BRIDGING THE GAP AND PROVIDING THE NEXT STEP

ESTABLISHING A HOMELESS/FOSTER CARE LIAISON AND SUPPORT PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Next Step
successful transitions to college

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FOOD PANTRY
MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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I AM *true*BLUE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

For many young people, the road to higher education and self-sufficiency begins in childhood. Expectations and support from family members encourage and inform their career and educational aspirations. Access to consistent, age-appropriate educational games, toys, supplies, and materials and supportive, effective education at the pre-school and K–12 levels enable them to realize these aspirations. Many children in foster care and homeless situations, however, lack both family support and access to additional educational opportunities. Though college students are usually considered adults, their success in many ways is dependent on an effective support system, often provided by the family. In an effort to fill that gap for students who age out of the foster care system and are without that support, Middle Tennessee State University created **Next Step**. The program aims to provide students with the necessary assistance in navigating many of the practical issues students may face regarding housing, academic support, and campus life.

When working with former foster youths, it is important to know how to define the environments and backgrounds they come from. The Child Welfare Information Gateway glossary (2019) defines a former foster youth as someone who as a child was placed in a state's legal custody because custodial parents or caregivers were unable to provide a safe home due to abuse, neglect, or their inability to provide care. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), there are approximately 20,000 young people who age out of foster care each year. In the state of Tennessee, approximately 800 youths age out of foster care each year (YTAC Report, 2020). At any time, there are an estimated 300,000 former foster youths between the ages of 18 and 25 in the United States. Only about half of former foster young adults graduate from high school, making 150,000 eligible for post-secondary education every year. However, only 20% of former foster youths enroll in college, compared with 60% of their peers who have not been in

foster care (Wolanin, 2005). In Tennessee, on average, less than half of eligible young people in foster care or transitioning from foster care enroll in a postsecondary institution. A college education, and the economic benefits that accompany having a degree, are just as important, if not more important, to students who have negotiated significant difficulties in their early lives.

Even though a large number of former foster youths are eligible and interested in a post-secondary education, the number who enroll in a postsecondary program is low in comparison with their peers who have not been in foster care. According to the National Center for Education Statistics' *2016 Digest of Education Statistics*, 4.7% of the 19.9 million undergraduates attending postsecondary educational institutions in academic year 2015–16 were from foster care. (These students identified themselves as a "ward/dependent of the court" on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.) Youths in foster care are less likely to enroll in college because they may not be prepared for postsecondary work and because there was not an expectation for them to go to college (Davis, 2006).

Additionally, those formerly in foster care may not be aware of the opportunities available to them, due to the lack of support to guide them through the college search and application process. Across the nation, there are several programs, grants, and scholarships created specifically for former foster youths. Often former foster youth are eligible for Pell Grants, Education and Training Vouchers, and additional state funding to attend postsecondary institutions (Dworsky, 2017). Helping those who age out of foster care to understand the financial opportunities that would allow them to attend college is an integral piece of assistance, as finances are often one of the biggest barriers to attending college. Despite the availability of financial assistance through state tuition waivers and state and federal needs-based funding, less than a fourth of those who enroll at a postsecondary institution remain enrolled beyond the first year. Finally, and perhaps most disturbing,

very little is known about why these students leave because there is a lack of formal research in this area. However, pre-college research and anecdotal information suggest that a key need is a nonstigmatizing structured support system that starts, at a minimum, in high school.

In 2012, we recognized that many of the needs and alarming statistics relevant to students who aged out of foster care also applied to our students who were homeless or experiencing housing insecurity. At that point we broadened the scope of the **Next Step** mission to include those students in our outreach and support. According to the National Center for Homeless Education's annual report in 2020, there were approximately 1.4 million children nationwide in the 2018–19 school year who classified as homeless (K–12). In Tennessee, for that same year, we had almost 20,000 homeless students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Of that number, 1,300 were unaccompanied and at an even higher risk to never attend college.

Knowledgeable adults working with young people can play a significant role in guiding them to successful experiences after high school. Developing support for this at-risk population in higher education has the potential to combat the long-term systemic issues that students formerly in foster care have encountered and increase retention rates in higher education (Unrau, 2011).

The purpose of this project was the development of a model for a supportive infrastructure within MTSU that provides relevant professionals with the information and tools they need to help youths in or transitioning from foster care and homeless situations to successfully prepare for and complete postsecondary education or training. This manual will help explain how we did that, step by step.

Coming into college, I was battling very serious problems I was too afraid to admit to just anyone. In the middle of my senior year, I didn't even have a place to sleep at night. I bounced around with friends for a while so I could finish high school. In a last effort, I messaged a lady who had spoken at our orientation about financial aid, and she told me there was a homeless liaison at MTSU. I truly believe I would not be enrolled in college at all if it wasn't for her. No matter how many problems arose, or how many times I needed (and still need) help, she was happy to assist. I strongly believe that every public institution in the country should be required to have a homeless liaison. Someone that specializes in special cases like mine that go above what a typical financial aid worker can assist with. She and I will be able to make my dreams of attending and graduating from a university a dream come true.

—Isaac, Next Step member

I met Becca because she called me out on living in the woods, literally. I was sleeping in a tent close to the edge of campus. One day, she saw me on campus and actually called me out. Turns out, she had been looking for me. She wanted to help me, which was strange for me. I could only work with her; everyone else made me feel uncomfortable, even though they did nothing to me. But she helped me stay in school as long as she could. I continued to live in my tent; that's where I was comfortable. But I used the resources she gave me when I needed them. I'm only leaving because I got a job on the other side of the country doing what I want to do and making good money. It works best for me. She helped me get here. Who knows where I'd be without the help she provided.

—Josh, Next Step member

GETTING STARTED

Next Step began as a program in fall 2008 and was a product of direct need. The staff in Academic Advising (then known as the Academic Support Center), along with their director, noticed a growing population on campus that needed assistance facing some unique challenges. We were committed to the success of all our students but saw the compelling and unique needs for this group of students who had aged out of the foster care system. Obtaining financial aid and year-round housing and learning general life skills were huge barriers for this population. To address these obstacles, we sought out partnerships with the experts in our community. We worked with the Department of Children's Services and the Tennessee Youth Advisory Council to help us understand and address the specific needs of students transitioning from foster care. After several meetings and discussions with these groups, we identified and evaluated the most important issues to tackle first. We identified and trained individual staff members all over campus in key offices to help with student transition. Liaisons in Admissions, Financial Aid, Housing, Academic Advising, and Student Support Services (TRiO) all worked together to help this population of students not only get enrolled at MTSU, but also to succeed and graduate from MTSU.

Fast forward to 2010. Greater needs became evident, so additional partnerships developed, and **Next Step** evolved into what it is known for today. Our foster care population opened our eyes to the needs of our homeless population, a related and often overlapping group, who came with even more needs. **Next Step** broadened the umbrella to become a resource on campus for both former foster youths and homeless students. We began modestly with a closet that served as our first student food pantry in 2012 and further cultivated partnerships to identify community resources our students could access for food, clothing, shelter, financial needs, and mental

health support. We began a student mentor program consisting of juniors and seniors from these particular backgrounds who worked closely with incoming students on specific concerns, many of which they did not want to admit to or discuss with staff.

What was most interesting was the rocky start our mentor program encountered. For the first semester, we did not receive much student interest in working with a mentor, but we received overwhelming interest in being a mentor. Our students seemed exhausted by seeing themselves as needing help but energized by the idea that they could offer their unique combination of knowledge, experience, and success to be of benefit to students like themselves. We used mentor training as an opportunity to deliver services the students might not otherwise take part in. Our **Next Step** mentors have become some of our greatest success stories and have gone on to complete Fulbright research in Germany, enter medical school, and begin work in the field of professional social work.

Just as important as what we did was what we did not do in setting up this program. MTSU has a history of success with serving students through themed housing, usually centered around academic groupings. It was immediately clear after talking with our community partners, however, that the development of a Living Learning Community housing **Next Step** students together would not work. The students did not want to be so readily identified/stigmatized as members of this group. They were also understandably opposed to anything that reminded them of a group home or residential facility. We opted instead to give preference for housing options that offered year-round living. Because those options were also the apartment-style halls and the most popular options on campus, they were very attractive to the students.

Another thing we did not do was wait. We did not wait for more money, staff, attention, or support. We dug in with what we had, repackaging it to meet the needs as we identified them.

The program is maintained by a liaison who serves as the first point of contact for students, counselors, teachers, and community members. This staff member coordinates all aspects of the program: intake, recruitment, campus and community partners, professional judgments, mentor program, as well as tracking retention and graduation rates. It is the responsibility of this individual to keep all pieces of the program up to date and running smoothly. When we started, our liaison was an academic advisor. It is now a coordinator in our MT One Stop.

It's important to note that this role, this task, was a duty assigned to a current staff member. No new position was created or additional funding required to start and maintain this role. Your first goal should be to identify where this individual already is housed at your school. Who is willing and able to take this on? The time commitment of this role depends on the size of your school. Search for someone with connections both on and off campus, someone with student interaction like financial aid, academic advising, student success, etc. Find where in the organization and to whom it makes the most sense to assign this role. Although these students may come with some additional needs, they are not additional students. We are already responsible for their academic success. Developing a program like **Next Step** just allows us to more effectively and efficiently encourage their academic success.

As of 2019, **Next Step** has served almost 3,000 students and has taken this population from underserved, at risk, and low achieving to meeting goals attained by the average college student. The students' abilities to function on a campus while not standing out because of their backgrounds has proven to help increase the chances of retention and completion.

KEYS TO SUSTAINABILITY

First and foremost, we knew that we needed to identify the offices on campus and in our community that would play a large role in assisting our students in overcoming the additional

barriers they may face. Our liaison serves as the main contact on campus, working in conjunction with each partner.

On-Campus Partners

Admissions, Financial Aid, Housing, Academic Advising, and Student Support Services (TRiO) were immediately recognized as areas that could ideally offer support but—if we were not mindful of the particular needs of our students—could also be roadblocks or gatekeepers. We then set out to establish the individual staff member needed to provide one-on-one attention for our students. These individuals would be coached and trained on responding through and to our **Next Step** program. They were given background and statistics on these groups and the tools they could use to help. The following segments will explain each office and its role in more detail, as well as how to identify that contact.

A. Admissions Office

Typically, this is where the first contact occurs for most students. A recruiter or administrator needs to be identified who will be a champion for students coming from homeless and foster care backgrounds. This individual will need to understand the unique backgrounds these students are coming from and how that can affect their ability to meet guaranteed standards for admission and deadlines and complete the admissions process of submitting applications, forms, and transcripts. For example, many foster youths bounce from high school to high school, which could cause a significant impact on the GPA. They often do not have the support and assistance of parental figures to help guide them through the college application process. The admissions contact should be able to assist with:

- completing the college application and any essays/personal statements needed.
- finding resources to cover application fees (these could be from the university itself or community partners).
- attending review committee meetings on behalf of the student (this is where

understanding the background of this population can come into play).

- connecting the student to orientation, registration, and additional next steps (hand-off and follow-up are critical at each point in the process).
- connecting the student to financial aid administrators.

B. Financial Aid Office

This is typically where students from this population are lost. We try throughout the program to refer only to a specific person and not to a faceless office. This is particularly important in dealing with financial aid and the billing and payment processes. By having an individual contact here, we could keep students from potentially being re-traumatized by having to tell their stories every year, over and over. Former foster and homeless youths may not be aware of the opportunities and financial resources available to them. Across the nation, there are several programs, grants, and scholarships created specifically for these groups. These students are often eligible for the Pell Grant, an Education and Training Voucher, or additional state funding to attend a postsecondary institution (Dworsky, 2017). The individual in this office must be trained on how to find these funding opportunities and committed to diligently searching for new programs offered by federal, state, and private sources. This person's role would include the following:

- assist with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This can be difficult for many of these students, since FAFSA requires parent information, professional judgments, or a dependency override. It would be the task of this individual to aid the student in determining what is needed and how to request or document an override. Following through and getting the student past any hurdles here is the key to laying the foundation for trust in this individual.

- assist with identifying funding sources.
  - o State agencies (Department of Children's Services, adoption and transition agencies, state housing authority) are the best place to start.
  - o State grants/scholarships (i.e., state lottery scholarships, student assistance grants, McKinney-Vento sources)
  - o Community resources (nonprofit organizations, shelters, transitional living communities)
  - o School-specific resources (guaranteed and competitive scholarships, departmental grants, emergency funding)
- provide support throughout the time students are enrolled.
  - o Recertifications, when needed
  - o Scholarship applications
  - o Appeals, if needed
  - o Emergency aid access

C. Housing and Residential Life

For many students from foster care and homeless backgrounds, the ideal situation is year-round, on-campus housing. This will not always be possible, so other sources must be tapped. The individual in this office will be responsible for:

- assisting with on-campus placements.
- navigating waiting lists (moving them to the top).
- finding funding to pay housing deposits (such as state agencies or private donors).
- helping with parental waiver requirements.
- locating and connecting to public housing options.

D. Academic Advising

Once students are admitted and housed, the focus shifts to acclimating them to college and campus life. First, students need to understand why they are in school—what their intended majors are and/or their career goals. The individual in academic advising would play a huge role

in this determination and would help to keep the students on track. This person would:

- discuss possible majors available and help determine the right fit.
- guide students on what classes to register for to reach graduation in a reasonable time frame.
- start connecting students to individuals in the field who can help them reach their career goals (internships, summer job placements, etc.).

E. Student Support Services (TRiO)

This is a federal grant-funded program available at many institutions. TRiO provides individualized attention to encourage, empower, and inspire students to achieve excellence. It offers free services and access to cultural events. The individual from this area would:

- assist with free tutoring.
- provide emotional support and encouragement.
- assist with career counseling and advising.
- provide access to cultural events and additional scholarship applications.
- assist with graduate school applications.

This role will be very different for each educational institution. Not all will have TRiO programs or the ability to provide these resources. The goal for this tier is to provide access for an at-risk population to as much free and one-on-one attention as possible.

F. Student Mentors

Sometimes good advice can be best received when it comes from someone who looks and talks like you and who has walked a similar road. Our **Next Step** mentors are typically currently enrolled juniors and seniors who have come from foster care and homeless backgrounds and participated in **Next Step** as freshmen and sophomores. These students volunteer their time to help acclimate students to campus culture and help them to

overcome the many hurdles they could face. In the past, mentors have:

- met new students for coffee on campus.
- attended cultural events with new students.
- offered campus tours to new students and even volunteered to show where classes are located.
- helped new students with FAFSA and scholarship applications.
- helped new students get jobs on or around campus.

The mentors can come from any major or area on campus. Our most success has been with students in the family studies and social science areas— human sciences, social work, education, etc.

Community Partners

This will look different depending on your campus's needs. A student's basic needs must be met in order for them to have the best chance of success, so begin the focus there.

A. Housing Needs

- Connect with local shelters to discuss what they can offer students.
- Meet with your local Housing Authority to determine low-income housing areas and how your students can take advantage of that.
- Collaborate with local churches, businesses, and nonprofits on emergency housing solutions (hotel stays, friends' couches, church outreach, etc.).

B. Food Needs

- See about starting a food pantry at your school just for students. Begin small, with nonperishable items, and encourage your campus community, staff, and administrators to donate.
- Make sure when you solicit donations that people understand what the needs are and what students eat.
- An Amazon page/wish list is a convenient way for people to donate.

- Connect with local food banks for larger needs (such as perishable items like milk, meat, and eggs).
- Include nonfood items such as toiletries, can openers, and personal care items.
- Look into possible vouchers for your campus dining halls. Your food service provider may gift these to the program.

C. Basic Necessities

- Personal hygiene and household items are also needed. Network with local nonprofits, churches, and other donors to provide these items for students. We have seen more than one student cry when we opened the cabinet in the food pantry containing these items.
- Help with utility bills is often needed. Look into collaborating with Action Agencies and other community organizations for this need.

- For medical services, reach out to local offices (health, dental, vision) and see about forming a partnership to offer reduced rates for students.
- Secure vouchers for public transportation.

These resources could look different depending on the location of your school. The more central your campus, the easier it is to get students to community partners. The more rural, the more difficult it could be. Look into bus systems, vouchers, ride shares, etc. to get students where they need to go.

> This is a great service for our youth. Entering college is a great time, but it's also intimidating. It's critical for our young adults to have that extension of support when they need it."
>
> —Joanna, Youth Villages partner

Our Student Food Pantry is open to and can be accessed by any student. It grew from a literal closet stocked by staff in our office to a service that last year provided 10,364 pounds of food to almost 1,340 students.

Our pantry began in 2012 and in 2014, we moved to a new building with a much larger, intentional space.

TRACKING AND RETENTION

Of the 20% of former foster youths who enroll in college nationally, only 10% graduate with a degree. This further shows that, despite their desire to go to college and finding the means to apply and enroll, many cannot successfully navigate through the system to graduation (Davis, 2006).

Once enrolled, students formerly in foster care or experiencing homelessness continue to face challenges that their peers may not experience. The challenges to persisting at a postsecondary institution could include: lack of support from a caring adult, struggles with mental health, insufficient support in maintaining their basic needs, trouble accessing academic support, difficulty balancing the demands of school, the need to pay bills, and all of their other personal responsibilities.

Statistics show that those from high-income households are 6 times more likely to complete a four-year degree program. Engle and Tinto (2008) found that students from low-income households increased their degree completion from 6% to 12% between 1970 and 2005, while students from high-income households increased from 40% to 73% during the same period. As we know from Wolanin (2005), former foster youths are disproportionately low income. Low-income students are less likely than their high-income peers to be engaged in academic and social experiences that encourage postsecondary success. Tinto's research on why some students persist and succeed while others do not indicates that to be successful, students must integrate into their college or university both academically and socially. Therefore, as outlined in the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) Toolkit, it is important to have a program with a designated point person who can help students navigate the college process and direct students to the necessary resources both on and off campus to meet their needs and to get them involved in the life of the campus.

Helping a student become more engaged in his or her college experience has proven to assist in college retention. A designated point of contact and source of support could serve as an encouragement for these students to get involved on campus. Research by Baum and colleagues (2010) reported that students less engaged in college are more likely to drop out without completing a degree. Additionally, it was observed that without adequate support, former foster youths may not persist through college graduation (Emerson, Duffield, Salazar, & Unrau, 2012). Other risk factors related to degree noncompletion are: part-time enrollment, delay into postsecondary enrollment after high school, not having a regular high school diploma, having dependent children, being a single parent, being financially independent, and/or working full time while enrolled (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). The YTAC report of 2009 stated that youths who earned a high school diploma are almost 4 times more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those with a GED.

At MTSU, we track our students in **Next Step** using a simple Excel spreadsheet based on their self-reported status on the FAFSA as well as through their completion of a Homeless Petition for financial aid. The information we track consists of GPA, hours attempted and earned, and enrollment status. Each semester, we monitor our students to identify areas that may be most helpful in their college success. Tracking also helps us to make sure they receive the resources they need as efficiently as possible.

FAFSA began collecting information on homeless and unaccompanied student status for the 2009–10 academic year application. MTSU has had 2,938 former foster and homeless students enroll since the 2009–10 academic year. Additionally, since the 2014–15 academic year MTSU has maintained a retention rate of about 50% of the students in this population, with an average

of 134 students each semester. We have had 91 graduates, giving us a six-year graduation rate of 15% with an average of 20 graduates from the program each academic year. According to the numbers presented by Davis (2006), 10% of former foster care students who enroll in college graduate. MTSU is trending over that projection. Moving forward, our goal is that future changes to the program will allow us to improve both retention and graduation rates for this population.

SUCCESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

When we first started **Next Step**, the first lesson we learned was that students from foster and homeless backgrounds have been "programmed to death." The simple word "program" in our title discouraged participation. So, we dropped it and stuck with **Next Step**. We also learned that students tend to open up more to their peers than to school staff. That's how the mentor program began. And that's why it still works. Having someone to talk to who has been through similar struggles and understands them is something students have said actually kept them here. Definitely seek out those students on your campus.
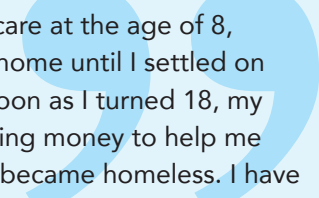
We quickly realized that, in order for this venture to succeed, we needed people. We needed contacts. We needed support. Do not be afraid to ask for it—from the higher administration at your school, from the local nonprofit organizations, even from your local governmental body. Forming those connections is the most integral part of making this work. In the early days, it was hard to ask for money and space, but easier to ask for changes to procedures and time from staff members all over the campus with a record of working hard for all students.

The hardest lesson we learned: You cannot save everyone. There will be times when you just do not have the resources you need, either on campus or in your community, to fix everything

or be everything the student may need. You have to do your best and know that you did just that.

The biggest success of **Next Step** is the number of students we have seen walk across that graduation stage who never thought they would make it. All the small victories lead to big wins, and that is just the way it goes. We may feel like we're not making a difference each day, but we are. You are. Every little step leads students closer to stable futures.

One of our most notable successes came at the state level. MTSU's **Next Step** served as the model program for Tennessee House Bill 1000. Our team testified to legislators on behalf of the bill numerous times and attended countless hearings at the Tennessee General Assembly. We worked hard with policy leaders and community members on the specifics of the bill, and in 2019, our bill was signed into law by Gov. Bill Lee. The law "requires

> I was forced into foster care at the age of 8, bounced from home to home until I settled on one when I was 14. As soon as I turned 18, my foster family wasn't getting money to help me anymore, so overnight I became homeless. I have no idea where my "parents" are today. Through financial aid, I was able to live on campus but had nowhere to go during the breaks. Becca reached out to a local nonprofit that graciously paid my fees to live on campus over break, and also provided Christmas dinner and presents. I will never forget the way that made me feel. No one ever cared enough to get me presents, much less treat me like family. Becca was in my corner the whole way, even when I took a semester off. I graduated and am now working for a local foster care agency. Maybe one day I'll be like Becca and help the kids that everyone ignores. I'll always owe her.
>
> —Anne Marie, Next Step member

State of Tennessee

PUBLIC CHAPTER NO. 266

SENATE BILL NO. 763

By Yarbro, Crowe

Substituted for: House Bill No. 1000

By Beck, Clemmons, Helton, Hardaway, Hazlewood, Powell, Camper, Stewart, Hodges

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, relative to homeless students.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 7, Part 1, is amended by adding the following as a new section:

(a) A degree-granting postsecondary educational institution, as defined in § 49-7-2003, that has a campus in this state shall:

(1) Designate a staff member who is employed in the financial aid office, or another appropriate office or department as determined by the institution, to serve as a homeless-student liaison. The homeless-student liaison is responsible for understanding the provisions pertaining to financial aid eligibility of homeless students, including eligibility as independent students under the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. § 1087vv), and identifying services available and appropriate for students enrolled at the institution who fall under these categories. The homeless-student liaison shall assist homeless students who are enrolled in the institution in applying for and receiving federal and state financial aid and available services; and

(2) If the institution offers housing resources, develop a plan to provide homeless students who are enrolled in the institution access to housing resources during and between academic terms. The plan must include granting homeless students first priority in housing placement and placing those students in housing facilities that remain open for occupation for the most days in a calendar year.

(b) As used in this section, "homeless student" means a student under twenty-five (25) years of age who has been verified as a homeless child or youth, as defined in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. § 11434a(2)), at any time during the twenty-four (24) months immediately preceding the student's enrollment in, or at any time while enrolled in, a degree-granting postsecondary educational institution by:

(1) A director or designee of a governmental or nonprofit agency that receives public or private funding to provide services to homeless persons;

(2) An LEA liaison for homeless children and youth designated pursuant to 42 U.S.C. 11432(g)(1)(J)(ii), or a school social worker or counselor;

(3) The director of a federal TRIO or Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs program, or a designee of the director; or

(4) A financial aid administrator for a degree-granting postsecondary educational institution.

SECTION 2. This act shall take effect July 1, 2019, the public welfare requiring it.

SENATE BILL NO. 763

PASSED: April 18, 2019

RANDY McNALLY
SPEAKER OF THE SENATE

GLEN CASADA, *SPEAKER*
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

APPROVED this 30th day of April 2019

BILL LEE, *GOVERNOR*

(https://legiscan.com/TN/text/HB1000/2019)

Signing of HB 1000 into law with Gov. Bill Lee on August 20, 2019

any degree-granting postsecondary educational institution to designate a staff member to serve as a homeless-student liaison to assist homeless students who are enrolled in the institution, and to develop a plan to provide homeless students who are enrolled in the institution access to housing resources, if the institution offers housing resources" (TN HB1000).

We encourage you to champion for something similar in your home state. Seek out the political link you need to get that started by emailing your local representative. If that individual supports the goal, great! If not, ask to be pointed in the direction of a person who aligns with your needs. A senator, representative, corporate sponsor, or even a registered lobbyist can walk you through the beginning phases of getting a bill introduced in state government, and it will be easier with the precedent of Tennessee House Bill 1000. There are nonprofit lobbyists in every state. You just have to seek them out!

FUTURE PLANS

Next Step has been a great resource for students experiencing the transition from foster care, for unaccompanied minors, and for students experiencing or at risk for homelessness. The program has prioritized helping students within this population to make sure they get moved off the on-campus housing waitlist and placed immediately, while covering the housing deposit with the Safety Net emergency grant. The Safety Net emergency grant has been a major success for **Next Step** as it is a financial assistance resource that helps students to cover basic need expenses that would otherwise disrupt their academic success. Securing additional funding sources is a top goal.

Moving forward with **Next Step**, it is important to continue to identify any remaining gaps in resources on and off campus. These gaps can be identified through continued conversations with students about their needs and how best to serve those concerns while they are enrolled at MTSU. Working to fill those needs will require continued

partnerships on and off campus to develop the necessary assistance for these students.

Increased awareness of the needs of this population is important for planning. Utilizing a syllabus statement may help move students toward contacts and assistance that they may not be aware of if they have been unwilling to self-report on FAFSA or through a Homeless Petition. While it is useful to be able to track and identify students via the FAFSA application, it is also important to provide the appropriate information across campus for those who may be in need but may not know where to find help. The hope is that a syllabus statement may decrease the stigma that often surrounds this population. We were able to have the syllabus statement below added to our faculty handbook for use across campus:

The MTSU community is committed to the academic achievement of each student, and we know that struggling to address basic needs can affect a student's ability to perform academically. If you are having trouble finding a safe and stable place to live or enough food to eat, please contact Danielle Rochelle (615-898-2808 / Danielle.Rochelle@mtsu.edu), come by the MTSU Food Pantry at the MT One Stop, or speak with your instructor to get the assistance and resources you need.

We also hope, post-COVID-19, to grow our community base. The more groups, individuals, and organizations we can bring on board, the more students we can help succeed here at MTSU. Our overall goal is to increase our graduation rate for this population exponentially over the next five years to equal that of students who have not experienced foster care or homelessness.

We will continue to serve as a model program for those needing help getting started, and we will continue to advocate for additional resources at postsecondary levels. Moving forward, we are tackling Washington. A federal bill—the Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act (HEASHFY)—was introduced

in March 2019 to remove additional barriers for this population. You can find out more about the bill and how to help get it passed at **schoolhouseconnection.org**. With any luck, we'll be helping schools all over the country set up their own versions of **Next Step** very soon!

THE VERY BASIC STEPS

All of that said, we know this process can be very overwhelming. Focus on these basic steps and remember to find what works for your school, your community, and your students:

1. Know your numbers: Find out how many students you're talking about at your institution and what their current persistence and graduation rates are.

2. Get the players at the table: A meeting costs no money. Invite colleagues from university housing, admissions, academic advising, TRiO, food services, the development office, and financial aid to start the ball rolling.

3. Talk to students: Find out what they want and need, and what will encourage and discourage accessing your program. Involve them in every stage of the program development.

4. Start small: We started with a meeting and a closet. Don't let your inability to do it all this year stop you from helping one student even a little.

5. Tell your story: Any publicity you can get will be good for the program and for the students. Ask to talk to every group you can. The more people who know about the program, the more likely they are to pass the information to a student who may benefit. Eventually you'll want more— of everything. More space, more people, more programming resources. If your program is high profile, bringing good attention to the college/ university, those resources will be easier to get.

CONCLUSION

The most important thing to remember when working with this particular population is that you, the liaison, may be the one individual who steps up and shows interest in these students' futures and well-being. That you, the liaison, could be the driving force to graduation. After 12-plus years of running our program, we see the responsibility as both a blessing and a challenge. As a liaison, you'll need the support of your supervisors, your community, and your own family. As they say, "It takes a village." We sincerely hope the information provided here helps you to find the village that can change a stigma and transform the lives of the students who are all too often left behind.

Questions? Need help getting your program off the ground? You can reach us at **mtonestop@mtsu.edu**.

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