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Every day, the small boy wakes up behind the Safeway grocery store. He packs all of his belongings in a backpack, cleans up at a gym and heads off to school.

His mother and her new boyfriend live in a van parked in front of the store. She doesn't want her son in the van. She tried to send him away, but the boy doesn't trust the man not to abuse her. And so the child sleeps nearby.

A girl watched her single dad abuse her older sisters, physically and verbally. She's 15 now and knows it'll be her turn soon. She packs a small bag and chooses a classmate's couch over what awaits her at home.

A teenager rolls out a sleeping bag in a park near his house every night. The house that was once a home is now filled with drugs and fighting. The teen knows how to hide — the neighbors who see him during the day have no idea he's all alone.

These children are real and these are their stories. They have no home, yet they go to school. School is the one place where they can be children.

They number in the thousands across Oregon, many in suburban and rural districts where resources are scarce.

While unaccompanied minors — children who live without a legal guardian and without stable housing — are reported in nearly every school district in the state, they are surprisingly concentrated in suburban and rural districts.

Several new developments concerning these children have occurred recently: one Portland-area housing program ran into a roadblock, another is bound to export its success to one of the hardest-hit districts, and the state gleaned some surprising insights into the ages of these homeless students.

So young

There were nearly 3,200 unaccompanied minors in Oregon schools in the 2012-13 school year, according to the Department of Education. Or rather, that many children were reported to the department by their school district's homeless liaison.

The actual number of Oregon students who live without a legal guardian is certainly much higher, experts agree, because kids hide their housing status.

Two years ago, the federal government enacted new rules on how to count homeless students. Rather than just calling in a total number to the state, district officials now had to list every student by his or her identifying number — or SSID — said Dona Bolt, the state coordinator for

Home work

How some schools are creating innovative solutions for unaccompanied homeless students

STREET ROOTS ILLUSTRATION

homeless education programs.

This had two effects: It reduced duplication, because students who moved around frequently no longer were counted multiple times by several districts.

It also identified which grade levels these students were in.

"We saw that there are unaccompanied minors at every grade level, including preschool," Bolt said.

The state will soon start training district liaisons on what to do for these youngest kids, because the stakes are highest at that age.

"Homelessness is a trauma," Bolt said.

And research on younger children shows that if any trauma occurs between age 3 and third grade — which is the critical time for brain development — it can inhibit social function and delay learning to read. These two factors alone can set back a child dramatically in school and in life, Bolt said.

A dream, shattered

This summer, a dream came true for a small program in the North Clackamas School District, which reaches from

Milwaukie nearly to Damascus, and from Clackamas to Happy Valley.

It wasn't to last.

The Host Home Project is a collaboration between the school district and a nonprofit called The Inn. The nonprofit is small — it runs a seven-bed facility for homeless youths and transitional housing for nine homeless mothers with children, said Steve Olsen, its director of housing services. It was created four years ago by Kristin Kinnie, the school district's homeless liaison, who contacted The Inn with an idea and a little seed money from the district.

"Let's say little Johnny's mom left and his dad had to go to prison," Olsen said.

"Johnny is friends with Tommy; Tommy asks mom if Johnny can come live with them."

And let's say Tommy's mom agrees, at least for a while. But she's probably reluctant to commit to a long-term stay for a child she doesn't know that well. That's where Host Home comes in.

Teachers or counselors refer children in that situation to Kinnie, who contacts Host Home's case manager. The nonprofit meets with the family and arrangements are discussed.

Unaccompanied minors in Portland area schools, 2012-13 (most recent data available)

- Oregon: 3,178
- Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas counties combined: 1,123
- Beaverton: 419
- David Douglas: 127
- Oregon City: 125
- Portland only: 101
- North Clackamas: 69

Source: Oregon Department of Education

After a safety inspection of the house and criminal background checks on the adults, the project agrees to provide support to the youth and his or her new host family. The family gets no money from the program to offset the youth's living expenses. But Host Home will pay for things such as getting the child a new copy of his birth certificate so he can apply for assistance, Olsen said. And the school can provide a backpack full of supplies, some clothing and food. The child might even get an outfit for job interviews.

Members of the Trinity Lutheran Church donate some household supplies for the host families.

Equally important, the Host Home Project provides a number people can call when there's trouble at home. It helps mediate any disagreements and provides overall guidance.

"People might be scared to take in (a homeless youth)," Kinnie said. "This program can be a trigger to someone saying yes."

It's a low-cost alternative to providing institutional housing, Olsen said. It's always been a lean operation. The nonprofit has been scraping by on donations and \$5,000 annual grants from Clackamas County. In its first year, it helped three students. Last year, it helped six. But there are about 70 known unaccompanied youths in the district's schools and about 250 throughout Clackamas County.

There is "nothing for them except to go to a youth shelter in downtown Portland," Kinnie said. "But they want to stay in their community; they don't want to go downtown."

More money was needed to expand the program.

In mid-June, The Inn applied for a grant from the state's Department of Human Services. The grant, available to programs

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