

Guidance for Working with Military Service Members and Their Families Experiencing Homelessness

This guidance is for homeless liaisons and other school district personnel who are working with active duty members of the military, the National Guard, veterans, and their family members. Montana is home to only one military base, Malmstrom Air Force Base, located in Great Falls. However, we also have several medical facilities which serve veterans, National Guard units, and countless citizens who have served their country in one of the four branches of the United States military (Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force) or the Coast Guard.

For more than a decade U.S. military forces have been engaged in combat zones in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Service members and their families have been exposed to high levels of stress and traumatic events that have had a lasting impact on their ability to cope and function in civilian society. The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) recommends that school personnel use a “trauma-informed” approach when working with military families. Homelessness, and the events which cause it, can add more layers to the stress and trauma that these families are already experiencing. Military personnel and their families may also use terminology and acronyms which may be unfamiliar to school personnel. Take the time to ask for clarification if you are not sure what they are talking about. Miscommunication may occur due to cultural differences between military personnel and their families, and people who are not familiar with this way of life.

Military families may experience homelessness for all of the same reasons that other families do. Divorce rates and domestic violence are high, due to the effects of PTSD and the stressors of maintaining a relationship over long distances. Families of National Guard members may experience financial hardship during a deployment if there is a significant difference in military pay versus civilian pay. Death or injury resulting in long term disability may have a permanent impact on a family’s ability to function, and again may present an extreme financial hardship. The dependent children of military service members may become homeless unaccompanied youth due to difficulties in the family or with the caregivers they are living with while their parents are deployed.

When are military families NOT homeless under McKinney-Vento?

Service members and their families may be confused about the definition of homelessness under McKinney-Vento, or may have been given incorrect information from friends or relatives. It is important to treat all inquiries regarding services for homeless families and students with respect. Ask questions to determine if there are unusual or unique circumstances which may be impacting a family’s or student’s housing status.

1. Families who are living with relatives or friends while the service member locates housing at a new duty station are not considered homeless. This living situation is based on convenience for the family and not on financial hardship or lack of adequate housing.
2. Families who are living in a hotel or motel upon arrival at a new duty station are not considered homeless. The military often provides a “temporary” housing allowance to such families while on-base quarters are located or the family finds housing in the surrounding town. Although this living situation may qualify as temporary or transitional housing, it is due to a lack of adequate

alternative accommodations, which is the underlying criteria of McKinney-Vento homeless designations for people staying in motels.

3. Children who are left in the care of grandparents, other relatives, or friends while one or both parents are deployed are not homeless – unless the caregivers themselves become homeless. Service members are required to provide for the care of their dependent children before deployment. These provisions include power-of-attorney or similar agreements between caregivers and legal parents/guardians. The children may reside in the family home or may relocate to the home of the caregiver.

What additional services should military families be referred to?

1. Regardless of their housing status, military families and dependent children should be referred to local mental health or counseling services as appropriate. Medical and mental health care for service members and their families are also available at Community Based Outpatient Clinics located in Anaconda, Billings, Bozeman, Cut Bank, Glasgow, Glendive, Great Falls, Hamilton, Havre, Kalispell, Lewistown, Miles City, Missoula and Plentywood.
2. School counselors should consider offering additional support or group counseling to the dependent children of military members who are deployed overseas, particularly for service members deployed in a combat zone. These types of counseling services should also be offered to the siblings of deployed service members as they may also be under considerable stress and worry.
3. Any veteran or military member in need of additional support should be referred to services through the Montana Veteran's Affairs Department. Their website is located [here](#). There are ten VA Service Offices located throughout Montana which can assist veterans in accessing any benefits they may qualify for. You may also contact or refer families to the [U. S. Department of Veteran's Affairs](#) for additional assistance. Contact numbers for the VA can be located [here](#).
4. Veterans in crisis can call the Veteran's Crisis Hotline at 1-800-273-8255. They also have a [website](#) with more information for assisting veterans and their families experiencing crises.
5. Montana veterans may receive medical and mental health services at [Ft. Harrison-VA Medical Center](#), which serves as the Regional VA Office for Montana. The contact number is 1-800-827-1000.
6. The Montana Department of Labor- [Workforce Services Division](#) also provides services to veterans seeking training or employment through the Montana Job Service centers located throughout the state.
7. Veterans who are attending colleges, universities or vocational training programs throughout the state should be referred to their local veteran's support office on campus or to the VA [website for veteran's benefits](#) for help.
8. Veterans and their families who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness should be referred to the [VA's homeless services](#), or you may call 1-877-424-3838. Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) program managers are located in Helena, Kalispell, Billings, Anaconda/Butte, Great Falls, and Missoula.

What if I suspect someone is attempting to fraudulently access VA services?

In recent years there have been many instances of people who falsely claimed they were military veterans or had been wounded in combat in order to access services or other assistance. The McKinney-Vento Act provides services to all students who are homeless, regardless of the military service status of their parents. There are no special services or additional services which are available to military members under the Act. It is the responsibility of the VA, or of other agencies which serve veterans, to determine the status of anyone applying for services. Concerns about fraud should be referred to the [U. S. Department of Veteran's Affairs](#).

Further questions or concerns should be addressed to Jack O'Connor, the interim State Coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program at joconnor2@mt.gov, or (406) 444-3083.

The OPI's Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program would like to thank the staff of the Veteran's Administration stationed at Ft. Harrison, Helena, Montana, for their advice and guidance in the development of this document.