

Monday February 17th

Testimony of Jani Koester for the Wisconsin Opportunity Act

Senate Bill 467 & Assembly Bill 508

Submitted to the Members of the Senate Committee on Local Government,
Small Business, Tourism and Workforce Development & the Assembly
Committee on Housing and Real Estate

Jani Koester, TEP Lead Resource Teacher
Transition Education Program (TEP)
Madison Metropolitan School District
545 W. Dayton
Madison WI 536703

I am the Lead TEP Resource teacher in the TEP MMSD program for the last 31 years. TEP's role is to implement the Federal McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act in the Madison Schools. TEP provides direct supports and resources to families, youth and students experiencing homelessness through both direct contact and through the training and support of the Point of Contacts in each school and program in Madison Schools.

Transition Education Program (TEP) goal is to reduce barriers to school enrollment and achievement so that students who are experiencing homelessness have a **full and equitable opportunity to succeed in school.**

Services include, but are not limited to:

Advocacy

Resource development

Staff development

Community education, Training and awareness

Coordination with community partners

Basic Need and School supplies

Transportation

Connections and Referrals to community services and programs

Countywide/Districtwide/Communitywide Professional Development and training

Other supports as needed and necessary

Access to housing resources in our communities throughout the state vary depending on how you experience homelessness.

Last Friday I answered the phone and found a mom crying on the other end. They had once again been asked to leave another household they were staying with. They could go to shelter, as it was a cold weather night when no one is denied, but she works second shift and could not leave her children unattended at the shelter while she worked. She was asking once more for any options for shelter for the night. She already had the 2 numbers I give out and she had already tried them. No luck, she knew her choice was to not go to work or to set her children up someplace not safe for the night. She could not afford to miss work again or she would lose her job. The schools do not provide housing vouchers or hotel vouchers and the places I knew that might would be hard to reach on a Friday afternoon.

This dilemma of shelter is a daily question we receive in our office. Last year in Madison we served over 1,100 students identified as homeless. These are students as young as 3 and as old as 19 who might also be on their own, unaccompanied. This number only includes those who are identified. We serve anyone experiencing homelessness, but do not always have permission to tag them for data purposes. On top of that, we know this number is underrepresented due to the stigma of identification. Non-school aged children experiencing homelessness are not identified in this data. They are often overlooked in many homeless information collection systems.

School districts under McKinney Vento report individual students experiencing homelessness while housing programs under HUD identify family units. In Madison Schools our student numbers last year translates to 641 family units experiencing homelessness.

Within this identification we also ask at the time of verification how the family/student is experiencing homelessness. Last year in Madison our family units identified; 111 families in shelter or transitional housing programs, 454 doubled up, 18 unsheltered, 57 in motels or hotels and 1 unknown.

My mom from the phone call was a family experiencing a doubled situation. She was on her third doubled up stay. Her job, childcare, school connections, mobility and access to resources is a daily challenge.

In Dane County when you experience homelessness you are encouraged to go through the coordinated intake system – a one stop shop to receive information and support for finding shelter and housing. During this process families/youth are asked how they are experiencing homelessness. If you are in shelter or stay someplace not meant for human habitation you are then processed further into the system and become eligible for HUD housing resources. If you are self-paying in a hotel or doubled up, you are given a few phone numbers for other resources, but not included in the system for HUD housing supports.

80% of the families/youth we support in the Madison Schools are doubled up or self-paying in hotels. They are not eligible for HUD housing supports. An even greater challenge is that if you start in shelter and become doubled up, you are often removed from the HUD housing support system. These families/youth desperately need a system that sees their housing needs as challenging and provide supports for them in the same way or at least in a similar system as those who come from shelter.

Across the state of Wisconsin in 2017-18 school year there were 18,854 students identified as homeless. 87% of them were doubled up or in hotels. This is not just a Madison concern it is a concern across the state. The need for supportive affordable housing services and homes is overwhelming, especially for those who are doubled up or in hotels.

Reaching out to families with younger children that are not even identified or counted because they are nor not yet in school is crucial.

Recently a mom said to me “We are invisible within our own system, homeless yet not homeless enough. We have children struggling each day to find their way in the world, yet they have no idea what that is supposed to look like. Why my family is deemed less worthy of housing support frustrates me. I was evicted. I work hard. I have children who are supported only by the schools. My own housing system tells me I am not eligible for housing because I refuse to have my children sleep on the street. Something is wrong with our system, when I go for help and ask for shelter I am diverted to a friend’s home only to be told I am now doubled up and can’t access housing programs. Our own system removes me from the supports I so desperately need.”

Please help our families and youth experiencing all types of homelessness.

Jani Koester
TEP Lead Resource Teacher
Madison Metropolitan School District

I would like to share a recent reflection from one of my moms who is currently still experiencing homelessness in our community.

That Is How It Is

She lies quietly sleeping
For once I do not worry that she is quiet
When she is awake and chatting I know that her questions will not have an answer
I lack the resources to help her understand the no to her why

We struggle to find the right places to go
A place for her need to move and be a child
My need to find resources and supports
A place that supports us both at the same time

We often end up where I need to go
She just follows along
Taking in:
The same stories
The same explanations
The same tears
Wherever we go

She is too young to keep hearing my failures along with our struggles
Too young to experience the day to day challenges of homelessness and poverty
Too young to be hungry, cold and tired all the time
Too young
Too young to be listening to and experiencing adult issues

I let her sleep
On my lap, for lack of a better place
In my arms
Hopefully feeling as safe as she can
On the park bench,
Outside while it is still warm enough to come here to play

Soon we will collect her siblings
The ones who had breakfast and lunch at school
The ones who will bring her their snacks and milk that they snuck into their backpacks

They bring something for me too
I refuse knowing that she needs it more than me
They insist
They worry

I think they know I am trying my best
But yet I do not have any good news

They take her off my lap and let me walk around for a bit by myself
Time to try and make a plan for our next step

We did not get into shelter tonight
I did not get any invites from friends or family to stay with them
I wouldn't know how I would get there anyway

They gave me a gift card for groceries that I cannot use
nor do I have a way to get to there
They tell me to try again tomorrow
But what about tonight?
I am the parent
The one they depend on

And I have no one that I can lean on
This is hard....

I let them all sleep
In a pile of blankets
Hidden back behind the church

We will go to the gas station in the morning to get ready for school
We will meet the bus at the shelter we did not get to stay in
We will start over hoping for something to be different
They will have breakfast and lunch at school
We will find something in our pockets that they left for us for today

That is how it is-
Looking out for each other
Holding each other
Caring about each other
Worrying about each other

Maybe we will get into the shelter tonight
Maybe I will sleep for a while
Maybe it will be different.