

## The Portland Public Schools' McKinney-Vento Program

### Featuring McKinney-Vento Liaison, Priscila Bitencourt

When **Priscila Bitencourt** first began her role supporting multilingual students in 2020 for the Portland Public Schools (PPS), she quickly noticed that many students experiencing housing instability were going unidentified and unsupported.

Today, as PPS's full-time McKinney-Vento liaison, she leads a districtwide effort to ensure every student and their families have access to the support they need as they navigate the uncertainties of housing instability. Priscila has been the McKinney-Vento liaison for the Portland Public Schools for 5 years. Her journey from part-time liaison to full-time advocate reflects the district's deep commitment to educational access and equity for all students.



The Portland Public Schools is the largest school administrative unit in Maine, serving more than 6,200 students.

### Meeting a Growing Need

Priscila's role began as a split position — half-time multilingual social worker and half-time McKinney-Vento liaison. During her first year, only about **100 students** were identified as McKinney-Vento eligible. After launching professional development for staff and strengthening outreach to families, that number grew to **400 students**.

*"The need was so high that we had to expand," Priscila explains. "Once staff understood what housing instability can look like, they began recognizing it everywhere."*

By the 2021-2022 school year, the Portland Public Schools shifted the position to full-time to meet the growing demand. Today, the district supports about **500 McKinney-Vento students**, 90% of whom are multilingual learners.

### The Portland Public Schools' McKinney-Vento Team

The Portland Public Schools' McKinney-Vento program is built on collaboration across departments. Each school has a **social worker point of contact**, ensuring every student has someone they trust.

*"You can't support a McKinney-Vento student if you don't support the family," Priscila says. "That's the social work lens — we look at the well-being of the whole family."*

The Portland Public Schools' McKinney-Vento team includes:

- **40 social workers** and **20 school counselors**
- A **housing navigator** and **grants manager**
- A **registrar** who ensures transportation and records are updated immediately
- A **multilingual department** with **13 family and community engagement specialists**, who serve as cultural and language bridges between schools and families

Together, they create a responsive, relationship-centered network of care.

## Student Identification

At the Portland Public Schools, the identification process begins with connection. Multilingual families participate in in-person intake interviews, while English-speaking families complete online forms with non-stigmatizing housing questions. When a potential McKinney-Vento situation is flagged, Priscila reaches out directly.

*“Everything starts with a conversation,” she says. “Families won’t always share their reality on a form — but in person, they open up. You hear about eviction notices, temporary stays, and uncertainty. That’s how we really understand how to help.”*

Because Priscila shares languages and experiences with many families, as she originally is from Brazil and speaks Portuguese, trust often comes naturally. *“I’m part of the community. I know what they are going through because I lived through it myself.”*



A photo of the **McKinney-Vento Closet**, a resource room outfitted with basic needs for students including jackets, shoes, backpacks, and more.

## Removing Barriers: Transportation, Housing, and Community Partnerships

Students and families in Portland face significant challenges, with housing emerging as the most urgent need. High rents and limited long-term assistance make it difficult for families to maintain stability, and a shortage of case managers leaves many without the guidance needed to navigate financial barriers. Many families rely on General Assistance to secure leases, but sustaining rent on low wages is nearly impossible.

*“The system is set up for families to fail,” Priscila explains. “They want to stay in Portland — their community is here and public transportation is accessible here — but the cost of living is too high.”*

Unaccompanied youth encounter even steeper obstacles, as landlords and General Assistance programs often will not approve leases for those under 18, pushing many into teen shelters. Community partners such as **Opportunity Alliance** and **Maine Housing** help fill some of these gaps through case management and creative housing solutions. However, these challenges highlight the need for more transitional housing options, sustained systems of support, and pathways like trade schools to help students find long-term stability.

When families face housing emergencies, the Portland Public Schools uses **Preventing Student Homelessness (PSH)** funds for security deposits, first month's rent, and utilities. Since 2023, the district has utilized this state-funded resource to fulfill over **550 requests** for housing-related assistance, often preventing evictions before they occur.

The Portland Public Schools' McKinney-Vento team also works to remove barriers that keep students from school. Transportation is one of the biggest — but the district handles it in-house, **operating six vans and drivers dedicated exclusively to McKinney-Vento students.**

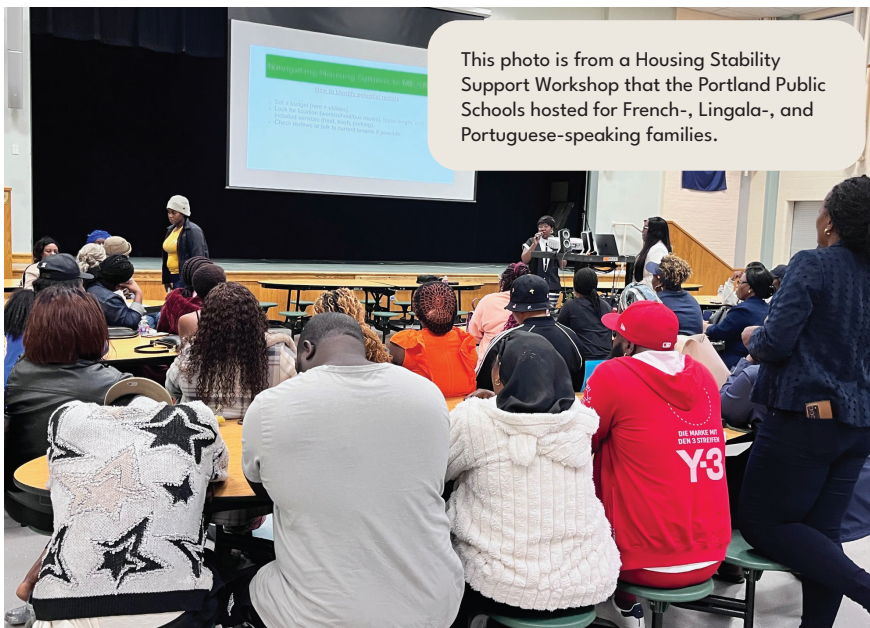
*“The transportation team makes it work,” says Priscila. “Students aren’t missing school because they can’t get there.”*

The district also maintains a **McKinney-Vento Closet** — three full rooms stocked with jackets, shoes, backpacks, mattresses, and other essentials. Partnerships with groups like **Soles4Souls** help restock items each year, providing hundreds of new shoes for students in need. With oversight from Priscila, closet organization is supported by Colby Senior, the district's community outreach specialist; Zoe Horton, an Americorps VISTA focused on community outreach and events for the district; and two interns from the University of Southern Maine, who all restock and maintain the closet on a weekly basis.

## Stand Out Story

One example of impact comes from a McKinney-Vento family member. After experiencing housing instability and living in a hotel, this family member described to Priscila how the Portland Public Schools' support — from completing assessments to building trusting relationships — transformed her family's life. The stability she gained inspired her to learn English and pursue a role where she can give other families the same care she received. She is volunteering with the Portland Public Schools now and has her sights set on applying to work for the district as a family and community engagement specialist.

*“That’s what this work is about,” Priscila says. “Supporting families until they can thrive — and then watching them give back.”*



**Housing Stability Support Workshop**

**COME AND LEARN THE BASICS OF HOUSING IN PORTLAND!**

Have you recently been in a housing crisis, shelter, or overcrowded housing?

Learn how to identify obstacles, seek assistance, and find, apply for, and keep a home that is right for your family

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18<sup>TH</sup> 6-7PM** **KING MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Presented in Spanish and English • Food and Childcare Provided

**CONTACT YOUR FAMILY COMMUNITY SPECIALIST FOR MORE INFORMATION!**

This was the flyer shared with families for a Housing Stability Support Workshop.

## Advice for New Liaisons

Priscila's advice for new McKinney-Vento liaisons is clear:

*"Hire a social worker for this role. Take time to talk with every family. Visit the shelters. Understand what families are going through. This work has to be human — it's rooted in relationships."*

And above all:

*"Focus on the student. When you center the student and family, everything else falls into place."*

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**Thank you** to Priscila and all the Portland 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 Priscila 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](mailto:signe.lynch@maine.gov) and we would love to set up an interview.