

MSAD 17's McKinney-Vento Program

Featuring McKinney-Vento Liaison, **Steve Ciembroniewicz**

Across Maine, school districts are finding thoughtful and creative ways to support students experiencing housing instability. In **MSAD 17** (Oxford Hills School District), the work is grounded in responsiveness, collaboration, and a deep commitment to supporting families during difficult transitions.

MSAD 17 serves nearly **3,000 students across eight schools and nine campuses in Western Maine**, serving the towns of Norway, South Paris, West Paris, Hebron, Oxford, Harrison, Waterford, and Otisfield.

For assistant superintendent **Steve Ciembroniewicz**, also MSAD 17's McKinney-Vento liaison, the role reflects a career-long commitment to serving students and communities.

Steve has spent nearly four decades in education. Over the years, he has worked as a classroom teacher across multiple grade levels, an Outward Bound instructor, a district Gifted and Talented coordinator, and a building principal for 12 years before stepping into his current role as assistant superintendent four years ago.

"That variety of experiences has been really helpful," he says. "You get to see education from a lot of different perspectives."

Today, his work as assistant superintendent spans a wide range of district responsibilities. Steve oversees school safety planning, ensuring staff receive training and emergency plans remain up to date. He manages the district's performance evaluation and professional growth systems, supports educator certification, and works with the school board on district policy development. His responsibilities also include conducting HR investigations and FMLA processes, supervising and supporting building principals, participating in contract negotiations, and coordinating the district's mentor teacher program.

Serving as the district's **McKinney-Vento liaison** is one of several responsibilities assigned to his role, but one that carries particular meaning.

"I feel like when you assume a leadership role, you have a responsibility to deliver. There's so much need in the world. If you can do something to make a difference, even a small difference, that's a responsibility I welcome."



Dare to Accept the Challenge

MSAD 17 serves the Oxford Hills region, encompassing eight towns in the Western foothills of Maine.

Today, about **100 students in MSAD 17 are identified under the McKinney-Vento Act**, with **71% living in doubled-up housing situations**, which is the most common form of housing instability in the district.

MSAD 17 also **provides transportation for approximately 22% of identified students**, helping ensure they are able to remain connected to their school communities despite housing disruptions.

Understanding the Local Context

The Oxford Hills region, like many rural areas in Maine, faces significant housing challenges. Affordable housing is extremely limited, and when families experience a sudden change in their living situation, options can be scarce.

“Housing is exceptionally limited in this community,” Steve explains. “It’s very hard for families to find affordable housing that’s available. That’s why we see so many families doubled up.”

Many families experiencing housing instability temporarily stay with relatives or friends. In other situations, the need for shelter arises suddenly and urgently, especially during Maine’s harsh winters.

“Things can happen quickly. All of a sudden a family might lose their housing, and it’s going to be single-digit temperatures outside. The question becomes, what do we do right now?”



The front office team at Rowe School, Hayley (left) and Pat (right), put together food bags for students.

In emergency situations, families may stay in local hotels when possible. **Preventing Student Homelessness (PSH) funds** have helped the district provide short-term hotel stays when families have nowhere else to go. If those options are unavailable, Steve often works directly with families to identify alternatives.

“Sometimes we just have to talk it through together. Do you have a friend? A relative? Is there someone your kids know who might be able to help temporarily? We try to strategize and figure out the safest option we can.”

While the community does have a local family shelter in Norway, space is limited. When beds are unavailable, the next closest shelter is in Rumford, between 30-60 minutes away depending on where in the district the family is coming from.

A School-Based Network of Support

In MSAD 17, support for students experiencing housing instability is deeply embedded within schools themselves. Staff across the district, from secretaries and counselors to teachers and principals, play a vital role in identifying and supporting students.

“School secretaries are the eyes and ears. They’re often the first ones who notice when a family might be struggling. They’ll reach out and say, ‘Hey, I have this situation, does this qualify for McKinney-Vento?’”

Each school focuses on its own student population, connecting families with resources such as school food pantries or the **Pink Feather Foundation**, which provides access to essential clothing items for students in need in MSAD 17 and RSU 16. When families need additional support, schools often refer them to Steve.

“Over time you build relationships with families,” Steve says. “Sometimes people will say, ‘Call that guy at central office, he helped me last time.’”

Transportation: The Unsung Hero

One of the most significant challenges in a geographically large district like MSAD 17 is transportation. The district is one of the state’s largest in terms of geographic size at 475 square miles between the eight towns it serves.

This means the **district’s buses travel tens of thousands of miles each year**, ensuring students experiencing housing instability can remain in their school of origin whenever possible.

“The unsung heroes in this work are our transportation folks. The things they do to work out transportation for our students are truly amazing.”

Coordinating transportation often requires daily adjustments: rerouting buses, collaborating with neighboring districts, and responding quickly when family circumstances change.

“They’re constantly changing routes, teaming up with other districts, making adjustments, sometimes the very day of,” he says. “They’re the ones who make it happen.”

The Impact of Preventing Student Homelessness Funds

In recent years, **Preventing Student Homelessness (PSH) funds** have significantly expanded what the district can do to support families experiencing housing instability.

“The grant has been amazing. In my first year, we didn’t have it. Families would come to me with all these different needs, and I’d think, ‘I see the problem, but I can’t do anything about it.’”

MSAD 17 McKinney-Vento Program: By the Numbers

- **102 students** identified on average each year over the past five years
- **101 students** currently identified in the 2025-2026 academic year
- **71%** of identified students are living in doubled-up housing situations, the most common form of housing instability in the district
- **22%** of identified students receive district-provided transportation to maintain school stability
- **49%** of identified students are in elementary grades (PreK–6)
- **51%** of identified students are in middle and high school (grades 7–12)



Members of the MSAD 17 Transportation Team: **Megan, Chuck, and Crystal.**

“Once we had the grant, it was like, ‘Wow, we can actually help.’”

The funding has allowed MSAD 17 to address immediate needs while also helping families move toward longer-term stability. In some cases, the funds have helped families secure housing by covering security deposits or other upfront costs.

“We’ve had situations where someone has been without stable housing and just needed that one last push, such as help with a deposit or first month’s rent. And suddenly they have an apartment,” Steve says. “Those moments are incredibly rewarding.”

Other times, the assistance is smaller but still life-changing.

“If someone gets their car fixed, suddenly they can get to work and bring their kids to school. That can make a huge difference in a family’s life.”

Building Trust Through Responsiveness

For Steve, building trust with families starts with something simple: responding.

“If someone calls me, I call them back,” he says. “People are often surprised, and very appreciative, just that someone got back to them.”

Sometimes the most important role he plays is simply listening.

“I might not be able to solve the problem, but I can be a partner in trying to figure it out. I can say, ‘Let’s talk this through. What options do we have?’”

He also believes strongly in following through.

“If I say I’m going to call the landlord, I call the landlord. If I say I’ll call CMP or the mechanic, I do it. You make a promise, and you deliver on it.”

Advice for New McKinney-Vento Liaisons

For those new to the role, Steve emphasizes the importance of collaboration and perspective. He also encourages new liaisons to recognize the limits of what any one person can do.

“The liaison community is incredibly supportive. Reach out to other liaisons. Team up with people. Everyone is trying to figure this work out together. The needs are much greater than our ability to address all of them. So you do what you can. And you remember to be good to yourself as well.”



Pictured are food bags staged for delivery at Oxford Elementary School.

At the same time, he reminds colleagues to celebrate the victories along the way.

“Savor the small victories,” he says. “There are lots of them.”



The **Pink Feather Foundation** provides clothing and other basic necessities for any students in need.

Pink Feather Foundation partners with teachers in MSAD 17 and RSU 16 to confidentially provide clothing and accessories at no cost so students can be confident, engaged, and prepared to achieve their full potential.



Thank you to Steve and all the MSAD 17 staff, administrators, and community partners who come together to support McKinney-Vento students and families.

Across the state of Maine, McKinney-Vento liaisons like Steve work to ensure that students experiencing housing instability and homelessness have the support they need to stay in school and have opportunities to succeed. McKinney-Vento liaisons serve as a vital bridge between students, families, and the resources that help them feel supported and safe.

Each month, we will feature McKinney-Vento programs, the liaisons who lead them, and the teams of staff, administrators, and collaborative partners who support McKinney-Vento students and families each day. If you are a McKinney-Vento liaison or an SAU that would like to be featured, please reach out to Signe Lynch, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Specialist, at signe.lynch@maine.gov and we would love to set up an interview.