

Sanford School Department's McKinney-Vento Program

Featuring McKinney-Vento Liaisons, Leah Marks & Cecilia Sirianni

With a dual-liaison model, deep community partnerships, and a focus on prevention, **Sanford School Department** has transformed its approach to identifying and supporting students experiencing housing instability.

When **Leah Marks** started her career in Sanford School Department thirteen years ago, she was co-teaching a program for at-risk youth. Over time, she noticed a pattern: a significant number of the students she was working with were experiencing housing instability. The answer, she felt, wasn't just to identify those students, but to build real, sustained relationships with their families and offer intentional support and resources. Her perspective would eventually influence how the Sanford School Department's system approaches McKinney-Vento work.

Today, Leah and her colleague **Cecilia Sirianni** serve as co-McKinney-Vento liaisons for Sanford School Department, operating out of the district's outreach department. Their model is unique in Maine: a dual-liaison structure that divides responsibilities by grade level, connects the district into the community, and has reduced the number of students experiencing homelessness. Their work offers an example of what's possible when schools treat housing instability as central to a student's ability to learn.



Sanford, located in southern Maine, serves more than 3,500 students across 6 schools in the district.

A TEAM BUILT FOR THE WORK

When Cecilia joined the district five years ago, bringing significant McKinney-Vento experience from another Maine district, the two quickly recognized what was possible working together. Previously, the liaison role had been held by someone without direct family-facing responsibilities. Moving the role into outreach, where both Leah and Cecilia were already embedded with families, changed everything.

Sanford School Department's McKinney-Vento structure is straightforward: Leah covers Pre-K through fourth grade, with a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Cecilia supports middle and high school. They collaborate on families whose children span both levels, and they lean on each other when the emotional weight of the work becomes heavy.

“The work can be really isolating. Having a colleague who is already working with a family, who might have history with them from when their kids were in elementary school, that trust can transfer, and it makes such a difference when we’re trying to engage a family who is guarded.”

- **Cecilia Sirianni**

Strong administrative leadership has also been critically important. Assistant Superintendent **Steve Bussiere** has been a strong advocate for identification.

“There can be some stigma to being a school with a lot of McKinney-Vento students. Steve did so much work in saying, no, we identify students, and that’s in their best interest.”

- **Leah Marks**

Cecilia echoed that sentiment.

“A difference in this district compared to some others is that we have a person in that administrative position who really values and understands this work and supports it. His leadership helped us to be able to do the work that we knew how to do and wanted to do.”

- **Cecilia Sirianni**

At the building level, that support structure includes weekly **Student Assistance Team** meetings. These teams bring together a wide circle of school-based professionals, including administrators, school nurses, IEP coordinators, school counselors, school resource officers, school psychologists, social workers, and behavioral interventionists. Together they take a holistic look at students who may be struggling academically, behaviorally, or at home. For Leah and Cecilia, these meetings serve as both an identification tool and a way to coordinate support.

“The school counselor might know a student is struggling socially, and the teacher might be able to say they’re struggling academically. And then I can share a picture of what their home life looks like right now and try to address the situation with all of that information: how do we best support this student?” - **Leah Marks**

The Student Assistance Team meetings also create space for the liaisons to flag situations that others in the room might not immediately recognize as McKinney-Vento.

“Sometimes something is brought up and Leah and I will think...that sounds like it might be McKinney-Vento. Those meetings are a place where students get identified because someone brings something up and we’re able to piece it together.” - **Cecilia Sirianni**



Sanford School Department students walk to their bus stop in the morning.



STUDENT IDENTIFICATION: CASTING A WIDER NET

The district uses multiple overlapping systems to identify students. At the start of each school year, a McKinney-Vento screener goes out to every family. Online enrollment forms include specific questions about housing situations, and when families check those boxes, both liaisons receive an automatic alert, sometimes before a child's first day of school. Warm outreach calls to every Pre-K family create another early touchpoint. Annual all-staff trainings, delivered in-person on professional development days, have shifted how teachers, counselors, and administrative assistants understand housing instability.

"We are now getting referrals from teachers and staff. Before, those wouldn't come to us. Having people say, 'I think this might fall under McKinney-Vento,' that's been a really big shift."

- Cecilia Sirianni

The district has also built partnerships with transportation staff. This includes contracted bus drivers who are often the first adults to see a child each morning. Bus drivers can be really tuned in to what's going on in the community because they are seeing kids' homes. The district has trained them to flag concerns about what they observe, making them the first line of support.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Another notable feature of Sanford's approach is how fully Leah and Cecilia have plugged themselves into the broader housing network within their community. They attend regular meetings with local housing organizations, bringing (with family permission) anonymized case details to problem-solve with others who are already in the field.

Their partners include Sanford Housing Authority, two local shelters (a family shelter and a domestic violence shelter), York County Community Action, General Assistance, and Sweetser, among others. The collaboration has become genuinely reciprocal.

"Sanford Housing Authority will reach out to us now. That never would have happened before. Community resources are talking about the schools as a resource, about Leah and me and the relationships we've built. That's been really helpful."

- Cecilia Sirianni

PREVENTION IN NUMBERS

After years of steady increases in the number of identified McKinney-Vento students, driven in part by improved identification, the past two school years have seen that number begin to decrease. A central driver of that shift has been the state's **Preventing Student Homelessness** (PSH) grant, now in its third year.

66+

families prevented from entering homelessness in one school year through support from Preventing Student Homelessness funds.

From the beginning, Leah and Cecilia made a deliberate decision: PSH funds would not be used as a quick fix. Rather than spending down the grant on emergency motel stays, a short-term solution that can drain a budget without moving a family closer to stability, they built an internal framework that required every funding decision to be tied to a longer-term plan. Families in a motel, for instance, were encouraged to hold those funds for an upcoming security deposit, while the liaisons worked to connect them with other community resources to address the immediate need.

“It was hard to be the decider of where funds go, but we saw in our first year that motel funding can just drain your budget. We worked hard to save those funds to really prioritize stable housing instead of just putting a band-aid on the situation.” - **Leah Marks**

When a family comes to them with an urgent utility need such as a CMP bill they can't pay, for example, the first question Leah and Cecilia ask is whether the family has applied for LIHEAP, Maine's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. They work through every available community resource before considering PSH funds, using the grant as a last resort supplement rather than a first response.

“It's more than just, ‘here's the funding,’ it's, ‘here are all the other resources we can refer you to, here's the sustainability plan we're building together,’ and then the funding piece comes in. We want to help put things in place for the long term. We don't want families to be in the same place a month from now.” - **Cecilia Sirianni**

That philosophy extended to how they engaged families throughout the process, not as recipients of aid, but as active participants in building their own stability. Conversations centered on natural supports, community connections, and longer-term goals, with PSH funds positioned as one tool among many rather than the answer to the problem.

Reviewing the data at the end of the last school year, Cecilia and Leah found that **more than 66 families had been prevented from ever reaching the McKinney-Vento identified list**. These were households that had been on the edge of homelessness and, because of this work, never crossed it. Additional families were able to exit homeless status entirely because PSH funds were available to move them into stable housing.

ADVICE FOR NEW LIAISONS

Both Leah and Cecilia have clear guidance for anyone stepping into a McKinney-Vento liaison role for the first time. Their advice comes down to one guiding principle: you cannot do this work alone.

“You can't do this work without the community resources. You need to really get to know your community, attend community meetings, make those connections because we don't have all the answers as school employees. We don't have all those resources. We do better work together, and we create better outcomes for families when we do it together.” - **Leah Marks**



Some of the resources that Sanford provides for students and families.



Cecilia points new liaisons toward the statewide network of McKinney-Vento peers as an often-overlooked resource. Regional liaison meetings connect school staff across district lines and those relationships pay off in practical ways, from brainstorming complicated cases to smoothly transferring students who arrive from another district already experiencing homelessness.

“Get to know who your surrounding folks are. We bounce things off of each other a lot when we’re trying to figure out situations. People will reach out to us, and we reach out to them. This is not a one-person job. It is a collaborative, community effort. Also, always ask questions. I’ve been doing this work for a really long time, but I’m always learning new things. If I just sat in my office and said I’m all set, it wouldn’t work. We are also teaching families the importance of reaching out and accepting help. So we have to model what we hope families can do for themselves.”

- Cecilia Sirianni

Both also urge new liaisons to stay curious and keep learning, no matter how experienced they become. Community resources change, new programs emerge, and the work itself is always evolving.

Leah offered one final piece of advice, the same thing she tells every teacher who emails her with a question about a student’s living situation: don’t hesitate, and don’t try to have all the answers before you ask.

“I always tell them, please, always ask. That’s how we figure this out. Together.”

Thank you to Leah, Cecilia, and all the Sanford School Department staff, administrators, and community partners who come together to support McKinney-Vento students and families.

Across the state of Maine, McKinney-Vento liaisons like Cecilia and Leah 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.