

Kids Backing Kids, Inc. is pleased to share with you its first quarterly newsletter. Each newsletter – written and edited by student volunteers – will shine a spotlight on childhood homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, or trauma; feature someone in our local communities who is working to help kids in need; and share news about recent or upcoming KBK activities.

School Supplies Drive a Big Success

By Grace Rodrigue, Olivia Rodrigue, and Simone Rodrigue

Our first annual back-to-school community campaign was a big success, thanks to so many individuals, businesses, and organizations who donated school supplies, money, time, space, and other resources.

Kids Backing Kids delivered backpacks with school supplies to over 150 children and families in need by filling requests from individual families in our local communities, the Wellesley Housing Authority, the Wellesley Public Schools, the Newton Public Schools, and the Boston Youth Sanctuary. Although our focus is on children 12 years and under, we did not place age or grade restrictions on filling the need for back-to-school backpacks. Kids from preschool through high school received a backpack if they needed one.

Because of your generosity, children received backpacks that were literally stuffed with supplies – lunch boxes, pens and pencils, pencil cases/pouches, crayons, markers, highlighters, binders, folders, notebooks, lined paper, construction paper, staplers, calculators, clipboards, water bottle, tape, glue, scissors, index cards, notepads, erasers, rulers, tissue packs, earbuds, and band aids. And, of course, hand sanitizers and masks for everyone, plus face shields for preschoolers.

The total cost per backpack was \$75 on average, with some variability based on grade level. For families struggling to make ends meet during these challenging economic times, your generosity allowed them to reallocate those funds to meet



other pressing needs at home. We have received so many notes of thanks from families, as well as pictures of children with happy faces as they see what's inside their new backpack – they are grateful for your compassion and generosity.

Despite the success of our collective efforts, we know that there still are many children who did not receive a backpack with school supplies in our local communities. So, we'll work with community partners to do our best to let them know we are here to provide them with whatever supplies they need to help them make this school year a success. Meanwhile, if you are aware of other kids who need school supplies, please let us know.

We are grateful to all of you, to our volunteers, and to our many community partners who made this school supply drive possible.

Spotlight on Childhood Homelessness

By Olivia Gubbay

Of Massachusetts' 950,000 public school students, 23,000 are homeless, according to the Boston Globe. Many of these kids aren't completely unsheltered; 64% of them are staying with other families and 29% live in shelters or transitional housing. Even these numbers are incomplete, as many homeless students don't identify themselves as such to their schools. These kids have to deal with the lack of security and the mental and emotional toll of homelessness on top of being a student.

While part of the recent rise in homelessness can be attributed to more accurate data, Sarah Slautterback, the Massachusetts state coordinator for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, believes it's simply because "there's not enough housing to go around." Massachusetts does lack affordable housing and has one of the highest costs of living in the US. As new developments contribute to the rapid gentrification of previously low-income neighborhoods, housing costs rise and drive out former residents. Consequently, urban public school districts—namely Boston, Worcester, and Springfield— have the most homeless students in the state, although suburbs like Wellesley and Newton also have significant rates of homelessness.

Some homeless students are forced to leave their homes or families. Massachusetts has over 1,400 homeless unaccompanied minors who are often left alone when their parents are imprisoned, hospitalized, or deported. Others include kids who escape abusive households and LGBTQ+ youth who are kicked out or flee unaccepting parents. Unaccompanied youth are particularly vulnerable and alone. And, while these situations or motivations reflect broader systemic issues, the individual kids need support systems to keep them safe, fed, and in school until they can find reliable permanent housing.

Homeless students are more likely to drop out of high school, with a graduation rate of just 64% compared to 85% for all students. Students may struggle to meet enrollment requirements like proof of residency, have more absences, or may suffer more from mental and emotional health issues. A potential lack of school supplies and transportation adds to the barriers homeless students face. This inequitable access to education continues to reinforce the cycle of homelessness, as young adults are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness if they don't graduate high school.

Homelessness is likely to worsen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While we don't know just how much homelessness has increased this year, some experts suggest 1.5 million more Americans could become homeless, due to loss of temporary housing and mass job layoffs. The Children's Hospitals Association also designates homelessness as a coronavirus risk factor, as it limits social distancing, use of masks and cleaning supplies, or access to healthcare, and is associated with other pre-existing conditions like asthma and obesity. Further, online learning doesn't ensure equitable access for homeless students. Many won't have devices, connectivity, or a private environment for their online classes. They'll also lose important mental health services, reduced-price or free meals, and communication with district social workers.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, school districts are required to accommodate and support the education of homeless students. Schools are helping close the gaps for homeless students during coronavirus by providing them with devices and connectivity, portable chargers, and shipped meals. Even with schools doing what they can, supplies and backpacks can help homeless students stay engaged in their classes and make things easier for them.

Schools can only use their resources for homeless students if they can identify them, though. Even without COVID-19, identifying homeless students can be difficult since many of them don't come forward. Some may not realize that they are included in the McKinney-Vento Act, or others might be embarrassed or scared to report to school counselors. With school closures, communicating with students is much more difficult. Schools need to make sure students and families know their McKinney-Vento rights, can enroll at their original schools with fewer documents, and have open lines of communication with counselors and liaisons for remote support.

While the broader systemic changes needed to end homelessness may feel out of immediate reach, we can make things easier for homeless students by providing them with school supplies, personal protective equipment, and backpacks. Further educating people about childhood homelessness will inspire people to help out, both with systemic changes from the top down and with individual actions that make life easier for homeless students. If we can help these students and treat them with empathy, we can begin breaking the cycle of homelessness bit by bit.

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Childhood Homelessness:

An Interview with Jill Glashow, MSW, LICSW

By Megan Hudson and Lauren Hudson

Homeless children in Wellesley, Newton, Needham, and Natick? It's probably difficult for many of us to imagine that childhood homelessness is a problem in our local communities. But homelessness is part of our community fabric in the same way as it is for larger metropolitan areas. The scope of the problem may be different, but the needs of homeless children and their families are the same no matter where they live.

To shed some light on childhood homelessness in our local communities, we interviewed Jill Glashow, MSW, LICSW, a social worker, homelessness coordinator for the Newton Public Schools, and Wellesley resident. Ms. Glashow works in a program for children with social and emotional needs, as well as in a separate program with homeless children and their families. She ensures that the district helps schools to identify kids who are struggling so that they receive the support they need.

About her job, Ms. Glashow told us that when families lose secure housing and move to a different town, children often enroll in the new school system. But this can create many problems because there may be a loss of continuity in learning and instruction, kids must navigate a new and unfamiliar social and educational environment, and families may lack adequate support both in and out of school. Consequently, kids who move frequently between school systems are at higher risk than other children of dropping out of school. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides homeless children with the rights, and means, to continue attending their school of origin if they choose, even if they move into a new district.

"My role or job exists in every school system," Ms. Glashow tells us. "The McKinney-Vento Act was created specifically because kids who were homeless – or in foster care jumping from home to home – were having really inconsistent education."

"Although not widespread, homelessness in our area is a bigger issue than some might initially expect" Ms. Glashow said. "When I tell people that I'm the homeless liaison in the Newton Public Schools, most of them are very surprised to hear that Newton has homeless people. My current caseload is 40 homeless families, but that's an undercount. There are a good number of families living doubled-up that live in Newton but that are not part of my program because they slip through registration cracks. So the true number of those struggling with housing insecurity is surely underestimated."



Ms. Glashow, Olivia Rodrigue, and Grace Rodrigue loading school backpacks for delivery to kids with housing insecurity in Newton.

While most of us may picture a homeless person as someone without a home, the truth is that homelessness is much more complicated.

“I don’t think that people really understand what the face of homelessness looks like,” Ms. Glashow said. “There’s not one face of homelessness and what it looks like – it could be anybody. Some families are in local shelters, others have lost housing and are temporarily living with family or friends. Some are unaccompanied minors who fled unsafe situations at a previous residence.”

One of the most thought-provoking things that we learned from Ms. Glashow was how easy it is for families to find themselves in an insecure housing situation.

“I do like to outline for people how easy it is to be homeless in this country,” Ms. Glashow said. “I think it’s really important to recognize that our minimum wage is not a living wage, even in a state like Massachusetts where the minimum wage is higher. There’s this whole myth around what it means to be economically poor and what it means to be homeless. We have a society that is structured around making it very difficult to live on an hourly wage. All it takes is a health issue or losing a job to become housing insecure. I think it’s important to flip the switch on what we believe homelessness means, and what we do as a society to contribute to economic instability for families. What would it mean to have a living wage, instead of a minimum wage?”

Ms. Glashow told us that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the lack of adequate housing for families even worse. Unfortunately, the scope of the homelessness problem is likely much bigger and some of these families impacted by the pandemic may not be getting all of the services that they need.

“This year, I probably have the fewest families in my caseload,” Ms. Glashow noted. “You would think I’d be swamped, but I think what’s happened is that so many families have gotten lost in this pandemic. This is a very challenging time for children and families in unsafe environments. A lot of people who are experiencing domestic violence don’t have access to shelter systems. It makes me worried about what happened to these families, and that they’re not getting the support they need.”

Although she faces many challenges and obstacles in her line of work, Ms. Glashow said she finds working with families in need to be professionally and personally fulfilling.

“Being able to support people who are at the most difficult part of their life is gratifying. When I can say, ‘Hey, I can solve this for you’... that sense of relief that you hear from families brings me a lot of joy. In light of all the bad that’s happening for the family, I like offering them a piece of good news.”

So, what can we do on an individual level to help families facing housing insecurity? Ms. Glashow suggested one thing that can be done is to simply infuse more compassion and understanding into our everyday lives.

“Even though we think we live in this bubble, not everyone is as fortunate and not everyone is experiencing the lives you are,” she emphasized. “If people walk through life a little more empathic and grateful... then you can sort of open your eyes to seeing that other people might be struggling. Empathy is so, so important.”

COVID Backpacks for Vulnerable Families

By Grace Rodrigue

The COVID pandemic has had an adverse impact on children and families, particularly those already living on the margins of poverty and food insecurity. Kids Backing Kids, Inc. applied for and received \$1,500 from the Wellesley COVID-19 Relief Fund to provide “COVID-19 backpacks” for vulnerable families. The Relief Fund, a partnership between the Community Fund for Wellesley and the Wellesley Board of Selectmen, was established to help address unmet needs in our community resulting from the ongoing COVID pandemic.

Our youth volunteers brainstormed ideas about what would be most helpful to kids in supporting them during the ongoing COVID pandemic and the delay in returning to school in person. Using their ideas, KBK prepared and delivered backpacks that included: masks, hand sanitizers, gift cards, activity books, crayons/markers, playing cards, bubbles, sidewalk chalk, writing journals, DIY projects, baking goods, and other items to 15 families identified by town and school social workers in Wellesley.



Simone Rodrigue preparing COVID backpacks for delivery.

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