

Pennsylvania's Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program 2016 Regional Homeless Advocates

Region 1

Deborah Moore, Secretary and Assistant to Deputy Chief, Office of Student Enrollment and Placement, School District of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA

Deborah Moore has been an advocate for children experiencing homelessness since the Region 1 office first merged with the Office of Student Enrollment and Placement a few years ago. She quickly learned the definition of homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Act, and has assisted in identifying, referring, and supporting our students ever since. In her role as office secretary, Moore directly receives a majority of the phone calls coming into the Office of Student Enrollment and Placement. Moore can always be heard asking parents on the other end of the phone sometimes very difficult questions in order to determine if the student/s qualify for school enrollment and/or services under the McKinney-Vento Act. In almost every one of the cases that she has helped to identify, most of families have called very concerned, had no idea that they were entitled to services under the Act, and hang up with a sense of relief and direction. When many of the families come into our office, they seek her out by name, give her a big hug, and often cry due to her kindness during a time when they did not know where else to turn or had been turned away from a school for various reasons. There are many great advocates in the City of Brotherly Love, but one of our true unsung "shero's" is Moore. She has helped to identify over 100 students experiencing homelessness this school year through her steadfast commitment and genuine concern for our children.

Region 2

Sandra Ramos, Registrar, Kennett Consolidated School District, Kennett Square, PA

As the registrar, Sandra is the first contact many families have with Kennett Consolidated School District (KCSD). She has been a constant in the process of enrolling students in a compassionate and timely manner. She was at the core of creating and implementing a district process and intake form to determine student's needs such as homelessness. As Sandra meets with families who are new to the district or changing addresses, she makes each and every person feel comfortable and supported. Families in need are given immediate resources to support the student and family. She has immediately referred families to community resources for school supplies, food and housing. She then ensures that the student has free lunch and transportation while immediately enrolling them in school. She does all of this with the utmost of care and confidentiality surrounding the sensitive topic of housing instability. Sandra always has the best interest of the child in mind while adhering to the many different nuances of registration and child accounting. Our district is truly fortunate to have her as not only part of the KCSD team but the front line face students and families meet.

Region 3

Jill Platts, Coordinator of Social Services/District Attendance Officer, Southern York County School District, Glen Rock, PA

Jill Platts has been a true voice for students experiencing homelessness in her role as liaison for Southern York County School District. Her warmth and caring shines through in every interaction she has with students and their families, and she works tirelessly to ensure student needs are met in a timely and effective way. Jill excels at collaboration and creating partnerships within the community, all geared towards assisting the youth with which she works. If a student requires resources, Jill goes the extra mile to secure them, from transportation to community resources. She also cultivates a team approach and maintains exemplary rapport with other school districts. This collaborative method ensures all students benefit from her wisdom and passion. Jill Platts is very deserving of this honor as Region 3 Homeless Advocate for 2016.

Region 4

Jeff Sigado, Social Worker, Brownsville Area School District, Brownsville High School, Brownsville, PA

Brownsville is a very rural, poor area of Fayette County that has a great deal of unreported crime within the community. Sigado has reported he works with many abused and neglected children of all ages, as

well as many youth at the high school that come from families with high drug and alcohol abuse, neglect, low income and generations of rampant lack of boundaries, as well as many runaways and gangs. It was clear from the beginning that Jeff is compassionate about his work and has a clear understanding of what goes on in his community. He is open minded and takes great concern with every student with whom he interacts. Working as the school social worker, he has an open-door policy with his students; he listens and communicates with any and every child that may need assistance. He is quite passionate about doing what is right for his students and at the same time he has a real-life view of what they are going through and he continuously advocates on their behalf.

Sigado fights for better rules and structures with his district as well as the community, by researching and sharing policies and explanations of the law with community organizations to ensure McKinney-Vento compliance. He is likely not aware of the positive impact that he has on his students, or the region itself. He stands up in meetings, and offers valued opinions and insight into the needs of youth. He is a leader and naturally draws others into focusing on what is best for children experiencing homelessness. Sigado is a true gem in an environment that is sorely lacking positive role models and non-judgmental guidance, and therefore highly recommended as Region 4 Homeless Advocate of 2016.

Region 5

John Seybert, Director of Special Education, Farrell Area School District, Farrell, PA

Since taking over as Homeless Liaison in January of 2015, John Seybert has had a huge impact on Farrell Area School District in terms of both identification of students experiencing homelessness and the services provided to students. The number of identified students has risen significantly, and it is clear that personal attention is given to those identified. Referrals for services, requests for help with uniforms and toiletries, and close collaboration with the Region 5 Team is an ongoing occurrence. Each student identified in the district is served in a way that ensures their ongoing academic and personal success. Seybert attends regional workshops and other available trainings and incorporates this information into his daily practice. He is informed and displays a consistent understanding of the federal law. Finally, Seybert works hard to develop collaborative relationships with neighboring districts, sharing transportation costs when needed and always advocating in a positive manner for the best interests of the students. Although he is a "new" liaison, he has quickly made his district a safe and positive climate for students who do not always have a safe or stable place to sleep at night.

Region 6

Craig Mlaker, President, Mlaker Transportation, Davidsville, PA

Craig Mlaker, owner of Mlaker transportation, has been very generous and diligent in helping in the transportation of our students who have encountered homelessness in their young lives. No matter what the circumstance, Mlaker has assisted our district in providing appropriate transportation to the schools our students attend during their period of homelessness. Often, our request for transportation is accommodated within 12 hours or less and as a result, students miss little if any school. In most instances the students are transported in a small van, and the drivers themselves treat the students with utmost respect and maintain the confidentiality of the situation. It is with the guidance of Mlaker that these students feel safe and respected. Even when a situation has occurred that there has been a move from one situation to another (which usually involves changes of location and pickup/dropoff times), he does not hesitate to make the necessary adjustments for our students. In many situations Mlaker also manages to adjust existing routes to accommodate our homeless transportation needs to minimize costs if possible. It is with great pride that we at Ferndale Area School District nominate Craig Mlaker as Region 6 Homeless Advocate for 2016.

Region 7

Bernadette Sedor, Federal Programs Coordinator, Hazleton Area School District, Hazle Township, PA

Bernie Sedor continues doing exemplary work as the liaison for the Hazleton Area School District. Hazleton is one of the fastest growing populations in Region 7, providing many challenges. Lack of affordable housing coupled with a high immigration population has caused the homeless population to rise in the district over the last few years. Many families are forced to double-up and lack the financial means to afford the necessary school clothing and/or supplies when enrolling. Issues such as language barriers or lack of academic records and immunizations are all additional obstacles students might face in

the district. Bernie has helped break down these barriers and assist the students in the enrollment procedure, as well as referring the families to much needed resources.

Bernie has always contacted the regional coordinator about families in need and has participated in Feed the Children and Kitz for Kids donations, attended the state conference, and has attended all liaison trainings. Bernie ensured two unaccompanied youth had the resources they needed, including clothing and school supplies. This is just one of many examples to share concerning Sedor and her outstanding efforts working with displaced students. Bernie has gone above and beyond her duties and is very deserving of this award.

Region 8

Charles James, School Social Worker and Homeless Liaison, Centennial School District, Warminster, PA

Chuck James has consistently gone above and beyond to ensure that the McKinney-Vento Act is upheld in his school district and that the needs of students and families experiencing homelessness in his district are met. Many families, students and local social workers have expressed their appreciation for his commitment to those in need. One family in particular asked several months ago that Chuck be publically recognized someday for his efforts and compassion in regards to the children and families with whom he works, because they were so moved by how much time, energy and assistance he provided to them after their house burned down.

Chuck not only ensures that educational stability is in place for students experiencing homelessness but also connects them with local resources and acquires donations in order to help them move out of homelessness as quickly as possible. He consistently bridges gaps and removes barriers to benefit students and families as they try to get back on their feet following the loss of permanent housing. He works with a large number of students experiencing homelessness in his district, but that does not prevent he and his colleagues from making sure that each individual child receives whatever they need in order to flourish. On a few occasions when he was having interactions with school districts that were being less than cooperative, he was slow to be critical and quick to do whatever was necessary to make sure that the law was followed and that the students' needs were addressed. No matter how complicated a situation might be or how challenging an obstacle may appear, Chuck has always made sure that the children and youth involved received the necessary supports. For a great number of years, Chuck has been a voice for the students who need someone to speak on their behalf and a great example of what can be accomplished when a Homeless Liaison truly cares for children and youth experiencing homelessness in their district.