



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).


### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico  
Program Title: Clothing Closet and Food Pantry Help Students Experiencing Homelessness  
Program Category: Health and Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Victoria Davis  
Title: Public Relations Specialist  
Department: Public Relations  
Telephone: 804-501-4933 Website: www.henrico.us  
Email: dav127@henrico.us

### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Brandon Hinton  
Title: Deputy County Manager for Administration  
Signature: 

### **Program Overview**

Just because students experiencing homelessness have less doesn't mean they deserve less. In fact, due to the trauma surrounding homelessness, students who are homeless actually need more — especially when it comes to making sure they are comfortable and confident enough to attend school. Using both grant funding and community donations, Henrico County Public Schools' McKinney-Vento team created a food pantry for emergency food support and a clothing closet filled with new clothing and shoes for students.

### **Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Henrico County Public Schools' (HCPS) McKinney-Vento team holds the legal obligation to ensure that students in Henrico County, Virginia, are either immediately enrolled or allowed to remain enrolled, whatever their living situation. We ensure that students are allowed to remain enrolled in their HCPS school no matter where they lay their heads at night and provide transportation support to get students to and from school. In essence, McKinney-Vento programs strive to level the playing field so that students who are experiencing homelessness have the same ability to succeed as their peers. However, to ensure that students who are homeless can make the most out of their education, it takes more than just allowing students to enroll or providing transportation. Homelessness brings a wide variety of obstacles that make accessing and participating in education challenging at best. When these obstacles are not addressed, students who are homeless are chronically absent from school at a rate at least twice that of the overall student population. Be it highly mobile living conditions, a lack of transportation, lack of sleep, lack of food, lack of hygiene, or fear of bullying due to appearance — the trauma associated with homelessness affects students' emotional health, physical health and preparedness for school. This becomes a cycle as chronic absences increase the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school. Not completing high school is the greatest risk factor for young adult homelessness.

### **How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria**

Communities nationwide face the challenge of student homelessness. While distributing bags of food and clothes is a critical part of addressing issues of student homelessness, this project is about shifting the cultural mindset of both the students and families we serve — and those with whom we partner. When educating people about the projects, we work to dispel the myth that

“something is better than nothing” for our students. Traditionally, accepting donations for a food pantry means an overabundance of canned corn, potted meats or week-old produce. When opening a clothing closet for families in need, we typically see a massive influx of overworn, out-of-style, and, yes, even soiled items.

We are working to educate donors and partners about how to provide meaningful contributions to make marked differences. For food, donors need to take into account where families might be staying and what access they may have for food preparation. Some families live in hotels and don't have access to a refrigerator to keep food cool, or a can opener to open canned vegetables. Regarding clothing, some of our students have never owned a new pair of shoes or a new outfit. They've only ever had access to things handed down from others. We want to ensure our community partners understand that helping our students and families isn't about unloading unwanted items, but we want to shift the cultural mindset. With the support we have from local churches, businesses and other community partners, we believe our goal of shifting local perceptions is taking root. We also want our students and families to understand that they deserve more. We do not want to simply give families items they use; we want to build confidence, self-worth and provide hope.

### **How Program Was Carried Out**

When students are too hungry in the evening to be able to concentrate, they can't complete their homework. If they don't complete their work, they are reluctant to attend school for fear of being shamed by their teachers. If they are too hungry at night to sleep, they won't have the energy to get up in the morning for school. If they only have one or two outfits that get washed once every couple of weeks, that don't fit properly, are worn out or are sorely out-of-style compared to their peers, they don't want to go school and risk ridicule for how they smell or look. And while it may be easy for adults to think these students should simply ignore the mean words and judgmental stares, it is not that easy for a kid just trying to survive, and desperately seeking a sense of normality and security. Just because students who are homeless have less doesn't mean they deserve less. In actuality, because they have so much stacked against them, they need more.

Like many federally mandated programs, McKinney-Vento funding does not always match the need, and funds that are appropriated are tightly restricted. Many of the things that we know promote school attendance and provide our students with an equitable shot at success are not

items allowed to be purchased with federal funds. Because of this, the HCPS McKinney-Vento team decided to seek other avenues of funding and support to build a clothing closet and food pantry dedicated specifically to serving students found eligible under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

While students under the McKinney-Vento act receive free breakfast and lunch at school each day, most people need more than two meals a day to prosper. The mission of the food pantry is to provide a bag of groceries that can help nourish a family of four for a couple of days until they can get connected to a community resource for more permanent food security. The groceries in the bag can be prepared and consumed no matter the living situation in which a family finds themselves. In addition to stocked bags of groceries, we also work to keep grocery gift cards on hand so that students with special dietary needs or restrictions (e.g., those with diabetes or food allergies) can also benefit from this added food support.

The clothing closet's mission is to provide clothing that helps give students the dignity they deserve and makes them comfortable, confident, ready and willing to attend school. Bags contain a new pair of shoes, three new shirts, two new pairs of pants, packages of undergarments, socks and fully stocked hygiene kits. All items are new and packed in a durable duffle bag to ensure students' privacy and provide them with something to carry their belongings in when moving from place to place. Why do the materials need to be new? Because we are working to create a paradigm shift — both in the psyche of our community partners and students. We have found that donations received from community partners were for the most part out of style and of poor quality. While perhaps not accurate, the items appeared to convey a message of “something is better than nothing.” When we presented these donated items to students, it promoted a mindset of “I'm only worth the scraps.” Instead of encouraging them to attend school, it further damaged their sense of self-worth and belonging, and did nothing to combat chronic absenteeism.

To get the projects started, we used some funding from the federal American Rescue Plan Act; however, because that funding expires in September 2024, we knew we needed to work quickly to establish community partners. We met with local churches, businesses and other community partners to discuss the need. We received cash donations from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Corinth United Methodist Church to purchase items needed to get the clothing closet and food pantry up and running. From these donations, we were able to purchase

clothes, shoes, garment racks, storage shelves, containers and a refrigerator. Another community partner, HOPE Church, hosted a gift card drive within their congregation. We were able to use those gift cards to purchase a substantial amount of clothing. One community member hosted food drives with her women's group to stock the shelves of the food pantry. As a service project, another local congregation committed to purchasing food to fill and package 300 grocery bags for the pantry.

Looking to build funding for the future, we hosted a Giving Tuesday Event on Nov. 29, 2022. We welcomed school division leadership and community partners to educate them about the prevalence of homelessness and our work supporting students who experience it. We invited our guests to tour the clothing closet and food pantry so that past donors could see how their gifts had been used and to encourage possible donors to support our mission. We shared personal testimonies and stories of students and families — changing names to protect the privacy of our students — so that partners and county leadership could see a true picture of the daily needs of the students we serve. Richmond TV station WWBT NBC-12 provided local coverage of the Giving Tuesday event. We met with multiple churches, local businesses and good Samaritans who want to help realize our vision of providing students the resources they need to succeed in school. As we forge new partnerships, we are encouraging donors to give directly to the HCPS Homeless Student Services Fund through the Henrico Education Foundation. In response to the event, we have seen an influx of donations and pledges of support from The Life Church RVA, Corinth United Methodist Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and other donors who wish to remain anonymous.

Homelessness is real — even in a county with plenty of affluence. And with continued fallout from the pandemic, it's getting more real every day. Just 12 weeks into the 2022-23 school year, we have already screened more than 800 students for eligibility under the McKinney-Vento Act. If this pace continues, we are on course to serve between 1,100 and 1,200 students this school year. This is a dramatic increase from 2021-22. All funds to support the McKinney-Vento team's clothing closet and food pantry have come directly from federal American Rescue Plan funding and donations from community partners.

### **Financing and Staffing**

A grocery bag filled with nonperishables to serve a family of four costs about \$45 per bag. We estimate needing to provide between 300 and 500 bags per school year for a total yearly cost range of \$13,500 to \$22,500.

The cost of clothing and shoes for a student is about \$300. We anticipate providing clothing to around 500 students per school year for a total yearly cost of \$150,000. All funds are from American Rescue Plan funding and contributions of community partners.

### **Program Results**

So far during the 2022-2023 school year, 166 students have been provided clothing and shoes. As mentioned, students who are homeless typically experience chronic absenteeism at twice the rate of their peers who have stable housing situations. However, as of January 2023, students eligible under McKinney-Vento in HCPS were experiencing chronic absenteeism at a rate relatively equal to that of their peers with stable housing. While this is a snapshot of time and trends may change, we are celebrating this break from the usual metric.

### **Brief Summary**

Homelessness can be a major deterrent to a student's well-being and education, but the initiatives carried out by the HCPS McKinney-Vento team go above and beyond to ensure that all students have not only access to education, but access to success. This begins with the grant funding that's able to provide the basic transportation and food a student needs, but the school division's connection to the community is able to provide so much more for students experiencing homelessness. Donations from local businesses, organizations and churches helped build up a stockpile of food and clothing that these students require as much as anything, and the Giving Tuesday Event brought in even more resources that go directly to the students in need. Thanks to the efforts of the McKinney-Vento team, 166 students in the past year have been provided critical resources, and absenteeism rates have been cut down considerably, proving the influx of resources has been able to directly lift up a group of deserving students within Henrico County Public Schools.

## Clothing Closet and Food Pantry Help Students Experiencing Homelessness Supplemental Material

Quotes from Students and Families upon receiving assistance from the HCPS McKinney-Vento Food Pantry and Clothing Closet:



*"Is all this really for me? This is awesome! I can't believe that someone really wanted me to have all this. Thank you for thinking of me!"*

*"Would you mind if I give you a hug? This means so much. I don't know where me and my children would be without this support."*

*"What do you mean these are my shoes? For real? I can have these? I can keep these? Thanks!"*