



Auburn School Department's McKinney-Vento Program

Featuring McKinney-Vento Liaison, **Sasha Anastasoff**

At Edward Little High School, **Sasha Anastasoff** keeps her office stocked with granola bars and vouchers for no-cost sports physicals, her door always open. Students call her the "snack lady," while families call her their advocate.

"I don't know how many times I've been called an angel, and I'm like, well, that feels like a gift, but it's because I'm armed with resources. It's not me, per se, I just get to deliver."

As the McKinney-Vento liaison for Auburn School Department, delivering is exactly what Sasha does for hundreds of students and families navigating the disruptions of unstable housing. Her work is marked by persistence, creativity, and a deep, values-driven commitment to service that has reshaped what McKinney-Vento support looks like in Auburn.

FROM SOCIAL WORKER TO FULL-TIME ADVOCATE

Sasha joined Auburn School Department as a social worker in 2000, spending two decades in a special purpose school before program changes shifted her into a district-wide role focused on student attendance, with a side assignment helping the district's McKinney-Vento liaison identify students in grades 7-12. It didn't take long for the need to become clear.

"Once they saw some of the changes that were occurring in the community and in our student identification numbers, they asked if I would just take the program over, period."

By December 2021, she had transitioned into the McKinney-Vento liaison role full-time, and the numbers tell the story of what happened next. Sasha explains why those numbers grew the way they did.



Auburn School Department serves more than **3,000 students** across 9 schools.

"I would definitely say our capacity to identify increased by having a dedicated staff member whose sole purpose is to work with McKinney-Vento, but I would also say we had an increase because of what immigration looked like at that time."

This year, as immigration patterns in the community have shifted, Sasha expects the numbers to dip slightly for the first time, but she doesn't see that as the full picture.

"Regardless of who is coming in from out of the country, we've been pretty consistent with our local community and the needs that are here."

It's a job, she notes, that in a district Auburn's size genuinely requires someone's full time efforts.

"It really is a full-time job here in our district. It's beyond full-time, I would say. It's kind of like a double-edged sword, the more you expand and grow and identify, the more work you're putting on the table for yourself. But you're reaching more people."

STUDENT IDENTIFICATION: FINDING THE FAMILIES WHO NEED SUPPORT

So how does a single liaison identify hundreds of students spread across nine schools, from pre-K through 12th grade? Standard enrollment paperwork and screenings are part of it, but Sasha's real strategy is built on visibility and relationships.

Every August, before the school year even begins, she sets up a table at the Auburn Police Activities League (PAL) Center's back-to-school backpack giveaway, where hundreds of families attend. She does the same at City of Auburn events, often adding a playful hook to draw people in.

"It's incorporating some kind of fun with it, doing face painting, inviting others to come help. This past school year, over the summer, I had hundreds of plain t-shirts donated and I brought them. It gave me a chance to connect with parents as they were walking by."

The outreach matters because so many families simply don't know the program exists.



Pictured is **Sasha Anastasoff** during the yearly backpack giveaway she participates in with the **Auburn PAL Center**. Sasha sets up her own McKinney-Vento table to connect with parents across the school district before school starts in the fall.

"A lot of families are not aware. You say McKinney-Vento and oftentimes they have no idea what that is, what it entails, how it could help them out or the rules and regulations that surround it. The outreach piece is really big in the identification process."

But if outreach is important, staff education is, in Sasha's words, *"probably the top tier, number one factor for identifying students."* Every year, she visits every school in the district to train staff, especially new hires, walking them through what qualifies a student for McKinney-Vento support, including the trickier, less obvious categories like substandard housing.

"Without the staff, I'm not really anything. I'm not in the classrooms, I'm not in the hallways of every school. The teachers and staff are hearing the side conversations. They are getting hugs from the elementary kids who are sad because they're moving someplace where they have to share a bedroom, or learning that this is a child's third new school this year. The staff are critically important in the identification process."

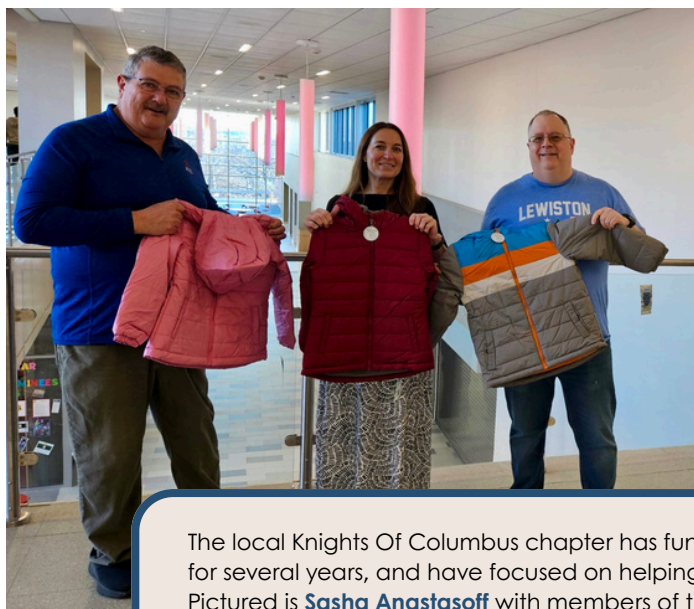
Auburn's staff network is anchored by a McKinney-Vento point of contact in each of the district's nine schools, a role historically held by school secretaries. Sasha's goal, however, is to gradually shift that responsibility to social workers and school counselors, who are better positioned to navigate sensitive conversations with families.

"It's making sure that people understand the language. I typically approach it by talking about housing disruptions. That seems to be a really gentle way where it's less prickly."

BUILDING TRUST WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Sasha says that trust is the key to what makes her approach work.

"It generally starts with more of a get-to-know-families approach. Are you comfortable sharing your story with me?"



The local Knights Of Columbus chapter has fundraised on behalf of Auburn School Department for several years, and have focused on helping provide new winter jackets for students. Pictured is **Sasha Anastasoff** with members of the local Knights of Columbus chapter.

Her guiding philosophy goes even further:

"Consistency is key, if you say you're going to do something, you've got to make sure you're doing it. And overperform. Promise something and then give more. That really makes people feel cared for, and supported, and like they matter, that somebody out there has their back. That's really where trust begins."

It's a needed antidote, she says, to the negative experiences many families have had with schools. For example, when families receive repeated calls home about a child's absences, caregivers can feel like they are failing, when the real issue is housing instability the family hasn't disclosed.

"I'm always super clear with families: I'm here solely to support you. It's an act of service, how can I advocate for you and your needs, how can I help you attain your goals? Let's create a plan to get there."

That accessibility extends to how families can reach her, call, text, or email, whatever works best.

"It's opening up those lines of communication, and it makes you accessible."

KNOWING THE BOUNDARIES AND BUILDING THE NETWORK

Sasha is candid that the line between liaison and case manager has been one of the hardest parts of the job to define. Early on, she says, *"I was a yes person, saying yes to opportunities that pop up."* Over time, she's learned to hold boundaries that protect her own capacity, while still going the extra mile when it counts, like committing to a phone call at 7:30 p.m. because that's when a working parent is finally free.

"If I have the capacity to talk at 7:30 at night and share information she could tackle the next day on her own, why wouldn't I?"

What she can't always do is fix every problem herself, a lesson that arrived with real weight in her second year.

"I had my first family that had to sleep in the car, and I cried. There was nothing I could do to help. It's been embracing that, you can't help everybody, but maybe it's not that I can't help everybody, it's that I can't prevent things from happening to everybody."

Instead, Sasha has built an extensive referral network, one she considers essential for any liaison.

Below is a flyer for the annual backpack giveaway event, organized by the Auburn PAL, that Sasha participates in.

THE AUBURN PAL PRESENTS OUR ANNUAL

BACKPACK GIVEAWAY!

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 13TH | 5:00-6:30 PM | 24 CHESTNUT ST.,
OUTSIDE OF THE NEW PAL CENTER

CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

- AUBURN PUBLIC LIBRARY
- AUBURN BUSINESS & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
- AUBURN GENERAL ASSISTANCE OFFICE
- AUBURN POLICE DEPARTMENT
- AUBURN SCHOOL NUTRITION DEPARTMENT
- AUBURN SCHOOL MCKINNEY VENTO DEPARTMENT
- AUBURN PLANNING DEPARTMENT
- SAFE VOICES
- SEXUAL ASSAULT PREVENTION AND RESPONSE SERVICES
- KENNEBEC BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
- COMMUNITY CONCEPTS
- BLACKIE'S FARM FRESH PRODUCE

AUBURN STUDENTS GET A FREE BACKPACK!

FOR INFO, CONTACT: SBOYD@AUBURNMAINE.GOV

Auburn Recreation Department

EXCHANGE
THE EXCHANGE CLUB OF AUBURN

"Network. Be familiar with your surroundings, the agencies that are there, and really make the effort to put yourself out there. People want to help, but they don't know how to. Know where you need help and support, so when people ask, you can just shoot the answers."

That network for Auburn School Department includes local churches, the City of Auburn's public health manager, the General Assistance office (*"we have each other on speed dial"*), and landlords.

"I have landlords who will call me and say, 'I have an open apartment.' I'll be the first person they call before they advertise it."

Her advocacy has even shaped city-level programs, including a host family initiative for unaccompanied youth that matched students with families in the community rather than shelters, which are often full. One student from that program still lives with their host family years later.

"It goes back to that consistency. When you have a kid with consistent adults in their life, they do better. If somebody is couch surfing, sharing a bed, sleeping on the floor, how can you focus on school? You can't."

MEETING THE EVERYDAY NEEDS AND THE MILESTONES

Beyond housing, Sasha's role touches nearly every corner of a student's life: daily social emotional support, healthcare access, and making sure graduating seniors don't miss out on caps and gowns, yearbooks, prom tickets, or their class trip.

"You want them to have the same experience as their peers who are housed."

Through donor relationships she's cultivated over the years, she's been able to make that happen consistently for Auburn's graduating McKinney-Vento seniors.

The district's **Preventing Student Homelessness funds** are focused deliberately on keeping families housed, rental assistance, security deposits, and utilities, including a detail many wouldn't think to consider.

"If families in public housing lose their electricity, that's a breach of their lease, and they can get evicted. It's really honing in on: how do we keep them housed, or get them housed?"

When the need calls for something outside that scope, like beds for a family sleeping on the floor in their coats, she's built relationships, including with a local furniture store, to make it happen.

ADVICE FOR NEW LIAISONS

For anyone stepping into a McKinney-Vento role for the first time, Sasha offers a few core principles she's learned over her years in the position.

Don't try to do it alone.

"Don't shy away from asking for help and support. We can't do this alone."

Build a network of peer liaisons you can lean on.

"Familiarize yourself with other liaisons. Form a little group of people that you can lean on. It's incredibly helpful when you have a challenging case to be able to reach out to another liaison and just say, hey, this is the scenario, what are your thoughts, are there any legal areas that you think I should be aware of that I haven't thought of?"

Reach out when you see turnover in other districts.

"Whenever I see a liaison turnover at another district, I make the effort to reach out and say, 'Hi, I'm Sasha, this is my number, please don't hesitate to reach out.'"

Get out into the community, don't just refer from behind a desk.

"It's easy to make referrals, but it's even better if you are submerged in the network."

Stay anchored to your role, even when it's uncomfortable.

"Maintain that focus on what your role is. It's really about supporting the student and the families, and to remove barriers to them accessing an education. It's very easy to get pulled into your surroundings, what admin wants to see, what teachers want to see. But is that in the best interest of the students in this very moment or situation? Stay true to what your role is."

Accept that you can't please everyone, and that's okay.

"You can't always please everyone, and sometimes you're going to upset the people who are your base. That's okay, because at the end of the day, are you going to feel comfortable with yourself knowing that you did something that benefited the student and family that you're working with?"

When in doubt, remember the rules and regulations are your foundation.

"It really comes down to rules, regulations, and laws. You can always use that as your backing."

Under her leadership, Auburn School Department has built a robust, relationship-driven McKinney-Vento program, one grounded not in policy alone, but in the idea that every family deserves someone in their corner.

Auburn School Department

MCKINNEY-VENTO BY THE NUMBERS

- **34** students identified in 2020-2021, the year before Sasha took on the role.
- **113** students identified in 2021-2022, Sasha's first year in the position.
- **229** students identified in 2022-2023, Sasha's first full school year as liaison.
- **234** students identified in 2023-2024.
- **241** students identified in 2024-2025.
- **167** students identified in 2025-2026.
- **45** unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) identified in 2025-2026.
- **Doubled up** is the most common form of identification in 2025-2026.
- **9 schools** across Auburn School Department, spanning pre-K through 12th grade.
- **1** full-time liaison serving the entire district.

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

We will continue to feature the McKinney-Vento programs and liaisons across Maine in each monthly newsletter. If you are a McKinney-Vento liaison or an SAU that would like to be featured, please reach out to Signe Lynch at signe.lynch@maine.gov and we would love to set up an interview.