

Youth *from A1*

to employ Jade Chamness, the McKinney-Vento liaison for the district. Chamness works to break down barriers between youths and their pathway to school success.

Previously, the district had contracted the position out, but created a district position for the 2017-18 school year. Since then, Chamness has doubled her work hours, enabling her to increase effectiveness and provide more services.

Through the program, students can achieve immediate enrollment even if they lack documentation.

"So, we can get them into the system and start getting some supports in place right away while we're completing our records requests and doing whatever we need to do," said Chamness.

Once receiving a referral, Chamness sits with the referred youth to determine their needs, drawing on an array of solutions to fit the student's particular situation.

Chamness collaborates with other agencies in the area such as Looking Glass and South Lane Mental Health and makes referrals to groups that help kids get their first jobs.

Other services aid youths with getting food stamps, health care or even put on an affordable housing wait list for when they turn 18. The program also helps break down financial barriers to enrollment by waiving fees.

In some cases, students may move outside the district. The McKinney-Vento program maintains student

stability by offering transportation for those students.

Providing transportation options is a huge leverage point for the school district in creating a "school of origin" — the school that a child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled.

Establishing this consistency is one key element in increasing a student's chance of success.

"Many times, students are living in a variety of spots across the school year — not just one place — so our transportation department is incredibly responsive," said Hamilton.

Community involvement has also been a feature of the program. Last year, Chamness started a community responder program, inviting people in the community to sign up and receive alerts when food or clothing needs arise.

"That has been so successful," said Chamness. "The community has been amazing with supporting our McKinney-Vento students."

Last month Goodwill agreed to partner with the program by providing gift cards for students for school clothing.

"We're absolutely elated about that because it really helps us stretch our budget and meet more needs," said Chamness.

The Oregon Department of Human Services self-sufficiency office has also collaborated to update the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (commonly known as SNAP) intake process to accommodate unaccompa-

nied youth.

"We get them in for their food stamp interviews really quickly and it's been going so well," said Chamness. "It's a really exciting win."

A number of living conditions may qualify youths for assistance, such as living in accommodations which have no water or electricity, living in a motel or hotel, or staying with friends or family due to hardship.

State of Homelessness

The past school year saw a marked increase in homeless youth who benefited from the program according to data presented to the SLSD board by Chamness.

While there were 138 total McKinney-Vento students in SLSD during the 2017-18 school year, that number saw a 48.5 percent increase to 205 for the 2018-19 school year.

Chamness chalks the larger numbers up to the increase in employment hours.

"As a result of that increase, I've been able to streamline our referral process and identify more students than what were able to be identified in previous years," she said. "It looks like there's a huge increase in homeless students, but that's actually not the case — we just have more capacity to identify students."

Still, the problem remains pervasive throughout the state. According to a report by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), roughly 3.75 percent of K-12 students enrolled were determined to be unhoused during the 2017-18 year, for a total of 21,756 youth. While the

ODE's report stated that counts of homeless students in high-rent districts were dropping, many rural districts have been seeing increases due to families seeking more affordable housing.

Among SLSD schools, Cottage Grove High School topped the list at 73 McKinney-Vento students followed by Bohemia Elementary School at 36, Kennedy Alternative High School at 31, Lincoln Middle School at 30 and Harrison Elementary School at 24.

While data from ODE shows that homeless youth tend to underperform in language arts, math and science compared to their peers, efforts such as those by the McKinney-Vento program have worked to decrease the achievement gap. Results on Oregon State Achievement tests have shown a gradual increase in the percent of homeless students meeting state standards.

In finding long-term solutions for students and their families, establishing consistency in housing ranks highly among them.

"There isn't enough housing that meets the Section 8 criteria," said Chamness, referring to the federal rental housing assistance program. "So, families can get Section 8 vouchers and they can't find a place to live here."

While some housing options for youths exist in Eugene such as Looking Glass' Station 7 and St. Vincent De Paul's Youth House, such options do not exist in Cottage Grove and many unhoused students bounce between others' houses, cars or tents.

Food insecurity is also

an issue.

"It would be helpful if there were more opportunities for families to access food," said Chamness. "We've got Cottage Grove High School, Al Kennedy and Lincoln Middle that are all interested in starting food pantries, which is so exciting."

If such a program takes off, the district plans to negotiate with students to find the best distribution methods.

Parents can sometimes be another barrier.

"To a certain degree, parents have to let us know," said Hamilton. "If a parent doesn't let us know about their situation, we really can't help, though we want to."

"We've been able to make more contact with families.

And that's the most important thing — helping families connect to services, helping families know that they're welcome to be at school, helping families to figure out what we can do to help them through."

Ongoing discussion of how to spend money from the Student Investment Account, state funding through the Student Success Act, may aid the district's efforts in this further.

"If that's the direction that the community would like to go, we'd like to leverage some of those monies to help students experiencing homelessness," said Hamilton.

Hamilton envisions extra programs such as after-school gatherings with

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