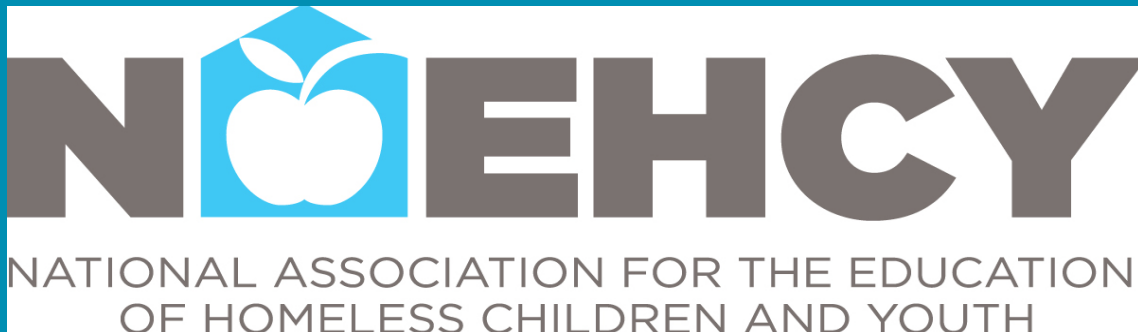


Making State Laws Work for Unaccompanied Youth

A How-To Manual and Tools for
Creating State Laws and Policies to
Support Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Under Age 18

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www.naehcy.org



“I received a call this morning from a liaison who was at a walk-in clinic with a 15-year old unaccompanied youth in need of an inhaler. The doctor would not see the youth without a parent’s permission due to her age. The liaison wants to get some assistance for the youth so she can get her medication.”

Washington State McKinney-Vento Coordinator

“As a clinician, I had experienced the barriers to providing care to homeless youth. In Maryland, minors were not allowed to consent to medical treatment. This was a major barrier for homeless youth in their ability to access health care, and as an advocate I knew we had to change the law.”

*Lisa Stambolis
Pediatric Nurse Practitioner
Health Care for the Homeless*

This publication is designed to assist youth, advocates, educators, service providers and others in creating state and local laws and policies to support unaccompanied homeless youth under 18. Unaccompanied youth are homeless and on their own, without a parent or guardian willing or able to act on their behalf. Generally, parents or legal guardians have legal control over their children, and youth under 18 have limited legal rights. As a result, unaccompanied homeless minors struggle to access services and survive independently in their communities.

McKinney-Vento liaisons, youth service providers, attorneys and others work to assist unaccompanied homeless youth whose parents are not capable of supporting their children’s best interests or who purposefully act against those best interests. However, state and federal laws often do not provide youth or their advocates with the legal tools they need. This publication offers background on unaccompanied homeless youth, explains their legal status under state and federal law, and provides tools to help youth and advocates create state and local laws and policies to support unaccompanied homeless youth.

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BACKGROUND

“I got kicked out of my mom’s place, because she didn’t have enough money to support me.”

Andre, high school senior in Illinois

Unaccompanied homeless youth are young people experiencing homelessness and not in the physical custody of a parent or legal guardian. Unaccompanied homeless youth live in a variety of temporary situations, including shelters, sharing the homes of other people, cars, campgrounds, public parks, abandoned buildings, motels, and bus or train stations.¹ Youth may find themselves homeless and unaccompanied for many reasons.

- Some youth become homeless with their families, but end up on their own due to lack of space in temporary accommodations or shelter policies that prohibit teenage boys.
- Many unaccompanied youth have fled abuse in the home: Studies have found that 20-40% of unaccompanied youth were sexually abused in their homes, while 40-60% were physically abused.²
- Over two-thirds of callers to the National Runaway Switchboard report that at least one of their parents abuses drugs or alcohol.³
- Many youth have been thrown out of their homes due to their sexual orientation: 20-40% of unaccompanied youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (compared to 3-5% of adults).⁴
- Many youth have been thrown out of their homes due to pregnancy.
 - 48% of street youth have been pregnant or impregnated someone.
 - 10% of currently homeless female teenagers are pregnant.⁵
- Over half of youth living in shelters report that their parents either told them to leave, or knew they were leaving and did not care.

¹ The legal rights of unaccompanied youth are recognized by several laws, including the McKinney-Vento Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Higher Education Act, and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

² Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. (2002). “Runaway / Thrownaway Children: National Estimates and Characteristics.” *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children*. Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. See also Greene, J. (1995). “Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors.” *Research Triangle Institute*. Washington DC: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

³ National Runaway Safeline, <http://www.1800runaway.org/>.

⁴ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless (2007). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. Washington DC: Authors.

⁵ Toro, P., Dworsky, A., & Fowler, P. (2007). “Homeless Youth in the United States: Recent Research Findings and Intervention Approaches.” *Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington DC: US Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development.

“My mom is in Africa, and I don’t know my dad. I’ve been moving from house to house. I started getting beaten and stuff like that. I didn’t want to go into a foster home anymore, but I have nowhere else to go. I have no family. All those things led to me going into the shelter.”

Finda, high school senior in Maryland

Each year, between 1.5 and 1.6 million youth run away from home or are forced out of their homes by their parents.⁶ Public school districts that receive funds through the McKinney-Vento Act are required to identify unaccompanied homeless youth enrolled in school and report that data to the U.S. Department of Education. During the 2010-2011 school year, those school districts counted 55,066 enrolled unaccompanied homeless youth.⁷ While these data are important, they grossly underestimate the number of unaccompanied youth, since only 22% of the nation’s school districts receive McKinney-Vento funds. The data also do not account for youth who are not enrolled in school or those who do not reveal their situation to school personnel.

This publication focuses on the legal rights of unaccompanied homeless youth under age 18. Many legal rights in our society come with age limits, and youth under 18 do not share many of the rights adults consider fundamental. Legal scholars and policymakers offer many justifications for restricting youths’ rights, including concerns about children’s ability to analyze decisions, comprehend consequences, and participate as informed, capable members of society. Others believe parents should have the right to determine their children’s best interests and act on their children’s behalf. Much as people justified restricting the rights of slaves by arguing that slave owners would protect them, or restricting the rights of women by arguing that their husbands would protect them, many people in modern society propose that children do not need rights because their parents and guardians will protect them. In the relatively few cases where parents do not protect their children, federal, state, and local governments empower the child welfare system to assume that role.

Despite society’s assumptions about youths’ rights and welfare, the fact remains that tens of thousands of unaccompanied homeless youth in our country do not have the rights they need to participate in society. Without a parent’s approval, in many states they cannot go to the doctor, get an ID card, enter a shelter, or buy a car. Since unaccompanied homeless youth by definition do not have a parent or guardian willing or able to act on their behalf, they are left without the rights they need. The child welfare system is not the solution for most of these youth. Unaccompanied youth fear being reported to child protective services and being brought into foster care.⁸ Child welfare outcomes justify their fear, as studies demonstrate that system’s inefficacy, particularly for older youth. Two related studies found that youth placed in foster care

⁶ Toro, P. (2007).

⁷ National Center for Homeless Education (2012). *Education for Homeless Children and Youths Program: Data Collection Summary*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.

⁸ Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice (2012). *Mandatory Reporting Survey*. Unpublished draft, available from NAEHCY; NAEHCY surveys of homeless youth and service providers in Sacramento and San Diego, CA, San Antonio, TX, Guilford County, NC and East TN demonstrated the same fear.

had higher rates of teen pregnancy, juvenile arrests, young adult crime and unemployment than youth experiencing similar levels of neglect or abuse but left with their parents (with standard family preservation services).⁹ Another study comparing children left in their own homes with comparably-maltreated children placed in foster care found that the children left in their own homes did better, even when the birth families received little or no help.¹⁰ 25% of former foster youth experience homelessness after leaving care.¹¹ And the Congressional Research Service reported that at the close of fiscal year 2005, close to 11,000 foster youth had run away from their placement and were not accounted for.¹² In recent years these data have improved, but the most recent report continues to show 5,870 foster youth in runaway status.¹³

In short, unaccompanied homeless youth do not have adults in their lives who are able to provide them appropriate care under the law, and those under 18 are unable legally to care for themselves. Without laws to provide them with rights, unaccompanied youth are stuck in a legal limbo.¹⁴

⁹ Doyle, J. (2007). "Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effects of Foster Care." *American Economic Review* 97(5): 1583-1610; Doyle, J (2008). "Child Protection and Adult Crime: Using Investigator Assignment to Estimate Causal Effects of Foster Care." *Journal of Political Economy* 116(4).

¹⁰ Egeland, B., et. al. (2006). "The impact of foster care on development." *Development and Psychopathology* 18: 57-76.

¹¹ Fernandes, A. (2007). *Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics, Programs, and Emerging Issues*. Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, citing Cook, R., Fleischman, E., and Grimes, V. (1991). *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 2 Final Report*.

¹² Fernandes (2007).

¹³ Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2011 data.

¹⁴ 33 states have laws creating judicial processes for youth to become emancipated. While these laws provide some youth with relief, they are not an effective solution for most minors, for several reasons: 1) Judicial emancipation generally requires youth to establish a level of financial independence that relatively few youth can establish; 2) In some cases parents must petition for or consent to emancipation, leaving the youth with no right to seek emancipation independently; 3) It is difficult for youth to win emancipation without an attorney, and in many communities there are few if any attorneys willing to assist; 4) Emancipation statutes effectively force youth to relieve their parents of their legal responsibilities in exchange for being granted certain rights.

LEGAL CHALLENGES FOR UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

*“I have a homeless student who has completed driver’s training and needs to know about getting her license. In our state this requires a parent/guardian signature. She is on her own—is there any way she can get a license?”
School district McKinney-Vento liaison, Michigan*

In general terms, minors lack independent decision-making power. Absent abuse or neglect, minors are required to remain in the custody and control of their parents or guardians. Youth who run away from home can be taken into custody by law enforcement in virtually every state, and running away is a status offense in eleven states. The McKinney-Vento Act gives unaccompanied homeless youth fairly extensive educational rights, but the Act does not apply outside the school setting.¹⁵ Without parental signature and/or consent, youth under 18 often cannot access their own birth certificates, get a driver’s license, apply for jobs, seek medical attention, purchase a car, secure stable housing, or take many other basic steps that would allow them to access services and survive independently in their communities.

State Laws

The following bullets provide a few specific examples of basic rights minors do not have under state laws.

- *Access to shelter and housing*

Most states do not allow minors to sign themselves into a shelter for more than 72 hours without parental consent or the intervention of law enforcement or child welfare. State laws and shelter licensing requirements impose these restrictions.¹⁶ Under a typical state law or licensing requirement, when a youth arrives at a shelter the provider has a certain time period, usually 48 to 72 hours, in which the shelter must notify the youth’s parent or guardian of the youth’s admission to the shelter. If the youth’s parents are not reachable or if contacting the parents would lead to harm for the youth, the shelter must make a referral to child protective services, law enforcement, or another analogous state agency.

NAEHCY recently joined forces with advocates in Texas to pass a state law allowing unaccompanied youth ages 16 and over to stay in a transitional living program without parental consent. Programs are required to attempt to notify parents of the youth’s whereabouts, but the youth can remain in the program even if parents object. Texas Family Code §32.203.

¹⁵ For more information about youths’ rights under the McKinney-Vento Act, visit NAEHCY’s website, www.naehcy.org.

¹⁶ For more information, see NAEHCY’s Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit, Chapter 22, “Access to Shelter and Housing for Unaccompanied Youth.” Available at http://naehcy.org/sites/default/files/images/dl/tk/hs/22_shelter.doc

Unfortunately, Texas’s law is fairly unique. As a result, a youth under 18 who is fleeing an abusive home must choose from poor options: stay at a shelter, with the likely result of the youth being returned home or placed in foster care; or live on the streets, on someone’s couch, or in another unsafe and unstable environment. Many young people choose the final option. In fact, recent surveys NAEHCY conducted of youth, service providers and educators in California, North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas found fear of being reported to police or child protective services (foster care) was the greatest barrier to homeless youth under 18 being able to access services. The second greatest barrier was minors’ inability to access services without the consent, permission or notification of a parent or guardian. A Massachusetts survey produced similar findings.¹⁷

State laws limit housing options other than shelters, as well. Statutes that prohibit “harboring a runaway” impose potential liability on any adult who provides a minor who has run away from home with a place to stay. People who provide shelter to an unaccompanied homeless youth are likely violating laws against harboring unless they contact the youth’s parents, child protective services or law enforcement within a short period of time (often as little as 24 hours).

Finally, it is very difficult for minors to access permanent housing on their own behalf, as they have no legal right to enter contracts. This makes a lease between a minor and a landlord unenforceable. Oregon has an important state law that allows youth age 16 and over to rent apartments on their own if they are living apart from their parents or legal guardians.¹⁸ The youth can enter into binding leases, other rental agreements and utility services agreements independently and without parental consent. This statute has empowered local agencies to start host home projects for homeless youth.

- *Consent for medical care*

“I received a call this morning from a liaison who was at a walk-in clinic with a 15 year old unaccompanied youth in need of an inhaler. The doctor would not see the youth without a parent’s permission due to her age. The liaison wants to get some assistance for the youth so she can get her medication.”

McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, Washington

Generally, only persons age 18 and over can consent for their own routine medical and dental care. Minors need the consent of a parent or legal guardian to receive medical care, with some limited exceptions.¹⁹ As a result, unaccompanied minors cannot access routine medical or dental care. They cannot access preventive health care, which is critical to basic safety and welfare. Routine infections and illnesses go untreated.

¹⁷ Massachusetts Applesseed Center for Law and Justice (2012). *Mandatory Reporting Survey*. Unpublished draft, available from NAEHCY.

¹⁸ Or. Rev. Stat. §109.697 (2011).

¹⁹ Typical exceptions include emergency treatment, substance abuse and mental health treatment within limits (see next bullet), family planning, prenatal care, and sexually-transmitted diseases.

Fortunately, 30 states have addressed this issue, using a variety of approaches to ensure that youth on their own can obtain basic medical care.²⁰

- *Consent for mental health care and substance abuse treatment*

The abuse and neglect that most unaccompanied homeless youth experienced at home and the trauma they often experience once homeless means that most unaccompanied homeless youth could benefit from mental health support. A recent study of youth staying at an emergency shelter found 48% to be “clinically symptomatic.”²¹ About half of all jurisdictions allow minors to consent to mental health treatment.²² The vast majority allows minors to consent to outpatient substance abuse treatment. However, these rights are not universal and not without limits.

- *The ability to participate fully in school athletics and other extra-curricular activities*

“Christopher’s participation in interscholastic activities is a major contributing factor to keeping him in school and other successes that he has had in school. The activities have given him a ‘family’ by exposing him to positive role models and teamwork. Christopher has also learned work ethic and leadership and goal setting skills from the activities. These skills have contributed to Christopher graduating with his class and his plan to attend college.”

Excerpt from Final Order of the Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction in Case No. 581-021-0035-09-1 (2009).

State high school athletic associations establish residency and other criteria for students who wish to participate in sports and other competitive extra-curricular activities. While the McKinney-Vento Act gives youth the right to immediate, full participation,

²⁰ For example, Arizona Revised Statutes § 44-132 provides: “Any emancipated minor, any minor who has contracted a lawful marriage or any homeless minor may give consent to the furnishing of hospital, medical and surgical care to such minor, and such consent shall not be subject to disaffirmance because of minority. The consent of the parent, or parents, of such a person is not necessary in order to authorize hospital, medical and surgical care.” California Family Code 6922 states: “A minor may consent to the minor’s medical care or dental care if all of the following conditions are satisfied: (1) The minor is 15 years of age or older. (2) The minor is living separate and apart from the minor’s parents or guardian, whether with or without the consent of a parent or guardian and regardless of the duration of the separate residence. (3) The minor is managing the minor’s own financial affairs, regardless of the source of the minor’s income.” Medical professionals, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, also have endorsed the idea of minors making their own medical decisions in certain circumstances and federal legislation to support that right. See, e.g., Hartman, R. (2002). “Coming of Age: Devising Legislation for Adolescent Medical Decision-Making.” *Am. Journal of Law & Medicine*. For more details, see NAEHCY’s Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit, Chapter 17, “Unaccompanied Youth’s Rights to Consent for Medical Treatment.” Available at http://naehcy.org/sites/default/files/images/dl/tk/hs/17_consent.doc.

²¹ Hughes, J., et al. (2010). “Youth Homelessness: The Relationships among Mental Health, Hope, and Service Satisfaction.” *J Can. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry* 19(4): 274–283.

²² National Network for Youth and National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (2012). *Alone Without A Home: A State-by-State Review of Laws Affecting Unaccompanied Youth*. Washington DC: Authors.

these state requirements often create barriers that delay or even deny participation.²³ Due to their mobility, many homeless youth cannot prove, and/or do not meet, typical residency and guardianship requirements. They may enter their local school mid-year or remain in their school of origin even though their homelessness has forced them to move into a different school district or attendance zone.

Unaccompanied homeless youth have won cases allowing them to participate in extra-curricular activities despite their mobility and lack of legal guardian, including the Oregon case cited above. However, these cases take time away from students' participation, often costing them opportunities to play in front of college recruiters. In addition, the countless students who do not have strong advocates are left on the bench. Texas and California have state laws guaranteeing extra-curricular participation for foster children²⁴; however, as yet there are no state laws explicitly ensuring participation for students who are homeless.

California's Senate Bill 177 gives homeless students the right to immediate participation in extra-curricular activities and is on its way to passage in the state legislature.

- *Assistance in credit accrual and recovery*

Homelessness forces youth to move frequently, which often results in changing schools. These school changes make it difficult for youth to accrue credits, particularly at the high school level. Different high schools may have incompatible class and credit requirements for graduation and "seat-time" rules that prevent youth from earning credits if they enter the district late in the semester or leave early. In addition to mobility, unaccompanied homeless youth may miss school due to employment obligations, struggle to concentrate in school due to lack of sleep or worries about meeting their basic needs, or be unable to complete assignments due to lack of a quiet place to study or resources to purchase needed school supplies.

State laws do not account for these challenges, and many unaccompanied homeless youth leave high school in frustration. In fact, states that have analyzed high school graduation rates for students who are homeless have found strong and disturbing correlations between homelessness and dropping out.²⁵ California has enacted positive

²³ The McKinney-Vento Act gives homeless students the right to immediate enrollment "in any public school that nonhomeless students who live in the attendance area in which the child or youth is actually living are eligible to attend," even if they cannot provide proof of residency and are not accompanied by a parent or guardian. "Enrollment" specifically includes attending classes and participating fully in school activities. In addition, homeless students can remain stable in one school despite changes in their living situation. Specifically, the Act says that homeless students can remain in their school of origin for the duration of homelessness, as well as until the end of the academic year in which they find housing. School of origin means the school that the child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled. 42 U.S.C. §§11432(g)(3), 11434A.

²⁴ Texas Educ. Code §25.001(f); Cal. Educ. Code §48850(a)(2).

²⁵ In Virginia, for example, students who were homeless at any time in their high school career had the lowest on-time graduation rate (66.1%) compared to any other subgroup, including

legislation which provides that: “Each public school district and county office of education shall accept for credit full or partial coursework satisfactorily completed by a pupil while attending a public school, juvenile court school, or nonpublic, nonsectarian school or agency.”²⁶

- *Access to vital documents*

Birth certificates, social security cards, driver’s licenses, and other documents are fundamental. However, minors often are not able to obtain these documents without a parent’s signature. Florida law permits homeless youth to obtain certified copies of their own birth certificates regardless of age, as long as a school district McKinney-Vento liaison or a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) or Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) shelter director verifies their homelessness.²⁷

- *Establishing eligibility for in-state tuition for college*

State colleges and universities offer reduced tuition for legal residents of the state. Each state has its own rules for how long students must reside in the state to be eligible for reduced tuition and how to prove residency. Students who are homeless in high school may struggle to establish residency for state colleges and universities, as their homelessness leaves them without leases, mortgages, utility bills, and other documents typically used to prove residency. Unaccompanied homeless youth face greater challenges. For example, as discussed above, unaccompanied homeless youth may not be able to obtain a driver’s license, which is another document commonly accepted as proof of residency. Also, state laws may base the student’s residency on parent’s residency, and unaccompanied homeless youth may have difficulty “proving” that they were homeless and not living with parents.

...

These are some issue areas in which state laws create barriers for unaccompanied homeless youth. The barriers, and potential solutions, vary by state. Some states have

economically disadvantaged students (74.7%). Students who were homeless at any time in high school had a drop-out rate (19%) that was more than twice the state average (7.1%), and higher than any other subgroup other than Limited English Proficient students. The drop-out rate for students who had been homeless at any time in high school was higher than it was for students who were economically disadvantaged at any time in high school, indicating that homelessness has negative educational consequences on top of the ill effects of poverty. Data from the Colorado Department of Education also show that the graduation rate for homeless students is the lowest compared to other subgroups; at 49.7%, it is lower than the rate for economically disadvantaged students (62.2%) and for all students in the state (73.9%). These same trends can be seen in academic data collected by the Indiana Department of Education. In 2009, homeless students had a lower graduation rate (65.8%) than other poor students (68%) and the state average (81.5%). Colorado data available at:

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/rv2011GradLinks.htm>; Virginia data available at: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/graduation_completion/cohort_reports/.

²⁶ Cal. Educ. Code §48645.5.

²⁷ Flor. Rev. Stat. §§382.025(1) and 382.025(1).

established state task forces or offices focusing on homeless youth in an effort to coordinate efforts and eliminate barriers. For example, in 2008 the New Hampshire State Legislature created a Task Force on Homeless Teenagers, with required members from state government and a specific mandate to investigate and report on the extent of youth homelessness and needed services, including soliciting information directly from young people.²⁸ The Task Force has resulted in greater attention on youth homelessness across the state and new efforts to create housing and ensure access to services.

Colorado's State Legislature established a State Office of Homeless Youth Services several years ago, "to create a vehicle through which services to homeless youth statewide could be improved by coordinating current services and facilitating interagency collaboration to identify gaps, remove barriers, improve access and information sharing."²⁹ The Office of Homeless Youth Services in conjunction with the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth developed and is implementing the Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan. While these efforts can bring attention to the plight of homeless youth and identify some of the barriers they face in accessing services, without complementary amendments to the state laws and regulations that pose the barriers, they are limited in their power to make real change for youth.

Federal Laws

In addition to the state-level issues that are the focus of this publication, federal laws also affect the rights of unaccompanied homeless youth. Federal laws and regulations establish rules for federally-funded programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Social Security, Medicaid, Child Health Insurance, federal financial aid for college, school meals, services for students with disabilities, and shelter and housing programs. NAEHCY has advanced important changes in federal policy to help unaccompanied homeless youth, including:

- Significant strengthening of homeless youth's education rights in the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program. For more information on the EHCY program visit <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/k-12>.
- Increased access to higher education for unaccompanied homeless youth through the inclusion of questions about homelessness on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the ability of unaccompanied youth to apply for aid without providing parental income information or signature. For more information about helping unaccompanied homeless youth with financial aid, visit <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/higher-ed> or call NAEHCY's toll-free Higher Education Hotline, (855) 446-2673.
- Expanded eligibility and collaboration requirements for Department of Housing and Urban Development's homeless assistance programs, through the HEARTH Act.

²⁸ New Hampshire HB 537 (2008).

²⁹ More information, the state Action Plan, publications and meeting minutes are available at <http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/DOLA-Main/CBON/1251595346101>.

For more information on the HEARTH Act visit <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/housing> and www.helphomelesskidsnow.com.

- Streamlined evaluations and special education services for homeless students with disabilities, particularly unaccompanied homeless youth. For more information on supporting homeless students with disabilities, visit http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc_spec_ed.php.
- Categorical eligibility for free school meals for homeless students, eliminating the need for meeting application and document requirements. For more information on homeless students' rights to free meals visit <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/food>.
- Removal of barriers to homeless youth receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, through a policy clarification from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, available at <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/food>.

NAEHCY will continue this work at the federal level and welcomes local partnerships. Currently, we maintain Youth Task Forces to guide and foster our work in several communities around the country, including East TN; San Antonio, TX; Guilford County, NC; Southeast WY; and Sacramento and San Diego, CA.

To stay abreast of NAEHCY's federal policy work, sign up for updates via NAEHCY's website, <http://www.naehcy.org/about-naehcy/get-involved>.

The following section applies tools we have created and lessons we have learned to assist youth, advocates, educators, service providers and others in creating positive laws and regulations on the state and local levels.

STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE STATE-LEVEL POLICY CHANGES

NAEHCY suggests seven steps to achieve state-level policy changes:

1. **Learn about the issue.**
2. **Prepare a brief summarizing the issue.**
3. **Build a coalition around the issue, including young people.**
4. **Bring the issue and your proposed solution to the attention of your target policymakers.**
5. **Develop and implement a traditional and a social media strategy to cover the issue.**
6. **Create and look for opportunities to highlight the issue before the legislature or other decision-making body.**
7. **Follow through and stick with the process.**

The following section provides more information and tools for implementing these seven steps. Although we present these steps as a linear process, policy change is never so neat. To be successful, you must be prepared to take advantage of opportunities to move your cause forward as they arise. At any point in your process, be prepared to accept offers of help from advocates and policymakers. Build flexibility into your process from the start. Our first three steps in particular will arm you with the tools you need to take advantage of any opportunity to move your cause forward.

To illustrate how these strategies can work to change real policies, we will share information about our recent policy work in Texas and California, as well as specific references to two actual policy changes that have affected homeless youth:

- First, in 2012 the Maryland state legislature passed a law to eliminate a barrier to health and dental care for unaccompanied homeless youth under 18. The law states that any minor who is living separate and apart from his or her parents or guardian (with or without the parent's/guardian's consent), and who is self-supporting (regardless of the source of the minor's income), has the right to consent for medical and dental treatment.³⁰ Barbara DiPietro, PhD, the Policy Director of Health Care for the Homeless in Baltimore, Maryland, led this successful policy effort and shared the story with us in October of 2012.
- Second, in 2007 the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) adding the following category to its list of housing preferences: A family with children that is sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as "doubled-up") and who receives services from an Alaska School District under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.³¹ This change eliminated a barrier to housing for homeless youth living

³⁰ Maryland SB72 (2012); Ann. Code Md. §20-102(a)(3).

³¹ AHFC Preferences PA-AP101 (2007); AHFC School District Homeless Verification PW-AP119 (2007). As of July 1, 2012, AHFC eliminated *all* housing preferences, primarily due to administrative workload. However, homeless families and other groups eligible for preferences who were on AFHC's wait list prior to July 1 continue to receive the preference.

with their parents. Janet Levin, the former McKinney-Vento liaison for Anchorage School District who was the impetus for this policy change, shared the story with us in November of 2012.

1. Learn about the issue.

a. *What is the service youth cannot access, or the action they cannot take?*

Maryland: “We used to do pediatric work largely on an outreach basis at shelters. Then we moved to a larger space and started working on developing a pediatric clinic on site. As we expanded that work, our Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, Lisa Stambolis, came to us and said they were having a hard time delivering services to the older unaccompanied teens, which is one of our primary groups. They could do some family planning, mental health, and substance abuse, but not primary care. They were seeing diabetes, asthma, upper respiratory infections, but they couldn’t treat them. Lisa said, ‘I can’t even give them cough syrup. I can’t practice medicine with them.’”

Alaska: “We were serving so many doubled-up families, and I would refer them for housing. But when I followed up with them, they would tell me they couldn’t get housing. They were put on the waiting list with everyone else, instead of receiving the preference for homelessness. Homeless children and youth were invisible because no one in the community was counting them unless they were in a shelter. Our school district provided services to homeless students, but they and their families would never qualify for housing assistance.”

Youth and people working with them confront barriers every day. Anyone who wants to change policies to support youth must research the problems they face by talking directly with young people, service providers, school district McKinney-Vento liaisons, legal aid attorneys and other advocates. Those who are experiencing the problem firsthand can offer the best description of challenges and barriers. For state-level policy, it is important to talk with people in different parts of the state, including rural, suburban and urban areas, to understand how the problem plays out in different areas.

Before beginning our state-level policy work in Texas and California, NAEHCY administered surveys to young people, service providers, and community members to elicit information about needs and barriers. We used simple, on-line surveys disseminated via the Continuum of Care and school district McKinney-Vento liaisons. We enlisted young people to do outreach in schools and communities to increase our youth responses. Appendix A contains copies of the youth and adult surveys.

Here are some suggested sources of information and how to reach them:

- Contact information for school district McKinney-Vento liaisons should be available from your McKinney-Vento State Coordinator. Coordinator contact information is available at: http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.

- Lists of legal aid offices are available at: <http://www.lawhelp.org/> and <http://www.lsc.gov/find-legal-aid> .
- Runaway and Homeless Youth Act providers can be contacted via: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/grants/fysb-grantees> .
- Contact information for homeless coalitions and homeless service providers can be found at: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/directories/index.html>, <http://www.homelessshelterdirectory.org/> and <http://www.shelterlistings.org/>.
- Contact information for Continuums of Care (the entity that leads all the homeless service providers that receive funding from HUD) is available at: <http://www.hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewCocMaps>.
- Many states have youth organizations that bring young people’s voices to public policy. Some of these organizations target youth who have experienced homelessness or foster care. Look on-line for organizations in your state. For example:
 - California Coalition for Youth: <http://www.calyouth.org/>
 - California Council on Youth Relations: <http://newamericamedia.org/ccyr.php>
 - Colorado Youth Advisory Council: <http://www.coyac.org/>
 - Florida Youth Shine: <http://www.floridayouthshine.org/>
 - Foster Care Alumni of America (with chapters in AZ, CA, CO, FL, ID, IL, KY, MA, MD, OH, TN, TX, VA): <http://www.fostercarealumni.org>
 - Voices for Michigan’s Children: <http://michiganschildren.org/Youth-Programs/>
 - The Youth Empowerment Program of the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio: <http://www.cohhio.org/programs/yep>
 - Washington State’s Youth N Action: Eastern WA, <http://www.youthnaction.org>; Western Washington, <http://www.youthempowermentstrategies.org/youth-n-action.html>)

b. What is the barrier? Why can’t youth access the service or take the needed action?

Alaska: “At a Homeless Services Forum meeting in 1999, we were reviewing Continuum of Care data on homelessness, and I noticed the school district numbers were not included in the report. I thought it was just an error or oversight, so I asked. I was told it was because doubled-up youth weren’t homeless. I showed them our definition from ED [the Department of Education]; they showed me theirs from HUD [the Department of Housing and Urban Development]. That’s when the meeting facilitator and I, and everyone in the room, learned about the differences in ED’s and HUD’s applications of the homeless definition.”

Advocates cannot develop effective policies without identifying the specific barrier(s) that prevent youth from accessing services or taking the action they need to take. Sometimes, barriers will be fairly obvious: in Maryland, youth under 18 needed parental or guardian consent for basic medical or dental care, leaving unaccompanied homeless minors unable to access this care. However, in other cases it may take some research to uncover the specific barrier. In Alaska, it took group discussions over a long period of time to uncover the differing definitions of “homeless”, understand them, contact the

respective federal agencies for guidance, and begin to formulate a different approach to this barrier. Again, talking to stakeholders and researching the issues were key.

c. Where does the barrier come from? What statute, regulation or policy is creating the barrier, or could eliminate the barrier?

Maryland: “After Lisa came to us, we looked at the law, and we saw that the law required parental consent for basic medical care. But we also saw exemptions in the law for some kinds of medical care, and also for emancipated minors. So we thought about going for an exemption for unaccompanied homeless youth.”

Conversations with stakeholders should point you in the direction of the law, regulation or policy that gives rise to the barrier. In limited cases, it may be beneficial to look at legislative history or court cases, to get a more complete picture of the legal issues. Local law firms and law schools may be very interested in assisting with this research on a pro bono basis. Legal aid offices may have information on-hand to get you started. NAEHCY can assist, as well.

However, most advocates can do this basic research on their own fairly easily. Several free resources and publications summarizing state and federal laws pertaining to minors are available, including:

» *NAEHCY’s Unaccompanied Youth Toolkits*, which provide a series of 1-2 page briefs on a variety of topics, including:

- McKinney-Vento 101: The basics of the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program
- FAFSA and Unaccompanied Youth Basics: The basic provisions for homeless unaccompanied youth in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- Several tools for identifying unaccompanied homeless youth
- Tips to Recruit and Support Unaccompanied Youth in College
- Access to Medicaid, Social Security Benefits, Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/Food Stamps) for Unaccompanied Youth
- Unaccompanied Youth’s Rights to Consent for Medical Treatment
- Access to Shelter and Housing for Unaccompanied Youth
- Training Resources

A separate Toolkit is available for each of the following audiences:

- McKinney-Vento Liaisons and High School Counselors: <http://www.naehcy.org/toolkit-high-school-counselors>
- Shelter and Service Providers: <http://www.naehcy.org/toolkit-shelters>
- College Financial Aid Administrators: <http://www.naehcy.org/toolkit-financial-aid-administrators>

» *Alone Without A Home*, which reviews current laws in 12 key issue areas that affect the lives and future prospects of unaccompanied homeless youth in all 50 U.S. states and 6 territories.

Available from the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty at http://www.nlchp.org/view_report.cfm?id=385.

» *The Child Welfare Information Gateway*, which contains states law on child welfare reporting and foster care: https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/.

» *The Public Library of Law* is a free, on-line tool to research state and federal laws, regulations, and court cases: <http://www.plol.org>

When researching regulations, policies or practices of state agencies, consider the following chart of common names for state agencies that tend to handle key youth issues:

K-12 Education	Department of Education; Superintendent of Public Instruction
Higher Education	Department of Education, Higher Education; State Board of Education
Preschool / Early Childhood	Department of Economic Security, Early Learning, Education
Health and mental health	Department of Health, Health and Human Services
Public benefits	Department of Public Welfare, Social Services, Health and Human Services
Employment	Department of Labor, Labor and Industry, Labor and Workforce Development
Foster care and child protection	Department of Social Services, Human Services, Children and Families
Housing	Department of Housing, Commerce, Trade and Economic Development, Housing and Economic Development, Housing and Community Development
Juvenile Justice	Department of Juvenile Justice, Public Safety

2. Prepare a brief summarizing the issue.

As you begin to work on policy change, you will need to be able to explain the issue and the barrier to policymakers, potential allies and opponents in the community, and the media. Drafting a clear, detailed brief at the outset of your campaign will help you be prepared to address concerns quickly and effectively. Your brief should provide context and background on youth homeless in your state/community, a detailed description of the problem/barrier, and a suggested solution. Carefully consider what are your most persuasive arguments and policy points.

Maryland: “We kept the focus on our persuasive policy points: the relatively small number of youth who would be affected by this change; how it would improve their access to education; the specific, serious health care needs of unaccompanied homeless youth; and the precedent in other states.”

Alaska: “You constantly have to be thinking about how you can explain the issue in a way that is clear, persuasive and descriptive of the challenges. You have to anticipate the questions and include the answers before they’re even asked. Frame it in a real-life way that people can understand, with objective data. For example, rents statewide in Alaska doubled over the same 10-year period in which wages increased an average of 33%. You have to know and name what creates child and youth homelessness and ground people in those facts.”

Over time, as new concerns are raised, your coalition grows, and you receive more information, your brief is likely to evolve. You will need to adapt your arguments to appeal to different target audiences and to address concerns. However, a strong early draft will be extremely useful as you start to build a coalition.

Appendix B includes sample briefs from several NAEHCY campaigns, including efforts to change laws on minor medical consent in Florida; change athletic association policies to ensure full participation for homeless youth in varsity athletics in Texas; and ensure unaccompanied homeless youth can access their own school records in California. These can be adapted for other states and other issues.

a. Include data and research to support your position.

Alaska: “I kept hitting the community with data, for years. Cumulative data over time was critical to show the growth in youth and family homelessness. How many students, how many families, how many preschool-aged siblings, how many temporary moves, how long they were homeless, how long transportation was provided; etc. Being able to quantify how often kids move was key. I kept track of what the average turn-around time was to get kids into housing: from 6 weeks to 18 months to 2 years, over time. So I could show how long they were waiting for housing assistance and how many moves they made over that time, based on how long we were transporting the students and how frequently we had to change their transportation plan.

“I made it simple to read and see the growth with graphs and charts. I also used studies on mobility and school performance.”

Maryland: “Johns Hopkins School of Public Health had done a homeless youth point-in-time study in January 2011 that identified 115 unaccompanied youth in a one-day count. So we were able to show that we were talking about a fairly small number of youth, rather than a wide, pervasive change in state policy. In some other policies, we struggle to establish how many homeless youth there are, to show the depth of the problem. But for this particular strategy on this bill, the best path was to minimize the number of people, and the count data were very helpful. That same study also reported that 40% of the unaccompanied homeless youth needed dental care and 17% needed basic care.”

Data on youth homelessness in your state should be available from your McKinney-Vento State Coordinator (contact information at

http://center.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php), as well as local school district liaisons. Continuums of Care, homeless coalitions, shelters, legal services and other advocates may have additional useful data to share. Since many policymakers are not aware of the extent of youth homelessness, state and local data are critical to make your case.

Your brief also should share available social science research on the effects of homelessness and the specific barrier you seek to address. Research pointing to the efficacy of your proposed solution is particularly helpful. Some sources of research on unaccompanied homeless youth are:

- National Runaway Safeline, <http://www.1800runaway.org/>
- “Homeless Youth in the United States: Recent Research Findings and Intervention Approaches,” from *Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*.
<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/Overview/index.htm>
- *The Runaway Youth Longitudinal Study* (National Runaway Safeline).
http://www.1800runaway.org/assets/1/7/NRS_Longitudinal_study_report-FINAL.pdf
- *Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers* (CA Research Bureau). <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/08/08-004.pdf>
- *Unaccompanied and Homeless Youth Review of the Literature* (National Center for Homeless Education).
http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/uy_lit_review.pdf
- Homeless Resource Center’s Youth page (SAMHSA).
<http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/Youth-31.aspx>

Survey data also can be very persuasive. Using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) or a similar on-line tool is an easy way to collect information; you can disseminate the link widely in your community and analyze and share the data. It is important to survey young people directly, as well as adults who work with young people, such as service providers, advocates, and liaisons. Appendix A contains sample surveys for youth and adults that NAEHCY used to gather local information to support our legislative campaigns in California and Texas.

b. Collect real-life anecdotes from young people and related service providers to support your position. Focus these efforts on the geographic area(s) of interest to the policymaker(s) you need to influence.

Maryland: “The youths’ stories were extremely powerful for educating legislators who had no experience with homelessness or unaccompanied youth. A lot of our kids haven’t seen a doctor for years when they come to us.”

Many policymakers and community members, even if they are familiar with homelessness in general, have no experience at all with unaccompanied homeless youth. Policymakers may believe that unaccompanied youth are served effectively by the child welfare system. True stories of youth will help target audiences understand what is really happening to young people. True stories touch people’s hearts, but they also

establish the irrefutable fact of the barriers and their dire consequences for youth. Many youth are willing to share their stories. In addition, McKinney-Vento liaisons, service providers and other advocates can share their experiences with youth, without revealing personal information.

c. Propose a specific solution to the problem.

Maryland: “Our initial team consisted of our Pediatric Nurse Practitioner Lisa Stambolis, our Community Relations Coordinator Adam Schneider, and myself [Policy Director Barbara DiPietro]. Then we tested the waters by consulting one of our Board members who is a lobbyist for other health centers, and she circulated the issue among people in her circle as well. Together with the lobbyist from the state’s medical association, it ended up being a great team working together to craft language that would address everyone’s concerns but still give us what we needed to provide care.

With your research complete and data assembled, you will be ready to develop a proposal to eliminate the barrier in question. A small, core team consisting of at least one policy expert or attorney, young person, and service provider should make the first attempt to devise a specific proposal. This proposal is almost certain to evolve and change as you recruit new allies, build a coalition and win the support of policymakers. However, it is very helpful to have a specific solution in mind from the outset. This is your goal and will orient people to the issue. The goal may change, but without a starting place, your movement will falter.

Alaska: “Showing similar efforts in other cities helped a lot to address fears of stepping outside the proscribed box. The message was: You won’t get in trouble, it’s being done elsewhere. We’re not bizarre!”

Maryland: “We looked at provisions from other states and modeled ours on what other states had done. We included in our testimony the number of other states that allowed this consent, listing them out. That was very helpful background. Our first try in 2011 was overly complicated. As we geared up to try again in 2012, the lobbyist for the state’s medical association suggested we trim it down and redraft it. She did some additional background research and saw the language from other states’ laws.”

If you have done your research well, you likely will have uncovered solutions already in place in other jurisdictions. These pre-existing solutions are an excellent place to start. Policymakers and potential allies may be hesitant to try something completely new, concerned about unforeseen consequences. Solutions that already are working in other places tend to be less frightening and more palatable. You can adapt these strategies to your state.

The following chart provides information about positive statutes covering many of the most important state-law issues affecting unaccompanied youth. These statutes are a good starting point if you are considering policy proposals on these issues.

Issue	Statutes Addressing It	How Addressed
Access to shelter and housing	OR Revised Statutes §109.697 www.leg.state.or.us/ors/109.html	Youth age 16 and over and living apart from their parents or legal guardians can enter into binding leases, other rental agreements and utility services agreements independently and without parental consent.
	CA Family Code §§6920 and 6924 www.leginfo.ca.gov/.html/fam_table_of_contents.html	Youth age 12 or older can consent independently to residential shelter services if both: (1) the youth, in the opinion of the attending professional person, is mature enough to participate intelligently in shelter services; and, (2) the youth (a) would present a danger of serious physical or mental harm to self or to others without the shelter services, or (b) is the alleged victim of incest or child abuse.
	TX Senate Bill 717, amending Family Code §32.203 http://legiscan.com/TX/bill/SB717	Unaccompanied homeless youth age 16 or older, and youth who are pregnant or parenting, can enter transitional living programs without parental consent.
Consent for medical care	30 states have addressed this issue in a variety of ways. See, for example: AZ Revised Statutes §44-132 www.azleg.gov/ArizonaRevisedStatutes.asp?Title=44 LA Revised Statutes §40:1095 www.legis.state.la.us/lss/lss.asp?doc=97033 AK Statutes §25.20.025 www.legis.state.ak.us/basis/statutes.asp#25.20.025	The most common approach allows youth living apart from their parents or legal guardian and managing their own financial affairs to consent for medical and dental services.
Full participation in athletics and extra-curricular activities	CA Senate Bill 177 http://legiscan.com/CA/bill/SB177/2013	Establishes that homeless students are immediately deemed to meet all residency requirements for participation in interscholastic sports or other extracurricular activities.
Credit accrual and recovery	CA Education Code §48645.5 http://leginfo.ca.gov/pub/11-	Requires school districts to accept for credit full or partial

	12/bill/sen/sb_1051-1100/sb_1088_bill_20120919_chaptered.pdf	coursework satisfactorily completed by a pupil while attending another school.
Access to school records	CA AB 1068 http://legiscan.com/CA/bill/AB1068/2013	Allows unaccompanied homeless youth age 14 and over to access and consent for the disclosure of their education records.
Access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits	CA AB 309 http://legiscan.com/CA/drafts/AB309	Clarifies that there is no minimum age for SNAP benefits; requires state SNAP agency to develop and disseminate information and provide training about unaccompanied youths' eligibility; requires local SNAP offices to accept applications from unaccompanied youth and individually determine if the youth constitute their own household or are part of another household.
Access to birth certificates	FL Revised Statutes http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2012/1351	Permits homeless youth to obtain certified copies of their own birth certificates regardless of age, as long as a school district McKinney-Vento liaison or a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) or Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) shelter director verifies their homelessness.
Limiting harmful/unnecessary reports to child protective services	CA AB 652 http://legiscan.com/CA/bill/AB652/2013	Clarifies that being an unaccompanied minor is not, in and of itself, sufficient basis for reporting child abuse or neglect.

In addition to using existing laws as a model, here are some tips to keep in mind as you draft your initial policy proposal:

- Do you need a new law, regulation, guidance, or policy? Your research on the specific barrier will point you in the right direction.
- Keep it as simple as possible. If you've identified the barrier with precision, you will know the minor tweaks that can eliminate just that barrier.
- Keep it as low-cost as possible. Solutions that can be implemented with no additional funding are the more likely to pass.
- Keep it as non-controversial as possible. Try to come up with a solution that seems so reasonable, tailored, and obvious, it's hard to oppose.

3. Build a coalition around the issue.

As you researched and learned about the issue in Step 1, you contacted youth, service providers, school district McKinney-Vento liaisons, legal aid attorneys and other advocates. Step 1 included many suggested sources of information and how to reach them. If you made those contacts at the outset, it will be much easier to form a strong coalition of diverse stakeholders in support of the policy change. If you did not make those contacts, make them now. As you build a coalition, be willing to adapt your arguments and proposed solutions to address concerns raised by your allies and critics.

a. Cultivate youth leadership and partnership from the outset.

Maryland: “Youth testified about how difficult it was to get medical care. We used this as an opportunity to educate people about the connection between homelessness and poor health—higher pink eye, high blood pressure, migraines, dental pain, violence, physical and mental trauma and abuse, etc.”

To speak with authority to policymakers, you will need the voices of the young people who are affected by the policy. Stakeholders must understand how the barrier hurts youth—whether physically, emotionally, or mentally; in terms of their prospects for education, employment, safety and stability; their relationships with family, etc. How would your proposal benefit particular young people? The words and stories of youth can convey this information more clearly and compellingly than any research, data point, or secondhand anecdote.

b. Bring the issue to the attention of your existing partners and networks.

Maryland: “We opened up a section of law for this provision, which contained a host of controversial issues beyond our bill. We were afraid to incite opposition to the section of the law that could have been more controversial, which could have spilled over onto our bill. So we reached out to partners we work with on homelessness and poverty issues generally, to explain to them what we wanted to do and ask them not to oppose us based on issues in the same statute that were not our issues. We asked them to let our bill get through, and we’d work with them to address other concerns another time and in another forum. There was a concerted nod given to us, quietly and behind the scenes, to allow us to go forward and do health care for homeless kids.”

Alaska: “I started going to the Continuum of Care meetings, even though initially there was no reason for me to go, because they were so HUD-focused. But they saw me every month, and that reminded them of the homeless families and youth. It kept them visible, even if not fully on the agenda. The housing agency, shelters and supportive services providers, and the Continuum of Care were the initial group, and later the Mayor’s Task Force on Homelessness. My superintendent never told me to back off.”

Starting your coalition with existing partners and networks will help maintain those relationships and allow you to try out your “pitch” among friends before taking it to tougher audiences. Your partners may be experiencing the same problem and be eager

to support the policy change, or they may need to be educated about the issue. They may have concerns about certain aspects of your proposed solution. Be prepared to explain your reasoning and potentially make changes to your proposal to address concerns. Having your standard allies on your side will make the process much smoother.

c. Bring the issue to the attention of other people, agencies and organizations you think would be interested.

Maryland: “You need to form a coalition specific to this issue. Build on existing relationships and also build new relationships specific to the issue.”

Alaska: “Via email, I made sure that school district and city leaders and the United Way knew about the number of homeless families and youth with nowhere to go. Community education was very important, particularly in vulnerable times, when the temperature is below freezing, the shelters are full, and you have children and youth literally facing freezing to death. I named that risk. Sadly, this is an excellent graphic attention-getter.”

Depending on the particular issue, many groups beyond your typical partners may be interested in supporting your proposal. Carefully consider all the potential stakeholders in the wider community, including:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Community foundations
- School board members
- School administrators
- PTAs
- Children’s advocacy groups
- Colleges
- Health care providers
- Employment agencies
- City or county leaders
- Judges and attorneys
- Emergency responders
- Trade associations
- Civic groups
- Community youth groups like Boys and Girls Clubs
- Faith community leaders

These and many other members of your community may become strong supporters of your issue. You can adapt your brief to address the specific interests of these groups and ask for their support.

d. Connect with stakeholders who may be opposed.

Maryland: “You never want your doctors and nurses to be against you. So we did outreach with the Board of Nursing, the nursing association and their lobbyist, as well as the state’s medical association, so we were all on the same page and could address their questions ahead of time. One concern initially was physicians’ liability: What will happen if you encounter an unaccompanied youth, provide care, and then 6 months later, Mom comes back into the picture. Can the mom sue you for care you provided when she wasn’t around? And how would you know if a youth really was an unaccompanied homeless youth? An unaccompanied homeless youth is not immediately obvious to a regular person. What if a legislator’s kid came to you claiming to be an unaccompanied homeless youth, and so you treated him without me knowing? We frankly didn’t have the legal answers to those questions.

“So we asked the state attorney general to provide a legal opinion about what the medical liability would be if such a provision were passed. The Department of Health worked with us to get the AG to provide the opinion, and the AG came out and clarified that there would be liability protection for providers under this provision. That handled the liability concerns. The rest we addressed through additional conversations and education.”

Any legal change will require certain groups of people to change the way they do business. Change can be scary, particularly when stakeholders are taken by surprise. It is important to consider all the groups that will be affected by your proposed policy change and attempt to gain their support. By explaining the barrier and how it affects youth, and discussing your proposed solution with stakeholders, you may learn of unintended consequences and be able to devise a better solution. You may gain new allies along the way, or at least address opposition earlier in the process. There may be strategic reasons to keep some information private at certain points in the political process, but in general, you can bet your opponents will find out about your efforts. It is better to work with them early on to address their objections than to wait for them to catch you and policymakers unprepared at critical moments in the process that can destroy your proposal.

4. Bring the issue and your proposed solution to the attention of your target policy makers.

Once you’ve completed your research, drafted your supporting documentation, and built your coalition, you are ready to bring your proposal to the seats of power.

a. Identify the policymaker(s) with the power to address the barrier.

In Step 1, you identified the law, regulation or policy that created the barrier. What body, agency or organization established that law, regulation or policy? That body, agency or organization should be the target of your policy advocacy. For example, the coalition seeking to change Maryland’s state law on consent for medical and dental care needed to approach members of the state legislature. In Alaska, the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation was the target agency, since it established the preferences that move those who are eligible to the top of the housing assistance list (e.g., senior citizens,

domestic violence survivors, and homeless people). In California, NAEHCY sought and achieved policy clarifications from county welfare departments and the state department of education, as well as new state laws from the state legislature.

The following chart shows who can change different categories of barriers. While it is not exhaustive, it should help get you started.

<i>What creates the barrier?</i>	<i>Who can change it?</i>
State law	State legislature, particularly members of the specific committees of the state senate and state house/assembly that oversee the issue (your state legislature’s website should include a list of committees)
State regulation or policy	Governor’s Office State agency that made the regulation/policy Federal agency that oversees the program, if your research reveals that the state regulation/policy violates federal law/regulation
County ordinance	County Commissioners/Counselors/ Supervisors
County policy	County agency that made the policy State agency that oversees the program, if your research reveals that the county policy violates state or federal law/regulation/policy
City ordinance	Mayor’s Office City Council
School district policy	School board members Superintendent Assistant Superintendent

Alaska: “The state housing agency director was sympathetic and knew me from the Governor’s Task Force on Homelessness and other presentations and meetings.”

Maryland: “We were looking for a sponsor. We found there was a similar bill that had been pursued in previous legislative sessions. It wasn’t exactly the same, but we thought it was a good strategy to add our issue into an existing legislative vehicle. House Delegate Sandy Rosenberg was working on that other issue. He knew us because we’d worked with him in the past, and he readily agreed to help. So we added our piece and circulated it among legislators.”

You or other members of your coalition may already have good relationships with some of your target policymakers. You may work with school administrators, be a member of the same civic organization as an influential member of the Governor’s cabinet, attend religious services with a member of the city council, partner with county agency administrators to obtain services for youth, or have teamed up with a state legislator on a past policy issue. If you have such relationships in place, start with those. Even if those

partners are not in a position to help you directly, they can open doors with policymakers who can.

Maryland: “The lobbyist for the state’s medical association was a key partner in opening doors for this bill, and her credibility with legislators also worked in our favor. We also approached Senator Delores Kelley, a longtime champion of children, youth and family issues and a very influential senator, and she agreed to introduce the same bill in her chamber. So in 2012, we had identical bills in both houses of the legislature. Senator Kelley and Delegate Rosenberg are both Democrats, but we worked with Republicans as well, and the bill ultimately passed both the House and Senate unanimously.”

Even if you have strong partnerships already in place, you will need to identify additional, influential policymakers likely to be sympathetic to the issue. You may want to research the particular interests and experiences of legislators. If you are working on a medical bill, is there a legislator who works in the health care profession? If you are working on a bill to help youth accrue and recover credits, is there a legislator with an education background? Has a member of your legislature experienced homelessness or poverty? Who has sponsored bills on similar issues in the past? Personal interests and experience can create common ground and lead to strong partnerships. In addition, newly elected legislators can be potential allies. They may be looking for ideas for new legislation and respond well to offers of partnership on what could become a “signature issue” for them.

If your target audience is the state legislature, make sure to approach members of both parties and both the senate and house or assembly. As mentioned above, research which legislative committee handles your issue and target members of that committee.

b. Arrange face-to-face meetings with your target policymakers to ask for their support.

Once you have identified potential policy allies, you will need to explain the issue and your proposal to them and ask for their support. Work with your coalition to determine who will attend these meetings. If a member of your group has an existing relationship with the policymaker, that person should set up a meeting and take the lead during the meeting. Similarly, if a member of your group is likely to be well received by a policymaker due to a similar background or experience, that member should take the lead.

» ***Request a meeting.*** Contact information for most policymakers is readily available on the internet. In general, you will need to call their office and ask to speak with a scheduler (to meet with a legislator or policymaker directly) or the staff person who handles your particular issue. Unless you have a direct relationship with the policymaker, you likely will be meeting with that staff person. Staff members can be very influential and often have more in-depth knowledge about your issue than the actual policymaker, particularly legislators. Developing positive, trusting relationships with staff is critical.

Explain who you and your coalition are and that you are requesting a meeting to discuss a serious problem facing youth in your community. Tell them your topic, group size, and participants. For example:

“I’m the school district McKinney-Vento homeless liaison. Our district serves 4,000 homeless students each year. Our school board chair, one of our students, and I would like to share information about what our school district is doing to help homeless youth succeed in school, and where we need your help.”

Depending on your location in relation to the state capital, you may request a meeting at the policymaker’s local office or state office. In addition, consider inviting the policymaker and/or staff member to visit your program, school, or clinic. A site visit will provide a depth of understanding that meetings alone cannot convey. It may also provide a “photo op” or other politically beneficial opportunity for the policymaker. Invite potential allies to events and send information about your programs’ achievements and challenges.

» *Prepare for the meeting.* You and your coalition have done your research and prepared for this meeting. You have looked into the particular interests and priorities of the person with whom you are meeting, so you can frame the issue in the most sympathetic light possible and avoid aspects you know do not appeal to the policymaker. You know your issue backward and forward, can explain the background and the barrier, and can answer questions. In preparing for the meeting, focus on being concise and clear in your answers:

- How can you describe youth homelessness in your community in 2-3 sentences?
- What are 2-3 data points that are particularly illustrative of the issue and the barrier?
- What are your 2-3 most persuasive arguments in favor of your solution?
- What is one powerful, real-life story worth sharing in the meeting?
- What are the clearest, most concise responses to the concerns most likely to be raised in the meeting?

Arrive at the meeting with these answers prepared. In addition, you should bring a few, strategic handouts with basic information. Your informational brief about the issue should contain all the background and arguments for your proposal. However, it is likely to be far too long to be effective in a political meeting. In general, you should have 2-3 handouts of 1-2 pages each, in bullet or outline format, that explain the problem in its context and your basic proposed solution. Consider including:

- Data and anecdotes that powerfully illustrate the problem
- Evidence showing your solution would work and/or is already working on other jurisdictions
- Clear responses to common concerns
- A specific request—the action you want the policymaker to take
- A list of influential organizations that support your proposal
- Your contact information

Appendix C includes sample handouts on extra-curricular participation for homeless youth in California; reauthorization and funding for the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth program; HR 32, related to youths' eligibility for HUD services; and access to school records for unaccompanied youth in California.

» *Be concise and strategic at the meeting.* Start the meeting by asking if the policymaker/staff member is familiar with the topic and youth homelessness in the community. Usually, they will say no, or “a little,” and you should respond by providing a very brief, clear summary. If they say “yes,” that does not necessarily mean they have the knowledge necessary to understand your issue. Respond with “that’s great,” and find ways to include some of the basics as you speak. Keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Present broad statements, supported by specifics, for example:
 - “Youth homelessness is a larger issue in this community than most people know—our area code generates more calls to the National Runaway Switchboard than San Francisco’s does.”
 - “Homeless youth have higher rates of chronic health problems than other youth in poverty—in our clinic, we see 30 youth every week with ear infections, eye infections, asthma and upper respiratory problems, and we can’t treat any of them.”
- Provide real case studies and stories and bring youth and service providers to the meeting to share them firsthand.
- Encourage questions and connections with any member of the group.
- Don’t be intimidated: first, you are the expert on this issue and have a wealth of specific knowledge to offer; second, policymakers work for us, as officials our elected or appointed to represent us and our best interests.
- If you do not know an answer to a question or have data that is requested, that is fine. Just tell them you’ll get back to them with the information.
- Conclude with your “ask:” prioritize your requests and state the specific commitments you are seeking, for example:
 - “We really need your help to make sure homelessness does not prevent students from participating in school sports and other activities.”
 - “We’d like to ask for your support of Senate Bill 72 so that youth who are homeless and without a connection to their parents can get basic health care services.”

The goal of this meeting is to educate the policymaker and pique their interest in your issue. Their interest may be based on a personal commitment or experience or a political strategy. It is important to pay attention to verbal and body language cues that can show you where their focus is, which aspects of the issue appeal to them, and which aspects provoke concern or disapproval.

» *Follow up after the meeting.* If you promised to provide additional information, do so immediately. Send a short email or letter thanking them for their time and summarizing the meeting and the commitment you are seeking. Offer yourself as a resource for additional questions or concerns.

c. Identify your champion(s) and be their right hand.

Hopefully, your meetings with policymakers will generate one or two strong allies who will usher your proposal forward in their agency or legislature. You must be prepared to assume the role of that policymaker's resident expert, the person they will go to when they receive questions or opposition from others. They will need you to be an honest, professional, and responsive partner, quickly providing the information and evidence they need to achieve the goal. Together with the rest of your coalition, you must be prepared to collect and provide research, information, data, testimony, real stories, and additional support. At this stage it remains important to be flexible and prepared to adapt your argument and proposed solution to address the concerns of policymakers, both allies and opponents.

5. Develop and implement a traditional and a social media strategy to highlight the issue.

A media strategy is important to raise the profile of your issue, gain new supporters, and draw the attention of policymakers. While media attention in any part of the state is helpful for state-level policy changes, it is always most powerful for your issue to appear in the media in legislative districts of key policymakers. Before launching a media campaign, bring your coalition together to take stock of existing resources and relationships. Members or your coalition may have communications staff or ongoing relationships with reporters. Use those assets to position your issue in the press.

a. Traditional news media: TV, radio and print

Alaska: "I emailed updates with current, powerful data. For example, tonight, this many families are sleeping in cars, the temperature is expected to drop to 10, and this many children and youth are sleeping in those cars. I cc'ed the mayor, superintendent, housing authority, etc. I framed it as a community problem."

Some strategies to publicize your issue in the news media include:

- Often, the same reporter will cover an issue repeatedly over time, so if a local news station, radio station or newspaper has done a story on homelessness, foreclosures, child abuse, youth issues, poverty, or any topic related to your issue, contact that reporter. Thank them for their work publicizing the issue and offer them new story ideas.
- Make your issue relevant to reporters by linking it to current news. For example, if a new study is released on homelessness, child abuse, youth health problems, or another topic related to your issue, contact a reporter with that information and how it connects to your community.
- Offer interviews with members of your coalition who are experts on the issue, including academic scholars, direct service providers, and national experts.
- Provide real-life "human interest" stories to reporters. It is critical to respect young people's privacy and dignity, but your coalition can share stories while protecting youth's privacy. In addition, many youth are willing to share their

- stories and feel empowered by the opportunity to talk about their triumphs and challenges.
- Write op-eds and letters to the editor for local papers. Keep them short and powerful, with a compelling mix of data, anecdotes, and local connections.
 - Invite reporters to visit your program and report firsthand on your achievements and challenges.
 - Stay on-message. Before contacting a reporter or giving an interview, review your issue brief and the brief handouts you have prepared for policymakers. Throughout your conversations with the media, remember your goal is to gain support for your issue. Work into every interview your most persuasive arguments and the specific policy change you seek.
 - Keep in touch with reporters, so they do not forget you or your issue, but be sure only to contact them with story ideas that are compelling and timely. Be prepared to help connect them to data and interviewees. Building strong, honest relationships with reporters will ensure they are available to you when you need them most, at key junctures in your policy process.

b. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

Social media has become a critical part of any media strategy. Its immediacy and reach are unparalleled. Some tips for making the most effective use of social media include:

- Tips from the 2012 Social Media for Nonprofits Conferences
<http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/policysocial-context/20983-tips-from-the-2012-social-media-for-nonprofits-conferences.html>
- Social Media for Nonprofits Blog
<http://socialmedia4nonprofits.org/category/blog/>
- Tweeting for a Better World
www.bridgespan.org/Publications-and-Tools/Strategy-Development/Tweeting-For-a-Better-World.aspx
- Five Social Media Tips for Nonprofits
<http://handsonblog.org/2012/05/31/five-social-media-tips-for-nonprofits/>

c. Scheduling your own event

Once you have local reporters interested in your issue or program, putting together an event with local personalities can generate more media interest. Together with your coalition, your event may consist of an awards ceremony to celebrate noteworthy achievements of local providers or youth; recognition of a local policymaker who is supporting your issue; an awareness-raising event designed to shed light on the struggles of unaccompanied homeless youth; a visit to a program; or even just a coalition meeting at which an influential or unusual local, state or national personality is speaking.

To boost the success of your event and press coverage of it, your coalition should consider approaching marketing firms for pro bono help with publicity, press advisories (sent out before the event), press releases (shared post-event), and media relations.

Sample documents are available from one of NAEHCY's national advocacy partners, First Focus:

- Press advisory:
http://www.firstfocus.net/news/press_release/media-advisory-advocates-to-rally-for-immigration-reform-that-works-for-kids
- Press release:
http://www.firstfocus.net/news/press_release/youth-children%E2%80%99s-advocates-rally-for-immigration-reform-that-puts-kids-and-famili

d. Use your media strategy as a way to keep in contact with your champions.

Maryland: “We spent so much time talking with people about what we were really trying to accomplish, doing constant education and outreach. That is what saved this bill.”

Policy change can take time, and it is important to maintain contact with your champions even when your issue is not at the top of their agendas. Forwarding good articles, letters to the editor, TV or radio stories, newsletter stories highlighting achievements and challenges, and invitations to significant events with press coverage are all good ways to keep in touch. These relationships are vital; nurturing them must be an integral part of your overall strategy.

6. Create and take advantage of opportunities to highlight the issue before the legislature or other decision-making body.

A successful media strategy will bring your issue to the attention of the wider community, hopefully winning you new allies and positive attention. However, it is also important to have a strategy to keep your issue squarely in the sights of key policymakers. If you are working to change a state law, you will need to create opportunities to educate legislators and staffers beyond individual meetings. Legislative briefings and committee hearings can be an effective way to win supporters in the capitol, as well as among state agency administrators. Testifying before your city or county council or school board can influence those bodies.

Some specific ideas for highlighting your issue are discussed below.

a. Educational briefings for legislative staff and Committee hearings

Maryland: “Both in formal public hearings and in private meetings with delegates and staffers, we brought homeless youth and Lisa, our nurse practitioner. The presence of youth at the table, in the hearing rooms was critical! Their stories were extremely powerful for educating legislators who had no experience with homelessness or unaccompanied youth. Also, service providers lend so much credibility. Lisa sitting in her lab coat, with her stethoscope, talking about how she can’t help kids and the barrier it presented to their health and education—it was a very compelling combination.”

Legislative hearings are formal events, typically held by committees in preparation for a vote on a specific piece of legislation. As such, hearings usually are organized by the chair of the committee, with some involvement of the minority party. Legislative hearings allow legislators who are members of the committee to learn about the topic by listening to and reading the testimonies of expert witnesses, asking the witnesses questions, and engaging in debate and discussion with other members of the committee. Legislative hearings become part of the formal legislative record, and therefore offer unique opportunities to make the case for or against a particular bill or legislative provision.

You can assist your legislative allies by helping them to select witnesses, prepare oral and written testimonies, and be ready to respond to likely questions. You also may offer to draft questions for legislators to ask witnesses that will provide answers that support the legislation under consideration. If you are asked to help select witnesses, be sure to consider who is likely to be persuasive, not just by virtue of their position, but also their ability to give articulate, compelling testimony and to respond to questions under pressure. Youth witnesses, in particular, should be selected carefully and prepared thoroughly, so that they can share their unique experiences in a way that does not further traumatize them, and that fully empowers them to advocate on their own behalf and on behalf of other youth who suffer similar conditions.

It is important to follow the directions and advice of the organizers of legislative hearings, respecting time limits, page lengths, and political nuances. To be successful, legislative hearings require careful attention to strategic concerns. For example, you might need to visit numerous members of the committee in advance of the hearing, to ensure their offices understand the core issues, and that as many legislators as possible show up to attend the hearing. This may mean engaging constituents to contact their legislator and request that he or she attend the hearing, or, if the legislator cannot attend, that he or she submit questions for the record.

Because they are public events, hearings also can help influence legislation by educating members of the public about a bill and the problem it attempts to address. Be sure to work with the hearing organizers to encourage media coverage, including providing opportunities for experts to speak to the media. Take advantage of the event by sending out information about the hearing – before and after – to your coalition, asking them to watch and contact their members to support the legislation. Post information on websites and social media to help spread the word.

If the legislative body with which you are working does not have the time, ability, or interest to hold a hearing on the specific bill or proposal, look for opportunities to work your issue into a hearing on a broader but related topic. For example, if the committee will be holding a hearing on tuition issues for state colleges more generally, is it possible to include a youth witness who has experienced homelessness and struggled as a result? In this way, youth homelessness issues and proposed solutions can receive attention, even if they are not the sole focus of the hearing.

Legislative briefings can be distinguished from legislative hearings in that the primary audience for briefings is legislative staff, rather than lawmakers themselves. Legislative briefings therefore tend to be less formal and more general than legislative hearings. Briefings can be organized by legislative caucuses, the offices of individual legislators, or outside organizations (such as non-profits, advocacy organizations, service providers, or trade associations). While briefings do not typically become part of the legislative record, they provide important opportunities to educate legislative staff on the issue of youth homelessness generally, as well as specific barriers and legislative proposals. Briefings are also open to the public, so they can help bring other stakeholders, lobbyists, and media up to speed on the issues at hand.

If a legislative caucus or individual legislative office is sponsoring the briefing, you will need to follow their rules and respect their wishes about the basic setup, agenda, and materials for the briefing. If a briefing is sponsored by an outside organization or group of organizations, there is typically more discretion about who speaks, the order of speakers, and the kinds of materials that can be provided. Co-sponsoring a legislative briefing with another organization or a coalition of organizations can be a great way to establish and develop relationships with allies, especially allies who represent broader efforts around education, health, and other services.

Typically, briefings include a few speakers who are experts on the topic, as well as ample time for questions and answers with the audience. Materials are prepared in advance, so that attendees have information to take with them that summarizes the hearing and issues discussed. Even though legislators rarely attend an entire briefing, they frequently make appearances as speakers, usually at the introduction of the briefing.

Some tips for successful briefings include:

- Identify a legislator and/or a local celebrity to speak or moderate a panel at the briefing. A well-known name will legitimize the briefing and also draw attendees.
- Ensure that there are not too many speakers, and that selected speakers are articulate and stick to their allotted time. Legislative staff have busy schedules and will appreciate succinct and clear speakers.
- Allot enough time for a meaningful exchange between the audience and the speakers, so that as many questions as possible can be addressed.
- Create short, enticing flyers to send out to legislative offices to invite them to attend the event; send out flyers at least two weeks in advance, as well as a few days before the event.
- If you or a partner organization has the technology and ability, create an on-line RSVP, so that you can estimate attendance.
- If rules and budget allow, consider offering snacks and drinks. Advertise that there will be refreshments. Legislative staff crave goodies during the work day, just like everyone else!

- Make a sign-in sheet, so that you can gather the names and email addresses of staff and others who attend the event. Send a follow-up thank you and materials the day after the briefing.

b. Advocacy days at the capitol

Advocacy or “lobby” days provide an opportunity for many people to educate legislative offices on a single day or multiple days, in a coordinated fashion. Advocacy days can be held as their own event, with a call to action to convene in the state capitol on a certain day, or in conjunction with another event that brings people to the state capitol — for example, state conferences. The advantage of organizing an advocacy day during a state conference is that participants have already made plans to be in town, including people who otherwise might not be inclined to travel and make visits to legislative offices.

While advocacy days can create a lot of work for organizers, they offer unparalleled chances for face-to-face interaction between people all over the state and their legislators. Tips for a successful advocacy day include:

- Offer to set up appointments for participants with their legislators. Even a small amount of logistical assistance makes it easier for participants to say yes to your invitation and increases participation rates.
- Offer to have an expert accompany participants on the meeting. Many people are intimidated by the legislative process or are afraid their supervisors will not approve of their involvement in advocacy. If you or your coalition can offer at least one person who is more experienced in legislative visits to accompany participants, it may set people at ease and make them more likely to attend.
- Be strategic when scheduling meetings; prioritize visits with members who serve on the committees that have jurisdiction over your youth proposal, and make special efforts to reach out to constituents from key legislators’ districts.
- Include youth in as many visits as possible, so that a youth perspective is included in the presentation of issues.
- Create brief, succinct materials to leave behind, as well as sample “talking points” to help participants cover the key issues in the meeting.
- If the state conference has a pre-existing lobby day, ask them if your youth homelessness proposal can be incorporated into their talking points and lobby materials.
- Ask participants to report back to you on the outcomes of the meetings, including questions that were asked that may require some follow up, and any commitments to support the legislation.

c. Letter-writing campaigns

Letter-writing campaigns can be an important advocacy tool as legislation develops. Letters can ask legislators to co-sponsor a bill or to vote in favor of a bill. Letters can ask a governor, mayor, city/county council member, school board member or other elected official to support a particular position, law, or policy. Regardless of the recipient, you can model your letters after the handouts you prepared for your policy

meetings, keeping them brief, specific, and compelling. Make the letters personal by sharing your experiences with the issue, data specific to your school, program or community, and real-life stories. Request the favor of a response.

The best way to send your letter is by fax; regular mail is second, and emails are least effective. However you send the letter, be sure to include your mailing address to establish that you are a constituent. Both quantity and quality matter: your entire coalition should launch the campaign together, so policymakers receive many letters in a short period of time. Circulate the campaign request widely to as many allies and stakeholders as possible, and gently nudge and remind people to follow through. Letters from diverse stakeholders are especially effective—business owners, faith community leaders, judges and lawyers, academics, and any partners beyond “the usual suspects” can be particularly powerful.

Appendix D contains sample letters asking legislators to support several pieces of legislation in California and Texas.

d. Phone-call campaigns

Phone-call campaigns are useful right before key votes or decisions. As explained earlier, contact information for policymakers should be available on-line. Phone calls should be brief and specific:

“Hello, I am a nurse at Central Clinic in Central City. I live and work in Senator Smith’s district. I would like the senator to vote yes on SB 72 to allow unaccompanied homeless youth to consent for medical and dental care.”

As with letters, numbers matter. Coordinate the phone-call campaign with your entire coalition to ensure a critical mass of calls on your side of the issue.

7. Follow through and stick with the process, even if takes multiple years.

Maryland: “The issue came to our attention 2010, we got the first bill introduced in 2011, and it passed in 2012. The first year we pursued it, it failed. It takes a while to educate people about the unique challenges of homeless populations in general, and unaccompanied homeless youth in particular. Very rarely does a law pass on the first go-around. You have to float it, mitigate concerns, educate, provide data, provide some more data, and stick with it.

“We were holding our breath every step of the way. When you work through the legislative process, there are about 100 different decision points where your bill can be killed. It can be terribly nerve-wracking. But in that first year, we made some new friends in Annapolis who took an interest in this, and they had more political power and prowess to help usher it through the second time.”

Alaska: “From start to finish, it took 8 years from that first confusing meeting in 1999 until the AHFC issued its policy. After 8 years of relentless data, showing a growing, cumulative view, the same staff at the same housing agency surrendered.

“You start with the end in mind, build relationships, and keep your eye on the prize. I would say the keys to victory are patience, perspective, patience, persistence, patience, relentlessness, patience, tough skin, patience. And don’t mind being a ‘sharp stick in the eye,’ which is how the housing agency director characterized me.”

State legislatures may meet only once every two years; administrative agencies can move at a snail’s pace when changing their policies and practices. Policy advocacy requires an endless supply of patience, tenacity, and optimism. You may not be successful the first attempt, or the first several attempts. Learn from failures, adjust to opposition, and stay focused on your goal and the youth it will help. Over time, keep coalition members informed of your progress with regular updates, newsletters, and other strategies outlined in Step 3. Stay in contact with key allies using the strategies outlined in Steps 4 and 5.

If a policymaker takes an action to support the issue, whether a vote, a letter, or a bill sponsorship, thank them. Even if you do not ultimately win the day, expressing your gratitude and letting them know your plans to keep fighting will help ensure you can count on their vote and support the next time around. If their support led to specific benefits for youth, share those details with as much specificity as possible. Where appropriate, you can give awards or other special recognition.

CONCLUSION

At NAEHCY we have witnessed how that policy advocacy makes a significant difference for youth on a large scale. If you have questions or need support in your efforts, contact us. We will be glad to help.

In closing, we offer this inspiration. Following passage of the Maryland law allowing unaccompanied homeless youth to consent for medical and dental care, Lisa Stambolis was honored as a White House Champion of Change in 2012. As part of her recognition, she was invited to post to the White House blog. We close with an excerpt from her entry (available in full at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/07/12/advocating-health-care-needs-homeless-youth>).

“As a clinician, I had experienced the barriers to providing care to homeless youth. In Maryland, minors were not allowed to consent to medical treatment. This was a major barrier for homeless youth in their ability to access health care, and as an advocate I knew we had to change the law. Under the direction of our Health Policy team at HCH we spearheaded the movement to do just this. I had the opportunity to testify side-by-side with many of the homeless youth I serve. We spent many days telling our compelling stories to the General Assembly in hopes they would pass our bill. It was often frustrating and confusing, and it was a world they and I knew little about. But we persevered, and this past May the Governor of Maryland, Martin O’Malley, signed into law the youth consent bill that will now allow unaccompanied youth (youth without a parent or legal guardian) in Maryland the right to consent to medical treatment.”

We hope this guide will help other health care providers, youth, educators and advocates just like Lisa to create state and local laws and policies to support unaccompanied homeless youth under 18.

APPENDICES

- A:** Needs assessment surveys for youth and adults
- B:** Sample issue briefs from campaigns for legislative action and rule changes
- C:** Sample handouts for advocacy meetings
- D:** Sample letters asking legislators to support legislation