

Lewiston Public Schools' McKinney-Vento Program

Featuring McKinney-Vento Liaison, **Natasha Turcotte**

Meeting Students Where They Are: How Lewiston Public Schools Supports Students and Families Experiencing Housing Instability

In Lewiston Public Schools (LPS), supporting students experiencing homelessness isn't the responsibility of one person or one program—it's a districtwide commitment rooted in compassion and the belief that every student deserves stability and the opportunity to succeed.

Natasha Turcotte is Lewiston's District Family & Student Engagement Coordinator and McKinney-Vento liaison. With experience as a school social worker, parent engagement coordinator, and family advocate over the course of her career, Natasha brings expertise to her current role.



Lewiston students are pictured wearing new shoes from the Student Resource Center.

"I saw the anxiety and struggle that families were navigating," Natasha shared. "If there's something going on, let us know that something is happening—let us help you."

Responding to Growing Need

This school year, Lewiston Public Schools is currently serving **318 students identified under the McKinney-Vento Act**, including **54 unaccompanied homeless youth**. In addition, the district supports many McKinney-Vento-eligible students who reside outside of Lewiston but attend Lewiston schools due to the presence of **Hope Haven** and **New Beginnings**, two shelters located in the city. The need has grown noticeably.

"We're seeing more families sleeping in vehicles and several unaccompanied youth who were living in encampments at the beginning of the school year."

Housing instability is compounded by a severe lack of affordable housing.

"Housing is very hard to come by—and affordable housing is even harder. Most families can't afford market rent right now and are on waitlists for vouchers and subsidized housing."

A System Designed to Catch Students Early: Student Identification

To respond to this level of need, Lewiston has built a strong, clear system of identification and support. Each school has a designated McKinney-Vento point of contact—typically a social worker—who helps identify students and connect families to support. In total, the district works across seven schools, the Next STEP alternative program, and the high school.

To reduce barriers for students, Lewiston recently introduced QR codes posted throughout school buildings, allowing students to self-identify discreetly.

“For students who don’t want to talk to folks, this gives them another way to reach out. School counselors or staff can also complete the survey with a student.”

Once a student or family is referred, Natasha connects with them directly—or, when preferred, works through the trusted school-based point of contact.

“Some families feel more comfortable working with someone they already know. I always check in with staff to figure out what’s best for the family.”

The Student Resource Center

A key component of Lewiston’s approach is the **Student Resource Center**, which Natasha oversees along with two dedicated support staff, Rosy and Ashley. Open year-round, including throughout the summer, the center provides food, clothing, hygiene items, laundry facilities, and showers—basic needs that make school attendance possible.

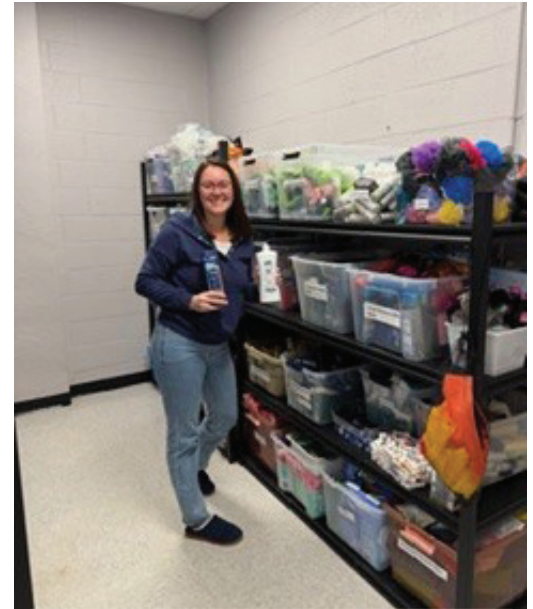
“Clothing is the biggest need. Food, shoes, boots for winter—those basics matter so much.”

For many students, the Student Resource Center provides critical support. Natasha recalled a high school student who had stopped attending school. When staff investigated, they learned he didn’t have clean clothes or a way to do laundry.

“Staff picked him up, brought him to the Resource Center to wash his clothes, and then brought him to school. We provided him with a phone and transportation. Suddenly, school felt possible again.”

Another family living in a vehicle comes regularly so their child can shower, wash clothes, and access food.

“He has his basic needs met. That’s where learning can begin.”



Natasha Turcotte, the LPS McKinney-Vento liaison, stands inside of the Student Resource Center.

Partnerships That Open Doors

Lewiston's McKinney-Vento work is strengthened by deep partnerships with community organizations, including Community Concepts, local shelters, Spurwink, Tree Street Youth, the Root Cellar, the Boys & Girls Club, United Way, and Bates College.

One especially impactful partnership is with a full-time Housing Navigator, funded through a grant and dedicated solely to supporting Lewiston Public Schools families this year.

"She helps families pay past-due rent or utilities, advocates in eviction court, pays security deposits, and helps families find housing. She also supports HEAP applications and connects parents with workforce development coaches."

So far, **85 families** have been referred to the Housing Navigator—just halfway through the grant period.

"We're not case managers," Natasha noted. "So these partnerships are essential."

Building Trust with Students and Families

Trust is the foundation of Lewiston's work. The district prioritizes family engagement through summer outreach, home visits, school-based events, and ongoing communication in more than a dozen languages.

"When families reach out for food or clothing, that tells us they trust us. They know we're here."

Lewiston also emphasizes positive attendance, celebrating progress instead of focusing only on absences. Families receive encouraging notes when attendance improves.

"Instead of only hearing bad news, families hear, 'Great job getting your kid to school.'"

Why the McKinney-Vento Program Matters

The challenges students are facing are significant. Many students are living in unsafe, overcrowded, or unstable housing situations—cars, encampments, or temporary arrangements that can change overnight.

"The number of students is overwhelming. And we know there are families we haven't even reached yet."

Still, she is motivated by the system Lewiston has built—and by the students themselves.



Ashley (left) and Rosy (right) are dedicated Student Resource Center support staff in Lewiston.

“We have clear processes, strong communication, and people who care deeply. When a student has clean clothes, food, transportation, and someone who believes in them, everything changes. That’s why we keep doing this work.”

Lewiston Public Schools offers a **Student Resource Center** for students in the community. This space offers clothing, food, laundry machines, showers, and necessities as well as a safe space for youth to spend time. Natasha, Ashley, and Rosy are based out of the Student Resource Center.



Thank you to Natasha and all the Lewiston Public Schools staff, administrators, and community partners who come together to support McKinney-Vento students and families.

Across the state of Maine, McKinney-Vento liaisons like Natasha 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.