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Students who are highly mobile typically change schools frequently and are in danger of learning loss (Aratani, 2009). There are innumerable issues that confront homeless families. The loss of housing for these families affects all aspects of a child's education. Significant populations of homeless children who attend school have experienced or will experience some type of trauma that may affect cognition, behavior, and relationships (Van Der Kolk, 2014). The McKinney-Vento Act is the federal policy mandated in 1986 and reauthorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. The Act designates services provided to children and youth experiencing homelessness to ensure educational access. An important facet of this legislation was the identification of a McKinney-Vento Liaison (MVL) in each school district to develop, review, and revise policies that are a barrier to a student's educational access. The MVL is designated to facilitate strategies for families experiencing homelessness and has an extensive list of responsibilities. Although there is significant research on homelessness and the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of the McKinney-Vento Legislation, there has been less research on the lived experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons and the challenges of the position.

My interest in this study was to learn more about and share the experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons regarding the important role they play in supporting unhoused children and youth. The McKinney-Vento Liaison can be a lifeline for families navigating the school system during a period when school may be the only stable part of their existence. Through this interview-based qualitative study, I sought to listen to MVLs and their accounts of

their lived experiences and perceptions, and of turning legislative policy into practice. The question motivating my study was: *What are the experiences and perceptions of McKinney-Vento Liaisons regarding their work with homeless youth and families?* To answer this question, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 7 liaisons who worked in different regions in North Carolina.

I found in my study that McKinney-Vento Liaisons' multiplicity of roles impacts their ability to fully engage families. I also discovered that the participants did not receive training prior to assuming the position, though they received assistance and professional development from the State Coordinator's Office once they were in the role. In addition, my participants reported that they are ultimately responsible for a district's students who are experiencing homelessness, but they must develop partnerships and collaborations to assist homeless families effectively. Another significant finding was that they lacked fiscal resources specifically dedicated to McKinney-Vento students. I conclude my dissertation by offering recommendations for practice, such as the development of a tiered operating practice protocol that MVLs might use to quickly assess families' needs.

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES, PRACTICES, AND  
PERCEPTIONS OF MCKINNEY-VENTO LIAISONS  
IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

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Approved by

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Dr. Craig Peck  
Committee Chair

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## DEDICATION

*To my great-grandmother, Georgia Rollins Moffitt Davis, born in 1886, who encouraged a little girl to love learning and reach for the stars! Even though you did not receive a formal education, you instilled in me the importance of learning. All those Summer days spent eating chocolate pudding and reading in the backyard continue to pay off.*

*Your love surrounded me, has kept me, and sustains me to this day. I know you are looking down and smiling.*

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Poet Munia Khan states, “Home was never a dream for homeless people as they used to have their homes. Living in a home was their reality. Now we need to help them to find the lost reality again.” It is important to note that families are not “homeless,” but are experiencing homelessness due to economic and societal factors that are outside of their control. In many instances, society impugns the families as not being “enough”—smart enough, tough enough, or able enough to pull themselves up by their bootstraps when faced with adversity.

Malik (pseudonym) was one example of homelessness that I recall from my career, which included significant experience as a McKinney-Vento Liaison. Malik was an 8-year-old boy with a mother, father, and three siblings. Malik loved school and was extremely sad when he is unable to attend. Each night, Malik and his family drove to the nearest truck stop to sleep in their car, in an environment where they felt safe and protected. Each morning, Malik’s mother transported the children into the truck stop bathroom and prepared them for school. Both parents dropped off all four siblings at different schools and then proceeded to work. In the afternoon, they did it all over again. Malik’s father once owned his own business and, due to an accident and inadequate health insurance, the family lost the only home they had ever known. Most of the children’s teachers were not aware of this family’s struggles, although they commented on the changes in Malik’s behavior in the classroom.

Sherri’s (pseudonym) family had lived a middle-class lifestyle. Sherri’s dad was an accountant, and her mother had been a stay-at-home mom. Due to an impending divorce, Sherri’s dad had moved out of their home and her mom had not been able to find employment to sustain the mortgage payments. The family had transitioned to the local homeless shelter. This has been a drastic change for Sherri’s family. All the activities Sherri enjoyed, including dance

lessons, overnight sleepovers with her friends, and visits to entertainment venues, had ceased. Sherri was embarrassed to share what has happened with her friends. She was a junior in high school and, not sure where she, her mom, and her brother will reside in the upcoming months. Sherri's social-emotional state was fragile. Once an honor student, her grades were showing a steady decline.

Finally, there was Mariela (pseudonym). Mariela was an undocumented, homeless, unaccompanied minor. Her mother died, and her father was not able to care for her. Mariela was sent to live with relatives in America. Her relatives were renting a room with others and did not have a lease in their name. Mariela's relatives could be evicted at any time as they have no legal standing in the home. Although Mariela had a place to stay, it was "not fixed, regular, or adequate," which is the definition of homelessness as characterized by the McKinney-Vento Act.

These are the stories of students experiencing homelessness, continually in a state of flux, change, and uncertainty. A quote by homeless advocate Dr. Kathleen Edwards sums up the life of these children: "when you are homeless life is a crisis" (K. Edwards, personal communication, July 2022). However, children who are experiencing homelessness do have an advocate in the school setting. The McKinney-Vento Liaison is the sole professional in each district designated by law to advocate for children in these special circumstances.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987; 2015) is the federal policy directing school practice regarding student homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act originally consisted of fifteen programs that provided a wide-ranging set of services including the Emergency Food and Shelter program, Adult Education for the Homeless, Community Housing Programming, and the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program. Section 725 of the McKinney Vento Act designates services related to homeless children and youth as required by

the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA). The most important facet of this bill is the mandated identification of a McKinney-Vento Liaison (MVL) in each school district. The MVL is required to facilitate strategies for families experiencing homelessness and is the school district's leader in this domain. My interest in this study is to learn more about and share the experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons regarding the important role they play in supporting homeless youth.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There are innumerable issues that confront homeless families. Homelessness is closely connected to race and income status. Residential instability is common among low-income families; these families move more often than higher-income families (Coulton et al., 2009). The loss of housing affects all aspects of family life. Significant populations of homeless children who attend school have experienced or will experience some type of trauma that may affect cognition, behavior, and relationships (Van Der Kolk, 2014). Not surprisingly, students do not want to share their homeless situation with school staff due to the stigma, and school staff does not always understand the conditions under which students reside. Parents and caregivers are afraid to share this information as they believe social service agencies will become involved and remove their children from them, which would further exacerbate their situation.

Homelessness is a factor that increases social-emotional stressors for students in school. Students experiencing homelessness are at an elevated risk for oppositional outcomes including physical and mental health problems, violence, early pregnancy, an increased school dropout rate, substance use, and even premature death. Children with disabilities, English Language Learners, migrants, unaccompanied youth have a higher incidence. Children of color are also notable populations, particularly African Americans in urban areas and Native Americans in



rural areas tend to disproportionately experience homelessness (Ingram et al., 2017). Students who are highly mobile typically change schools frequently and are in danger of significant learning loss. Each move creates barriers to attendance, such as the inability to enroll or lack of transportation, which often leads to chronic absenteeism (Aratani, 2009). When students experiencing homelessness are not in school, they confront academic and social-emotional challenges resulting from frequent interruptions of their educational experience.

Despite the various, complex circumstances that homeless youth and their families encounter, McKinney-Vento Liaisons are the sole personnel in school districts tasked with serving them. Their duties as outlined in the McKinney-Vento Act (1987; 2015) are as follows:

- i. Homeless children and youths are identified by school personnel through outreach and coordination with other entities and agencies;
- ii. Homeless children and youth are enrolled, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed, in school;
- iii. Homeless families, children, and youth receive educational services for which they are eligible, including Head Start, early intervention, and other preschool programs administered by the Local Education Agency (LEA);
- iv. Homeless families, children, and youth receive referrals to health, dental, mental health, housing, substance abuse, and other appropriate services;
- v. Parents or guardians are informed of the educational and related opportunities available to their children and are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate;

- vi. Public notice of homeless students' rights is disseminated in locations frequented by parents, guardians and unaccompanied youth, including schools, shelters, libraries and soup kitchens in an understandable manner and form;
- vii. Enrollment disputes are mediated;
- viii. Parents, guardians, and unaccompanied youth are informed of and assisted in accessing transportation services, including transportation to the school of origin;
- ix. School personnel providing McKinney-Vento services receive professional development and other support; and
- x. Unaccompanied youth are enrolled in school, have opportunities to meet the same challenging academic standards as other children and youth, including through receiving partial credits and are informed of their status as independent students for the FAFSA and receive verification of that status. (McKinney-Vento Act, 1987; 2015)

Beyond the roles and responsibilities of McKinney-Vento Liaisons as stated in the legislation, however, homeless students and their families encounter everyday issues that can be much more difficult and intricate to solve. The McKinney-Vento Liaison is integral to ensuring homeless students are being identified appropriately and services are communicated to parents (Wilkins et al., 2016), and the McKinney-Vento Liaison is the front-line person to assist families. Yet, we still don't know enough about what they do and their perceptions of what the job entails. I wanted to investigate how Liaisons ascertain what resources are available and how best to access these services to ensure students' educational needs are being met without interruption.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study was to examine and understand the lived experiences and perceptions of McKinney-Vento Liaisons in North Carolina. My study focused on how McKinney-Vento Liaisons deliver programming to disenfranchised families and the experiences they have in doing so. I wanted to understand how they address the legislative requirements of the McKinney-Vento Liaison, and I also explored their lived experiences as they work to navigate their countless duties effectively.

## **Research Question**

The main question of my study was: *What are the experiences and perceptions of McKinney-Vento Liaisons regarding their work with homeless youth and families?*

## **Background Context**

In this section, I provide further information regarding defining homelessness as well as the McKinney-Vento Act (1987; 2015) and its description of McKinney-Vento Liaisons. I also provide a brief background on the work of MVLs.

### **Defining Homelessness**

Section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 as amended defines the homeless as follows:

- Children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

- Children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a private or public place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; and
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, and some migratory children.
- Migratory children

Provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act (1987; 2015) as mandated are intended to ensure school stability for children and youth experiencing homelessness. Homeless children and youth have the right to remain in their school of origin for the length of their homelessness or until the end of an academic year in which they obtain permanent housing. Local education agencies (LEAs), used interchangeably as public-school units (PSUs), as school districts are known, must consider specific student-centered factors. The law takes into consideration the wishes of the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth about their school of choice, and districts must include a written explanation and provide the right to appeal if the district determines that the school of origin may not be in the best interest of the child or youth.

The McKinney-Vento Act also ensures school enrollment and full participation in school activities. Homeless children and youth must be enrolled in school immediately, even if they lack documentation or have missed application or enrollment deadlines during any period of homelessness.

Additionally, the McKinney-Vento Act states districts must develop, review, and revise policies to remove barriers to the identification, enrollment, and retention of homeless students in school, including barriers due to fees, fines, and absences. These duties fall under the purview of

the local Liaison. The legislation designates a McKinney-Vento Liaison at each LEA to assist public school families with maintaining the educational stability of their children.

Lastly, the McKinney-Vento Act obligates state education agencies (SEAs) to have procedures to identify and remove barriers that prevent students from receiving appropriate credit for full or partial coursework satisfactorily completed while attending a prior school, in accordance with state, local, and school policies. State plans must describe how homeless youth will receive assistance from school counselors to advise, prepare, and improve their readiness for college. The McKinney-Vento Act also mandates a State Coordinator whose role is to oversee each district's policies and procedures concerning students experiencing homelessness in conjunction with the local Liaisons. The State Coordinator's role is to inform local Liaisons of state and federal policy changes, respond to inquiries from parents and unaccompanied youth, and provide professional development programs for local liaisons (North Carolina Homeless Education Program (North Carolina Center for Homeless Education [NCHEP], 2023).

Funding is provided for LEAs through the McKinney-Vento Act; however, districts can seek funding under Title I as a set-aside budget item. Districts can also apply for competitive subgrants every three years. In many cases, these subgrants are for nominal amounts to assist with specific programming for homeless students.

In 2015, the McKinney-Vento Act was amended under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Nonetheless, the main thrust of the Act continued to be the identification of students, school stability, school enrollment, support for academic success, and child-centered best-interest decision-making in each child's best interest, the identification and enrollment of McKinney-Vento students must occur in a timely fashion and, if possible, continue the child's education in his or her school of origin until the end of the academic year, ensuring stability for

that student. The school of origin is defined as the school the child attended when he or she was permanently housed. The LEA must presume that keeping the child in his or her school of origin is in the child's best interest, with the student at the center of any decision. Also, the LEA must provide transportation to and from the school of origin until the end of the current year. This transportation must be comparable to what other students are provided. To eliminate barriers to enrollment and retention of students, the 2015 amendment to the McKinney-Vento Act expanded the parameters of the law, ensuring Liaisons and school personnel receive professional development. Families having access to educational services, including Head Start, Exceptional Children's Services, early intervention, and preschool initiatives, as well as children, youth, and families receiving referrals to health care, dental, mental health, substance abuse services, housing, and other needed services were included in the amendment. Primarily, the front-line person in supporting homeless students remains the McKinney-Vento Liaison (North Carolina Homeless Education Program [NCHEP], 2023).

Although it is not the only federal program that focuses on homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Act is the only federal legislation directly intended to address homelessness in America's schools. My study concentrated on the perceptions and practices of the McKinney-Vento Liaisons and the roles they performed as promulgated by the McKinney-Vento Act.

### **McKinney-Vento Liaisons at Work**

The McKinney-Vento Liaison can be a change agent, immersed in the community. The Liaison can be the boots-on-the-ground staff member who is extremely knowledgeable of families and their needs, understands the parameters associated with homelessness, and is often working with a minuscule budget with which to assist families (Sulkowski & Michael, 2014).

With his or her knowledge, the Liaison may take corrective action to assist families. The North Carolina Homeless Education website lists the following attributes needed for the liaison:

The local liaison should understand the challenges faced by impoverished and homeless children, youth, and families, including unaccompanied youth and preschool-aged children. The liaison also should understand the rights and services provided to children and youth experiencing homelessness through the McKinney-Vento Act and other Federal and State laws and programs. He or she must have a clear understanding of the requirements of the local liaison position, and the State and school district systems in which these requirements will be enacted, including the budgeting system and State student data collection system. The local liaison should understand State and local school district policies, and other State and local policies that impact children and youth experiencing homelessness. Under ESSA, liaisons must be “able to carry out their duties described” in the law. ESSA specifies ten liaison duties including an overarching requirement “to ensure that ... homeless children and youths are enrolled in, and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in, schools of that local educational agency.”

(NCHEP, 2018)

Importantly, in some local education agencies (LEAs), McKinney-Vento Liaisons serve solely in that role, while in other LEAs, designated McKinney-Vento Liaisons also serve in other roles in their district. Ingram et al. (2017) found that 90% of liaisons had other job titles and significant responsibilities, many of which dealt with policies rather than people. These other duties impacted the time they were able to allocate to their McKinney-Vento Liaison duties.

## **Description of Methods**

I chose qualitative research because the purpose of this study was to understand McKinney-Vento Liaisons' experiences in and perceptions of their roles. I was especially interested in how MVLs perceived the impact of their work and the effect on students and families experiencing homelessness. Qualitative research involves interpretations, those of the participants and those of the researcher, and takes the researcher into a natural habitat or setting (Marshall et al., 2021). According to Rossman and Rallis (2017),

Qualitative research takes place in the natural world, draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants, focuses on context, is emergent and evolving rather than tightly prefigured, is fundamentally interpretive and assumes multiple truths and assumptions surround the term qualitative research. (p. 8)

Researchers use qualitative methodology when they seek to achieve a depth of understanding of a particular phenomenon. In my study, I focused on the perspectives of the McKinney-Vento Liaison, amplifying their duties, choices, challenges, and championing of ideas. I wanted to comprehend the ins and outs of how liaisons work within the confines, across contexts, and within the complexities of the role. I also wanted to hear through their voices how LEAs might better effect changes in the lives of homeless families.

### **Pilot Study**

I completed a pilot study in which I interviewed two McKinney-Vento Liaisons and transcribed the interviews, coded the transcripts, and looked for overarching themes. This initial foray into qualitative research study enabled me to review my interview protocols and questioning techniques, reflect upon my listening skills, and practice following protocols



effectively. It also allowed me to refine my interview protocol and clarify the way I asked questions.

### **Study Setting and Sample Population**

For this study, I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely applied in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). According to Patton (2002), a typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the typical person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest. When using a purposeful sampling strategy, the researcher should focus on the regular, normal, and commonplace.

To locate possible participants, I began by conferring with the North Carolina McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, who oversees district liaisons. Working in collaboration with the State Coordinator, I utilized the network and relationships that I have developed over the years to assist with identifying participants for the study. My main selection criteria was that the participants had to have at least three years in the role. In order to access a diverse range of voices, I sought participants from different geographical regions within the state across low-wealth and resourced districts, thus giving a varied perspective of the issue.

In the end, I included 7 participants in the study. I provide an overview of the participants in Chapter 3. (One caveat: one other participant worked at a charter school and because her experiences were an outlier as compared to the other participants, I decided not to include her in my report of study findings). To aid in maintaining the confidentiality of the participants, I used

pseudonyms for all personnel and school districts. The North Carolina education community is a small one and the confidentiality of participants is paramount.

### **Data Collection Methods**

There are four primary methods for gathering qualitative data: (1) participating in the setting; (2) observing directly; (3) conducting in-depth interviews; and (4) analyzing documents and materials (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In my study, I focused on conducting semi-structured interviews using a Zoom web platform due to the distance between my location and the location of the participants. The use of in-depth interviewing allowed me to understand the McKinney-Vento Liaisons' lived experiences in a more concrete and understandable way. Kvale and Brinkman (2014) define interviews as two or more individuals discussing a topic of mutual interest.

I interviewed each participant with a semi-structured interview protocol that enabled me to ask questions using an informal conversational style. The utilization of a conversational style aided me in building relationships and helped enable the liaisons to feel more comfortable in expressing their thoughts and ideas. The semi-structured protocol also allowed me to ask follow-up questions, or "probes" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 161). Rossman and Rallis discuss three main types of probes: open-ended elaborations, open-ended clarifications, and detailed elaborations. How I used these probes depended on the initial response of the participant. (See Appendix A for the interview protocol).

I completed all interviews virtually using the Zoom platform, at mutually agreed upon times. Using this online communication platform gave me the opportunity to record the interviews. Conversations were confidential, and participants were able to review the recordings

if requested. Interviews took approximately ninety minutes each, and I conducted a second additional follow-up round with some participants as needed.

### **Data Analysis**

Flick (2013) describes the process of data analysis as “the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it” (p. 5). Qualitative data can be ambiguous and complex, so it is not as easy to analyze as quantitative data. Much of the data is descriptive and subjective in nature.

As I noted previously, I used a tool in the Zoom digital platform to transcribe each interview. Initially, I reviewed the transcripts for clarity as well as an initial inspection of emerging ideas and trends. Once the interviews were complete and transcribed, I coded the transcripts and began the process of transferring the codes into categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that data analysis is inductive or somewhat instinctive but must also be systematic and led by the purpose of the study. As the researcher moves along into analyzing data, they must decide whether earlier interpretations and iterations remain valid as additional data is analyzed. I continued to code until I reached saturation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, “Saturation occurs when continued data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon you are studying” (p. 199). Eventually, I considered the codes and categories to identify four main themes that appeared across the transcripts.

### **Trustworthiness**

Marshall et al. (2021) stressed that trustworthiness rests on ethics, relationships, and transparency. The researcher must be credible and dependable, and the findings should be transferable. Since I have engaged in the role of the McKinney-Vento Liaison myself, an

important part of the research process was to ensure that I understood how my own experiences related to and informed my research.

According to Creswell and Plano (2018), the beliefs of the researcher help to shape the researcher's interpretations. A qualitative account has more validity if the biases and beliefs of the researcher (i.e. what he or she brings to the study and what shapes his or her interpretation of events) are known. Therefore, I created and maintained a reflexivity journal during my research project. Lincoln and Guba (1985) detailed reflexivity journals as part of the auditing process. Lincoln and Guba compare a reflexive journal to anthropologists' field journals that assist the researcher with keeping a running record of the process. Qualitative research projects are complex to create, manage, and analyze. Keeping a personal recollection of my decisions, thoughts, and feelings provided an opportunity for me to learn from the research process. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) explained,

Research should be undertaken to generate knowledge. The researcher is a learner, continually and consciously making decisions that affect the questions pursued and the direction of the study. Research is a process of conceptualizing, designing, conducting, and writing up what is learned. Research is recursive, iterative, messy, tedious, challenging, full of ambiguity, and exciting. (p. 3)

Research is all of those adjectives and more, but research is faulty if the research and the researcher cannot be trusted, if the data is not accurate, or if the conclusions are flawed. The purpose of the journal was two-fold. As this was my first foray into research in a very long time, I used the reflexivity journal to bring clarity to the process of qualitative research and to fully understand the nature of qualitative inquiry. I also used my journal to review and make notes on

the interviews. As I reviewed participants' comments, I reflected on families and incidents that I had forgotten, which evoked the reasoning for choosing this study topic, rather than another.

As an additional trustworthiness strategy, I applied member checking (Doyle, 2007). It is a "way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences" (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92). Creswell (2009) stressed that member checking is best done with "polished" (p. 191) interpreted pieces such as themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis of the data rather than the actual transcripts. Member checking can be an individual process or can take place with more than one person at a time, such as in focus group settings or during a discussion with the researcher (Doyle, 2007). After I coded the transcripts and identified themes, I discussed the themes with the participants to gather their feedback regarding my interpretations. Participants related that all of the themes were pertinent and specific to their role as an MVL. There were lengthy, reflective conversations that were insightful. I left with the knowledge that my findings held validity based on their experiences and not my expectations or perceptions of the role.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Patton (2002) stated, "there are no perfect research designs. There are always 'trade-offs' (p. 223)." There are various potential limitations to this study. Most importantly, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, a common condition in qualitative research. A strength of this study is my own lived experience in the role I studied. My years of experience in education and my work with family and community engagement have been extensive. I was a classroom teacher for over twenty years, and a Central Office administrator for sixteen years, which included working directly with families to increase family engagement and collaboration with families and schools. Inclusive of those sixteen years, I served as a

McKinney-Vento Liaison for five years. Although I served in the role, I wanted to examine the lived experiences of other liaisons across the state.

### **Reporting the Findings**

As evidenced in Chapter 3, I reported the findings as themes that surfaced when I analyzed the data. I supported each theme with direct quotes from the interviews.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My study is grounded in identity theory. Identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The study of identity (the degree to which a person identifies with a certain role or is committed to a given role) has a long tradition in the social psychology literature (Hogg et al., 1995). Burke and Stets (2023) define role identity as the process through which individuals give meaning to themselves in relation to a specific role. Role identity theory seeks to explain how roles develop in societies and how people represent 'who' they are in different contexts, including their working environment. Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. A particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) note,

Identity themes are addressed on a multitude of levels; organizational, professional, social, and individual and sometimes these are linked. Identity is viewed as central for issues of meaning and motivation, commitment, loyalty, logic of action and decision-making, stability and change, leadership, group and intergroup relations, organizational collaborations, etc. (p. 1163)

McKinney-Vento Liaisons are the link between local, state, and national policies. ESSA specifically requires that the person chosen as the Liaison “must be able to carry out their duties described in the law.” MVLs must be able to broker or make connections throughout the organization in order to provide assistance for families experiencing homelessness and role identity is essential. Role identity theory helps to understand the difficult position of the McKinney-Vento Liaison. They are single-source individuals in a school district, performing in a lonely role that is based on legislative mandates. But the reality is legislative parameters do not always provide effective solutions to ensure students experiencing homelessness are successful in the school setting. Other administrators and staff in the district may not understand the amount of time and effort necessary to embrace and successfully manage the role fully. The number of families experiencing homelessness in a district can vary from a relatively few to as many as a thousand, yet there is only one Liaison per district — and they often have other organizational responsibilities.

In line with identity theory, I sought to understand how McKinney-Vento Liaisons understood their roles and pursued their organizational responsibilities in relation to interactions within school and community groups and organizations, role performance, feelings of responsibility, and organizational commitments. I also investigated how through collaboration within and outside of the organization, MVLs forged an identity.

### **Researcher Experience/Perspective**

I have been in education for over 40 years and served previously as a McKinney-Vento Liaison. I have taught at all grade levels, served as an administrator in a juvenile justice setting, and as a Central Office Administrator. As with other McKinney-Vento colleagues, the position was given to me as part of the “other duties as assigned” portion of my job description. It quickly

became a learn-as-you-go position and started me on a journey to understand the ramifications of homelessness and has led to my work in other areas that impact families, such as food insecurity and neighborhood regentrification.

Sadly, as a classroom educator, I was aware of children with difficult home lives, but being homeless was not always something that was discussed. At times, families were doubled up, and rather than viewing this as a homeless situation, it was viewed as “family helping family,” more of a cultural phenomenon than an aspect of homelessness. Teachers do not always recognize the trauma of not having a place to call your own and how this factor intensifies disciplinary behavior. Imagine not having a room or space to call your own, your valued childhood items misplaced and sometimes totally discarded as you are being evicted, no bed to sleep in, a loss of friends and significant adults in your life. Considering these disruptions may enable you to get a semblance of what these students face.

As shown by the overwhelming statistical data, homelessness is a significant factor that affects social-emotional stressors for students. Young people who experience homelessness are at substantial risk for negative outcomes such as physical and mental health problems, violence, early pregnancy, school dropout, substance use, and premature death. As a former McKinney-Vento Liaison, I have intimate knowledge of McKinney-Vento law and the limitations and possibilities of programming based on experiences as a district liaison, working in a highly resourced district. Although the district was highly resourced, I discovered that effective long-term resources and strategies for families were not always available or adequate, which led to frustrations on the part of families and staff. As I began to work in the role, I came to understand the importance of community collaboration and how it is the key and an inherent component of adequate wrap-around services for students. Each day, I wondered if I had done enough to assist



a family, what I could have done differently and what community programs I could access to facilitate an effective outcome for the family. At times, I felt a tremendous joy when families became housed and at other times, great sadness when every one of my approaches failed.

With the increase in inflation, the cost of goods and services and the cost of housing post-Covid, homelessness is rising in our urban as well as our suburban areas. The McKinney-Vento Liaisons' role is becoming ever more important in our nation's schools and it is imperative that the government, school districts and communities invest in strategies to alleviate this crisis and as data confirms, the long-lasting effects.

Thanks to my experience as a McKinney-Vento Liaison, I recognize the challenges of the role. Nonetheless, I was extremely aware of my positionality as I conducted my study. As the researcher, I endeavored to remain neutral, not lead my participants in any way, or preordain the results. I used tools such as a reflexivity journal and member checking to ensure trustworthiness. My goal was to listen and to look for themes in the data, not validate my own experiences.

### **Study Significance**

We lack research regarding the lived experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons, including what they feel is their place in the administrative hierarchy and their identity role in the district. The results of my study will inform current and future McKinney-Vento Liaisons about the nature of their work. My study will also provide information to school board members, district administrators, principals, counselors, social workers, teachers, and transportation department members to ensure that K-12 staff members on all levels of the organization are aware of the essential functions that McKinney-Vento Liaisons carry out on behalf of homeless students. In a study by Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006), the researchers found only 10% of teachers and

research staff were familiar with the McKinney-Vento Act, a lack of knowledge that affected students receiving services in a variety of settings.

Ultimately, this study is significant since greater knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Liaison's role may translate into further, more effective advocacy for marginalized families. Although there is extensive research in the area of homelessness and its societal effects, my study focused on the school setting and the importance of coordinated solutions from the perspective of the McKinney-Vento Liaison. Many existing studies have focused on the needs of the homeless families and considered the McKinney-Vento Act as a policy without listening to the voices of Liaisons. According to Hallett et al. (2015), "research has tended to be based on the assumption that District Liaisons and schools interpret policy and implement strategies in isolation" (p. 674). My study helps give voice to the Liaisons so that they can be heard by decision makers: school administrators, building level staff and community entities.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In Chapter I, I provided a detailed overview of my study. In Chapter II, I review the existing research regarding homeless youth and the McKinney-Vento Liaisons' impact on students experiencing homelessness. In Chapter III, I highlight the participants in my study and present the main themes. In Chapter IV, I analyze my findings and make recommendations for practice.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over half a million Americans go homeless on a single night in the United States. About 35 percent (just under 200,000) are found sleeping unsheltered on our streets in places not intended for human habitation, such as sidewalks, parks, cars, or abandoned buildings. Meanwhile, over 350,000 sheltered homeless people are found in emergency shelters and transitional housing programs (The Council of Economic Advisors, 2019). These include our most vulnerable: our children and youth. These numbers continue to rise. Even prior to the pandemic, homelessness was ranked as the major public issue concern in the nation's cities (Elde, 2022).

Although not the only federal program that focuses on homelessness, The McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) is the only federal legislation to address homelessness in the school setting. The legislation designates a McKinney-Vento Liaison at each Local Education Agency (LEA) to assist public school families with maintaining the educational stability of their children. My study concentrated on the perceptions and practices of the McKinney-Vento Liaison, which is the lifeline for families navigating the school system during a period of time when school may be the only stable part of their existence. The McKinney-Vento Liaison becomes the families' sounding board. McKinney-Vento Liaisons must help homeless families as they encounter daily concerns such as living in cars, moving from motel to motel, residing with family members (also known as "doubling up") who may not be as supportive as needed, addressing the social-emotional issues of their children, and navigating the obscurity of governmental regulations. Each family's situation is different with complexities and problems that must be addressed.

In my study, I investigated the roles that McKinney-Vento Liaisons play in attempting to provide responsive programming for marginalized students. My study also examined the "other"

roles McKinney-Vento liaisons play that are not applicable to the law but are subject to the unspoken rule of “other duties as assigned.”

In this chapter, I review existing research related to children, homelessness, and the effect of homelessness on school settings. I also examine previous scholarship regarding McKinney-Vento Liaisons and their efforts to combat homelessness and effect change collaboratively.

## **Children, Homelessness, and Schools**

### **The Extent of Youth Homelessness**

In reviewing the research, it is important to note that studies conclusively determine homelessness is detrimental to the emotional, social, and cognitive development and well-being of children and manifests in the school setting.

The number of children experiencing homelessness increased by 8% nationally overall as well as an increase in 31 states and the District of Columbia from 2010 to 2013 (Bassuk et al., 2014). Hallett and Skrla (2017) stated that at the start of the 2017-2018 school year, there were 1.5 million students experiencing homelessness, which was a 15% increase from the 2015-2016 school year. In each study and report from the years 2010 to 2017, there has been a significant increase in homelessness throughout the United States, with an upswing in children and youth homelessness. The researchers brought to the fore that these students wanted to be engaged in the educational process but often are labeled behaviorally insufficient due to the trauma of instability. This in turn causes deficiencies in academic performance, although the underlying issue of homelessness is not always considered a factor in the equation.

During the 2016-2017 school year, statistics highlighted the living arrangements of students whose nighttime residence was not “fixed, regular or adequate.” The referenced

homeless data across the nation, as compiled by the National School Boards Association (NSBA), highlights the staggering number of students experiencing homelessness.

- In six large school districts, more than one-third of homeless students reported living in hotels or motels. The districts were Gwinnett County (Ga.); Lewisville ISD (Texas), Virginia Beach City (Va.), DeKalb County (Ga.), Cobb County (Ga.), and Cumberland County (N.C.).
- In Boston (Mass.), 83% of homeless students reported living in shelters, transitional housing, or awaiting foster care placement. In Philadelphia City (Pa.) and Omaha (Neb.), more than 40% of homeless students reported such living conditions.
- In Texas, two school districts — United ISD and San Antonio ISD — reported that more than 30% of their homeless students were unsheltered. (NSBA, 2021, para. 9).

Even more disturbing are the homelessness figures since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2022 to 2023, the number of people who became homeless for the first time increased by 12%. Homelessness among persons in families with children increased by 16%. The numbers represent the sharpest increase and largest unhoused population since the federal government began tallying totals in 2007 (U.S. Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2023).

### **The Effects of Homelessness on Students**

In a powerful scene from the movie *Antwone Fisher* (Washington & Fisher, 2003), the main character, who experienced homelessness, asks the question, “Who will cry for the little boy?” This was a powerful moment in a powerful movie. The character had experienced family dysfunction, homelessness, and hopelessness. Who will cry for the little boy and ensure that he is

cared for? In a school setting, the McKinney-Vento Liaison is the person who breaks down barriers, creates effective coalitions, helps build relationships, and ensures student success. Existing research indicates educational opportunity is the major access point for marginalized families and their children to have any hope of upward social mobility. In their study, Ausikaitis et al. (2015) examined the experiences of homeless families impacted by the McKinney-Vento legislation and the implications for providers offering assistance as well as academic success for students. The key themes of the study included factors that prevent youth dropouts. The study indicated several barriers faced by homeless students, including such factors as lack of transportation to the school of origin and the amount of travel time that caused chronic absenteeism affecting student grades, building relationships with students and staff, and a feeling of not belonging.

Youth homelessness is associated with negative academic and life outcomes. Among the disadvantages that homelessness creates for a child or youth, the effect of homelessness on his or her education may be considered one of the most severe. Compared to housed families, those who are homeless experience greater problems keeping their children in school due to stressors that accompany housing instability. Homeless children exhibit developmental delays at four times the rate of children who are in stable housing, especially in the domains of social-emotional functioning and academic achievement (Masten, 2013).

Masten (2013) also found that housing mobility was linked to more school problems, an increase in grade retention, and ultimately lower levels of academic achievement than stably housed peers. The researchers compared students identified as homeless or highly mobile as opposed to students receiving assistance through the free and reduced-priced lunch program to ascertain whether these students were lower functioning. The data determined math and reading

achievement was lower and growth slower for these students, showing a definite academic disadvantage. Similarly, in studies by Cutuli et al. (2013) and Murphy and Tobin (2011), compared to their housed peers, students who are homeless or highly mobile tend to lag behind academically in both reading and math and have higher grade retention and dropout rates as compared to their peers who have housing.

School mobility and absenteeism have been identified as the factors most related to negative education effects (Aratani, 2009). Rafferty et al. (2004) examined and compared the academic achievement of families who experienced homelessness and housed students whose families received public assistance. In this study, they reviewed the academic experiences of 46 adolescents of families experiencing homelessness and 87 families who were permanently housed and whose families received public assistance. Their study showed that being homeless negatively affected academic achievement and revealed an evidentiary decline. More children and youth experiencing homelessness scored below grade level on tests for math, reading, and spelling than those students who were not experiencing homelessness. Even after being housed, formerly homeless families evidenced a less than favorable school experience.

Children experiencing homelessness are also often in need of a special education evaluation; however, research has shown that approximately 23% of children and youths experiencing homelessness with a disability had not received such an evaluation for accommodations. Erb-Downward and Blakeslee (2021) noted that among students who had experienced homelessness, some as young as second grade or younger, were suspended or expelled at a higher rate, than their peers. Studies such as Aratani (2009) and Masten (2013), demonstrated that families experiencing homelessness needed an array of services, including an increase in housing subsidies, an increase in school-based and community health, targeted and

increased programs to facilitate positive outcomes for families, and increased funding for independent and transitional housing. Other significant areas were the facilitation of high school graduation, understanding of the Special Education process, step-up vocational funding, and college scholarship opportunities (Aratani, 2009; Masten, 2013).

The effects of not having a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence are revealing. Students experiencing homelessness struggle to stay in school, perform well, and form meaningful connections with peers and adults. Ultimately, these students are much more likely to fall off track and eventually drop out of school than their non-homeless peers. In a report for the National Center on Family Homelessness, Bassuk et al. (2014) examined over 30 variables from over a dozen data sets. Major causes of homelessness included our nation's high poverty rate, the absence of affordable housing, influences from the recession, racial disparities, barriers to single parenthood, and traumatic experiences were all worthy of attention. In a mixed methods study, Grothaus et al. (2011) explored the perceptions of students and parents experiencing homelessness from an academic need standpoint, emphasizing the services that were considered helpful. The study reviewed an after-school tutoring program and its effects on student achievement. Over a one-year period, there was a notable difference in the number of courses failed by students who were housed and students experiencing homelessness.

Research has also found that the effects of homelessness are long-lasting (Buckner, 2008). Buckner identified negative outcomes of homelessness for children and youths that included poor school performance, hunger/food insecurity, poor physical health, poor mental health, exposure to violence, and juvenile delinquency. According to Hopper et al. (2010), programs serving families experiencing homelessness do not directly address the needs of these trauma survivors. has a negative impact on the social-emotional health of children. Kidd (2012),



in a dialogue concerning homeless youth, determined that “health trajectories of most homeless youth are poor and mortality rates are strikingly higher than those of housed youth” (p. 533).

All of these issues related to homelessness are manifested in public school settings. In a study by Havlik and Bryan (2015) in which they surveyed 207 school counselors, they found that counselors are not always aware of the underlying issues of students experiencing homelessness. The study noted that there was professional development training, but there was a gap in graduate-level courses for counselors, which left them at a disadvantage when providing services for students. Since they may not be receiving proper support, high school students experiencing homelessness perform below grade level in state reading and math assessments. 42 percent of youth surveyed indicated they had dropped out of high school more than once (Ingram et al., 2017). The results are retention, failure of classes, not having enough credits to graduate on time and a close correlation to encounters with the juvenile justice system. Youth experiencing homelessness are 4.5 times more likely to not complete high school than their stably housed peers (Kull et al., 2019).

Youth experiencing family instability and trauma are at increased risk for unstable living situations and interrupted educational experiences. Youth who leave school before graduation were much more likely to experience homelessness at a later date. Also, the data indicated youth and young adults who experience homelessness were less likely to enroll in college, missing out on the scaffolding that high school students receive from school counselors and mentors. Kull et al. (2019) demonstrated that secondary students who are homeless do not fare well, and the economic effects of not completing high school or receiving a college education are long-lasting. The research established a clear pattern regarding how youth homelessness disrupted the educational process.

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System is a biennial survey of adolescent health risks and behavior for North Carolina students in grades 9-12 and is quite an extensive look at student behaviors. The 2019 Youth at Risk survey indicated that more than one in three high school students experiencing homelessness attempted suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Students experiencing homelessness were 4.39 times more likely to attempt suicide compared to stably housed youth, and Hispanic homeless students were 1.5 times more likely than students of other races to have felt sad or hopeless. African American homeless students were slightly more likely than white and Hispanic homeless students to have committed suicide. A disproportionate number of homeless youth are African American. Data from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior survey shows that although African American students comprise just 13% of the overall high school population, they represent 20% of high school students experiencing homelessness. Data in these studies make clear that children of color are affected disproportionately by homelessness. These research indicators were prevalent prior to the COVID pandemic and research in the next two to three years will have an impact on academic achievement and social-emotional aspects of our nation's youth. Youth of color, and all youth, are wary of disclosing their homeless status, and that is one reason the McKinney-Vento legislation is important.

Existing research underscores the issues of safety and security these families face that alter their view of the world. For instance, García and Kim (2020) utilized qualitative research to collect data from families experiencing homelessness in Utah who had participated in rapid rehousing programs. They conducted focus groups at four homeless shelters. The researchers noted that safety and security were priorities for homeless families, whether on the streets or in shelters. In shelters, there was no privacy, belongings were stolen, and one respondent noted,

“They steal your food, like it was terrible. It was similar to jail; the only difference was having your child with you. Exactly the same feeling ... I hated being there” (p. 7). Once rehoused, these families felt more stable and secure. However, García and Kim (2020) also surveyed case managers who connected families with resources. The researchers found that, though now housed, formerly homeless families needed additional services such as budgeting and educational strategies, and often transitioned socially and emotionally into the fear of what may happen next. These issues would continue to affect these students in the school setting.

Securing transportation to school can elicit a sense of risk to students who must travel through unfamiliar terrain. Placing students in a strange situation in a cab or walking through foreign neighborhoods because that is where the nearest shelter is located may affect their feeling of well-being and can negate the parents’ ability to resolve their housing situation. In the study by Ausikaitis et al. (2015) that I previously referenced, a parent shared the struggles she faced when she had to send her children to a school that was not the one closest to the shelter and the hardships that she faced getting her children to school each day. For example, in Chicago, homeless students who reside within a mile of their school are not eligible for free transportation cards. When students have to walk unfamiliar distances through unsafe neighborhoods, parents either have to risk their children’s safety or accompany them and forgo the possibility of full-time employment. These everyday conundrums negatively affect a family’s already tenuous economic situation. What becomes more important: ensuring your child arrives safely to school or arriving at work on time? This can be a heart-wrenching decision for families.

Garcia and Kim (2020) and Ausikaitis et al. (2015) highlighted the difficulty families face in all aspects of their lives as they experience homelessness. The logistics of simply getting one’s children to school and completing paperwork when applicable documents are not available

are monumental obstacles for families to overcome. Feelings of security and personal safety become nonexistent. Homelessness deprives a student of his or her possessions (especially during an eviction) and generates a lack of privacy, a loss of a sense of self, and an inability to have a structured routine and support systems. Homelessness also creates economic instability and family disunity. The angst of students moving into shelters and leaving their prized possessions behind, such as their favorite toy or video game, has a social and emotional impact on a child's psyche and feelings of safety as these studies have indicated.

Importantly, it is evident that the impact of homelessness is long-reaching and long-lasting. For example, Ingram et al. (2017) found that 82% of participants reported homelessness significantly influenced their overall life in areas such as the ability to feel safe, mental/emotional health, physical health, self-confidence, and relationships with family and friends. According to the study, the percentage in each of these areas was above 50%.

## **Summary**

The studies I reviewed in this section expose in detail the manner in which homelessness affects all facets of a student's life and suggest how collaborative approaches are necessary to ensure students experiencing homelessness receive all they require to be successful.

### **The McKinney-Vento Liaison and Supporting Homeless Youth**

Homelessness is sometimes considered a status: either you have a home or you do not. Reviewing the research indicates that homelessness should be thought of as a multi-faceted experience with different factors or systems influencing a homeless individual or family's situation (Rafferty et al., 2004). For the McKinney-Vento Liaison, the building of relationships with students and families is crucial. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act designates that each Local Education Agency (LEA) must by law have a McKinney-Vento Liaison on staff

whose sole responsibility is to assist homeless youth with needed services. All districts have McKinney-Vento Liaisons, but this is not always their sole job. Studies in this literature review noted that districts are not identifying homeless students due to several factors, including the stigma felt by students, not recognizing the signs of homeless, misperceptions, and a lack of awareness on the part of the districts (Hallet & Skrla, 2017). This limits equity and access for students.

Wilkins et al. (2016) explored homeless liaisons' perceptions of MVA implementation in their service areas. The researchers invited homeless liaisons in three southern states to complete an online survey focusing on their perceptions of the implementation of McKinney-Vento and their service area's response to homelessness. Of the 369 practitioners identified as homeless liaisons solicited for study participation, 32% completed surveys. The study that MVA's noted who had more interactions with children had higher implementation scores, indicating a correlation between relationships and access to resources. The participants in the Wilkins et al. study noted failure to implement MVA properly puts children and youth experiencing homelessness at an even further disadvantage than housed children and youth. Other findings from the study highlighted collaboration and awareness as a major factor that affects the perceptions and implementation of programming. The study highlighted that a collaborative environment is necessary to implement the MVA effectively.

Limited research has been conducted about the effectiveness of the McKinney-Vento Act, but Atwell et al. (2020) also noted that without assistance in place to help these young people experiencing homelessness, they are at an even further disadvantage than their housed peers. The goal of their study was to identify strategies school districts were using to successfully

mitigate the challenges homeless students face attending and succeeding in school. These strategies included credit recovery programs and flexible scheduling. For example,

Districts in Michigan and Virginia allow students to take classes through an online portal if they are close to graduation. Other districts have alternative programming in the evening to allow students to complete their coursework. Some districts provide or partner with local entities to create after-school learning programs to help students “feel important, safe, and successful. (Atwell et al., 2020, p. 24)

It is apparent, based on a review of the research and educational statistics, that homelessness negatively affects students in our nation’s schools. The McKinney-Vento Liaison is pivotal in ensuring students receive support. In a study, youth and liaisons both identified the same sets of supports and services as most important to keeping homeless students in school and engaged in learning (Ingram et al., 2017). But despite general agreement on what homeless students most need to stay connected to school, there are numerous areas where there are gaps between perceptions of what should be done and actual practice within schools. In Ingram et al.’s (2017) study of over 500 McKinney-Vento Liaisons and 44 students, eight in 10 liaisons (80%) reported that their schools are doing a good or fair job of addressing youth homelessness. However, fully one-third of liaisons (33%) believe their school district does not place a high priority on the problem of youth homelessness. Almost nine out of 10 (89%) see room for improvement in the job their schools and other organizations are doing to address this issue. Students and liaisons agree that, by far, the most significant challenge is connecting homeless youth to housing. While both youth and liaisons identify safe, stable housing as imperative to these young people's success in school, only 25% of youth and 29% of liaisons believe their schools are doing a good job on this vexing issue. In addition, 58% of youth feel that their

schools did only a fair or a poor job supporting them and helping them stay in and succeed in school.

A collaborative approach to the identification and delivery of early intervention and providing wrap-around services is essential. Ingram et al.'s (2017) research affirms that "schools desperately need the support of their communities to manage this issue ... they need strong partners to help manage the issues that students face outside of the school building" (p. 16). A study by Sulkowski and Michael (2014) underscored that homeless liaisons need to provide all-around services to the students. Participants in the study used the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework to meet the mental health needs of homeless students. The MTSS framework was inclusive of all partners involved in a child's delivery service model. A qualitative study by Miller (2011b) examined how school-based and community-based organizations must work together to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. The study reviewed three different levels: the individual school level; district administration; and finally, neighborhood and community factors. The study found that educating students who are homeless depends upon school, district, and state personnel, but must also include community agency efforts. In other words, there must be a true collaboration including other aspects of the public sector, such as community and relief agencies.

Other research has considered future problems of practice. The increasing prevalence of homelessness among young children and families in the United States has a developmental impact on educational opportunities. Education is a major access point for marginalized families to have any hope of upward social mobility. Compared to housed families, those that are homeless experience greater problems keeping their children in school due to the various stressors that accompany housing instability. Although there are mandated services for this

population under the McKinney-Vento Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, barriers continue to exist for young children and adolescent youth related to identification and access to quality early intervention services and supports. Hallett et al. (2015) indicated that even with the McKinney-Vento Act, there continue to be gaps in perceptions and practices: “Challenges of children and families experiencing homelessness are often hidden, overlooked, poorly understood, misunderstood or ignored by school districts” (p. 106). Further research into all aspects of youth experiencing homelessness is needed to identify ways to close these gaps in services.

Given their legally required designation, the McKinney-Vento Liaison can be the catalyst for providing services for students. Dedicated liaisons are essential to assisting students who are homeless. However, teachers, administrators, and other support staff also have a role to play. Bishop et al. (2021) laid out a powerful vision of what high school educators can do to help students experiencing homelessness graduate. In this study, the authors interviewed 150 individuals across California, including students, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders. They concluded that homelessness must be tackled on multiple levels, including trauma-informed care, restorative practices, and social-emotional development. To provide these supports, staff need training in these key strategies. In fact, any adults who work directly with students could benefit from training in the kinds of support these students require.

Similarly, Sosa et al. (2013) described the McKinney-Vento functions as a System of Care and listed several areas for improvement, including a crisis intervention protocol that “extends beyond identification and classification to the assurance of dissemination of needed services to improve academic success” (p. 8). Sosa et al. (2013) asserted that services must be broad and extensive since the needs are substantial. The Response to Intervention (RTI) model



evolved into the Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS), which centers on universal support and targeted responses and included members of the school community. However, MTSS does not always include the McKinney-Vento Liaison, who has a unique perspective and many times is aware of hidden issues affecting student progress.

The care that students and families experiencing homelessness receive should be a wraparound program. Ingram et al. (2017) highlighted the need for other staff members, including teachers, counselors, and cafeteria workers, to receive additional professional development around the topic of homelessness to assist with identification and understanding to meet the needs of MKV students. The researchers asserted that 34% of MVLs reported that they are the only person within their school district who receives training and 9% reported that no training at all is provided by their district. The value of providing training to staff members beyond just the McKinney-Liaison is crucial.

As one views the responsibilities of the Liaison, those duties include knowledge of policies and procedures on a state and local level to ensure families receive appropriate information and services and knowledge of school and community partnerships to foster applicable services. One example of McKinney-Vento Liaisons collaborating with community partners is the Continuum of Care (COC). THE COC program is a network of community agencies established by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition Act of 2009 (HUD Exchange, 2009). The purpose of the act was to bring diverse voices together, challenge members to think outside the box to identify solutions to the needs of those experiencing homelessness in their community, and be creative in identifying funding and other resources to achieve their collective missions. Building effective networks requires individuals who are compassionate and understanding of the issue. The Continuum of Care is a regional or local

planning body that works to coordinate housing and services for persons experiencing homelessness. The COC consists of representatives of organizations such as nonprofit homeless providers, faith-based providers, businesses, universities, schools, and organizations that serve homeless persons. There are several counties in North Carolina with Continuum of Care programs. The Continuum of Care promotes county-wide commitment to ending homelessness. The COC consists of resources and assistance to support community partners. Programming provides such family options as rapid rehousing, consolidated planning, counseling programs for families, and other strategies to assist families. In a case study by Frank and Baumohl (2021), the researchers defined the types of community agencies and wrap-around services that McKinney-Vento Liaisons must collaborate with to provide adequate services for families and the interdependency of the service modalities.

The leadership of the McKinney-Vento Liaison can be amplified throughout the school and community, when they act as a collaborative leader and an advocate for change by utilizing district policies and procedures, assessment of programming, understanding community culture and social mores, and meeting auspices as mandated by law. According to Hallett and Skrla (2017), “no change will begin, take root, flourish and/or become sustained without some sort of system that collects data on results and includes accountability for individuals and groups responsible for implementing the change” (p. 79).

### **Conclusion**

In this literature review, I examined the connections among homelessness, children, and schools. I also explored scholarship related to the McKinney-Vento Liaison and their role in maintaining stability for students experiencing homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Liaison continues to be the point person in each school district, but studies vary as to the procedures and

professional development necessary to include all school staff to ensure students' needs are being accommodated.

In my study, I sought to discover McKinney-Vento Liaisons' thoughts, feelings, and approaches concerning their lived experiences in and their perceptions of the role. In the next chapter, I share my findings from my study.

### CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

Homelessness is a national problem, and its effects are felt in all aspects of society, including the nation's public school system. The front-line staff member intimately involved with these families is the McKinney-Vento Liaison (MVL), who is responsible for ensuring that students who lack residential stability have educational access. Despite the importance of the MVL position, the public would benefit from more insights into what they do. The purpose of my study was to understand the lived experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons. For data collection, I focused on hearing the voices of the participants. In the interviews and the follow-up sessions, they bore witness to their perceptions of their roles and the families they were legislated to serve by federal mandate, but more importantly, they also felt a call to serve.

McKinney-Vento Liaisons are tasked with making decisions quickly and efficiently as lengthy delays negatively affect students and families. Additionally, some of the issues McKinney-Vento Liaisons must consider are the continuity of a student's instruction, age and grade placement of the student, their academic strengths, the effects of inordinate absences from specialized programming, a child's social and emotional state, and the possible distance of the student's daily commute and its impact. These are extraordinarily important issues in the life of a child. The participants in my study were thoughtful and reflective in their interviews and gave frank and honest views about the manner in which their respective school districts manage the concerns of families experiencing homelessness. Moreover, they spoke of their passion for the work, their empathy for families, and the fear of not getting it right when it comes to assisting families in need.

In this chapter, I provide brief profiles of each of my study participants that include a short synopsis of the demographics and settings in which they work. Next, I present the main themes that emerged from my analysis of the interviews. These themes represented my findings.

## **Participants**

### **Background**

I drew my participants from a diverse range of school districts. In choosing participants, I sought a variety of characteristics such as age, years of employment, and the location of their districts. Toward the last point, the state of North Carolina has eight Prosperity Zones. Prosperity Zones were developed to ensure economic growth by leveraging regional economics. I felt it was important to include Liaisons from disparate prosperity zones throughout the state including both highly resourced and low-wealth districts (See Appendix B). “Contrary to most perceptions, homelessness is a wide-ranging problem that affects rural and urban areas of all sizes” (Miller, 2011a, p. 309).

Each of the participants is a full-time school district employee, with most holding at least one or more positions in addition to serving as the McKinney-Vento Liaison in their district. I conducted individual interviews and a follow-up interview participants, if needed for further clarity. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used. Table 1 lists the pertinent characteristics of each MVL.

**Table 1. Pertinent Characteristics of MVLs**

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age Demographic (Born Between)</b>	<b>Prosperity Zone</b>	<b>Years in Position</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Three-Year Average of- Homeless Families in District</b>
Taylor	Generation X (1965-1980)	Northeast	15	African American	Over 50
Leslie	Millennial (1980-2000)	Western	8	White	Over 100
Andrea	Baby Boomer (1955-1964)	Northwest	17	White	Over 50
Patricia	Baby Boomer (1955-1964)	South Central	13	African American	Over 500
Zelda	Generation X (1965-1980)	North Central	3	African American	Over 100
Jennifer	Millennial (1980-2000)	North Central	7	African American	Over 50
Sandra	Generation X (1965-1980)	Southwest	7	African American	Over 1000

One interesting characteristic concerning the participant data is that all of the respondents were female. Data attest that positions in public school education are overwhelmingly held by females, and the same is true for liaisons (Johnson, 2008; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). Only two of the over 100 local liaisons in the state are male, and only one of the state program specialists is male. As shown by the state data, the McKinney-Vento Liaison is a female-dominated position.

### **Participant Profiles**

#### ***Taylor***

Taylor is an African American female in her early 50s. In addition to being the McKinney-Vento Liaison, she is the Director of Federal Programs in a low-wealth district in the eastern portion of the state. The district has over 1,000 students. The median household income

is a little over \$30,000, and the poverty rate is one third of the population. The population is over 60 percent African American. Because her district is small, in addition to being the designated district's McKinney-Vento Liaison, Taylor wears a variety of hats, some of which are interrelated and some not so much, including family engagement coordinator, volunteer coordinator, and public information officer. She handles all of these roles without the aid of additional personnel. She has served in the Liaison role for over 15 years. Although she was assigned this role, she found that she had a knack for the duties of the position. Taylor explained, "I found that it was a match for me, and when I had a chance to delegate the position to someone else, I chose to remain." Her days are stretched thin with all of her different duties, and she does not have as much time to assist families experiencing homelessness as she would like.

Affordable housing is scarce in the area, and the population is transient.

Her passion for the position finds her working hard to find allies in the district, which is sometimes difficult to do because of the lack of resources. Taylor depends upon the largesse of the community to assist with issues, but since it is a low-wealth district, the collaboration consists mostly of faith-based entities such as churches or community outreach groups. In addition, she has collaborated with a local big-box retailer to provide clothing for families.

The most wide-reaching issues she encounters are the lack of transportation and housing insecurity. The county is extremely rural, and there is only one local motel that will accept families experiencing homelessness. The other major issue is transportation. The town does not have any buses or other means of public transport. Although it is a small district, there are other districts associated with this county, as well as it being in close proximity to an adjoining state. Many of the families experiencing homelessness move in with family members whose domicile

does not lie within the confines of Taylor's district. This situation causes transportation challenges as students must remain in their school of origin, if at all possible.

*Leslie*

Leslie is a white female with over 15 years of experience as a classroom teacher and instructional specialist. She is the Executive Director of Federal Programs in addition to being the district's McKinney-Vento Liaison. Her district is a rural one that is located in the far west region of the state and extends over a large geographical area with a small population. The population is transient and the largest employer in the county is tourism. The district is in the Western Prosperity Zone and is coupled with 13 similar counties. The median household income in the district is approximately \$33,000 and roughly 17% of the population lives below the poverty level. The school district has over 3,000 students, 85% of whom are white, and the largest ethnic minority is Native American.

McKinney-Vento falls under Leslie's purview along with a myriad of other district initiatives, including English as a Second Language (ESL), Accelerated Students (AIG), Rural and Low-Income Schools (RLIS), and Pre-Kindergarten students (Pre-K). She gained the McKinney-Vento Liaison role when a colleague retired and McKinney-Vento was coupled within other federal initiatives. Leslie has served in the role for eight years and over time, has designated school social workers as the McKinney-Vento point of contact in each of the schools. The social workers assist with assessing students experiencing homelessness, placing these personnel, as Leslie described, "on the front line for identification and support." She noted that it can be difficult meeting the needs of families by herself since she juggles so many roles.

As with Taylor's district, transportation is a major issue. Again, there is no public transportation and the county is almost 500 square miles divided by a waterway, with many



small unincorporated areas. Part of the district is in heavily wooded national, state, and local protected park sites. Some of the homeless populations are able to camp out in these sites undetected, in recreational type vehicles, living there under the radar, which, at times, makes it difficult to have an accurate count of families in this situation. Leslie consistently collaborates with faith-based agencies, as well, to assist with needed resources in the community.

### ***Andrea***

Andrea is a white female with over 25 years of experience in the public school system, including serving 17 years as a McKinney-Vento Liaison. Andrea's district is located in the Northwest Prosperity Zone with 11 other counties. Unlike the counties mentioned in the previous profiles, this district does have public transportation. Although situated in a somewhat rural community, the district is within an hour of several major cities. The district has approximately 4,000 students. The median income is roughly \$35,000; the poverty rate is 11%; and the poverty level for the economically disadvantaged is around 45%. The dominant demographic is white with African American and Hispanic students about evenly distributed. The primary economic component in the district is manufacturing, with education and health care as major secondary employers.

Andrea began her career as a classroom teacher in another state, worked as a school counselor, and is currently a Director of Student Services. Her wide range of experience, from classroom teacher to Central Office administrator, and the length of time she has served in her district, gives her a unique perspective on issues in her community. In this district, the McKinney-Vento Liaison is positioned within the student services division, and Andrea's divergent roles of responsibility include school safety, PowerSchool management, transportation, and alternative learning. She also manages school nurses, counselors, and social workers. Even

with all of these duties, Andrea has been honored for her work as a McKinney-Vento Liaison and is recognized in her district as the expert for those who really want to know and understand the issue of homelessness. However, she acknowledged this perception only began once she was cited for her extraordinary work in the state.

One of her biggest concerns is not having enough time to complete her MVL duties, as she spends many weekends completing tasks that she is not able to complete during the work day. Andrea collaborates with community cadet programs, the Salvation Army, and the YWCA to provide tutoring programs for homeless students, but she has difficulty staffing positions for her program initiatives. For example, she has the funding to pay for an after-school tutor but has had no one to apply for the position. She needs more human resources as the district has frequent staff turnover, which impacts her organizational vision for meeting the adjustments of families experiencing homelessness and for providing innovative strategies to meet their needs.

### ***Jennifer and Zelda***

Jennifer and Zelda work as McKinney-Vento Liaisons in two districts that are in the same county. They are not aligned as one county district, unlike most districts in North Carolina, but are divided into two standalone districts. Jennifer works in the county district, and Zelda works in a separate city district that is located within the county. Each of them serves as the Liaison in their respective district and is only responsible to their district. The districts lie in a Prosperity Zone with 14 other very diverse counties. While these two districts are in the same county, they each have different issues around housing insecurity and families in transition. Zelda's city district is considered more of a metropolitan area with extensive cultural resources for its residents. It is considered a highly resourced area, but it is a difficult place for families experiencing homelessness because of the ever-increasing cost of rental properties.

Comparatively, in Jennifer's district, due to its rural location, and an influx of families looking for a slower lifestyle with more resources, there is an absence of available low-income housing.

The median household in the county is approximately \$80,000 with a low unemployment rate. The economically-disadvantaged percentage is approximately 20% and the poverty rate is approximately 14%. Conversely, the unemployment rate is low, but many of the jobs offered are low wage positions. The largest employers are in the fields of education and health care.

Although the county is highly resourced, the Liaisons indicated they have many of the same transportation issues and housing inequity issues as many of the low wealth districts. There is only one shelter that accepts families for both districts and it is usually full with a waiting list. In the past, there were several hotels willing to accept families in this situation, but due to the housing boom in this area, there is only one motel left that is willing to do so, and families have to move to neighboring counties to find housing. Both districts are able to collaborate with the same community agencies to reduce food insecurity.

**Jennifer**, who works in the county district, is a millennial who has not reached 40 and is an African American. She has a counseling background with degrees in Human Development and Counseling with over seven years of experience as a McKinney-Vento Liaison in her current district. Jennifer also has prior experience in another district in a similar role. Jennifer also has a doctorate in Educational Leadership. Along with McKinney-Vento, she oversees foster care; 504 Plans, which supplies support for children with disabilities; and social, emotional, mental health, and homebound services. Jennifer has experience in several other districts, urban and rural, which gives her a unique perspective.

**Zelda**, who works in the city district, is a baby boomer and is also African-American. She has an extensive background in human service fields and school administration with two

Master's degrees and has a counseling background. She has also worked as a school social worker. She has been in this current position for three years, but has served as a McKinney-Vento Liaison in a neighboring district. Zelda has had additional employment as a Foster Care Point of Contact for foster care students in the district and works extensively with families as a mental health clinician, which allows her to more fully understand the mental health issues affecting homelessness. Additionally, Zelda works with family and community engagement, overseeing family initiatives and training sessions for parents and families.

Being in the same geographic area, these Liaisons must collaborate on transportation quite frequently as the district lines adjoin each other. Both of the districts have public transportation that is free to all residents. The free transportation does not always meet the needs of elementary school-aged children and parents, due to the lengthy travel times and work schedules of parents; the matter of safety for elementary students traveling alone in contracted transportation is at the forefront of many of their discussions. One pressing problem is helping other staff understand that immediate transportation is an integral section of the McKinney-Vento Act. Jennifer explained, "Transportation is immediate, just like enrollment is immediate ... it's not right to have a five-day span between when a student enrolls and when a student can get on a bus or contracted transportation. And there are rules behind that."

Both districts have wide-ranging food insecurity and increased housing costs that negatively impact renters, who face eviction when they are not able to afford the expanding rental costs. One other concern common to both districts is the turnover of high-ranking administrators, which can negatively impact the understanding of the legislative responsibilities and expectations of MVLs around families experiencing the trauma of homelessness.

***Patricia***

Patricia has been employed for 13 years as an MVL in a highly transient district. Her district is almost equally divided between majority and ethnic minority students and has a median household income of approximately \$51,000. The poverty rate is 15%, and the economically disadvantaged rate is around 57%. The largest employers are health care, social assistance, and the federal government, with education following closely behind. The county has the most extensive economic base of the other counties in the Prosperity Zone, and Patricia related that families experiencing homelessness move to the area because there are smaller hotel chains that accept week-to-week rentals, which are more cost-effective for families.

This district has recently experienced weather-related catastrophes that significantly impacted the homeless population. During that time, Patricia stated, “I focused all or most of my energies on McKinney-Vento ... making sure to identify students and that their needs were met, out in the shelters and collaborating with other agencies.” She has degrees in Sociology and Social Work with a clinical therapy background and has worked in outpatient facilities, evaluating clients with developmental delay concerns. She has also worked as a school social worker and an adjunct professor. In her current role, she oversees dropouts, foster care, and social workers in addition to serving as the MVL. Because of her extraordinary work, she has been recognized on the State level for her support of families as a McKinney-Vento Liaison.

***Sandra***

Sandra works in one of the largest districts in the state. This district has highly resourced areas and, in stark contrast, many low-wealth areas. The number of McKinney-Vento students in this district can be overwhelming. Transportation can be difficult to master, with students crisscrossing the district, the large number of schools throughout the district, and attempting to

maintain the mandate that students remain in their school of origin. Thirty-eight percent of the families are economically disadvantaged. In contrast, the median family income is \$72,000. The school district is divided equally among African American, Hispanic, and white students, but the county is predominantly white. The district has an abundance of charter schools as well. The economics of the district are driven by the utility and banking industries.

Sandra has experience as a social worker within the Division of Child Services in homeless shelters, which has allowed her to view housing insecurity through two separate lenses. She began her career in the school district as an elementary and middle school teacher. She has Bachelor's and Master's degrees in social work as well as a Master's in teaching, a terminal degree in educational administration and various certifications in substance abuse and life coaching. Unlike the other study participants, McKinney-Vento Liaison is her only role. Part of her duties in this role are to supervise and directly manage ten social workers, two itinerant workers, and five coordinators who assist with families.

Sandra has lived in several states and shared that she has empathy for families experiencing homelessness due to her lived experiences. She moved to North Carolina without a job or a place to live. She stated, "I can relate, but the fact that I had resources and knew how to utilize resources and had an educational background, I didn't feel the impact as much as somebody who has no resources, no income, no nothing."

### **Themes**

As I coded and analyzed the data, four thematic points emerged. In the discussion below, I support these themes with impressions and quotes from the liaisons.

## **Theme I**

*McKinney-Vento Liaisons' multiplicity of roles impacts their ability to fully engage with families*

McKinney-Vento legislation states each district should have a Liaison and the Liaison must have the capacity to do their job. However, the law neither specifies the qualifications for the position, the background needed, nor whether the MVL can hold other positions. The members of this study are some of the most degreed personnel in the districts, with many having Master's degrees, some more than one, and several with terminal degrees in fields of study where altruistic traits are integral which serves the MVLs well as they navigate through this difficult role. These educational experiences as well as their lived experiences become critical in the function of the McKinney-Vento Liaison as they manage and facilitate their varied roles, support families, and collaborate with staff and community.

All of the McKinney-Vento Liaisons are entrusted with the preceding issues and so much more. The first theme that was conclusive in the data was the multiple roles that Liaisons were expected to perform. As described in the profiles above, for most of the participants, the MVL position is intertwined with other positions such as Family Engagement Director, Social Work Coordinator, or Student Support Services Director, that are completely distinct from the McKinney-Vento Liaison role. The MVL position is directed by specific federal mandates; however, the other positions McKinney-Vento Liaisons occupy, while having stated duties, are not dictated and monitored by state and federal regulations.

As I interviewed each participant, I was astounded at the number of other duties as assigned that each participant managed. Although many of the additional positions were under the realm of student support services, they varied widely from dropout coordinator to public

information officer. Sandra was unique as the only member of the study whose sole position was McKinney-Vento Liaison. Although this was her only assigned responsibility, Sandra emphasized that due to the size of her district, she spent an inordinate amount of time during the day managing the social workers, coordinators, and itinerant workers under her direction.

In terms of a typical day, Liaisons unequivocally stated there were none. Taylor shared, Oh, there's no such thing as a typical work day for McKinney-Vento, because right when you go in, and you think it's simple, 1,2,3 you always get called in for a situation or you may need to investigate, so a typical day is not typical. Because it is hard to plan, because this is the area that you can't plan, because when families come up you have to serve them.

Liaisons in my study emphasized that they were adept at juggling roles, but at what cost? It was also expressed that they were working outside school hours to maneuver through all of their responsibilities. Taylor, for example, serves as her district's Community Outreach Coordinator, Parent Involvement Coordinator, Federal Programs Director, Title Nine Coordinator, Volunteer Coordinator, and Public Information Officer in addition to serving as McKinney-Vento Liaison. Patricia expounded,

McKinney-Vento Liaison is just one of the many hats I wear, including the Foster Care Point of Contact, Dropout Prevention Coordinator, Social work coordinator. It seems this district tends to give many roles to one particular person. Because I tend to be a high energy person, that's probably my ADHD, so I can do three or four tasks, when I got into this role, I was so excited, but you know bringing work home, data collection on the weekend, but I began to realize that there's not just enough capacity to do all of the roles effectively.



Others noted that the McKinney-Vento position was not always seen as equal to or as important as higher positions; frequently, additional requirements were added in the vein of “other duties as assigned.” The Liaisons I interviewed reported that they had as many as seven additional assignments for which they were responsible.

The members of the study spoke with intensity about this theme. All of the participants except Sandra indicated they are expected to complete many of the McKinney-Vento duties without support staff. They are required to maintain accurate records of the number of students who are experiencing homelessness in their districts, and this data includes any siblings living in the home who are below school age. This aspect of the law can become problematic as Liaisons have to gather information that families feel is intrusive. This information must be maintained throughout the year with a final report to be submitted to the State Coordinator in early June as a condition of their mandated duties.

According to district policies, Liaisons are also charged with creating and revising policies and procedures that affect students experiencing homelessness and ensuring these policies and procedures are equitable and fair. Patricia explained,

Yes, we have a policy for homeless children and I have added additional documentation.

Twice it has been revised since I’ve been here and the policy committee asks for my input, so I had to learn the procedure for writing and revising policies so they would be in line with state and federal requirements and in alignment with State Board of education policies.

Leslie explained how she has developed policies and procedures to ensure identification of students that were not in place prior to her assuming the job:

I have developed a screening. Looking for homeless kids. We only identified homeless kids when the need was really obvious when I became the Liaison. And so, I've added a few procedures to help, you know, keep track of their academic data, their attendance data, things like that along the way and just some ... just a residency questionnaire that we give periodically to all students to try to find those kids that you don't know about.

Participants expressed concerns that all of their other duties distract from the primary role of assisting families who most need it. Some of the participants recounted anxiety and apprehension around managing all of these job duties, and questioned whether they are as effective as they would like to be in their McKinney-Vento role. Patricia noted that in order to get the job completed each week, with all of her duties, working during the weekend has been the norm. She shared, "it is just never enough time to get it all done." Taylor also spoke to the question of whether or not she was doing all she could, saying, "based on all of my duties, I find myself coming in early and staying late to get everything done ... and wondering if I could do a better job."

Since all of the Liaisons are typically empath personality types, they work hard to build relationships with families. This is not a short-term process because homelessness, in itself, is not a short-term process. Families contact them to navigate issues in the schools, navigate issues in the community and at times, the McKinney-Vento Liaison is the one supplying basic needs. For example, ensuring families have food for Thanksgiving dinner. Although Sandra is unique as the only Liaison in the study designated solely as an MVL, she spoke to the demands of the multiplicity of her managerial roles and her feelings of not being able to get everything accomplished:

After talking to the parent, she told me she only had food for sides. I immediately left my office and took other items to the family as they had recently been evicted and had just been placed in a temporary shelter and did not have transportation. That was not the first time that I delivered food directly to a family. I had to completely stop my other duties for the day to ensure this family was taken care of. I sometimes feel my other duties suffer.

For most of my study participants, their job was sometimes difficult to manage and time consuming, but Leslie gave a unique take on wearing so many hats and how there was an advantageous side. She stated,

I support all of our Federal Title programs, Title I, Title II, Title III and Title IV, Rural, all low- income schools grants. I support our elementary education program, our ESL, our AIG, our Pre-K program and I am also the McKinney-Vento Liaison. So that sounds like a lot, but it also offers me the ability to have conversations with myself in my head, because I do know about all those programs. So, thinking about those different programs and meeting the needs, I'm making a full plate but at times it gives me some advantages at times. I think.

With the multiplicity of duties and the numerous responsibilities associated with their McKinney-Vento role, the participants in my study described how all of these duties distracted from the primary role of assisting families. In the final analysis, the multiplicity of roles and the number of duties attached to the McKinney-Vento role can be daunting, even for long-term Liaisons. There are a surplus of job duties, just for the McKinney-Vento component of their position alone. Although Sandra's only listed job position is that of the MVL for the district, with that comes various duties including the management of twelve staff members, which is also quite

burdensome in a large district. Although Sandra is an outlier with her only designated role as the MVL, she still has additional duties with the management of personnel that add to an already heavy workload. As her district is much larger than any of the other study participants, she has sizable numbers of families experiencing homelessness. Sandra explained, “being a manager is certainly more demanding. I feel like I can’t be out, because when I do, everything falls apart. If there is an issue, it comes back to me.” As with any role in education today, time is a major factor. Assisting families, completing paperwork, meeting with staff, providing staff development, and managing their other roles can be quite time-consuming. With all of the expectations of MVLs; identification, school stability, and enrollment, support for academic success, and child-centered decision-making, for families in crisis, the data indicated the McKinney-Vento Liaison is an important link to stability and provides a less tenuous existence for families, the participants in my study align with the literature review, the multiplicity of roles affects their ability to fully engage with building effective strategies for families. Patricia seemed to concur when she said “being a strong advocate will wear you down.”

## **Theme II**

*The participants did not receive training prior to assuming the McKinney-Vento Liaison position, but they did receive helpful support from the state coordinator’s office once in the position.*

According to McKinney-Vento legislation, Liaisons must ensure that students have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in school. Each homeless MVL receives professional development in order to carry out his or her duties. However, the second theme that emerged was participants attesting to the fact that they did not receive immediate and much-needed training prior to assuming the position. This caused angst around their decision making. In direct

contrast, another perspective of the theme was how the support of the State Coordinator's office enabled the Liaisons to have a more improved and successful job performance, leading them to become more cognizant of the law, and enabling them to feel confident providing Professional Development to their staff.

From the interviews, what was unmistakable and expressed by each Liaison was their lack of initial training for the role. None of the MVLs were given directed training around McKinney-Vento mandates and expectations prior to assuming the role. Andrea, the longest serving Liaison, replied, "coming into the liaison role many years ago, nothing really, when I came into the role there really wasn't any (training)." Taylor stated, "I did not have any training prior to accepting the role, so I walked in not really knowing."

From their comments, participants were not familiar with the McKinney-Vento legislation, as they received the job duties either as an addition to their duties or by being "voluntold" about the position. Because several had degrees and experience in human services fields or had the heart inclination for the work, they were able to learn on the job and avail themselves of their empath skills to move the essential job duties forward, hoping they were meeting the needs of the families as well as mandated attributes of the legislation.

When questioned on their knowledge of the role before taking it on, the responses they provided were extremely transparent. Leslie stated,

I mean, I was the person that thought they had to live under the bridge to be homeless. So, I literally had none. I didn't know what the requirements were for; it's just not something we talked about ... as a teacher I never knew anything. I had no training whatsoever, didn't know it existed. I had been an assistant principal in a district. But I would hear about students who were homeless and the social workers, you know, would

talk about what kids were homeless and that kind of thing, but in terms of me having to know the requirements and understand what to do and what not to do, when the kid is displaced and when is a kid homeless. I didn't have to know any of that, I really didn't, so I had to learn everything. I am being honest.

Zelda communicated that it was sometimes difficult to move the work forward as a new liaison without the training needed to explain the requirements of the legislation to others and in reality, not quite understanding the legislation herself. She stated, "I was sometimes fearful of making the wrong decision and I would second guess myself all the time."

Liaisons from my study also had to cope with gatekeepers who questioned their decisions around families being enrolled immediately or remaining in their school of origin. For example, there were staff such as enrollment coordinators or school principals in districts who did not understand the procedures and continually questioned decisions made by the Liaisons. They were not aware that families have the right to disagree with any ruling set down by the Liaison who represents the district. If families do not agree with the decision of the Liaison, these policies and procedures have a clear delineation through a direct line to the district Superintendent, Board of Education, and finally the State Coordinator for a resolution. The gatekeepers challenged Liaisons in a variety of ways, and Liaisons indicated without the initial training they felt ill-equipped to articulate their decisions forcefully. Jennifer said,

It took me a while to understand what I could and couldn't do, what decisions were mine alone, and how I could ensure that families' needs were being met. For example, staff and principals sometimes wanted students to be moved to another school without understanding the law and that families had the right to attend the school of origin. This sometimes seemed to be a problem for the child to remain (in the school of origin) if the

student had behavioral issues, and I had to explain the law without stumbling. As I became more familiar with the law, I was able to better articulate, more forcefully articulate what was in the best interest of the student.

Liaisons in my study explained they must consider micro and macro issues affecting families and lend their voice to everyone concerned. This can be difficult when Liaisons are thrust into the position, with a steep learning curve, making decisions that affect students and families. Liaisons are expected to make decisions quickly and efficiently, while ensuring families experiencing homelessness are being treated equitably. They are tasked with guaranteeing that students have access to educational opportunities. Without question, decisions should be viewed as being fair and equitable, while applying the merits of the law. Liaisons are on the front lines of the social justice movement ensuring students are being treated equitably and fairly in all facets of academics and extracurricular activities that have significant consequences on a student's educational life.

Participants from my study emphasized that they needed to contend with the judgment of staff in such matters as immediate enrollment, immediate transportation as dictated by the law, and immunization requirements not being met because a family did not have access to the appropriate paperwork. Many families arrive at a school without the necessary paperwork to enroll, as the documentation was lost in a fire, due to a quick exit because of domestic violence, or as a result of a weather-related event. Patricia described a weather-related event that affected her county and several counties in the Prosperity Zone.

We had families coming in without any identification cards or social security cards or any documentation because their information was lost in the flood and some of them couldn't even get into their houses, and they had to move from another county to stay with

relatives, and some of the enrollment coordinators didn't understand that the law says immediate enrollment. Immediate means immediate.

Liaisons from my study stated that they needed to be very knowledgeable about the federal regulations; be well-versed in local, state, and federal procedures to be able to advocate for the families, identify problems, and make astute calls quickly. Prolonged decisions can negatively affect the academic life of students. Without the prerequisite training, my study participants explained they were unfamiliar with the legislative mandates, but understood the importance of their decisions and how these decisions impacted families and students. Patricia asserted that every decision Liaisons make has an effect on students and families. Even the small aspects are important. Giving students a feeling of normalcy is part of the role: She said,

We try to make them feel like every other kid; even though they are going through a very difficult time, we have to make it happen: graduation, a cap and gown, extracurricular sports, games and practices, creating consistency and normalcy, and you don't receive training for those aspects of the position.

The participants indicated they would have felt more confident with their decisions if they had received appropriate training prior to taking on the role. Training is offered by the State Office for new Liaisons in the fall, but many of the MVLs were given their duties later in the school year, and they were not always self-assured about those decisions. Jennifer addressed her increased confidence with the position:

I am finally getting footing on my voice, if that makes sense ... being able to be here and give the knowledge that I have, and get people to understand, again, that education and advocacy are important to McKinney-Vento. So, it's not just something we have to do. It's something that is important for our students. If we're really talking about being an



equitable district, and being equitable to our students and our families then we have to consider it even so as a big piece of that, because our job as interpreted by the law is that we make the educational experience equitable for those families. So, I am just now beginning to kind of crack that egg in getting people to hear and understand me.

Liaisons felt the lack of training initially impacted the services that families received. What they did not know at the outset concerning the aspects of the law permeated the services for families with whom they worked. Each Liaison, depending upon their lived experiences, needed a different level of support. They each confirmed that once they became more confident, they were able to ensure more positive outcomes for families.

Part of the newfound confidence came with the support that the participants received from the State Coordinator once they entered the MVL role. According to the law, Liaisons are charged with the identification of students, promoting school stability, enrolling students in a timely fashion, supporting academic success and employing child-centered, best-interest decision-making as well as providing professional development for staff. These job functions cannot be managed without the assistance of the State Coordinator. The State Coordinator is entrusted with overseeing compliance of the local Liaisons, as well as providing professional development to enhance their job performance. Theme two also highlighted the affability of the State Coordinator and her hands-on approach in assisting MVLs and the effect of her support on their day-to-day relationships with families. The data clearly communicated that the participants appreciated the availability and responsiveness of the State Coordinator and her team. They explained they were better able to do their job with a State Coordinator who is truly vested in the work. Andrea spoke to the State Coordinator's accessibility:

The State Coordinator and her team work tirelessly to connect with Liaisons throughout the state. Prior to the current coordinator it [support] was non-existent ... but there wasn't a lot of support there, and I don't remember the people's names or whatever that was in place at that point in time, but it wasn't helpful. But since the current coordinator's been there, she's done so much to develop that program and I truly think North Carolina is a leader in the nation as far as what we're doing to support kids.

Within the last three years, the state team has expanded from two to four program specialists, which gives Liaisons more access. In the past, there were only two program specialists who handled issues throughout the state. With the addition of new personnel, Liaisons were afforded fuller discussions around concerns and closer interactions across districts and statewide. Patricia shared thoughts about the positive communication and interactions with the state team:

With the way the coordinator has the regional support specialists set up now, that's really helpful. Because if liaisons don't know, they've got a direct contact to get us the answers and information that we need. I think all of those different things they put in place are very helpful.

Both of the previous quotes highlight the positive collaboration and support provided by the State Coordinator. As described earlier, Liaisons come into the role with little or no training. The state team has an initial training for new Liaisons in the fall that is mandatory and professional development for more seasoned Liaisons who said they still need support. The program specialists host bimonthly virtual meetings so that Liaisons can connect with their peers, keep updated on any new changes, discuss individual issues, and form thought partnerships with

their colleagues, which lessens feelings of isolation. Leslie said, “there is also a Spring Institute with sessions that are pertinent to the position.” Zelda stated:

I think our state leaders in North Carolina do a good job doing training. So, I always go. We typically have a fall training and then a Spring Institute, so I always attend those myself. I don’t typically send anybody in my place. I attend those personally. I get a chance to connect and spend time talking through issues with other Liaisons.

Andrea agreed, stating:

The State Coordinator impacts our work by offering compliance forums that we do on an annual basis. They have lots of webinars that we can look into. We have the learning institutes as well, and they are always informative.

Liaisons are also encouraged by the State Coordinator to attend the annual conference of the NAEHCY. After attending the conference, liaisons are then invited to share what they have learned at the State Spring Institute. Zelda stated,

Attending the NAEHCY Conference allows me to be more confident in my work, research around homeless issues, how to help students transitioning into college and make connections with liaisons around the country to learn about innovative and exciting programs happening in their communities.

Finally, another key point is how the support of the State Coordinator and the professional development provided on that level directly impacts one of the specified duties of the MVL, which is providing professional development to school and district staff. The participants in my study spoke to the support they received in this area from state and national trainings, and which attendance was supported and encouraged by the State Coordinator.

Staff do not always perceive the signs of homelessness and attribute negative behavior of students to some other factor. McKinney-Vento Liaisons dispense training to school counselors, social workers, and teachers in a variety of ways. Some create websites, PowerPoint presentations, and FAQs for staff as well as conducting face-to-face trainings. One ongoing issue participants noted was staff retention and the need to provide this training continually. As the data reflects, staff turnover is increasing in the nation's public schools. The continued turnover of staff in all districts necessitates more training and retraining that must be delivered by MVLs like those in my study. Andrea stated, "staff turnover is a major issue in my district." Sandra said:

When I was in the classroom, there were a lot of kids experiencing homeless[ness], but I was trying to help them from a different level because nobody explained the McKinney-Vento law. To hear other educators say ... I know we have this homeless program that is a federal program. Every school district in the United States. How come I've never heard about it? My response is so many more people would get the help if you had heard about it. That's why we have to keep talking about it and training about it.

It is a high priority that staff understand the issues facing families. Providing pertinent information to staff is an important requisite for the liaison and is directly supported by the State office. The up-to-date information and training the MVLs provide to district staff is directly impacted by their own professional development they receive from the State Coordinator's office

Theme II suggests that while MVLs came into the position without professional development, with the assistance of the state coordinator and her staff, they have been able to coalesce around their job description and effectively sustain their job duties. Patricia commented, [The State Coordinator] is always a phone call away and listens to us with solutions in mind. When difficult issues arise or we need validation or endorsement in our district, the

State office can be counted on to be our voice when needed, and I realize all states are not as lucky. I am ready to nominate our State Coordinator for the national Coordinator of the year. I feel with the resources and assistance she has provided for us, the impact that she is making on the lives of children and families, it would be a well-deserved honor.

Data from Theme II fortified the idea that despite all of the facets and intricacies of the position, there is a dearth of training for Liaisons prior to taking on the role. Liaisons agreed they were propelled into the position in conjunction with other job capacities, not aware of the legislative compliance, conditions that families faced, and the multi-faceted decision-making aspects of the position. Liaisons discussed feeling unprepared, and in some cases uneducated, concerning the complexities required. The Liaisons in this study stated they were not sure of their efficacy when assuming the role. Despite failing to receive requisite training early in the process, they were able to find their voice and foster change in their districts for the betterment of students and families. As the McKinney-Vento Liaison is a stand alone in their district, they must depend on the State Coordinator to ensure they are in compliance with the law and are making the best child-centered decisions. Each Liaison praised the State Office and the manner in which they received support. From the responsiveness of a phone call, to bimonthly meetings with the Program Administrators, to support when there is a pressing question from a district staff member concerning an unhoused family, the State Office is quick to respond and support the Liaisons in their responsibilities. The State Office received high praise for their ability to support Liaisons, with much of that support credited to the leadership of the State Coordinator.

With the support of the State Coordinator, the interests and needs of families are at the forefront of efforts to return a family to stability. This dichotomous view showed a comparison and contrast of McKinney-Vento Liaisons receiving support. How that support creates a more

confident Liaison and has a direct correlation to a positive impact on served families. While the participants noted they entered into the position with little or no training, they affirmed that with the assistance of the State office, they felt more confident in their decisions, and how the educational background of each Liaison in the areas of counseling and or social work actualized their depth of knowledge. With their own professional development provided by the State office, they were able to implement transference of this knowledge to staff in their districts, which is an indispensable segment of their job duties.

### **Theme III**

*Participants reported that they are ultimately responsible for a district's students who are experiencing homelessness, but they must develop partnerships and collaborations to assist homeless families effectively.*

According to Hallett and Skrla (2017), “students who are homeless and highly mobile endure significant challenges that are often hidden, poorly understood, misunderstood, or ignored by schools and districts” (p. 106). Recently, a principal stated to me, “I know about McKinney-Vento, but I really don't know about McKinney-Vento. All I know about this student is he is not in my attendance zone.” This quote from the leader of a school speaks to the importance of the MVL and the need for them to be visible, to advocate, and to collaborate with external and internal partners.

The third theme I identified reflected that Liaisons are the single sole source of knowledge about homelessness in the districts. According to the participants, the McKinney-Vento Liaison is valued for their perceived knowledge of the topic, but their role is not always fully understood. They in fact, must create a social identity in the district. The social identity of the MVL is created through their knowledge and understanding of the tenets of the MVA, but

more importantly, their social identity is evidenced by their ability to build collaborative relationships with diverse stakeholders.

The term “sole source” is typically used as a fiscal term but is appropriate in this instance. Sole source is defined as the only one capable of providing a service, which accurately describes McKinney-Vento Liaisons. They are the single source, or have the sole responsibility in the district, of providing support to families experiencing homelessness. As the only one-of-a-kind assignment in the district, they must create their own social identity. As the solitary person in the district handling the many facets of the position, Liaisons make decisions independently, without the benefit of a team approach. They do not have a team to confer with on pertinent issues and decisions that are made. Their solution to families’ problems is made within a vacuum to protect the privacy of the families while at the same time endeavoring to create a collective behavior group of external and internal partnerships to ensure students’ needs are met.

Therefore, although McKinney-Vento Liaisons work independently, they have to be accomplished in working and collaborating with others in their districts and communities who have the same empathy for families experiencing homelessness. They must navigate through those who do not understand the ramifications of the law. ESSA revisions state a homeless student’s living arrangement must be treated as an education record and is subject to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protections. In other words, this information is to be provided only on a need-to- know basis.

Although MVLs are sole source experts who occupy a position of one, they formulate groups based on their “identity.” The social identity theoretical framework highlights how these identities are formed. Groups provide people with a sense of who they are and as well as who they are not, and much of what happens within and between groups can be understood as

attempts by people to express, clarify, or defend their social identity. Social identities do not form in a vacuum or as a planetary revolution that never touches the other lived experiences. All of the participants have backgrounds in human services fields, which gives them the ability to create a social identity within a group and advocate for students. MVLs must carve out or create their own social identity and underscore the importance of their role in the school district and community. Taylor asserted,

Advocacy and outreach. I think it is my widest sphere of influence. they know I'm an advocate for homeless children and not so much for the adults, but why children?

Because I always say it's not their fault. You know it's through no part of their own that they are in these circumstances, but being an island of one, party of one when you're trying to make sure you are compliant within the legislation can be difficult.

MVLs must find a way to collaborate with staff whose biases against families experiencing homelessness is evident. Liaisons spoke about their battles with “gatekeepers,” who can be found in any segment of the educational population, from administration to enrollment coordinators to classroom teachers, to sports coaches. Gatekeepers are persons that control access. Gatekeepers may create barriers for homeless families through intentionality, behaviors, or unrealistic beliefs. Gatekeepers work to keep homeless students out of a particular school or district. Liaisons noted these actions can be motivated by a lack of cultural understanding, an unclear understanding of what the law entails, being uninformed, or in some cases, being biased against familial situations, especially if this family is a “frequent flier” with societal issues such as drugs or chronic unemployment. Sandra said,



I am fearful every day of the fact that they just don't get it ... they don't get the fact that it's not a person's personal fault that got them in that situation, all the time things happen and one little mistake can cause a whole mountain to fall.

Requesting that a family provide documents immediately that they may not have access to because of domestic violence, or having to leave a situation without warning is one barrier that families have been exposed to. Another barrier can be a child's behavioral issues. This type of gatekeeping becomes a social justice issue as it deprives students of the right to an equitable and fair education. Studies have confirmed that students experiencing homelessness are unfairly suspended or given harsher punishment even in the elementary grades, without the trauma of their life circumstances being considered. Each Liaison felt that it was important to facilitate change in people's attitudes, their discernment, and their compassion to each family's situation. Patricia said,

I think in my district I make the most impact because I let them know that students in transition, whether they're unaccompanied, they must be enrolled immediately. I mean that's kind of like a given, even if they don't want to enroll them, or they'll try to give an appointment to come back next week...sometimes they don't have a lease, you know, so they will try to make them do an affidavit. I have to work with those gatekeepers to change the perceptions but also stand on the law.

Liaisons caution staff that one cannot view the lives of families experiencing homelessness through a middle-class lens. Taylor explained that she works to change the stereotypes and the staff's perceptions of the families that they are encountering. She wants to diffuse the notion that when families are asking for resources, their needs are not genuine, and persuade staff to embrace a different perception of the student in crisis. She related one instance

when she had prior knowledge that other staff members did not have. The family was embarrassed and didn't want to share the information of their current situation. Taylor had to work independently to assist the family and somehow relay to staff that there were exigent circumstances without breaking the trust of the family. She shared:

You know the staff can stereotype, assuming that our families were taking advantage of systems when they really weren't. For example, I had one mom who was driving a fairly new SUV and teachers made disparaging remarks about the family and the younger child falling asleep in class. What they didn't understand was that she was a working mom with a job, but due to circumstances, she did not have a residence and the students were sleeping in the car. She had to decide whether she was going to pay the rent or other bills. She hoped the landlord would work with her. She paid some, but was evicted ... The teacher was very negative about it. I was privy to this information, but the teacher was not and part of my role was to help her understand the student's circumstances. My role is to help other staff to think outside the box about student issues and not stereotype families based on what they see visually.

Similarly, Patricia said:

We have certain schools that make it difficult for families. They may not say it because they know it's not politically correct. But yes, it's their actions and their tone. They don't want them there, particularly if they have behavior problems or if they move a lot, they don't want them, so they will do an extensive search, and I have to clarify the law for them.

The Liaisons in my study confirmed these stereotypes prevent families from seeking assistance. Another misperception by school staff is that homelessness is a short-term condition,

when in reality it can take families years to alter their situation. Taylor was able to relate her experiences to the feelings of these families. As a young child, her parents went through a divorce. She didn't realize that she would have been considered a McKinney-Vento student because she moved in with relatives and was doubled up. Upon reflection, Taylor stated,

It makes it a little personal to me to understand and know that these families are struggling, that although they may be residing with relatives, it is not fixed, regular, or adequate for children as they may be sleeping two or three to a bed and sometimes in unsafe conditions, but culturally, even they do not feel they are homeless and the Liaison is the only person in the school that the family relates to.

Each Liaison voiced similar sentiments. Patricia said, "Although I am one person, and I know the law, it comes down to identity." Taylor put it this way,

I wanted to be a vessel to the families as they are enduring a storm. I feel I am just being a shelter in the storm and I will do whatever it takes to find solutions. It is sometimes a lonely journey to find the solution, but if our homeless families need barriers broken down or need access, I know it is my role to ensure they receive that access. Making sure, as much as possible, that children have a sense of normalcy and to lessen feelings of disenfranchisement.

In order to fulfill their sole responsibilities, Liaisons must be adept at collaboration. Juxtaposed with the self-reliance of the position is their ability to collaborate with external and internal partners. Each Liaison is skillful at building relationships. The Liaisons in my study emphasized their inability to execute their job without allies. Each of them pointed out internal and external collaborators in their communities that were instrumental in assisting families in need.

Liaisons related how important their collaboration is with counselors and social workers. In the larger districts, the school social workers were the ones with their ear closest to the ground around families in distress. As the school social worker was the face that families were most familiar with (other than the child's teacher), they were more willing to discuss fears and concerns with the social workers, who in turn were the direct conduit to the McKinney-Vento Liaison, spending many hours collaborating to solve problems. They were also the first to know about beneficial school initiatives that should be shared with district administrators to help families. During the pandemic, several districts had funds specifically for families in need and community support was at an all-time high. Liaisons, social workers, and counselors were working hand in hand to ensure families experiencing homelessness were receiving needed services without being able to physically see or visit families. Leslie noted,

I have a point of contact in schools. So, it's either a licensed school counselor or a licensed school social worker, and they work together in teams. We're blessed to have a lot of student support service. Our local county government provides in addition to what the state funding allows and so they work together, and I have kind of one point of contact who helps me with identification and I work closely with all of them.

Zelda noted the importance of the Child Nutrition Department in the equation:

And my child nutrition, yeah, my child nutrition director, we are very close, we work real closely together, as far as, you know, trying to make sure that they eat, that they go to eat, and they get their food without delay and backpack buddies in the summertime.

Some participants also made key collaborations with their districts' transportation department. During the interviews, I asked each Liaison to describe the three greatest barriers they faced. Without fail, each one noted transportation as a major barrier. One of the most

difficult aspects of the position is coordinating transportation, and the transportation hurdle came up time and again. Having students reach school on time, when the school is across the district from where the students reside, or in a mountainous region with winding roads, or a large rural area can be formidable. Each Liaison voiced the challenge of ensuring students reached their schools of origin on time. But the greatest obstacle was guaranteeing students reached school at all, when two districts were trying to coordinate. According to the study participants, the transportation staff became essential in this equation. Jennifer shared,

My transportation department is outstanding. They bend over backwards to make sure students are able to get to their schools. They have even been known to go back out to pick up a McKinney-Vento student when there has been miscommunication about where a child is staying and the bus drivers became a part of that child's village to make sure he arrived at school on time.

As a means to help facilitate better services, Taylor and Sandra created Families in Transition (FIT) teams. The team consisted of data managers, child nutrition directors, transportation directors, counselors, and school nurses. These teams received in-depth training during the summer months to ensure everyone understood the parameters of the legislation and to provide assurance that major departments were on board. Taylor explained her process for her FIT team:

So, first of all, we talk about staff development. I have implemented a FIT team, Families in Transition team. The team consisted of the data managers to the enrolled. They help with the enrollment piece, child nutrition director and managers and the school nurses. So, they see in-depth training during the summer, making sure that we were all on board, and then at the beginning of the school year, as I shared earlier, we will go out into the

schools and provide training from the team on McKinney-Vento. And at least once a month, the team will send out information reminding staff to be aware of families that may be in distress. This team is instrumental because sometimes they get information that I am not aware of.

One area where there should be more collaboration is the Multi-Tiered System of Support Team (MTTS). This data-based problem-solving team does not always have the underlying reason of homelessness as a basis of a child's situation because the McKinney-Vento Liaison is not included as a member of the team. Participants stated they were working to become more integrated with this team. They wanted to collaborate with team members to help them understand that there may be basic foundational issues for a child's academic or behavioral issues that the team might not be aware of without their input.

Each Liaison spoke about allies who are not directly involved in McKinney-Vento work but collaborate willingly, such as chief equity officers, deputy superintendents, and chief financial officers. Jennifer said of her allies, "They trust the work I do and support the work that I'm doing, which makes things a lot easier when they understand and support the work and the difficult decisions I sometimes have to make."

Externally, all MVLs served on numerous local committees such as the Continuum of Care (COC), local governmental agencies, and numerous faith-based entities. Each Liaison reported using their voices to advocate for families, whether it was with a local hotel, lessening the stigma around families experiencing homelessness, or finding community grants to assist families. Each participant emphatically stated they could not do their job as effectively as they do without collaboration within the communities they serve. The collaboration cuts across faith-

based, civic, and personal connections. Liaisons were not above using those personal connections to aid a family when needed. For instance, Andrea shared:

I have a wonderful church where I can just literally send a text message to one of the members and say, 'I've got a family that needs this,' and 99% of the time they're able to help with whatever that might be. We also have a couple of community groups that will do nice donations every year, as far as monetary donations. We've got everything done from paying a utility bill to buying shoes.

Liaisons are constantly attempting to expand these partnerships wherever they can by serving on boards of different organizations to heighten their visibility in the community.

Jennifer advocated for more extensive partnerships:

I said before, a lot of the partnerships that we have are just meeting basic needs of students and family. The larger question becomes "what other partnerships can we have or bring in that might help us with academic services or transitions from PreK-Kindergarten or from twelfth grade into college, to bring on partnerships that can cover the full spectrum rather than just one small piece.

These external and internal collaborations are sometimes the catalyst to assist Liaisons with removing the barriers families face. Each liaison made a point of stressing the importance of building relationships throughout the town, city, or county. They participate in organizational initiatives, speak to community organizations about the issues and concerns in their specific district, and are counted on when organizations need volunteers. Zelda explained her give and take with community entities:

I coordinate with the advisors of school clubs so that when community organizations need volunteers, they have a ready pool of students willing to help. This allows for

building relationships with these organizations and in turn, when a family is in need, they are willing to help.

Sandra stated,

I think I make the most impact in my district by being first of all, I'm hands on. I'm visible. I'm all over. I go to schools, I go to shelters, I go to the hotel. My name is out there ... Let me be the person to help, no matter what it is ... but I look at the whole child and the whole family. They may not have running water at home or heat, so they can't go to school now. I work with my staff to look outside the box because without understanding, you can't connect. And no, we cannot necessarily walk in their shoes. But in order to do this job, you have to have empathy. You have to listen. You have to understand.

Zelda concluded, "We build relationships with families, staff, with communities. It is imperative with the work we do and the impact we must make." Patricia commented,

The more people I can train about the effects of homelessness, the signs to look for, and strategies and resources available, the more families are positively impacted. It's hard to manage all the day to day, things that I might need to do, you know, entering, keeping up with my spreadsheet of homeless students, making sure I get them identified in PowerSchool, Opening Purchase orders to buy them supplies when they need it, trying to get them signed up for tutoring when they need it. That's hard for me to add to my role, because I just, you know, I have so many different hats. I had to stop taking work home, I just had to. One of the greatest barriers is the lack of time to do the job really, really, like it really should be done. Once I really got into it and started seeing or going to the hotels and seeing six people in one room, with no food and clothes, I was really like I want to



learn more. If I had my way, if I could just be the king ... I would just be a McKinney-Vento Liaison and not do anything else.

As stated earlier, the term sole source is typically used as a fiscal term, but is appropriate in this instance. The MVL has the sole responsibility in the district of assuring the legislation is carried out as it is mandated by federal law. As the sole single source expert, they are tasked with ensuring families' wants and needs are met. At times, this means working in a silo, as privacy to the families is paramount as directed by ESSA and FERPA regulations. The role of the McKinney-Vento Liaison is facilitating systems for families experiencing homelessness, disrupting social dislocation while working within an organizational silo to maintain individual family privacy.

At the same time, they must be able to collaborate with a multitude of agencies, inside and outside of the school district. While working independently on many issues, they must also form collaborative partnerships as well as disturb stereotypes and misperceptions formed by gatekeepers. Partnerships, whether internal or external, are crucial elements to ensuring families have some of the basic necessities they need when they are in distress. Liaisons recounted they form alliances with as many people in the "village" as possible. They must be tuned in to the community and its available resources to be able to pick up the phone and garner what is needed in real time.

As reaffirmed in each interview, Liaisons must carve out their identity as they are the only staff in this role. They walk a fine line of independent action and collaborative processes. As Patricia noted in her last thought during the interview, "whatever it takes to create stability for the students, that is what we do."

## **Theme IV**

*Participants reported that they received limited resources to conduct their work.*

The fourth theme to emerge was the limited resources McKinney-Vento Liaisons have to assist families who need a hand up and out of their situation. As I mentioned in Chapter I, McKinney-Vento is not a fully funded mandate. The McKinney-Vento Legislation states that all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that receive Title IA funds must reserve (set aside) funds for homeless children, which is determined by a per-pupil allocation formula. Districts can also seek optional funding through grants. However, other than the Title 1A funding requirement, there is no other designated funding for McKinney-Vento Liaisons nor for the students they serve. An additional problem is that not all students experiencing homelessness attend Title I schools. Therefore, higher increases in a district's incidences of homelessness will not necessarily correlate with an increase in funding.

Liaisons declared that school districts must take a more vested financial interest in McKinney-Vento students. A scarcity of resources means a Liaison must be accomplished at managing the finite funds they receive. The expectations of assisting families with homelessness did not come with a funding source other than the Title I set-aside. Therefore, it is critical that the McKinney-Vento Liaison and the Title I Director collaborate. The Title I grant has funding that can be set aside for this population; however, it does not meet all of the student needs and can only be applied to allowable expenses as designated by Title I. These funds can contribute to additional tutoring services, and can be utilized for some additional academic support. The funding cannot be used for rent, utilities, or clothing for parents. The set-aside can be used to transport homeless students to and from their school of origin only if it is an excess cost.

It weighed heavily on McKinney-Vento Liaisons that their attempts to do a difficult job exist without adequate resources. None of the reported district budgets have a line item specifically for McKinney-Vento students. Sandra said, “We are doing this work with really only the funding from federal funds but with no local money.” Patricia reflected on possibilities, explaining,

I do not have a local budget, and that issue was a topic that just came up this past week because we have a new finance director. And he did say that at one time there was a social work budget, so I am hopeful that having a budget may be a priority.

In every three-year cycle, districts can apply for a McKinney-Vento subgrant. This competitive and intricate application process offers no guarantee that districts will receive the funding. The district must have the minimum specified number of students in the previous three-year cycle to apply for the grant. The grant is funded on a tiered system with districts having a larger homeless population receiving a greater portion of the funding. These grant amounts range from \$15,000 to \$90,000 for a three-year cycle. Leslie regretted not receiving the grant in the previous cycle:

Previously, I did not get the McKinney-Vento Grant and I applied to get it, the cycle before last, or the last cycle that we’re finishing up right now. And then Covid happened and I am waiting to see if I receive those funds, which are determined by a grant selection cohort group.

During the pandemic, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) was flowing and some of that funding was disbursed for McKinney-Vento students. As this funding ends in the next fiscal year, so does the additional funding provided by the bill. Andrea noted,

We are a Title I school-wide district, so that money is parsed out to all of the schools so they can have that on hand for them and I do have the subgrant as well as the ESSER 183 and ESSER 184 funding right now. But there is no funding out of local accounts. We've got the Title I set-aside, but other than that, without my donations and stuff, we don't have any local set-aside.

The ESSER funding is scheduled to be allocated and designated for final usage by 2024, and will not be reauthorized, so any programs or staffing paid for with these funds must be reallocated or dissolved. The Liaisons highlighted there was specific funding for Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) students, Exceptional Children (EC), students, sports, and other programs, but a population that has few resources (McKinney-Vento families) also receive few resources.

As previously stated, one of the most expensive costs is transportation. Contracted transportation via a private carrier can become very expensive, can be difficult to find, is not cost effective, and has safety considerations. Logistically, finding transportation for a student can consume a major portion of a Liaison's Day; the Liaison must be willing to coordinate with the Transportation Department, which can be extremely challenging. Sandra said,

If a child is an hour away, crossing three different lines, it is one of my most difficult days as it may not be feasible for me, trying to make it work nor do I have the manpower to make it work. Sustainable funding has not kept up with the number of families needing services. Costs have increased, needs have intensified, but funding continues to be minute or nonexistent and it has not kept up with needed services.

It is left up to the Liaisons to search for additional funding sources. Liaisons shared several ways in which they made connections and convinced community groups to assist them.

These range from motorcycle groups donating supplies to individuals donating backpacks to Public School Foundations providing short-term housing for families, to “Stuff the Bus” initiatives for donated school supplies.

In one highly resourced district, a simple call to the Public-School Foundation was all that was needed to assist a family, but low-wealth districts did not have that luxury. Sandra noted, “I’ve written many grants through banks, community groups, to help, and the community foundation, which is a quicker process so we can help with things that we normally couldn't help with any of the federal funding.”

Liaisons are often questioned as to why they can’t assist a family with some basic necessities with Title I funds. Leslie exclaimed,

[I have to let] people know I can’t use McKinney-Vento funds to put them in a hotel for even one night. I can’t use McKinney-Vento funds to buy them a pizza to eat that night in the hotel that the organization put them up in, I always say it’s academic related and it’s removing barriers to their academic success. So, then somebody’s going to argue back, ‘Well sleeping on the streets is a barrier to academic success.’ Yes, it is, but legally I can’t!

Sandra echoed Leslie’s statement:

In order to spend it, there are internal barriers. We only do checks. We don’t do debit cards. It’s a process to get checks processed, you know. Vendors don't want a check any more. Then there’s no one who wants to wait 30 days. So, because of that, I’ve written many grants, through banks, community banks to help me and the public-school foundation, which is a quicker process. So, we can help with things that we normally

couldn't with regular federal funding. We rely on organizations, neighborhood churches, and small organizations that just want to help one school.

Liaisons expressed the frustration of not being able to solve all the issues, not having the funds to work with all families who need it. The other emotion that stood out was their love for the job, regardless of the frustration. Patricia and Taylor said they wouldn't want to give up the position because they have a passion for the work. Jennifer noted,

Without the necessary resources, the biggest challenge is wanting to do more and feeling like your hands are tied when you see families going through and you don't have enough fiscal resources to help them and you have to go to several sources, and piece things together to assist them.

In the end, MVLs recognize that families have a myriad of needs when they become unhoused. The participants emphasized one important feature of the McKinney-Vento legislation that is needed is a request for adequate funding. Liaisons have become skillful at writing grants, making connections with community agencies that have funding, and going directly to sources such as Public-School Foundations, motorcycle clubs, and community outreach agencies to meet the needs of families. Although this legislation was created over 30 years ago, and the number of unhoused families continues to grow, the funding sources are inadequate. Funding was not present in the bill and more importantly, in comparison, funding has not grown at all, even with the exponential growth in homelessness. Until it becomes of great significance to the powers that be, and they understand that more funding is needed, McKinney-Vento Liaisons will continue to beat the bushes, wherever and whenever they can, for funding sources to benefit families.

## **Conclusion**

My study confirmed that there is compelling evidence that the role of the McKinney-Vento Liaison is unlike any other role in a school district. As one can infer from the themes, there are many facets of the position, with the foremost role of being there for families in times of crisis to ensure their children have some sense of normalcy during a chaotic time. These Liaisons are tasked with an impossible job, almost like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up a hill only for it to roll down again. Families experiencing homelessness is not a short-term phenomenon; it has been with us for an eternity. What stands out in this qualitative study is the ethos of people helping people.

The McKinney-Vento Liaison is a hands-on, heart filled position: each of the Liaisons has developed not only a skill set, but also a passion for the work. What was significant when I interviewed the participants was the lack of resources for families in transition. Emerging from their voices was the ability to make things happen for families when at times resources seemed few and far between. I have listened to the voices of the McKinney-Vento Liaisons. Sometimes it seems as if they may be a voice in the wilderness, but with their voices and their actions, they never stop striving to give hope and compassion to the families they serve.

The extinction of homelessness is one of the major social justice issues of our times and the McKinney-Vento Liaisons are in our school districts quietly and efficiently assisting those students without a “fixed, regular, and adequate” place to lay their heads at night. Jennifer spoke for the participants as she articulated their “why”: “Why do they do what they do? Simply because it matters! It matters in the life of a child; it matters in the life of a family and ultimately it matters in the quality of life in a community.” She concluded:

We worked with them for months to find housing and to get things together for her kids and to help her find work and just to see how, even then, when everything kind of came together for her, because she felt like the world was against her, like the first time seeing her smile, and to see her happy and to see her thankful for everything that our team did to help them get back on their feet and ultimately exited the McKinney-Vento program, that was everything because it just confirmed that the work you did mattered. And she still talks about it to this day. ... Those stories make it all worth it and make it most rewarding.

In this chapter, I provided brief profiles of each of my study participants and described the settings in which they work. Next, I presented the main themes that emerged from my analysis of the interviews. These themes represented my study findings.



## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In my study, I examined how McKinney-Vento Liaisons (MVLs) deliver programming to disenfranchised families and their experiences in performing their duties. The main question of my study was: *what are the experiences and perceptions of McKinney-Vento Liaisons regarding their work with homeless youth and families?* During interviews with MVLs, I strove to understand how they follow the legislative requirements of the position, and I also explored their everyday work lives as they sought to establish linkages among families, schools, and communities.

In this chapter, I engage in analysis by connecting my findings with existing research. I then discuss the implications of my study before providing recommendations for practice, including the development of a standard operating practice protocol. I conclude with final thoughts and personal reflections.

### **Analysis**

My findings consisted of four main themes that emerged from my interviews. Each of the four themes provided insight into the Liaisons' roles as they attempted to meet the needs of families in their districts and operated as the only person in the district answerable to this responsibility. Participants explained how their own view of homelessness evolved from believing that homelessness was a term that only applied to someone who lived in their car or under a bridge; to understanding that the term embodies the complexities of what constitutes a "fixed, regular, and adequate" nighttime residence for families. My participants explained how they began to understand that homelessness is complex and ever-changing with significant long-term issues for families. The broad research question allowed participants to relive their daily

experiences and speak candidly about the joys of the position and the barriers they faced. The analysis of my study's four findings are as follows.

### **Finding I**

*McKinney-Vento Liaisons' multiplicity of roles impacts their ability to fully engage with families.*

While teachers and administrators understand they have homeless students, generally, most are not aware of the actual number of unhoused students in their districts. Many of these students experiencing homelessness in districts are invisible, not seen or heard, and suffering in silence and embarrassment about not having clean clothes to wear, adequate food to eat, or a home to go to after school hours. As Hallet and Skrla (2017) noted, "Students experiencing homelessness tend to be overlooked or considered at the fringes of the overall student population" (p. 3). One of the fastest-growing homeless populations involves those individuals living in a family unit. A U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report (HUD, 2013) demonstrates that most youth under the age of 18 in homeless situations live within a family unit, which differs from our view of what homelessness looks like.

It is the role of the MVL to identify those students in their districts without a primary nighttime residence. I found that the MVLs in my study held multiple roles in the districts, which limited the services they provided for students. Ingram et al. (2017) noted that 90% of liaisons had other responsibilities and could only designate half of their time, or less, to their McKinney-Vento duties. This finding was borne out by my study. For example, Leslie explained how her other duties besides MVL have numerous expectations and responsibilities as well. She is expected to attend all of the leadership meetings with principals and other staff, prepare for budgeting issues, and oversee the aspects of her other programs. She added these duties "reduce

the time directly spent working with families.” It is evident that the MVLs need more support as well as more time and staff singularly dedicated to the position to adequately meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Supporting this point, a California-based study by Shea et al. (2010) found that 92% of homeless Liaisons reported that they spend less than 25% of their time carrying out their duties. In my study, participants discussed the number of roles they held and how the multiplicity of roles negatively affected their work-life balance and the efficacy of McKinney-Vento mandates.

Based on what my participants reported, Liaisons also have to contend with compliance demands. MVLs are tasked with completing the annual needs assessment and tabulating the number of students in each district, which includes younger and older siblings not attending school. They foster school stability by helping the student remain in their school of origin. Patricia explained that one family lost their paperwork due to a flood. She said, “I had to explain to the enrollment coordinator that they must be enrolled immediately, even without the paperwork and these conversations take time away from working directly with families.” The MVLs also spend an inordinate amount of time meeting with other community agencies, such as the Department of Social Services, Public School Foundations, or social services agencies. Andrea stated, “There is just not enough time for implementation of the program.”

Homelessness also adversely affects students who may already be marginalized such as students of color or LGBTQ students. Students of color experience homelessness at higher proportions than expected based on the overall number of students. In the school year 2020-21, the top three subgroups of students who experienced homelessness by race and ethnicity were Hispanic or Latino students at 39%, White students at 26%, and Black or African American students at 24%. Data from school year 2019-20 showed these same subgroups as the top three

highest race and ethnicity groups, but with Hispanic or Latino students as the largest racial or ethnic group, followed by Black or African American students and White students. Hispanic and Latino students accounted for 28% of the overall student body, but 38% of students experiencing homelessness. African American students accounted for 15% of the overall student body, but 27% of students experiencing homelessness. White students accounted for 46% of all students enrolled in public schools, but they represent 26% of students experiencing homelessness. Both Asian and White students were underrepresented among students who experienced homelessness. Asian students accounted for 5% of students overall, but only 2% of students who experienced homelessness (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022). These numbers highlight the inequities across racial and ethnic lines. This data speaks to the continued disenfranchisement of students experiencing homelessness and how it disproportionately affects students who are displaced. It is imperative that the MVLs focus on the immediate enrollment of students to reduce their instability and help lessen the societal issues that students face by being in a safe environment during the school day. Study participants were keenly aware of this issue. Jennifer addressed leveling the playing field for these students saying,

We provide services for these students so they can be on same playing field as students as students who are in regular housing. For example, it comes down to a variety of services, including educational services, medical or therapeutic services, whatever they need that they do not have access to.

Even in districts with large homeless populations, my research found that MVLs may still be tasked with other duties. This is similar to findings from Ingram et al. (2017), who discovered that the amount of time MVLs can work directly on issues related to families experiencing homelessness is quite small. My study participants concurred. For instance, although Sandra had

large numbers of McKinney-Vento students on paper and her sole job was designated as McKinney-Vento Liaison, she was also given management duties, which took up a large portion of her time. Throughout the interviews with participants, time and again, they spoke to the number of duties and the impact it made on their job performance relative to assisting families experiencing homelessness. The data conclusively affirmed that the MVLs' duties are enormous and time-consuming. They strategized to complete all of their responsibilities within an 8-hour workday, which was rarely the case. Work-life balance was a concern for the Liaisons as well as their wanting to do their jobs expeditiously. Taylor affirmed this thought with these words; "a child needed it and they just couldn't wait."

## **Finding II**

*The participants did not receive training prior to assuming the McKinney-Vento Liaison position, but they did receive helpful support from the state coordinator's office once in the position.*

As stated in Chapter III, Liaisons did not receive professional development or training prior to being assigned the role. A concerning aspect of this theme is that the Liaisons were thrust into the position without adequate training before taking on the role, which they felt placed them at a disadvantage. Generally, professional development of some type is essential to anyone starting a new position. Once the Liaisons were in the role, however, my study showed that, with the help of the State Coordinator and her staff providing support and professional development, Liaisons were better able to impart this information to staff with confidence and mastery of the law and its requirements.

Professional development is a requisite and must be continuous and ongoing for MVLs and school and district staff. One of the responsibilities of MVLs is providing professional

development to staff. This is where the State Coordinator and her team came into play. Once Liaisons received the support and professional development they needed, they, in turn, felt they were better able to provide pertinent training for staff in their districts. However, many school-based professionals remain unaware of the existence of McKinney-Vento or uncertain of its specific provisions (Miller, 2011b). Ironically, as McKinney-Vento students are hidden in plain sight, it seems McKinney-Vento Liaisons sometimes face that same challenge. McKinney-Vento Liaisons are not always known about or seen within the district or valued when attempting to remain within the confines of the law. Increased awareness, in particular, for other staff members is needed, such as psychologists or behavioral specialists, if they are going to be able to successfully discern the signs of homelessness and advocate for these students when there are behavioral issues. They must become aware of the tenets of the legislation around educational stability, pairing with community agencies and expanding relations among family, school, and community Hallet and Skrla (2021). By becoming more cognizant of the current research and findings, staff will become better able to address the needs of students who are homeless in their schools (Wisehart et al., 2013). With all of the conditions of the McKinney-Vento Legislation, it was important for Liaisons to receive information to become more effective in the role and to be seen as the expert when explaining policy to staff.

Another area that should be examined closely is the amount of time Liaisons spent training and retraining staff in their district. In every district, staff turnover is increasing.

According to Ronfeldt et al. (2013),

Teacher turnover rates can be high, particularly in schools serving low income, non-white and low-achieving student populations. Nationally, about 30% of new teachers leave the

profession within 5 years, and the turnover rate is higher in high-poverty schools as compared to more affluent ones. (p. 5)

Albeit, Liaisons did not receive adequate training prior to being placed in the position, my findings indicated that collaboration with the State Coordinator and program administrators gave Liaisons specialized training to have, as Zelda described, “more tools in my toolkit.” The efforts of the State Coordinator and her team enabled Liaisons to become more confident in their work and their knowledge of McKinney-Vento legislation. In turn, the Liaisons were better able to impart this knowledge to their colleagues, which led to a clearer understanding of the importance of the McKinney-Vento Act in their districts. In the final analysis, professional development for Liaisons as well as school staff is an essential component of avoiding misperceptions about family situations and the stigma many families feel regarding their condition of being unhoused.

### **Finding III**

*Participants reported that they are ultimately responsible for a district’s students who are experiencing homelessness, but they must develop partnerships and collaborations to assist homeless families effectively.*

McKinney-Vento Liaisons are the link between school and community to ensure equity and access for students. They become master collaborators within the school and throughout the community. Experiences from a lifetime of social services and school interactions as well as being a Liaison affected how MVLs performed their job and made connections within the school district and community. Being fully engaged and building relationships with school, families and community strengthens the momentum for meeting the responsibilities of the legislation, as well as the moral aspects of “people helping people” which legislation cannot mandate.

Two of my participants reported having direct experience. During childhood, one participant, doubled up with family during a divorce, while another moved due to extenuating circumstances without a job or a home. They reflected upon their past experiences and were able to relate to the families they serve and how best to collaborate with inter and intra agencies. Taylor explained that a “challenge” for her was “getting agencies to see, hey, until you walk in their shoes or until you experience it, you don’t understand.” She found that her own experiences were invaluable stating “and what helped me was a personal piece of having my family struggle as a child.”

Through these experiences and because of their knowledge of societal issues, Liaisons spend much of their time advocating for families. They may be figuring out how to get around a barrier, taking food to a hotel because a family is in need, or reassuring a hotel registration desk clerk that a family is not destructive just because they are homeless. Taylor spoke of advocacy, noting, “Leadership trusts me to make the right call. I have to change people’s attitudes, understanding, and empathy.” Even with all of the responsibilities of MVLs, they continue to feel they are working for the greater good, which speaks to the heart of the MVLs. As Sandra explained, “I am walking in my purpose ... I’m constantly doing something. I’m constantly advocating.”

With all of the collaborations and allies that the Liaisons establish, it is no small wonder that their trajectory for changing minds and hearts can be far-reaching. In my study, Liaisons described a multitude of collaborations. Many positions in a district directly affect their constituencies, but Liaisons reported collaborating to directly affect schools in a variety of ways, from the academic needs of students to extracurricular activities to post-secondary opportunities for students who need help understanding the process. Taylor, for example, explained that she



has met with staff members on college campuses to ensure students have the right documentation for college. She commented, “I received a phone call from the Special Populations Coordinator on a local college campus to confirm that our former student had indeed experienced homelessness ... Our relationship with students doesn’t stop when they graduate; we still follow their progress.”

MVLs can also affect family dynamics, ensuring families are aware of their rights and helping them to maneuver through an ever-changing landscape. And finally, Liaisons partner with community agencies in all types of ways, from those supporting housing insecurity or food insecurity to finding sustainable solutions for problems families are facing. Zelda spoke passionately about her relationship with an organization that provided food for students in the district. She had developed such a great partnership with them that she could simply go to their office to pick up food for a needy family. She stated, “That is the kind of partnership we had with the organization. If there was a need, no questions asked.” These activities highlight aspects of a Continuum of Care process, utilizing a variety of service providers to meet the necessities of families.

#### **Finding IV**

*Participants reported that they received limited resources to conduct their work.*

The Liaisons in my study consistently declared that one of the greatest barriers faced by their program is lack of funding. In a study by Ingram et al. (2017), 78% of Liaisons confirmed their biggest challenge was funding. The Title I set-aside funding does not meet all the needs of students in this situation. My study participants noted they received Title I set-aside funds and several explained they worked well with their Title I directors, but the set-aside funding does not

adequately serve students experiencing homelessness. State and local entities do not have budget line items for McKinney-Vento students.

Schoolhouse Connection is an advocacy group working to end homelessness. Using data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education and in conjunction with the University of Michigan, issued a report that highlights policy and recommendations ensuring access to fiscal supports as an important part of creating a school system that meets the needs of all our nation's children and youth. They noted:

In the 2020-21 school year, more than 25 million children and youth – roughly half of all elementary and secondary students in the United States – attended schools in school districts that lacked dedicated funding to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. This significant funding gap increases the likelihood that many children and youth experiencing homelessness will not be identified, and even in cases where they are identified, that they will not receive the educational protections and services that can stabilize their education and their lives. (Schoolhouse Connection, 2023, p. 1)

Additionally, the effects of homelessness continue to impact students even after they become permanently housed. These students continue to score lower on proficiency tests and have lasting social-emotional effects and trauma. Research demonstrates students need academic services, but also wraparound services to halt the long-term negative impacts on students.

Hopper et al. (2010) explained:

Few programs serving homeless individuals and families directly address the specialized needs of trauma survivors. Homeless services have a long history of serving trauma survivors, without being aware of or addressing the impact of traumatic stress.

Overwhelmed by the daily need of their clients, providers in these settings often have few resources to address issues of long-term recovery. (p. 81)

The third significant takeaway is that, in order to meet the needs of families, Liaisons must find unique ways to supplement funding, such as writing grants or relying on community largesse to gain additional resources for families. Hallett and Skrla (2017) emphasized that the Liaisons “serves as an important link between the state, district and school sites and as the primary facilitator of McKinney-Vento and ESSA mandates” (p. 41). They work with community organizations to provide supplies that students may need to attend school but may be inaccessible to students as a result of their homeless situation. Liaisons had a host of community agencies to assist with funding. Andrea discussed the numerous agencies with which Liaisons collaborate noting, “We partner with a family services organization, mental health therapists in our schools and they’re great as far as a student needs therapy or whatever it is and they don’t have the right insurance or the right whatever.” Patricia said, “we beat the bushes for funding. We even have a local motorcycle club that makes donations.”

As Liaisons from my study noted, their job would be made easier with an ample funding source. Very few states have contributed any state funding to support students experiencing homelessness. Other school programs are fully funded and, in some cases, legislated for a particular subset of students, such as Title I, Exceptional Children, or Academically Intellectually Gifted students. There are programs designed specifically for these students based on myriad factors and conditions. In the end, this is a federal mandate without fiscal responsibility, over 30 years in the making. There should be adequate state and local funding allocated categorically for these students. Not having fiscal resources to engage students in all activities in which other students participate becomes a societal failure. This failure hinders

students' access and aids in their feelings of disenfranchisement. The mandate for adequate funding is a core concept for improving the lives of students in this situation. Every other subset of students has a funding source. McKinney-Vento students, some of the most fragile students, deserve the same consideration.

### **Discussion**

Of significant interest is how McKinney-Vento students are often overlooked, and not truly *seen* in districts. Hallett (2012) and other researchers have concluded that families experiencing homelessness are often ignored by schools and districts. Ingram et al. (2017) found homelessness is a hidden epidemic and is heightened by a lack of awareness of the issue in many schools and communities. It is a cultural norm and expectation that in order to be valued, one must be seen. Wilkins et al. (2016) explained that 33% of McKinney-Vento Liaisons wished their districts would place a higher priority on students experiencing homelessness. The Liaisons in my study concurred with Wilkins et al.'s (2016) determination that McKinney-Vento students are not considered a priority. Sandra reflected: "I'm fearful every day of the fact that they don't get it. The city, the county, the state ... we've got to dig deeper, and it's not happening." Patricia assented, stating, "They don't mention how many children (we have) very much unless it is reporting time, or if I'm writing a grant or if I get a grant or if a news reporter is to come, so I just feel like they need to take more of a vested interest."

The entirety of a homeless student's situation has to be seen, valued, and understood. It is important to value their experiences and use that information to inform the work and tailor services to meet their needs effectively. MVLs are also responsible for the equity and access of students, ensuring that they are able to benefit from all of the opportunities that other students enjoy. Many times, the Liaisons themselves are hidden behind a cloak of invisibility, working to

change the minds and hearts of staff, encouraging them to place themselves in the shoes of the family, not always an easy undertaking. Sandra shared a poignant story of a student experiencing homelessness who had behavioral issues. The school wanted to suspend her for a minor issue, not understanding the trauma the family was going through. The child's birthday was coming up and her mom didn't want her to feel the stigma of being homeless; she just wanted to be able to celebrate in a normal way, by bringing cupcakes to school for the class. Even though their situation was abnormal, that couldn't happen if the child was suspended. Sandra said, "You have to bend a little bit because of what the child is going through and now you put her through more trauma, over something petty ... You can't say you can do it next week because it's not her birthday."

I considered several points regarding the lived experiences of MVLs: the abnormality of their workdays; their focus on the academic success of students; and their emphasis that each family situation is different. Taylor noted, "no two days are alike, no two families either." Their comments confirmed how they work with few resources but are skillful in collaborating with staff and community members, sometimes at a moment's notice. Sandra stated, "At one school, the social worker and the counselor were out. I was called to go to the school because there were still families entering that were homeless ... I had to immediately attend to that situation." Along with their mandated duties, Liaisons performed duties of the heart. Ensuring families had the basic necessities, visiting hotels and motels to confirm families would have a roof for the night, writing grants for funding sources, and attending a host of community agency meetings to form collaborative relationships, all of which was part of their work day. Zelda spoke of the time she left work on a Friday evening to convince a hotel to admit a family who was faced with immediate eviction. She had to scramble to find funding for a weekend stay, provide gift cards

for food and calm the mom, who was concerned about the child's academics. "Although I had plans for the evening, they were put on hold because I couldn't leave this family without resources over the weekend ... I was so concerned. It took a toll."

Along with the invisibility of the students, MVLs know the important work they do is not often recognized. Although the participants in the study were positive thinkers, several of them spoke of having difficulty ensuring that the premise of the MVA legislation was being met. They described how they developed their own identity and visibility in the school setting and the community at large. According to Burke and Stets (2023), "identity forms at the micro and macro levels of society, influences behavior, thoughts and feelings and ties individuals to a larger society" (p. 3). The McKinney-Vento Liaisons from my study strived to build their identity, or their "role-related behaviors" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 258), to make themselves and the students and families they serve visible. When the task becomes disheartening, they continue to push forward. As the lone person in the district advocating for students and families facing a homelessness crisis, the MVLs must shape their own identity in order to forge effective solutions for people in intolerable circumstances. As the data signifies, and as Sandra explained, they continue in the role for years because they have empathy for the families and choose to make a difference. What is clear from the participants' comments is the passion McKinney-Vento Liaisons have for the work. What also is clear is McKinney-Vento Liaisons, from low-wealth districts to highly resourced districts, face the same challenges, including isolationism, a multiplicity of roles, creating an identity, and the largest obstacle, a dearth of resources. Although several of the participants were given the position as an add-on, they all expressed the joy and fulfillment they find in a most challenging capacity. Sandra's short statement sums up the overall feeling of the participants: "We must listen because our neediest students deserve all

we have to offer.” As the Liaisons have eloquently reiterated throughout the study, being seen, heard, and understood is important to those whose lives are in crisis; the small things matter.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

I have three recommendations for practice: fair allocation of resources, increased staffing, and the development of a tiered standard operating practice protocol.

#### **Make Fair and Appropriate Allocation of Resources**

The most important recommendation for practice is to increase funding for families experiencing homelessness. This should not be as difficult as it is currently; however, this funding does not exist as a line item in local or state budgets. Other than the Title I set-aside and subgrants, little funding is allocated for this population. Although subgrants can be utilized for a broader range of activities for students, the caveat is that each district must apply for the funding. All districts do not receive the grants as it is a competitive process. As shown in Appendix C, out of 328 LEAs in the state, only 60 received subgrants to assist McKinney-Vento students (NCHEP, 2023).

According to Miller (2011a), lack of funding at both the state and district levels embodies the most obvious barrier to the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. Liaisons spent an inordinate amount of time searching for grants, working with community agencies and soliciting public school foundations for support. As shown in the study, McKinney-Vento Liaisons do a lot with a little. This is a haphazard way to fund programming, especially for such a marginalized population. School district administrators, as the Liaisons observed, need to see, understand, and value these families. They should not be counted only when needed for a report or grant and then pushed back into the shadows. Sandra reiterated, “I’ve written many grants through banks,

community banks, to help and then we have the foundation that helps. ... We don't have anything in local funding.”

School districts should allocate specific funding for these students, just as they do for Exceptional Children, Gifted Education or students with special needs such as behavioral and social emotional concerns. Part of the legislation should be sufficient programmatic funding. If the federal government is not willing to allocate the funding, it is left up to state and local Boards of Education to do so.

### **Provide Additional Staff Dedicated to McKinney-Vento Families**

The McKinney-Vento Liaison is a required position in all school districts. What is apparent from my study is participants had additional duties that impacted the amount of time they could work directly with families. The second recommendation for practice would be to offer the position as a stand-alone position, or add additional personnel to assist the Liaison with the responsibilities of the role. Participants noted that much of their work was completed after hours. None of the study participants had designated administrative staff. Additional personnel would increase the effectiveness of the position, allowing for more direct contact with families while still maintaining compliance and program fidelity.

Students and families fear that exposing themselves as someone who fits the category of being homeless can result in a report to Child Protective Services. The fear of identifying oneself as homeless to people of higher authority can sometimes affect how often one will reach out for services (Winiarski et al., 2020). Zelda concurred with these statements, explaining, “Sometimes families are afraid to ask for help. I had a mom who was on drugs and was experiencing homelessness. ... We work hard to build relationships so that families do not feel like a failure, to build perseverance and resilience.”



Having an additional staff member dedicated to administrative duties would give districts a more accurate account of data and would allow the MVL more time to build rapport and trust that is needed to assist families effectively. Having those relationships would lessen the fear and anxiety of negative repercussions for families as they would have more opportunities to build those trusting relationships with the Liaison.

### **Develop a Tiered Standard Operating Practice Protocol**

The third recommendation is the introduction of a tiered level of support to assist with streamlining services. Hallet and Skrla (2017) note that all families experiencing homelessness have extended needs, but all families experiencing homelessness are not the same. Homelessness is complex and each family scenarios vary. Urban homelessness looks different from suburban homelessness, and different from rural homelessness. Families experiencing a traumatic short-term event have different needs than a family with long-term housing instability. Homelessness for families is fluid, ever changing, not consistent and, as such, must be looked at in the context of each families' present situation. Doing so will benefit MVLs in the decision-making process to provide appropriate services.

In support of this idea, I have created a Standard Operating Practice Protocol (SOP) in the form of a tiered system of support that would enable Liaisons to become more strategic in their work. Based on the interviews, MVLs noted they were stretched thin with their duties and that no two days were alike. This tiered process, based on the RTI and MTSS model, is used in instruction for academic interventions, social emotional strategies, and is now being used in the area of family engagement to assist families with navigating the school setting. My participants informed me that a SOP based on a tier system currently does not exist. The tier system will allow MVLs to be judicious and focused in their work and continue to provide equitable access

for students experiencing homelessness. The SOP will also provide an internal process for consistency. Based on my study, this protocol will be a new dynamic in enacting appropriate services. The SOP recognizes that services are fluid and can be expanded or collapsed based on individual family needs and will enable MVLs to have a more targeted and strategic plan of action to assist families quickly and efficiently.

I refer the reader to Table 2, which defines the tiers and lists the services provided by each tier. This framework has three tenets.

- All families experiencing homelessness are not the same.
- Services are based on McKinney-Vento legislative mandates.
- Decisions and interventions are driven by tier level.

The tier selection is a three-step process. Initially, the MVL would determine whether the family's current situation aligns under the auspices of McKinney-Vento status. Next, the MVL would complete an eligibility form with pertinent questions to define the appropriate tier to meet the family's needs. Once the tier has been determined, the MVL would contact any school staff or appropriate community agencies to begin needed interventions. This process allows the MVL to streamline services quickly dependent upon the appropriate tier. For example, if a family has a weather-related emergency that might be short term, the MVL may only need to contact district transportation as the family's short-term housing and other needs are being met. However, if the family circumstances are in Tier 3 status, they may need more intense community wraparound services. It is possible, if circumstances change, for families to move from one tier to another. Of course, with any tiered system, the higher the tier, the more wraparound services would be required for the family. The MVL SOP tier system also gives MVLs important data, such as which interventions work best for which tier. This would give valuable information on how to

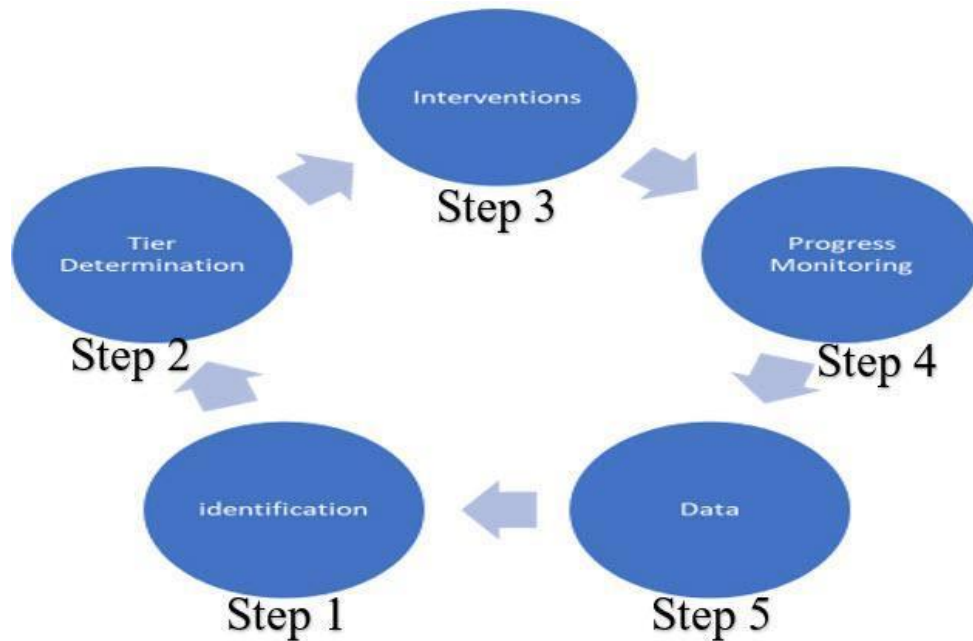
proceed for other families who find themselves in a similar situation and to adjust services, as applicable.

**Table 2. Tiered Protocol**

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Specificity of Services</b>	<b>Causation</b>	<b>Interventions to Eliminate Barriers</b>	<b>Progress Monitoring/ Additional Interventions as needed Housing Insecurity Time Frame</b>
1	Generalized Services	Family has a weather-related emergency, house fire or other need that is short-term	Immediate School Placement Ancillary Services Informed school contacts: Enrollment Coordinator Transportation Coordinator School counselor for social emotional issues	
2	Comprehensive Services	Family has immediate removal from home due to eviction or other family crisis such as divorce or medical crisis	Immediate School Placement Transportation Services Title I Tutoring if applicable Informed school contacts: Title I Coordinator for additional tutoring Enrollment coordinator Intervention specialists Behavioral specialists Community Housing specialists Community Medical Agencies	
3	Intensive Services	Family has immediate removal from home due to eviction or domestic violence or other family crisis. Family has long term housing insecurity	Complete Wrap Around Services: Utilization of Implementation Team Housing Insecurity Specialist Mental Health Services Workforce Training Intervention Services Learning Supports Enrichment Strategies Informed school and community contacts: Mental health therapists Food insecurity Community housing specialist Workforce training programs	

Figure 1 specifies the steps in the Tiered identification process.

**Figure 1. Graphical Illustration of Tiered System**



### **Recommendations for Research**

#### **Conduct More Studies on the Experiences of Liaisons**

The McKinney-Vento Act and its implications have been researched in studies and book form, but the study of the MVL has not been as thoroughly researched. As shown in my study, McKinney-Vento Liaisons are stretched thin with mandated duties and duties related to other job positions. As I researched issues around families experiencing homelessness, one area that lacked extensive research was how the multiple job duties of MVLs affected the efficacy of the services being offered to families. An area of future study would be to provide more insights into the work of MVLs and design processes for improving and refining perspectives of the position, including what metric Liaisons use to determine success.

## **Charter Schools as an Area of Further Study**

A growing trend in education today is the exponential influx of charter schools. With the increase in homelessness, it would be safe to say there are students attending these schools whose families are in crisis and are wrestling with the stigma of homelessness and may choose to be hidden in plain sight. One of my study participants was employed at a charter school and as such was an outlier to this study, but elaborated on one family's struggle to remain at their school of choice.

Although charter schools receive public tax dollars, their funding is mandated by different rules and regulations than public schools. There is the question of how charter schools are handling the issue of students and families experiencing homelessness. Pertinent questions might be; How are they identifying these students? Are they providing services? In what manner are these services being provided? How are they being monitored and held accountable? Many of these schools do not provide transportation or lunch for their students. How does this affect equity and access for children attending charter schools? This area of inquiry would be an intriguing scope for further research.

## **Study the Tiered Standard Operating Practice Protocol**

A third area for future research could focus on whether using a Standard Operating Practice Protocol (SOP) like the one I have suggested would be beneficial in terms of streamlining services for families, increasing efficiency within the school setting and whether a protocol would give Liaisons a more deliberate course of action. The tiered process will allow researchers to closely monitor specific tiers of homelessness, thus determining how McKinney-Vento Liaisons could best engage stakeholders to maximize working with families.

Researchers can study families based on their tier of need, as is done with academics, family engagement, and social-emotional learning. This would assist McKinney-Vento Liaisons with ways to streamline their services and possibly be more efficient, giving researchers detailed and conclusive data about what works best for families using quantitative and qualitative methods. Further research in this area would better determine the impact the SOP has on Liaisons' effectiveness and what strategies have worked well.

### **Final Thoughts**

As the data from the government indicates, homelessness is on the rise. In the school year 2020–2021, over one million children and youth experiencing homelessness were enrolled in public schools in the United States. Between SYs 2004-05 and 2020-21, the number of students who experienced homelessness increased by 63%. The number of students identified as homeless increased by an average of 4% annually during that same period of time. (NCHE, 2022). My first thought as a lifelong educator is with the children. As educators, we use the term safety and security, sometimes loosely. But what can be more safe and secure than having a “fixed, regular, and adequate” place of residence? Hallett and Skrla (2017), bring forth an analogy of having a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence as a comparison to a safe harbor:

Homelessness, though a huge, complex, and frightening issue does not have to be a signifier that individuals carry with them for life. Schools can and do every day serve as partners, safe harbors, solid structures and educational lifelines that help children and families navigate desperate circumstances and move on to more stable and highly productive lives. (p. 130)

As I reflected on the quote, my observation of Liaisons became even more clarified. In my mind's eye, I perceive them as navigators. A navigator can be defined as a person who

directs the route or course of a ship or other means of transport by using instruments or maps. Many times, the navigator works alone. In this case, McKinney-Vento Liaisons are navigating an organization to effectively meet the needs of families experiencing homelessness. Their map is the McKinney-Vento Legislation, but it does not take them everywhere they need to go.

The Liaisons from my study explained that they were placed into these positions with little knowledge around the issue of homelessness. What stood out during this study was the empathy, resilience, and encouraging spirit of the participants. Each of them was very relational. The ability to relate to others is an integral facet of this position. Liaisons expressed their thoughts about working with families. They did not view families from a deficit model lens, but only as people going through a difficult time. Their role was to be a guide and shelter for the families and to provide equity and access for their children.

Equity and access are important words when dealing with families in crisis. Equity and access are at the intersection of homelessness and the education system. Families need to feel they are being treated fairly and that someone cares about their well-being. Liaisons who work with them strive to remove unnecessary barriers and hurdles.

What really did not come as a surprise to me was all the complexities of the position. Even with the frustrations, lack of resources, gatekeepers and time management stressors, each of the MVLs shared a love and a passion for the work. Several shared that given the chance, they wouldn't want to cede this work to a colleague, but would remain because of their care and commitment to families. I continue to think of those disenfranchised families who would not be able to manage without the assistance of the Liaison. As Leslie stated, "The sphere of influence I have is about the fragility of children and why I think it is appropriate that the identification of

homeless children is far-reaching and broader than for adults, because children are just more fragile.”

Throughout this study, during conversations with participants, I was most surprised that all the Liaisons reiterated that every employee in their school systems understands that there are students and their families experiencing homelessness; yet, those employees continue to be unaware of the magnitude of the problem in the school setting. Further, those employees have no real understanding of the role of the McKinney-Vento Liaison in the lives of those students and their families. This law was legislated in 1986; yet people in the educational field, from principals, to enrollment coordinators, to coaches, are not cognizant of neither the magnitude of homeless students in their systems nor the impactful significance of McKinney-Vento Liaisons. I learned that each MVL must follow the parameters of the law, but the manner in which they do so varies. Above all, the decisions the Liaisons must make are dependent upon the informed support of the human resources they have at their disposal. Every Liaison’s experience was uniquely different, but in reality, all had the same challenges as they created personalized experiences for families who are in the midst of a devastating and impactful situation.

Leslie’s observation affirms the purpose of this study: to understand the lived experiences of McKinney-Vento Liaisons and the impact of the position. What bubbled up in my spirit when interviewing the participants were some of the same feelings I had when I served in the position. I struggled mightily to make sure families had what they needed. The passion expressed by these Liaisons was the same passion I felt: to be inclusive, to care, to advocate, to help students and families in any way possible, and not to prejudge. When I see families on the street with young children, I wonder if this study will make a difference to the people in positions of authority who



hold the power to improve their lives. Will they begin to really see these children and focus on the funding that is needed to make a difference in their lives?

With my research, I wanted to shine a light on the Liaisons who are working with these families every day. What would make their job easier and more efficient so they could help unhoused families? I also hope my research will assist new Liaisons with thinking through the responsibilities of the work and creating a work-life balance. As my study showed, this position can become all-consuming. The face of homelessness is much different and more varied than portrayed in social media and the psyche of the nation. Families of all types and different social strata experience homelessness. I close this study by revisiting the three students discussed in the first chapter.

First, there was Mariela, an unaccompanied homeless minor. When her mother died, Mariela's dad sent her to live with relatives. She continues to reside with a diverse group of people, some family, and some not, as the cost of housing is not affordable for them to find their own residence. They have yet to find a home that is a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. So, they exist in a state of flux.

Then there was Sherri. Sherri's mom and dad went through a divorce, and the end result was a loss of the only home Sherri had ever known which forced the family to move into a shelter. Sherri's mom has acquired employment and they are sharing a home with family members. Things appear to be looking up for this family. They are not where they once were, but are making progress toward a better life.

Finally, there was Malik's family. Malik's family lost their home after the father's accident left him unable to work. After years of homelessness, the parents were able to find their footing, obtain affordable housing, and continue sending their children to the same school district

without interruption. As with many other occupations, the rewards are not always monetary. Malik's father made a point of returning to thank the staff for their kindness and consideration for his family.

Liaisons are at the intersection of equity and access for students experiencing homelessness. They can serve as true social justice warriors on the front lines for those students who may not have the perfect home life that school and community leaders envision. The job of a McKinney-Vento Liaison is to navigate the swirling waters, to help right the ship, move those in crisis into calmer, more placid waters, and then do it all over again with another family. This is the story of a position in the school district that doesn't get the glory but does the hard work for families each and every day. It is just what they do, without great fanfare and sometimes without recognition.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### **Research Questions**

The main question of my study is: What are the experiences and perceptions of McKinney-Vento Liaisons regarding their work with youth and families experiencing homelessness?

### **Background**

a. How do McKinney-Vento Liaisons explain how their lived experiences relate to the McKinney-Vento Act?

1. Demographic Information- How do you identify?
2. Tell me a little about your educational background?
3. What is your work experience?
4. How did you come to the role of the McKinney-Vento Liaison?
5. What do you know about the McKinney-Vento Act Legislation?
6. What professional development, training, or experiences did you have prior to being a liaison and how did it foster your work in the role?
7. What professional development or training have you received from the Local, State, and federal levels since becoming a liaison that impacted your work in this role?
8. Does your District have policies and procedures related to students experiencing homelessness and have you added additional documentation to these policies?

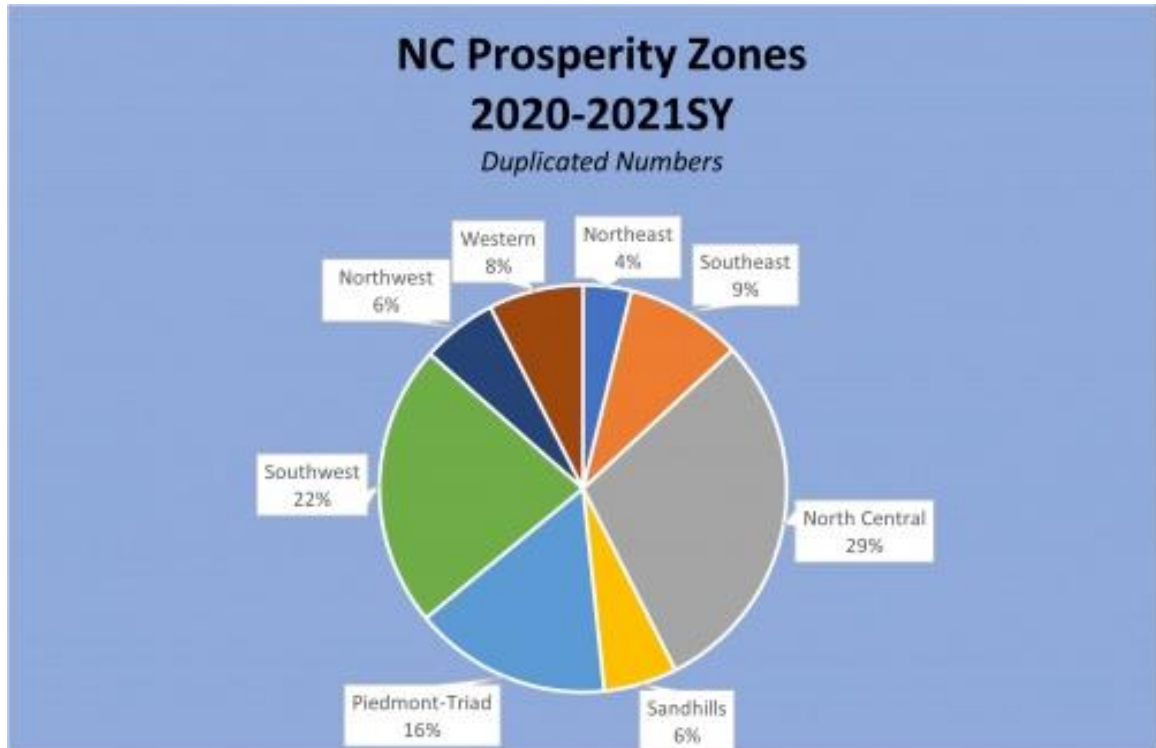
9. Within your school district, what other position or role do you have in addition to the McKinney-Vento liaison?
10. Describe a typical work day for a McKinney-Vento Liaison.
11. What do you describe as the challenging areas of the job when it comes to being a liaison?
12. What funding is available in order to do your job effectively? What type of funding is provided through LEA) funding, a McKinney Vento subgrant, or local community collaboration and donations and how do you maximize the available resources to effectively meet the needs of families?
13. How do you facilitate staff development around McKinney-Vento?
  - i. Which staff members do you interact and collaborate with on a regular basis concerning McKinney-Vento issues and concerns? What other staff should be involved?

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

- b. How do the McKinney-Vento Liaisons describe how they attempt to effect change in their schools and districts?
  1. Do you have the authority to make pertinent decisions regarding what is in the “best interest” of students experiencing homelessness, and if not, who does have the final authority? How does this adhere to, or differ from district policy? How does the lack thereof affect the outcome for students?

2. Where or what do you see as your widest sphere of influence, (areas directly or indirectly affected by your actions) or where you make the most impact in your **district**?
3. Where do you see your widest sphere of influence (areas directly or indirectly affected by your actions) in the **community** you serve?
4. In what ways do you feel you have the support of school leadership and or District Leadership? How can the district provide a greater level of support?
5. How do you affect change and in what areas do you have difficulty making an impact?
6. Who are your allies and why are these staff important to your job?
7. Do you have gatekeepers in your district that do not understand the importance of this role and facilitate a swift enrollment of students or cause other barriers?
8. How do you facilitate attitudinal change of staff and community around the work that you do?
9. What is the most frustrating aspect of your role?
10. What is the most rewarding aspect of your role?
11. Is there anything you would like to share or any topic you would like to discuss that we have not covered?

APPENDIX B: HOMELESS IDENTIFICATION BY NORTH CAROLINA PROSPERITY  
ZONES



Note. Source: [About – North Carolina Homeless Education Program \(uncg.edu\)](http://uncg.edu)

APPENDIX C: NORTH CAROLINA HOMELESS EDUCATION FACTS

Total number of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in this state:	328
Number of LEAs receiving McKinney-Vento subgrants:	60
Total students enrolled in LEAs:	1,525,223
Percentage of enrolled students who are homeless:	1.9%
Percentage of all people in the state who are below the poverty level	11.8%
Percentage of people under 18 years old in the state who are below the poverty level <sup>1</sup> :	16.5%

*Note.* Source: National Center for Homeless Education (2024).



APPENDIX D: LIST OF EDUCATIONAL ABBREVIATIONS

Continuum of Care.....	COC
Elementary and Secondary Education Act .....	ESSA
Every Student Succeeds Act .....	ESSA
Housing and Urban Development.....	HUD
Individualized Education Plan .....	IEP
Local Education Agency.....	LEA
McKinney-Vento Act.....	MVA
McKinney-Vento Liaison .....	MVL
National Association for the Homeless Children and Youth.....	NAEHCY
National Center for Homeless Education .....	NCHE
No Child Left Behind Act.....	NCLB
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.....	NCDPI
North Carolina Homeless Education Program.....	NCHEP
Public School Unit .....	PSU
State Education Agency .....	SEA