

School Meals in Vermont: What Homeless Liaisons Need to Know

Free school meals are an important part of the assistance that the federal government provides for homeless students to ensure that they are ready and able to learn. This handout provides basic information for school homeless liaisons in Vermont about how to ensure that qualifying students have access to this assistance.

Qualifying for Free Meals

Once the school homeless liaison determines that a student qualifies for services under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the student is automatically eligible for free school meals. This includes breakfast, lunch, and possibly after-school snack and summer meals.

Once the determination is made, the student qualifies for free meals for the remainder of the school year, and the first 30 days of the following school year – even if their situation changes and they secure permanent housing.

By law, all public schools in Vermont must operate the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Programs (SBP). Many schools also offer afterschool meals programs and summer meal programs.

Some independent schools also offer NSLP and SBP.

Direct Certification

A homeless determination from the school homeless liaison is considered a “Direct Certification” that a student qualifies for free meals. This means that certification of eligibility comes from a trusted external source and not from the family themselves. Other forms of direct certification include information from the VT Department of Children and Families that the family qualifies for 3SquaresVT (SNAP) or Reach Up (TANF).

Direct Certification helps the student because the family does not need to complete a school meals application, and directly certified families are never subject to income verification paperwork. Direct Certification also can help the school. Schools where at least 40% of the students are directly certified can qualify to serve free meals to all students at no charge to families under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Ensuring the school meals program is aware of every student who qualifies for assistance under McKinney-Vento could push the school over that line to make universal free meals possible for all of your students.



Left to Right: School lunch in Williamstown, Duxbury and Proctor, VT

Communicating with the Meals Program

It is the homeless liaison's responsibility to notify the school meals program about eligible students. This must be done in writing. It is acceptable to send a list of multiple students who qualify, or to send individual notices about each student. The notification may be sent by secure email, as long as it contains the liaison's electronic signature. The notification must include the student's name, a signed statement saying that the student has been determined to be homeless, and date that the determination is effective. It may include additional information such as the student's date of birth or student ID number.

Not sure who to contact at your school meals program? Your supervisory union or school district business office should know who handles meal program applications. Sometimes one person does this for the whole SU or district, and sometimes different people do this for each school. If you are still unsure, you can call Child Nutrition Programs at the Vermont Agency of Education at 802-828-1626 for assistance.

It is a good practice to reach out to the meals program contact to make yourself known—often, school meals staff know about homeless students before others in the school community. Once they know who you are, they may make additional referrals to you.

Helping Students Displaced by House Fires

Students displaced by emergency situations such as natural disasters or house fires can be eligible for McKinney-Vento services. However, we often hear stories in Vermont about principals or teachers personally paying for student meals in these situations. It is a very kind gesture, but it is unnecessary since students in these situations qualify for free meals.

As soon as anyone in the school learns that a student has been displaced, they should notify the school homeless liaison. If the homeless liaison determines that the student qualifies as homeless, they should immediately notify the school meals program. The meals program may begin serving free meals to the affected student right away. If everyone takes care of their responsibilities quickly, the student may begin receiving free meals that same day.

As with any McKinney-Vento eligible student, students displaced by house fires or natural disasters will remain eligible for free meals for the remainder of the school year, and the first 30 days of the following school year, even if their housing situation is resolved earlier.

What School Meals Look Like in Vermont



Salad bar at Hardwick Elementary

Think school lunch is just a greasy slice of pizza? Think again! There are now strict nutritional standards for school meals—these meals must include whole grains and a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, and meet strict sodium and fat limits. Several studies have recently shown that the new school meals are actually healthier than the average meal brought from home.

In Vermont, our school meals programs have gone above and beyond these requirements and are incorporating fresh produce from local farms, local meat and dairy items, scratch-made entrees, and impressive salad bars.

RHYA and MEP

Some homeless liaisons are also responsible for determining that students qualify for services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) or the Migrant Education Program (MEP). These students also qualify for free meals so their status should also be communicated to the meals program.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.