



National Center for Homeless
Education (NCHE)
<https://nche.ed.gov>

Supporting LGBTQI+ Students Experiencing Homelessness

Spotlight on ARP-HCY Funding for Implementation

This National Center for Homeless Education brief:

- illustrates the critical need to provide wraparound supports for LGBTQI+¹ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness;
- spotlights how one local educational agency (LEA) is using American Rescue Plan Act-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funding to support LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness; and
- explores promising practices for expanding LEA capacity to meet the needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Introduction

On March 11, 2021, President Biden signed into law the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP), which included an \$800 million reservation within the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund to address the specific and urgent needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. In a [Dear Colleague Letter](#) issued on April 23, 2021, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona emphasized that services provided under the ARP-HCY program should specifically include children and youth experiencing homelessness who are members of historically underserved populations, including LGBTQI+ youth.

LGBTQI+ youth are more likely than their peers to experience homelessness (Morton, Dworsky & Samuels, 2017); however, there are challenges to estimating the number of LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness, partly because States generally do not collect sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) data for K-12 students. According to one national survey, 28% of LGBTQI+ youth experience homelessness or housing instability (DeChants, Green, Price & Davis, 2021), due in part to family conflict related to their sexual orientation or gender identity (True Colors United, 2021). Native/Indigenous, Black,

¹ LGBTQI+ refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (one's sexual or gender identity), intersex, plus other gender identities and sexual orientations not specifically covered by the other five letters. There are other commonly used variations of the acronym to refer to sexual orientation or gender identity.

Hispanic, and multiracial LGBTQI+ youth are at greatest risk of experiencing homelessness (DeChants, Green, Price & Davis, 2021).

Schools can serve an important role in supporting the basic needs of youth experiencing homelessness. ARP-HCY funds present a unique opportunity to expand services to better meet the specific needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness by connecting these youth to service agencies that are willing and equipped to meet their needs. Schools can be a safe place to connect LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness with wraparound services in the community, such as shelters, behavioral health resources, clothing, technology access, food pantries, and laundry and kitchen facilities. By providing these connections, schools can help improve students' educational, physical, and psychological well-being.

This brief spotlights how one LEA—Bergen County Special Services (BCSS) School District in New Jersey²—uses its ARP-HCY subgrant funds to support LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In addition to spotlighting early implementation outcomes from BCSS' efforts to serve LGBTQI+ students experiencing homelessness, this brief also highlights research-driven promising practices and other resources that may help support this student population.

Spotlight: Bergen County Special Services School District and the Bergen County LGBTQI+ Alliance

In June 2022, BCSS provided \$40,000 of ARP-HCY funds³ in the form of a grant award to the [Bergen County LGBTQI+ Alliance](#) (the Alliance), which launched a formal partnership to better meet the needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The Alliance is a non-profit in Bergen County, a suburban county in northeast New Jersey, that offers programming for all ages and connects people to community-based organizations that can provide critical resources like food, transportation, and clothing.

Bergen County Special Services School District

BCSS provides special education and non-special education services to 78 LEAs across Bergen County and five other counties in northern New Jersey, together referred to as New Jersey's Region I.

BCSS is the lead agency overseeing the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth grant implementation for New Jersey's Region I. In the 2020-21 school year, Region I had 325,604 enrolled students, of which 1,466 had been identified as experiencing homelessness. In the same year, Bergen County had 134,271 enrolled students, of which 472 had been identified as experiencing homelessness.⁴ Important to note, these numbers are likely an undercount; identifying students experiencing homelessness is challenging due to the high mobility of this population. The prevalence of undercounts is

² The inclusion of non-Federal resources in this document is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, initiatives, or products or services offered. Any opinions expressed in these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education or the Federal government. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials.

³ BCSS received an American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) subgrant totaling \$1,071,763 from the New Jersey Department of Education.

⁴ National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). (2022). Federal Data Summary School Years 2018-19 to 2020-21. University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC. <https://nche.ed.gov/data-and-stats/>.

also related to the varying federal definitions of homelessness, stigma, fear, and lack of knowledge of the rights and services provided under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act⁵ (United States Government Accountability Office, 2014).

The Partnership

The partnership between BCSS and the Alliance began when the Alliance recognized it could extend its reach by partnering with local LEAs and reached out to BCSS. BCSS saw this as an opportunity to partner with a community-based organization to better serve its students at risk of or experiencing homelessness using ARP-HCY funds. Through the partnership, BCSS and the Alliance utilized already established community relationships and LEA access to collaborate in offering outreach and wraparound services to LGBTQI+ students. By connecting LGBTQI+ students at risk of or experiencing homelessness to community organizations including local shelters, hospitals, mental health providers, child welfare agencies, and the police, the partnership provides students with access to housing supports, mental and physical health services, clothing, food, and other critical resources.

In its first year—June 2022 to June 2023—the partnership served LGBTQI+ students at risk of or experiencing homelessness in five LEAs in Bergen County and one LEA in Passaic County. Moving forward, BCSS hopes to expand its reach to additional LEAs in Passaic County as well as the remaining four counties in Region I.

Using ARP-HCY Funds and Sustainability

BCSS leveraged ARP-HCY funds to support its partnership with the Alliance. Specifically, BCSS used ARP-HCY funds to support the Alliance’s activities for LGBTQI+ students at risk of or experiencing homelessness that includes engagement and facilitation with 29 Gender & Sexuality Alliances⁶ (GSAs), enrichment and skill-building programs, mentorship opportunities, a gardening program, and a warm line, which LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness can call to ask questions and obtain information on community resources. The Alliance’s programming is available for LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness throughout the academic year and during the summer.

LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness often must navigate multiple systems—including education, housing, child welfare, and labor—to meet their basic needs. To support LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness with navigating these systems, BCSS also utilized additional ARP-HCY funds to support a systems navigator⁷ position to identify students, refer them to the Alliance and other wraparound services, and disseminate information about the Alliance’s activities and resources to local liaisons and LGBTQI+ students at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

In addition to the ARP-HCY funds, the partners utilized other external sources, including grants from philanthropic and community organizations, to fund summer programming specific to LGBTQI+ youth at

⁵ For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act, view the following NCHE web page: <https://nche.ed.gov/legislation/mckinney-vento/>.

⁶ GSAs are student-led organizations within LEAs that provide safe and supportive environments for students who identify as LGBTQI+.

⁷ For more information on systems navigators, view the NCHE brief *Leveraging Systems Navigators to Support Students Experiencing Homelessness* at <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Systems-Navigators-to-Support-HCY.pdf>.

risk of or experiencing homelessness. The partnership also requested resources from community partnerships, such as physical gathering spaces and volunteer guest speakers for programming.

Outreach and Engagement

It can be challenging to conduct outreach to LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness due to their high mobility and reluctance to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Even so, BCSS and the Alliance utilize key outreach strategies to identify and serve this population. First, they identify LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness by sharing information about resources and services through their existing avenues of student engagement and communication, while also conducting outreach at places LGBTQI+ youth frequent such as clothing closets, social media, GSAs, and local organizations, and through an email listserv. Second, the Alliance and the systems navigator build relationships with the McKinney-Vento Act local liaisons in Bergen and Passaic counties, who are already knowledgeable about serving students experiencing homelessness and may have already established relationships with the students. Finally, BCSS and the Alliance rely on LEA and school staff, including LEA and school leaders, social workers, administrators, parents, and others within LEAs and schools, to refer students to the systems navigator. The systems navigator conducts an intake interview and, based on how the referred student responds to specific questions on the intake form, has an open conversation with the student to collect additional, more specific information about their needs before making a referral to the Alliance via a memorandum of understanding.

The Alliance provides LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness with referrals for wraparound supports to community-based organizations that are youth-driven and based on their needs. Supporting the youth in this process and building relationships with community-based organizations is key to keeping the youth from disengaging.

The Alliance also hosts a Young Scholars program twice a week in welcoming spaces to encourage group activities. The program covers a range of topics such as accessing resources, empowerment, sex education, bullying, and other timely and relevant topics. They offer cooking classes, opportunities to care for small animals, and the warm line. BCSS and the Alliance invite LGBTQI+ youth to be partners in the work by having them participate in event planning and facilitation. In addition, the Alliance connects LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness to mentors with similar lived experiences and supports students in developing and pursuing life goals. Programming is open to everyone including families, who can come together in safe and affirming spaces to foster a sense of community and support.

Emerging Successes and Challenges

Prior to June 2022, when the partnership began, BSCC reported there was limited programming for LGBTQI+ students at risk of or experiencing homelessness across Region I. Utilizing ARP-HCY funds allowed the Alliance to expand its programming to LGBTQI+ students through the GSAs and referrals from the systems navigator and homeless liaisons. By partnering with the Alliance, BCSS and community organizations are better able to meet the specific needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Bergen and Passaic counties. Specifically, the Alliance is improving referral processes to community-based organizations for LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness for wraparound services such as housing, healthcare, education, and workforce. The Alliance helps equip

community-based organizations to serve LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness through relationship building and providing education on the unique needs of the LGBTQI+ population. In doing so, the Alliance increases successful referrals and, subsequently, the likelihood that LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness will follow through with the services being provided.

Identification and data collection to support LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness remains challenging because LGBTQI+ youth are not specifically identified in any student counts. Despite these challenges, the partnership between BCSS and the Alliance has experienced success in outreach to this population. Most significantly, the partnership's multipronged approach to outreach in collaboration with the systems navigator has improved identification of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness and referrals to supportive services. From June 2022 to June 2023, BCSS and the Alliance had more than 700 engagements with LGBTQI+ students at risk of or experiencing homelessness, a number that continues to grow as more LGBTQI+ students learn about the Alliance's programming. The partners are also developing an evaluation plan to establish improvement goals to measure their impact. The partnership between BCSS and the Alliance is expanding, and both parties are enthusiastic about expanding to other LEAs in Region I to benefit more students.

Conclusions and Resources

The partnership between BCSS and the Alliance demonstrates important lessons for other LEAs to meet the needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

- **LEAs and their partners should invest time and resources** into building relationships and trust with LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- **LEAs should partner with LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness** (Shelton et al., 2017; Kline, 2018). LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness have the lived experience and expertise to help LEAs understand the needs of LGBTQI+ students and how they can be best served.
- **LEAs should build effective relationships with community organizations and leverage interagency collaboration** to provide tailored wraparound services focused on education, acceptance, and meeting the unique needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness (Tierney & Ward, 2017). Through interagency communication, LEAs can holistically and systematically meet the needs of LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, allowing this population to remain in their communities.
- **LEAs should leverage ARP-HCY funds** to provide wraparound services to LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness (NCHE, 2022; American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth).
- **LEAs should strengthen data systems** to improve identification counts and track outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness (Cunningham, Pergamit, Astone & Luna, 2014).

As educators seek to increase their support for LGBTQ+ youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, there are many resources beyond this brief to support this work, including those accessible at the [LGBTQ Youth Experiencing Homelessness](#) webpage, from [True Colors United](#), and the [3/40 Blue Print](#) Project.

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