



United Way of
Massachusetts Bay



BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Social Work



Empowering Homeless Liaisons: **A Daily Practice Resource Guide**



What's inside?

This guide seeks to inform and support homeless liaisons of Boston Public Schools (BPS), integrating relevant resources from the Rennie Center and BPS to enhance their daily practice. Blue boxes and pages discuss trauma, while green ones discuss student identification and liaison support.

How do students and families experience and display trauma?

PAGE 3

How can staff feeling compassion fatigue and burnout be better supported?

PAGE 7

How can liaisons help students heal from trauma?

PAGE 5

How can data help identify and support students and families experiencing homelessness?

PAGE 8

How can navigating systems lead to challenges in building trust with families?

PAGE 9

In what ways can information dissemination, screening, and reporting be improved?

PAGE 10

How can liaisons be further supported?

PAGE 12

How can liaisons continue to grow and share their understanding?

PAGE 13

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


This brief consolidates feedback and information from three sessions with homeless liaisons in Boston Public Schools (BPS), combined with document review and research, to create a comprehensive resource guide. It aims both to highlight the questions and needs of liaisons and to provide resources and answers to support them in their roles. The guide includes information about:

- Signs of trauma in students
- Ways to heal from trauma
- Compassion fatigue vs. satisfaction
- Partnerships between school personnel and liaisons
- Different definitions of homelessness
- Reasons families may not report homelessness
- Obstacles specific to immigrant families and those who are undocumented
- Strategies to improve family outreach
- BPS liaisons' experiences, shared in direct quotes

The document seeks to both amplify feedback and questions from liaisons while providing connected resources from BPS, the Rennie Center, and Boston College. While the context and resources are most related to BPS, this guide serves to amplify liaisons' voices and provide resources for liaisons across Massachusetts.



Feel free to reach out with additional questions to Gabriella Cruz (gcruz@bostonpublicschools.org) or Kedan Harris (kharris@bostonpublicschools.org).

Are you a **Boston Public Schools** staff member or a resident of Boston? Look for this  icon throughout the report to be connected to resources specifically designed for the BPS community!

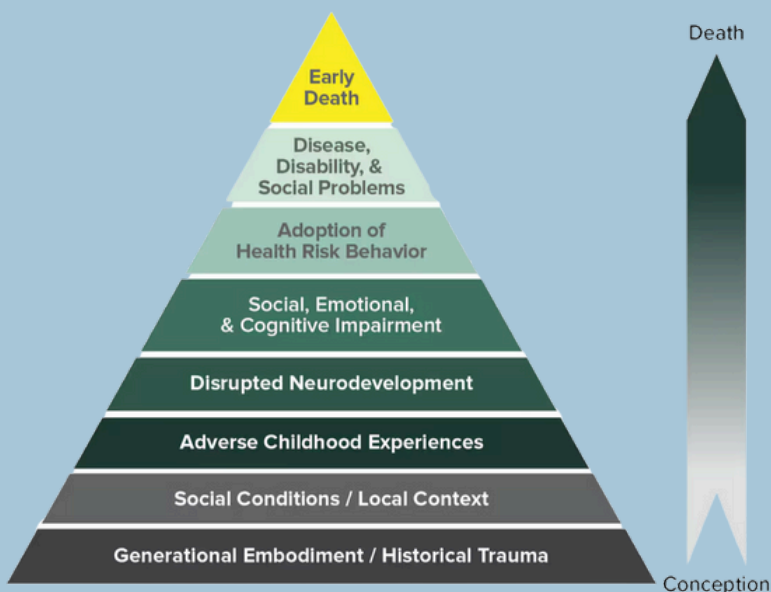
? How do students and families experience and display trauma?

Trauma is “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more” (American Psychological Association, 2018). These responses can manifest both in the short term (e.g., reactive decision-making, stress, shock, and denial) and the long term (e.g., fight or flight responses to stressful and dangerous environments, which can negatively impact health, disrupt development, and cause emotional fluctuations).



Trauma can occur unconsciously, causing our bodies to remain in survival mode even after the immediate danger has passed. Traumatic events also often prompt further life challenges. For example, losing housing is a traumatic event that can put students at risk for further adversity and violence.

However, trauma can be acknowledged, validated, and counterbalanced through supportive, consistent relationships, as our brains are malleable. By understanding the trauma experienced by our students and their families, we can address and heal the underlying root causes. This can be done by establishing programs to help families identify and secure stable and safe housing, for example.



Mechanism by which Adverse Childhood Experiences Influence Health and Well-being Throughout the Lifespan

Left: This pyramid represents the conceptual framework for a study that examined how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are related to the development of risk factors for disease throughout a person's lifespan from conception to death.

Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention; 2016. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>

The following indicators can help identify the impact of homelessness and related trauma in our students:

Physical health

- No immunization/health records and unmet medical/dental needs
- Chronic hunger and fatigue
- Limited access to showers, laundry facilities, and consistent grooming
- Repeatedly wearing the same clothes

School logistics

- Frequent school changes
- Regular absences and lack of preparation for class
- Missing or losing necessary supplies like books
- Missing enrollment records and inability to get parent/guardian signatures
- No access to financial information

Behavioral health

- Noticeable behavior changes, short attention span, and poor self-esteem
- Shyness and isolation, difficulty forming relationships, and mistrust of others
- Displays of aggression and behavior uncharacteristic of their age group
- Strained or broken relationships with parents and lack of supportive adults

In school settings, we often encounter trauma in students and families experiencing homelessness. Students may ask questions such as, "What does 'transitional' mean?" or "How can we find a permanent home?" These questions can prompt further one-on-one conversations to check if the student is experiencing housing instability.

For more resources on recognizing trauma in students with examples of potential behaviors, see page 9 in the Rennie Center's "[Helping Students Heal from Trauma](#)" resource.



The BPS community can learn more in [this slide deck](#) from the Department of Opportunity Youth, which is part of the [Homeless Education Resource Network \(HERN\) Toolkit](#).




<https://springfour.com/helping-renters-stay-put-responding-to-the-covid-19-housing-insecurity-crisis/>



In addition to directly asking if a student is struggling with homelessness, inquiring about the number of adults in their household can reveal if they are "**doubling up**"—living with friends or extended family, such as an aunt or uncle. It's important to consider that for many immigrant and newcomer students, living in multigenerational homes is normal and culturally appropriate. Recognizing these nuances and lending an attentive ear helps us support our students more effectively and equitably.

? How can liaisons help students heal from trauma?

A school can do more than just provide space to support students' academic learning—it can also play a role in preventing and healing trauma. In fact, schools are often the first place students express mental health challenges outside their family environment. Doing so relies on building blocks of positive childhood experiences: relationships, environments, engagement, and opportunities for social and emotional growth. In practice, liaisons can suggest these activities while keeping in mind that students experiencing homelessness should not be singled out.

 **Partner BPS** is a search engine where liaisons can find and reach out to both internal and external organizations. These organizations can offer structured programming, incorporating some of the activities mentioned below.

The following table organizes various trauma-healing activities, suggested by the **BPS Homeless Liaison Spring 2024 three-part series**, based on intensity and type of interaction:

	Physical or tactile-based	Non-physical or tactile-based
Higher intensity and mental stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral stimulation • Self massages • Dance, yoga, tai chi • Animal therapy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral stimulation • Writing down gratitude and mindful appreciation • Writing down thoughts, feelings, and/or dreams • Believable and incremental mantras and affirmations
Lower intensity, calmer settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being outside in nature—intentionally focusing on the natural world and the body sensations related to it (light, color, tactile experiences, body in space) • Stuffed animal cuddles • Tactile soothing: recommending warm baths, essential oils, fidget toys, squeeze balls, weighted blankets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditation, calm deep breathing exercises • Rhythmic activities, listening to and playing music • Artistic creation: coloring, drawing, painting

From families' perspectives, a **coordinated system** can minimize or prevent trauma and promote healing. This is often the case for those who are **connected to compassionate, collaborative, and culturally understanding staff** who are ready to help them navigate resources.

Homeless liaisons can employ the following strategies to build relationships with families and students who have experienced trauma:

- Offering prompt and empathetic responses gives families hope for pursuing resources and helps them feel more comfortable and less alone.
- Welcoming families and interacting without judgment allows for vulnerability and trust while eliminating shame.
- Having resources on hand serves as practical reassurance.

Through this type of experience, families are empowered to continue to seek support rather than avoiding it.

Furthermore, liaisons can utilize the strategies outlined in the Rennie Center's **"Helping Students Heal from Trauma"** resource guide to support students with trauma:

- **Focus on Relationships:** Get to know students' home culture, making time for 1-1 chats.
- **Empower Students:** Provide students with opportunities to affirm their identity (e.g., through books, storytelling), create opportunities for students to impact their community, and provide choice in activities or surroundings.
- **Facilitate a Supportive Environment:** Assist students in improving their sense of competence (e.g. by helping them mentor a younger student, sharing positive growth with family, and following the 10:1 ratio of positive to negative feedback).
- **Provide Emotional Support:** Validate students' emotions by responding with empathy, teach strategies to deal with difficult thoughts, and help students identify, articulate, and manage emotions (e.g. by modeling self-regulation, using mindfulness techniques).

Showing up for students with compassion and care can bring them healing

Given the prevalence of burnout and compassion fatigue that liaisons shared in facilitated sessions, it's important to remember and highlight the important positive impact that homeless liaisons make on the communities they serve. Liaisons provide a listening ear for families to express concerns, validate experiences without judgment and assumptions, and recognize the uniqueness of each story. Liaisons can also help support and facilitate conversations in families' preferred language.

The following quotes shared in facilitated sessions represent examples of the positive impact that liaisons make:

“

"I once approached a student's mom to ask if she was okay, and she started crying. I brought her to my office, and she shared that she was previously in a shelter and recently moved into an apartment but it doesn't have anything. I asked her for a list of what she needed, and I sent this list to the staff. My office looked like Bed, Bath & Beyond! It was so powerful to see how the student changed after this event."

”

“

"I always keep food in the office - one kid calls me 'Mama Bear.' I also carry a bag with me wherever I go in the school. This way, students connect with me over a snack and that's when kids will share. I check in while they have a snack and ask 'How's your family?'"

”

? How can staff feeling compassion fatigue and burnout be better supported?

Given the demands of the homeless liaison job, it's important to know the definitions and signs of burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue to support liaisons sustainably and ensure their efforts are recognized.

The following definitions are important for both liaisons and supervisors to be aware of:

- **Burnout** results from chronic occupational stress that has not been addressed/managed successfully.
- **Vicarious or secondary trauma** results from being continually exposed to other people's stories or experiences of trauma & violence.
- **Compassion fatigue** results from feeling intense and frequent compassion for the suffering of others and feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by caring so deeply in the face of constant, seemingly endless, uncontrollable suffering.

Common symptoms of these conditions that are important to be aware of include:

- Overwhelmed, anxious, angry, sad, and uninterested in their favorite activities
- Social withdrawal
- Difficulty sleeping or a lack of energy
- Reduced productivity and motivation or interest in work

Healing Through Compassion Satisfaction:

Compassion satisfaction comes from feeling appreciated, supported, and like our work is having a positive impact and meaningfully helping people to live safer, more enjoyable lives. It can be an antidote to burnout and compassion fatigue. It refers to the pleasure an individual derives from doing compassionate work, such as being a homeless liaison. To improve compassion satisfaction and well-being, liaisons and supervisors can:

- Foster relationships with supportive coworkers
- Forge a positive work environment
- Remind liaisons that their work makes an impact.

More Resources:

- Pages 20-22 of ["Helping Students Heal from Trauma"](#) contain strategies to support those working with students who have experienced trauma.
- [**Burnout Resources, Vicarious Trauma Resources, Compassion Fatigue Resources**](#)

Example Scenario:

Cam is feeling overwhelmed and disinterested in activities that usually bring her joy.

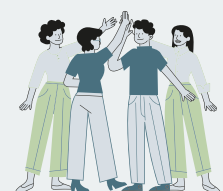


Her supervisor, Jon, noticed her social withdrawal and reduced motivation, and he brought up the possibility of:

- **Burnout**
- **Secondary trauma**
- **Compassion fatigue**

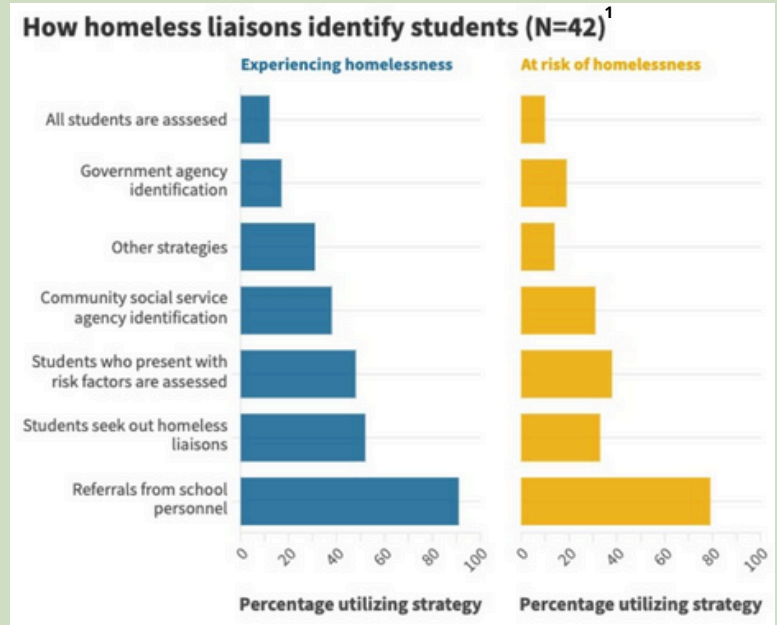
Over the next few weeks, Jon strives to reorganize resources to improve their accessibility, increases positive feedback to their team, and points out how Cam's work is making an impact.

Through these actions that make space for **compassion satisfaction**, he and Cam's supportive coworkers help counteract symptoms of burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue.

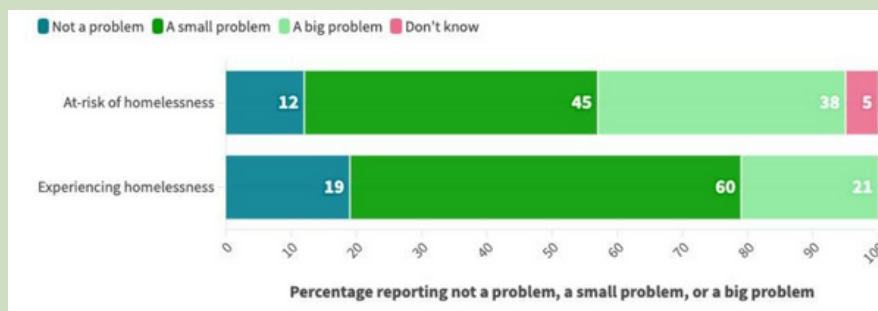


? How can data help identify and support students and families experiencing homelessness?

Boston College researchers conducted a survey of all Boston Public School's homeless liaisons to examine how liaisons identify students experiencing or at risk of homelessness. After receiving complete responses from 42 liaisons, data displayed in the chart on the right indicated that referrals from **school personnel are the most common method** of identification. Because they are a stable presence in students' lives, school personnel can be a powerful source of support. It is important that whichever staff member students choose to disclose their housing status to is equipped to connect them with the school's assigned homeless liaison for additional support. Therefore, **fostering strong relationships between school personnel and liaisons is crucial.**



Boston College researchers also asked homeless liaisons whether identifying students either at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness was not a problem at all, a small problem, or a big problem. The figure below breaks down the responses. Homeless liaisons reported greater challenges in identifying students at risk of homelessness compared to identifying students currently experiencing homelessness. **Approximately 38% of 42 respondents indicated that identifying students at risk of homelessness was "a big problem" compared to only 21% reporting the same for identifying currently homeless students.** However, similar proportions of respondents indicated that identifying students at risk of and currently experiencing homelessness was either a "small problem" or a "big problem" (83% vs. 81%).



Reaching at-risk students with resources as early as possible can be key to rooting out homelessness closer to its source. Page 11 contains more information about improving identification.

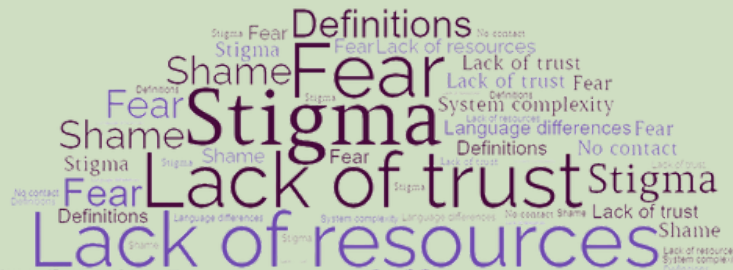
Get involved! If you would like to provide more input to this research, share your contact information through the QR code or reach out to Jess McCabe Johnson (mccabejc@bc.edu) or Tom Byrne (byrne@bu.edu).



¹ Note: Approximately 5% and 10% responded with "Don't know" when they were asked about how they identify students experiencing and at risk of homelessness, respectively. In addition 2% of respondents indicated that they preferred not to answer when they were asked about how they identify students at risk of homelessness. "Other strategies" include hearing from parents, examining data pertaining to family housing status stored in the Student Information System, and receiving notifications from the district-level BPS Department of Opportunity Youth

? How can navigating systems lead to challenges in building trust with families?

Identifying families experiencing or at risk of homelessness involves recognizing the multitude of systemic obstacles they encounter daily.



One key consideration is **varied definitions of homelessness**. For example, families may live together in doubled up situations for cultural reasons. When families do double up because they can't afford housing, their leases are often in someone else's name. This, and the **lack of formal eviction notices**—since many families choose to leave when they can no longer pay rent, but prior to eviction—makes it hard for families to prove their housing instability and get on waiting lists for subsidized housing.

Families may be hesitant in disclosing their homelessness status due to **fear of potential consequences**, such as:

- Being placed in shelters
- Having their children taken away by the Department of Children and Families (DCF)
- Being forced to switch schools, especially for families with language needs or who are new to the country
- Experiencing the stigma that can be associated with homelessness can lead to shame

Communication barriers further complicate the situation. Non-English-speaking families can face additional obstacles with translation. Email and phone communication can help translation barriers but have their own limitations, such as lack of internet access or frequent phone number changes.

Many families experiencing homelessness have had previous traumatic experiences. Constant stress, fear of negative outcomes, and false hope can exacerbate this trauma, making families even more reluctant to engage with the system. See Pages 3-7 for more information on homelessness-related trauma.

Families without complete immigration documentation face additional hurdles, often receiving inconsistent responses from different agencies. Without documentation and a Social Security number, they struggle to access shelters and housing lists, and the conflicting information they receive adds to their frustration. Currently, liaisons report that there is no clear decision path to follow due to different strategies that have worked for different families. Pages 8 and 14 of the Rennie Center's **"Supporting Unhoused Students: A Blueprint for Massachusetts Schools"** gives additional pointers for liaisons working with undocumented families experiencing homelessness. Additionally, BPS's **"Resources for Immigrant Families"** lists available programs and other supports for this population.

? In what ways can information dissemination, screening, and reporting be improved?

Information Dissemination

Sharing up-to-date information consistently with families experiencing homelessness is crucial to improve identification and provide necessary resources.

Effective methods for sharing resources with families include:




- Using accessible platforms such as WhatsApp, Social Media, or Class Dojo
- Posting information on the BPS website
- Sharing information through school newsletters
- Distributing paper pamphlets and flyers in multiple languages at school
- Sharing information at regularly scheduled school events such as parent-teacher conferences

For more information on the importance of targeted outreach and effective methods, see page 11 of "**Supporting Unhoused Students: A Blueprint for Massachusetts Schools**".

Homeless liaisons provided the following recommendations to improve information dissemination:

- Consolidate resources for families in a centralized location and update regularly
- Ensure that terminology is clear and defined so that families can easily complete forms
- Discuss other ways to define homelessness so families feel comfortable self-identifying
- Ensure that families know they can share information with liaisons discreetly

The following chart lists resources from BPS to address common questions.

Question:	Resource:
Given the volume of resources for families, can they be centralized and updated regularly?	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaisons can consult the <u>Homeless Liaison Quicksheet</u>. This is a consolidated version of the <u>HERN Toolkit</u> that is updated regularly.
Is there a way for liaisons to provide feedback or ask questions regarding program or resource information?	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaisons can provide feedback to their Project Manager. • Liaisons can complete a new Google Form that BPS will provide in the upcoming school year to share feedback and ask questions.
Is there a way for liaisons to access previous BPS trainings?	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaisons can access recorded trainings through the <u>Training and Professional Development for Homeless Liaisons</u> Google Drive.

Screening and Reporting Tools:

Students and families are screened for indicators of homelessness during school registration and referred for follow-up services by Welcome Centers. After this point, screening can be sporadic and not standardized, leaving room for more integration and improvement.

To improve identification and ensure that families can access the resources they need, it's important that quality, vetted screening questions are integrated into all existing family interface points. For example, families could access the screening questions during scheduled events such as parent-teacher conferences.

Screening questions could include:

- Are you struggling with housing?
- How many people live together in your household?
- Is your family working with a caseworker?
- What resources has your family requested?

“Are you currently receiving help with food, clothes, rent or utilities? If not, are you interested in support with any of these?”

“Do you have any income?”

Liaisons emphasized the importance of connecting the information collected through the screening tool to available resources. This way, families can access resources to support their specific needs.

“Do you have any family or friends in Boston that you can rely on for support?”

Liaisons suggested that screening questions could be accessed through:

- Email signatures (homeless liaisons could link the tool here)
- QR codes on school newsletters or other documents distributed at schools
- Paper questionnaires from schools

Liaisons shared several suggestions for screening:

“[Screening should be] quarterly and in many languages, with simple questions and clarity about what families can expect while using the tool.”




“[These questions can be] distributed to students at the beginning of the year along with the normal annual requests to update contact information.”

Liaisons expressed the need for additional resources to help newly arrived immigrant families secure housing. BPS has emphasized the importance of utilizing the **“Resources for Immigrant Families”** guide, which provides information on available support for these families if the topic of immigration is raised in conversations.



? How can liaisons be further supported?

During the series of discussion sessions, homeless liaisons shared that they are overwhelmed with the volume of work required and they lack a clear description of their responsibilities. Many feel powerless to provide housing solutions given available resources. The following table summarizes suggestions from liaisons for improving the support and resources provided by BPS.

Liaison Suggestions	BPS Resources
<p>“Expand resources available to liaisons to support families experiencing homelessness.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Liaisons can consult the “<u>Guidance to Leverage Homelessness Funding</u>” for more information on available school funds. • All homeless liaisons are allocated funding to use at their discretion to support students. While housing is the primary need, and it falls outside of school control, available funding can still support students through in-school factors.
<p>“Develop additional partnerships with other organizations to connect families with case workers and case managers.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Liaisons can consult this directory of internal and external <u>BPS partnerships</u> to leverage existing collaborations.
<p>“[Provide] clarity on what being a liaison entails and what is expected from the role, and what resources are available to us. Training for all could be very helpful.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  • Liaisons can access recorded trainings through the <u>Training and Professional Development for Homeless Liaisons</u> Google Drive. • Liaisons can consult the <u>Homeless Liaison Quicksheet</u> for more resources. This is a consolidated version of the HERN Toolkit that is updated regularly.

Considering that homelessness is multifaceted, community partnerships are crucial to ensuring that families experiencing homelessness receive the support they need. The Rennie Center’s **“Supporting Unhoused Students: A Blueprint for Massachusetts Schools”** is a helpful resource for strengthening and utilizing community partnerships.

The blueprint includes the following resources that may be helpful for homeless liaisons:

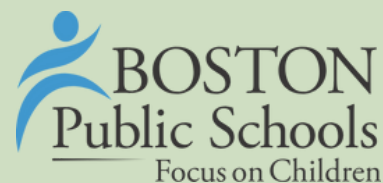
- Advice on identifying and screening unhoused students
- Best practices for home visits
- Suggestions of services to provide beyond housing (e.g., after-hours programs or showers)
- Best practices for targeted outreach
- Guidance for groups with specific circumstances such as undocumented families, unaccompanied youth, or students requiring specialized services
- Template and structure to track services and referrals within a school

? How can liaisons continue to grow and share their understanding?

Connect with resources at BPS:

If you would like access to further resources or have questions about supporting students experiencing homelessness, please contact:

- Gabriella Cruz (gcruz@bostonpublicschools.org)
- Kedan Harris (kharris@bostonpublicschools.org)



Get involved in research:

If you would like to receive updates and information about opportunities to provide input on research to develop methods and tools to identify students experiencing housing instability and homelessness, share your contact information by scanning this QR code. Or you can directly contact:

- Jess McCabe Johnson (mccabejc@bc.edu)
- Tom Byrne (byrne@bu.edu)



Learn about our Research Practice Partnership:

In 2019, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and the Boston College School of Social Work established a research-practice partnership, aiming to:

- (1) improve the quality of research on the impact of early homelessness prevention on educational outcomes;
- (2) equip service providers, schools, administrators, and policymakers with research evidence;
- (3) facilitate provider and school use of research evidence; and
- (4) ultimately improve child well-being and reduce educational inequity.



United Way of
Massachusetts Bay

This partnership is evaluating the impact of the Early Homelessness Prevention Program, a partnership of Boston Public Schools and FamilyAid Boston. Our research is funded through an Institutional Challenge Grant from the WT Grant Foundation, Spencer Foundation, and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (PI: Gautam N. Yadama). And it is supported by you! We were thrilled to engage Boston Public School liaisons in providing your input on the next phase of our research. Over three sessions in the Spring of 2024, we engaged 50 liaisons in discussion around the challenges and opportunities of your role supporting your school communities and families experiencing homelessness. This practice guide is for you, to document what you told us about your role.

To learn more about this partnership, please contact Sarah Bartley (sarahbartley@supportunitedway.org).

List of Resources

Resource:	Page(s) in brief:
<u>CDC-Kaiser Adverse Childhood Effects (ACE) Study</u>	3
<u>The Rennie Center’s “Back to School Blueprint: Helping Students Heal from Trauma”</u>	4
<u>BPS Homeless Liaison Convening 2023. BPS slides</u>	4
<u>BPS Homeless Education Resource Network (HERN) Toolkit</u>	4, 10, 12
<u>BPS Partnerships Database</u>	5
<u>Burnout Resources</u> <u>Vicarious Trauma Resources</u> <u>Compassion Fatigue Signs and Symptoms</u>	7
<u>BPS “Resources for Immigrant Families” slides</u>	7
<u>BPS Homeless Liaison Quicksheet</u> -- a consolidated version of the HERN Toolkit	9, 11
<u>Rennie Center’s “Supporting Unhoused Students: A Blueprint for Massachusetts Schools”</u>	9, 11
<u>“Guidance to Leverage Homelessness Funding”</u>	12
<u>Training and Professional Development for Homeless Liaisons</u> Google Drive	12
<u>Spring 2024 BPS Homeless Liaison Discussion Series</u> Google Drive	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research conducted and produced by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. This material emerged from a series of convenings with Boston Public Schools homeless liaisons in Spring 2024. This three-part series consisted of sessions covering:

- Trauma, Healing, and Systems Coordination
- Input on Research to Advance Identification of Families
- Liaison Feedback and Introduction to Rennie Center Resources

The production of this brief was guided by BPS liaisons' insights, and featured quotes were collected directly from liaisons during the series. We are thankful for all who participated and generously shared their time and experiences.

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ABOUT THE RENNIE CENTER

The mission of the [Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy](#) is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

