

Texas House of Representatives

Committee: Public Education

Re: Interim Charge 2

A number of barriers exist to providing an equitable virtual learning environment for all children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially true for students experiencing homelessness. According to data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), during the 2017-2018 school year, 8,362 children were identified as homeless in Tarrant County school districts. Among these children, 70% were living in doubled-up situations, 15% living in motels/hotels, 11% living in shelters, and 3% were unsheltered.

This document will focus on the challenges faced by families living in motels. Often referred to as the “hidden homeless”, families living in what are meant to be short term rentals find themselves in a precarious housing situation. However, without established tenancy (or a written lease), families are often not eligible for rental assistance programs (including CARES Act funding) and do not qualify for protections outlined by the CDC’s recent eviction moratorium.

Technology challenges unique to the population also rose to the surface as school districts implemented distance learning this spring. While district homeless liaisons were able to coordinate relatively easily with case managers at homeless shelters to deliver needed devices and hot spots, engaging with families experiencing homelessness in the broader community was much more difficult.

However, the biggest hurdle for these students was internet connectivity. While many of the motel properties where families are living in Tarrant County have wi-fi available for guests, the cost is often prohibitive for this population. When the pandemic closed schools this spring, a number of internet providers launched programs to provide free or discounted internet service to low income families. Once again though, families in motels hit a barrier. When parents tried to sign up for service, in some cases their application was denied because the address that they provided was a commercial address, rather than residential. Thankfully, homeless liaisons were able to negotiate agreements for these families, but this represented an unforeseen challenge.

As you gather information on Interim Charge 2 and deliberate solutions for providing equitable access to virtual learning, please keep these families top of mind. A statewide waiver program that low-income and homeless families could utilize to receive free or discounted internet service would contribute to a more equitable learning environment for these students, even after schools reopen. Additionally, incentivizing motels and low income housing communities to provide free wi-fi access for families with students would be beneficial.

According to Schoolhouse Connection, the national high school graduation rate in 2018 was 67.8% for students experiencing homelessness - 10% lower than other low-income students. Additionally, students experiencing homelessness are 87% more likely to drop out of school than their housed peers. To break the cycle of homelessness, we must strive to provide equitable access to education, as not completing high school is the single greatest risk factor for experiencing homelessness as a young adult.