that go beyond the classroom, from a lack of stable housing to the emotional trauma of displacement. These children are carrying burdens that no child should have to bear.

As of just three and a half months into the school year, we've already identified over 750 students. The need is undeniable and growing. But here's the stark reality. We don't have the resources to meet the demand. The funding we receive is limited, and we are forced to make heart-wrenching decisions about who gets support and who doesn't. No one's trauma should be ranked, minimized or ignored simply because of financial constraints.

Patricia Mayla:

I want to be clear. Inequity and equity should never be determined by a dollar amount. Our children deserve more than just a chance at education. They deserve high quality educational opportunities as every other child, regardless of their social economic status. They deserve to have their trauma recognized and their needs met. They deserve the same support, the same resources, and the same opportunity to thrive.

With increased funding, we will be able to provide comprehensive holistic support. We can ensure that every student has access to not just academic resources, but the emotional and social support they need to overcome barriers in their lives.

We can expand our outreach by providing other related educational activities such as summer camps, school-based mental health support, afterschool programs, transportation, and most importantly, provide equitable support that meets all students and families' unique needs, ensuring that our children never have to choose between their education and their survival.

As my partner mentioned before, we should not be forced to make heart-wrenching decisions about who gets support and who does not. Education is a powerful tool. It is the key that unlocks doors to brighter futures, doors that are often blocked by barriers, barriers that can only

be dismantled with the proper funding and support. We stand here today proudly representing the School District of Lancaster, asking for your commitment to our children. We are asking for your help in securing the funding necessary to continue our work, because when we invest in our children, we invest in a brighter and more just future for all. Thank you.

Gwen Bailey:

Gwen Bailey, vice president of programming at Hopeful in Philadelphia. I'm also representing Philly Homes for Youth Today. Hopeful provides housing and services to children, teens, and families, and also youth experiencing homelessness. We work closely with the school district of Philadelphia in supporting many of the students who are challenged with permanent places to live.

Together, the school district, Valley Youth House, Eddie's House, and the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services have created a pilot program that could be a model for all of Pennsylvania counties. Together, we connect families to housing supports, provide a safe space for students in schools, help families navigate the multiple human service systems, connect students to needed supports.

One of the students with whom we worked with is Meg. Her name is changed for privacy. In April, Meg and her mother were living doubled up due to the loss of her mother's job. We provided case management that led the family to being able to navigate the shelter system, which is not often easy to do. In addition, we connected the family to emergency funding, food, and clothing. We were able to get the family rental assistance that led to them being able to move into a new home. This is just one of the many examples of how a school district and a housing agency can collaborate successfully.

We encourage Governor Shapiro and the Pennsylvania General Assembly to enable school districts throughout the commonwealth to increase funding for programs like ours.

I thank all of our partners, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the School District of Philadelphia, and the state legislators here today for expressing their support for the tens of thousands of students experiencing homelessness.

Matt Butensky:

During the 2022-2023 school year, over 46,700 children and youth experiencing homelessness were identified in Pennsylvania. These numbers remind us that every voice matters and every effort counts. We hope these messages today have educated, inspired, and motivated you to take action. Each of us has the power to make a difference, and collectively, we can achieve even more.

To learn more about how you can support children and youth experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania, visit ecyehpennsylvania.center-school.org. Thank you for listening and stay tuned for future episodes of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast.