

## RSU 20's McKinney-Vento Program

### Featuring McKinney-Vento Liaison, Judy Cohen

**Judy Cohen** works as the McKinney-Vento liaison and the outreach social worker for RSU 20, a rural district serving Searsport and Stockton Springs and has about 400 students, Pre-K through grade 12.

For Judy, supporting students experiencing homelessness isn't just a job—it's a commitment shaped by decades of service, deep community partnerships, and a belief that stability begins with relationships.

*"I'm a career social worker," Judy explains. "I'm not a therapist. My work has always been about doing things with people—showing them how to take care of themselves and supporting them as they move forward."*

Now in her fifth year as a McKinney-Vento liaison—and with more than 30 years in the same school district—Judy serves in a part-time role that spans far beyond any single job description.

*"I really have two main functions," she says. "I'm the McKinney-Vento liaison, including for unaccompanied homeless youth, and I'm also doing outreach social work in the community. My day and my focus depends on what the needs are."*

### Student Identification: Built on Outreach and Connection

RSU 20 utilizes housing questionnaires and a notice at the start of each semester of services available under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to identify and connect with families in need of additional support.

*"A lot of people don't know about the McKinney-Vento program. So much of my job is just making sure families know they have rights—and that help exists."*

Because internet access isn't always reliable, Judy relies heavily on phone calls and texts.

*"Families call me directly, and I call them directly. Even after some families move out of the district, they'll still reach out if they need help."*

She also works closely with teachers and administrators. *"It's so important that teachers know what McKinney-Vento does. That way they can refer students and families, and we can reach out and offer support early."*



RSU 20 serves 400 students Pre-K through grade 12 in Searsport and Stockton Springs.

Similar to other SAUs, school staff turnover in recent years has presented a challenge in ensuring that new team members are educated on McKinney-Vento eligibility and services and all staff are aware of local procedures for connecting students with support.

## Meeting Student Needs—Challenges and Supports

In Judy's district, housing instability is a constant challenge.

*"Affordable housing is the biggest issue. There are broken-down trailers, expensive apartments, high heating and electricity costs. Some families go without heat for part of the year. Others double or triple up just to get by."*

Food insecurity is another major concern. Judy partners with the Belfast Soup Kitchen and Good Shepherd Food Bank to provide roughly 1,200 pounds of produce every two weeks, along with a weekend food bag program. The RSU 20 food pantry relies on support from the high school alternative education program students who assist in unloading the food, taking inventory, ordering food, and packing and delivering weekend food bags.

*"A lot of students and families access food through the program. Even then, it's still not enough for the level of need."*

She also helps families with transportation, clothing, rent and utility assistance through the **Preventing Student Homelessness Program**, and completes referrals to additional community resources.

*"Sometimes I'm paying bills directly with Preventing Student Homelessness dollars. We don't give families money—we pay the landlord, the utility company or the car repair shop."*

## Supporting Unaccompanied Youth

Unaccompanied homeless youth are among the most vulnerable students Judy supports.

*"They're the group facing the greatest challenges. They don't have a parent involved. They're here one day and gone the next. Everything is unstable."*

Through partnerships with organizations like **But Still I Am One**, Judy helps connect youth ages 16–21 with host homes, monthly prepaid cards, driver's education, vocational rehabilitation, and college visits.

*"Transportation is a huge barrier in rural Maine. If you don't have a car, it's hard to get to work, to school, to anything."*

Currently, Judy supports RSU 20's unaccompanied homeless youth population and approximately **20 families, consisting of 25 students**, experiencing housing instability.



Judy and her colleagues pack take home food bags as part of their **Help Us Stop Hunger** initiative.

## A Moment That Matters

When asked what motivates her to keep going, Judy doesn't hesitate to share a story that stays with her.

*"There was a student who had been homeless since she was 12, moving from place to place. In some situations, she couldn't even wash her clothes or her hair, so she stopped attending school."*

Through consistent outreach and advocacy, Judy helped the student reconnect with school, move in with a relative, and access critical support.

*"She's now attending school more regularly, got her driver's permit through a paid driver's ed course, and has gone on college visits. We were all there for her emancipation hearing—her caregiver, the outreach worker, and me. Now she wants to open a bank account. We're planning to walk to the local bank together. It's about helping students keep moving."*

## Advice for New Liaisons

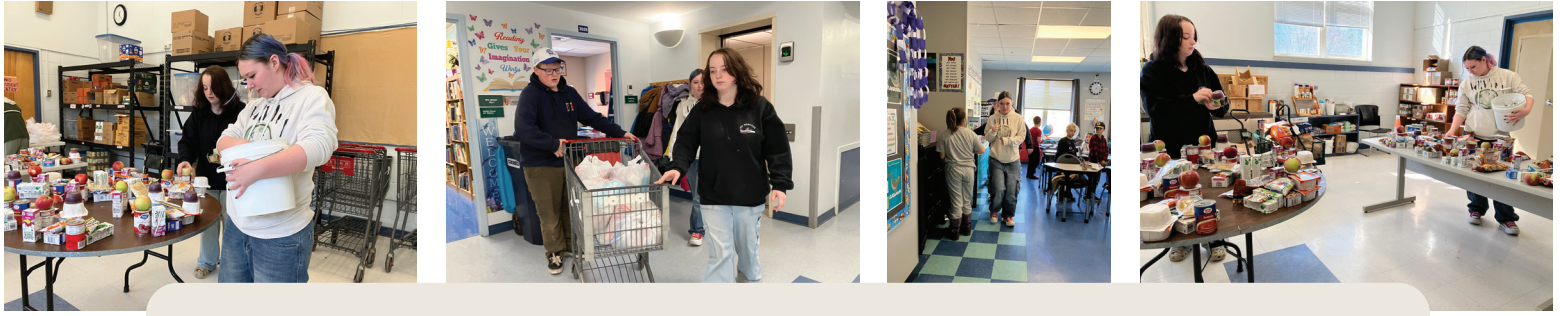
Judy's advice to new McKinney-Vento liaisons is rooted in patience and compassion.

*"Don't get frustrated. Be kind. Try not to judge people. People have been dealing with life difficulties long before you show up. You won't be able to fix everything—and that's okay. Don't give up on people. Regroup when things get complicated. It takes patience and perseverance, and remember that you're only one person."*

Lastly, in small communities, Judy believes that connection is everything: *"Friends, relatives, neighbors—everyone comes together. This is what you have to do in a small community. We're all just trying to help kids stay in school."*



RSU 20 has a **Help Us Stop Hunger** initiative that consists of a food pantry and a weekend take home food bag program. A team of students and a teacher run the program and together, they pack 30+ weekend bags each week for Pre-K-5th grade students in RSU 20.



The photos above highlight students from the Help Us Stop Hunger team as they pack and deliver weekend food bags for RSU 20 students.

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**Thank you** to Judy and all the RSU 20 staff, administrators, and community partners who come together to support McKinney-Vento students and families.

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