

Special Circumstances and Populations References

Are you unable to provide parent information due to special circumstances?

In situations such as the ones below, you may be able to submit your FAFSA without parent information despite being considered a dependent student:

- Your parents are incarcerated.
- You have left home due to an abusive family environment.
- You do not know where your parents are and are unable to contact them (and you have not been adopted).
- You are older than 21 but not yet 24, are unaccompanied, and are either **homeless** or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless.

FAFSA on the Web will ask you whether you are able to provide information about your parents. If you are not, you will have the option to indicate that you have special circumstances that make you unable to get your parents' information. *FAFSA on the Web* then allows you to submit your application without entering data about your parents.

However, it is important for you to understand the following:

- Although your FAFSA will be submitted, it will not be fully processed. You will not receive an Expected Family Contribution and must immediately contact the financial aid office at the college or career school you plan to attend.
- The financial aid staff may ask for additional information to determine whether you can be considered independent and have an EFC calculated without parent data. Gather as much written evidence of your situation as you can. Written evidence may include court or law enforcement documents, letters from a clergy member, school counselor or social worker, and/or any other relevant data that explains your special circumstance.
- The financial aid office's decision about your dependency status is final and cannot be appealed to the U.S. Department of Education.

<http://studentaid.ed.gov/fafsa/filling-out#determining-your-dependency-status>



Students in Unique Situations: Tips for Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)



Questions on the 2014–15 FAFSA that may cause difficulty for students in unique situations, such as wards of the court or foster youth, are listed below. Question **numbers** refer to the paper FAFSA. **Sections** refer to the FAFSA on the Web (FOTW) Worksheet. Please note that some questions on the paper FAFSA do not appear on the FOTW Worksheet. Answering yes to any question in Step Three on the FAFSA and/or checking the corresponding box in Section Two on the FOTW Worksheet means that you will be treated as an independent student and will not need to provide parental information on the FAFSA.

Question #44 Section 4

Free childcare

Q: I am a single mom with one child and will get free day care for my child (from a grandmother, aunt, or free day care center) while I go to college. Does the value of this free childcare have to be reported on the FAFSA?

A: No, this service is not income and the information is not collected on the FAFSA. However, note that you need to let the financial aid administrator at your college know that you are receiving free dependent care; an allowance for dependent care may not be added to your cost of attendance.

Question #51 Section 2

“Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between July 1, 2014 and June 30, 2015?”

Q: I have a child who will be living with me and I will receive assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Do I answer “Yes” to Question #51? Are TANF or welfare benefits considered to be like earned income?

A: TANF benefits count as support that you provide to your child. You should answer “Yes” to this question, as long as you provide more than half of the child’s support.

Question #53 Section 2

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I am a ward of the court who graduated from high school and then went to live with my mother for two months. Did I lose my independent status?

A: A student is considered independent if he or she is a ward of the court, or was a ward of the court, at any time when the individual was age 13 or older. If your ward of the court status changed before you reached age 13, you may be considered dependent on your parent. You should talk about your situation with the financial aid administrator at your college who will help you determine your correct dependency status.

Question #53 Section 2

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I am a dependent child of the court of my county. Is this the same as a “ward” of the court?

A: The term “ward” is used to mean “dependent” of the court. You are a ward of the court (regardless of whether this status is determined by the county or state) if the court has assumed custody of you. You should have court ordered documents that designate you a ward of the court.

Question #53 Section 2

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I am no longer under the court because my foster parents took legal guardianship of me a few years ago. However, my foster parents do not support me with their own financial resources. They still get a foster care check each month for me. How do I answer question #53?

A: If you were in foster care at any time when you were 13 or older, answer “Yes” to Question #53. If you are in a legal guardianship, answer “Yes” to Question #55.

Note: Neither legal guardians nor foster parents are considered parents when completing the FAFSA. This means you do not list their income and household size information on your FAFSA.

Question #53 Section 2

“At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court?”

Q: I turned 18 and graduated, so my court case was closed. My college is saying I am no longer an independent student because I am no longer a ward of the court. Am I considered dependent or independent?

A: You are considered independent if you were a ward of the court, **at any time**, when you were age 13 or older. This means you should check “Yes” to Question #53, if you were a ward of the court when you were age 13 or older.

Question #54 Section 2

“As determined by a court in your state of legal residence, are you or were you an emancipated minor?”

Q: I was emancipated at age 15, but lived with my aunt and uncle during my last semester of high school. How should I complete the FAFSA?

A: If you have a copy of a court order stating you are an emancipated minor, answer “Yes” to Question #54 and complete the FAFSA as an independent student. The court must be located in your state of legal residence. If the court order is no longer in effect and you have not reached the age of majority for your state of legal residence, answer “No” to Question #54. Complete the FAFSA as a dependent student if you answer “No” to the remaining questions on the paper FAFSA and none of the other boxes in Section Two of the FOTW Worksheet apply to you.

Question #55 Section 2

“As determined by a court in your state of legal residence, are you or were you in legal guardianship?”

Q: My grandparents are my court-appointed, legal guardians. They have provided support for me all my life. How do I complete the FAFSA?

A: If you have a copy of a court order stating you are in a legal guardianship, answer “Yes” to Question #55 and complete the FAFSA as an independent student. The court must be located in your state of legal residence. If the court order is no longer in effect and you have not reached the age of majority for your state of legal residence, answer “No” to Question #55. Complete the FAFSA as a dependent student if you answer “No” to the remaining questions on the paper FAFSA and none of the other boxes in Section Two of the FOTW Worksheet apply to you.

Question #56 Section 2

“At any time on or after July 1, 2013, did your high school or school district homeless liaison determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

Q: I became homeless during my senior year in high school. Am I considered an independent student?

A: You are considered an independent student if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2013, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless. The financial aid administrator at your college may require you to provide a copy of the determination or other documentation.

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or are an unaccompanied youth providing your own living expenses who is at risk of being homeless, contact your high school’s homeless liaison for assistance. Contact your college’s financial aid office for assistance if your high school’s homeless liaison did not make a determination.

“Youth” means that you are 21 years of age or less or are still enrolled in high school as of the day you sign the FAFSA.

“Unaccompanied” means you are not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

“Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing, including living in shelters, motels, cars, and temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to go.

Question #57 Section 2

“At any time on or after July 1, 2013, did the director of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

Q: I lived in an emergency shelter last year. How do I complete the FAFSA?

A: Answer “Yes” to Question #57 if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2013, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless. The financial aid administrator at your college may require you to provide a copy of the determination or other documentation.

If you are not sure you have a determination, but you believe you are an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or are an unaccompanied youth providing your own living expenses who is at risk of being homeless, contact the director of the emergency shelter for assistance. Contact your college’s financial aid office for assistance if the shelter director did not make a determination.

“Youth” means that you are 21 years of age or less or are still enrolled in high school as of the day you sign the FAFSA.

“Unaccompanied” means you are not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

“Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing, including living in shelters, motels, cars, and temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to go.

Question #58 Section 2

“At any time on or after July 1, 2013, did the director of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?”

Q: My mom died a few years ago and I have no contact with my dad. I am in a transitional living program. How do I complete the FAFSA? Am I an independent student?

A: Answer “Yes” to Question #58 if you received a determination any time on or after July 1, 2013, that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or at risk of being homeless. The financial aid administrator at your college may require you to provide a copy of the determination or other documentation.

If you are not sure you have a determination but you believe you are an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or are an unaccompanied youth providing your own living expenses who is at risk of being homeless, contact the director of the youth center or transitional housing program for assistance. Contact your college’s financial aid office for assistance if the director of the youth center or transitional housing program did not make a determination.

“Youth” means that you are 21 years of age or less or are still enrolled in high school as of the day you sign the FAFSA.

“Unaccompanied” means you are not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

“Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing, including living in shelters, motels, cars, and temporarily with other people because you have nowhere else to go.

Question #95

“How many people are in your household?”

Q: I live with my foster parents and their children. Are they my “family members?”

A: No. If you are considered independent (for example, because you are in foster care), and you have no dependent children of your own, you are a family of **one** (yourself).

Question #105

Signatures

Q: I have filled out this form as an independent student because I am a ward of the court. Do I need my father’s or mother’s signature? I do not live with them, but I see them sometimes.

A: No. Because of your status as a ward of the court, you are considered an independent student and a parental signature is not required.

Source: National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)

1/14



Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for Financial Aid Administrators

Financial Aid Administrators Checklist for Identifying Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

The CCRAAⁱ expanded the definition of “independent student” to include youth who are 1) unaccompanied and homeless, or 2) unaccompanied, self-supporting and at-risk of homelessness at any time during the school year in which they sign the FAFSA.

Q: How is “unaccompanied homeless youth” defined for the FAFSA?

A: An unaccompanied homeless youth is a youth who meets the McKinney-Vento education definition of homeless (lacking fixed, regular and adequate housing) and is not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. The legal definition of homeless includes youth who are:

- sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations
- living in emergency or transitional shelters
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.

Students who would be homeless but for living in a dormitory are to be considered homeless, as are students fleeing an abusive parent and living in a homeless situation, even if their parents would provide a place to live. A youth is 21 years old or younger or still enrolled in high school. Students who are older than 21 but not yet 24 and who are unaccompanied and homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless qualify for a dependency override.

Q: What do “self-supporting” and “at-risk of homelessness” mean?

A: Self-supporting is when a student pays for his own living expenses, including housing. At-risk of homelessness is when a student’s housing may cease to be fixed, regular and adequate, such as a student who is being evicted.

Q: How do youth become unaccompanied and homeless?

A: Generally, youth leave home due to severe dysfunction in their families, including circumstances that put their safety and well-being at risk. Unfortunately, physical and sexual abuse in the home is common; studies of unaccompanied youth have found that 20 to 50% were sexually abused in their homes, while 40 to 60% were physically abused. Parental drug use or alcoholism and conflicts with stepparents or partners also lead to youth homelessness.ⁱⁱ Many other young people are forced out of their homes by parents who disapprove of their sexual orientation or pregnancy.ⁱⁱⁱ In a survey of unaccompanied youth in California, over half felt that being homeless was as safe as or safer than being at home.^{iv}

Q: What are some strategies for identifying and verifying homeless youth?

- Avoid using the word “homeless” with students or colleagues, as it evokes stereotypes that do not match the reality of most young people who have lost their homes. Say “McKinney-Vento eligible”, “CCRAA independent” or “unstable, transitional or crisis housing”.

- Exercise sensitivity when talking with youth, who often are afraid to identify themselves as homeless due to fears of stigma or negative repercussions. FAAs are urged to use discretion and respect student privacy. Policy reports and Child Protective Services reports are not necessary.
- Have information about independent student status for unaccompanied homeless youth available in your office. Posters are available at no cost as part of this Toolkit.
- Create a process for verification that is sensitive to the unique needs of these youth.
 - Conduct the interview within the same day of their college/university visits if at all possible.
 - Do not interview the youth in front of others.
 - If the students do not have paperwork, work with them.
 - Let youth use resources that may not be readily available to them, such as the phone or fax machine.
- Remember that if the youth has verification from a school district homeless liaison, HUD- or RHYA-funded shelter or transitional living program, FAAs are not required to pursue additional verification unless they have conflicting information. It is not conflicting information if the FAA disagrees with an authority's determination. FAAs also may accept verification from recognized third-parties such as other homeless shelters and service providers, FAAs from another college, college access programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP, college or high school counselors, other mental health professionals, social workers, mentors, doctors, and clergy.

Q: What are some tips for having the verification conversation?

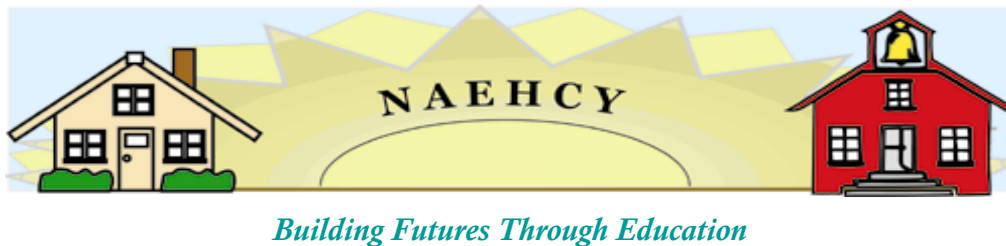
- Explain who you are to the student and why you are asking for the information: “Hi, I’m Mary. I want to help make sure you get the aid you’re eligible for. I need to ask you some questions to determine if you meet the criteria for ‘independent student’ status. Some of these questions may seem personal, but I need to ask them to see if you qualify. I won’t share your information with anyone else, unless I get your permission.”
- Below are sample questions for determining homelessness. It is not necessary to ask all these questions; each FAA will determine which questions are necessary on a case-by-case basis:
 - Tell me about where you are living. Is this a permanent arrangement or just temporary?
 - Are you looking for another place to live? Do you plan to move out soon?
 - Why are you staying in your current place? How long have you been staying there?
 - Where were you living right before this place? For how long? Why did you leave?
 - Where would you go if you couldn’t stay where you are?
 - Are you staying with friends/relatives just for a little while?
 - Could your friends/relatives ask you to leave if they wanted to?
 - Are you all sharing the home equally, or are you more like a guest in the home?
 - Do you stay in the same place every night? Do you move around a lot?
 - How many people are living in the home? How many bedrooms/bathrooms does it have?
 - Are you sleeping in a bedroom or a public area, like a dining room? How many people stay in one room?
 - Does the home have heat/electricity/running water? Does it keep out rain and wind? Is it safe?
 - Where would you be living if you were not living in your dorm room?
- Below are sample questions for determined if the youth is unaccompanied:
 - Do you live with your parent/guardian? How often do you interact with your parents/guardians?
 - Do your parents/guardians financially support you in any way? Do they help pay rent or other bills?
 - How long have you been on your own?
 - How are you supporting yourself?

ⁱ All legal statements related to unaccompanied youth and financial aid are from the CCRAA and the AVG 2010-11, pages 28-30.

ⁱⁱ Toro, P., Dworsky, A., & Fowler, P. (2007). “Homeless Youth in the United States: Recent Research Findings and Intervention Approaches.” *Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington DC: US Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development.

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless (2007). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. Washington DC: Authors; See also Toro (2007).

^{iv} Bernstein, N. & Foster, L. (2008). *Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers*. Sacramento: CA Research Bureau.



Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for Financial Aid Administrators

Financial Aid and Income Tax

Q: How does a youth's decision to file a tax return affect the FAFSA?

A: The obligation and/or choice to file a tax return is completely separate from the FAFSA. For the FAFSA, youth should just answer the questions about their income tax return and income (in Step Two of the FAFSA) truthfully. Also, their answers about income tax in Step Two should have no effect on how they answer the questions about homelessness in Step Three. Again, youth should answer those questions honestly and seek the appropriate verification.

Q: Are youth required to file tax returns?

A: Youth should file tax returns if they are required by the tax code to do so, or if they want a refund of taxes withheld by their employers. The IRS has an on-line questionnaire to help youth determine if they need to file a tax return, available at <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96623,00.html>.

Many youth will not owe taxes, due to the level of their income. However, youth who worked and had taxes withheld from their wages may choose to file a return to obtain a refund of the taxes withheld, even if they will not owe taxes. In addition, youth age 25 or older, or youth of any age who have children of their own, may be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which could significantly increase their tax refund (even if they owe no taxes).¹

Q: What should an unaccompanied youth do if his or her parents claim him or her as a dependent on their tax returns?

A: Tax fraud is a crime, punishable by financial penalties and, in serious cases, imprisonment. A parent's decision to claim a youth as a dependent reflects on the parent; the parent may be subject to penalties for unlawfully claiming a youth as a dependent.² The parent's actions should not subject the youth to penalties, as long as the youth is abiding by the tax laws applicable to his or her own income and does not personally benefit from the parent's unlawful actions. Examples of the youth benefiting from the fraud might include: the parent pays the youth a sum of money not to report the violation; or the parent pays the youth part of the tax refund the parent received by claiming the youth as a dependent, in exchange for the youth "playing along," and the youth knows the refund was obtained fraudulently.

Although the IRS offers some financial incentives to individuals who report tax fraud, there is no legal obligation for a youth to report a parent's tax fraud. Similarly, Financial Aid Administrators (FAAs) are not expected to be tax experts or investigate potential tax fraud. If a FAA finds evidence that an unaccompanied youth's parent is claiming the youth as a dependent for tax purposes, the FAA must resolve this conflicting information prior to disbursing aid. The FAA will have to review the verification the youth provided regarding the youth's status as unaccompanied and homeless/at risk of homelessness, and then ask the parent to submit a corrected income tax return or report the parent to the Office of Inspector General.³

<i>Tax filing</i>	<i>FAFSA Step Two</i>	<i>FAFSA Step Three</i>
Youth filed or will file on own behalf; Parents did not claim youth as dependent.	Answer truthfully if youth has filed or plans to file.	If youth meets unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) definition, mark “Yes” to the appropriate question, based on who will provide verification; ⁴ do not report any parental income (Skip FAFSA Step Four entirely); work on getting a verification letter from MV liaison or HUD or RHYA shelter director. ⁵
Youth filed or will file on own behalf; Parents also claimed youth as dependent.	Answer truthfully if youth has filed or plans to file.	If youth meets UHY definition, mark “Yes” to the appropriate question, based on who will provide verification; do not report any parental income (Skip FAFSA Step Four entirely); work on getting a verification letter from MV liaison or HUD or RHYA shelter director. If the IRS makes the connection between UHY status and parents claiming youth as dependent, the verification letter will be key for youth’s defense; parents may be subject to penalties.
Youth did not and will not file; Parents did not claim youth as dependent.	Answer that youth will not file, skip to next applicable question.	If youth meets UHY definition, mark “Yes” to the appropriate question, based on who will provide verification; do not report any parental income (Skip FAFSA Step Four entirely); work on getting a verification letter from MV liaison or HUD or RHYA shelter director.
Youth did not and will not file; Parents claimed youth as dependent.	Answer that youth will not file, skip to next applicable question.	If youth meets UHY definition, mark “Yes” to the appropriate question, based on who will provide verification; do not report any parental income (Skip FAFSA Step Four entirely); work on getting a verification letter from MV liaison or HUD or RHYA shelter director. In the unlikely event that IRS makes the connection between UHY status and parents claiming youth as dependent, the verification letter will be key for youth’s defense; parents may be subject to penalties.

¹ A Q&A on the Earned Income Tax Credit is on-line at <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96466,00.html#QA2>. An eligibility worksheet is available at <http://apps.irs.gov/app/eitc2010/SetLanguage.do?lang=en>.

² For a parent to claim a youth as his/her dependent, the youth must meet **all five** of the following criteria:

1. Relationship: son, daughter, stepchild, foster child, or a descendant (for example, your grandchild) of any of them; or brother, sister, half brother, half sister, stepbrother, stepsister, or a descendant (for example, your niece or nephew) of any of them.
2. Age: youth must be (a) under age 19 at the end of the year, (b) under age 24 at the end of the year and a full-time student, or (c) any age if permanently and totally disabled.
3. Residency: youth must have lived with parent for more than half of the year (with an exception for temporary absences due to illness, education, work, vacation, or military service).
4. Support: youth must not have provided more than half of his or her own support for the year.
5. Special test for qualifying child of more than one person (only applies if more than one person legally can claim the youth as a dependent).

³ See, e.g., 2010-11 Application and Verification Guide, page 106-108.

⁴ “Homeless” means lacking fixed, regular and adequate housing, which includes living in shelters, motels or cars, or temporarily living with other people because the youth had nowhere else to go; “Unaccompanied” means the youth is not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian; “Youth” means the youth is 21 years of age or younger or is still enrolled in high school as of the day the youth signs the application.

⁵ For a sample verification letter, go to: http://naehcy.org/higher_ed.html.



Unaccompanied Youth Toolkit for Financial Aid Administrators

FAFSA and Unaccompanied Youth Basics

Q: What does the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 (CCRAA) say about unaccompanied homeless youth?

A: The CCRAAⁱ expanded the definition of “independent student” to include unaccompanied homeless youth. Specifically, the CCRAA states that youth who are 1) unaccompanied and homeless, or 2) unaccompanied, self-supporting and at-risk of homelessness at any time during the school year in which they sign the FAFSA, are considered independent.

Q: How is “unaccompanied homeless youth” defined for the FAFSA?

A: An unaccompanied homeless youth is a youth who meets the McKinney-Vento education definition of homeless (lacking fixed, regular and adequate housing) and is not living in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. The legal definition of homeless includes youth who:

(A) lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and

(B) includes-- (i) children and youths who

- are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- are living in emergency or transitional shelters;

(ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings....ⁱⁱ

Students who would be homeless but for living in a dormitory are to be considered homeless, as are students fleeing an abusive parent and living in a homeless situation, even if their parents would provide a place to live. A youth is 21 years old or younger or still enrolled in high school.

Q: What do “self-supporting” and “at-risk of homelessness” mean?

A: Self-supporting is when a student pays for his own living expenses, including housing. At-risk of homelessness is when a student’s housing may cease to be fixed, regular and adequate, such as a student who is being evicted.

Q: Who determines if a youth meets the definition of unaccompanied and homeless?

A: The student’s status as an unaccompanied homeless youth must be verified, during the school year in which he or she applies for aid, by one of following:

- McKinney-Vento school district liaison;
- Director of a shelter or transitional living program funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) or designee;
- Director of a shelter or transitional living program funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) or designee; or

- Financial Aid Administrator (FAA).

Q: How does a youth indicate homelessness on the FAFSA?

A: The FAFSA contains three questions that ask specifically about homelessness. Those questions are:

- At any time on or after July 1, 2011, did your high school or school district homeless liaison determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless?
- At any time on or after July 1, 2011, did the director of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless?
- At any time on or after July 1, 2011, did the director of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program determine that you were an unaccompanied youth?

Q: What if the student was a homeless unaccompanied youth off and on and I am not sure if s/he will be an accompanied homeless youth when they start college in the fall?

A: A student is independent if at any time on or after July 1 (July 1, 2011 for students completing the FAFSA during the 2011-2012 school year), irrespective of whether the student is currently homeless or at risk thereof, s/he is determined to be an unaccompanied homeless youth by a school district homeless liaison, the director (or designee) of an emergency shelter program funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), or the director (or designee) of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program.

Q: What if the relatives or family the student is living with received legal guardianship but not custody?

A: A foster parent or a legal guardian is not treated as a parent for FAFSA purposes. If a student is living with her grandparents or other relatives, their data should not be reported on the FAFSA as parental data unless they have adopted the student.

Q: How is this different from professional judgment?

A: If the student does not have documentation from any of the relevant authorities, the FAA must determine if he/she is an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or is self-supporting and at risk of being homeless. This is not a dependency override or an exercise of professional judgment. It is important to examine students' living situations and claims on a case-by-case basis. The determination may be based on a documented interview with the student if there is no written documentation available.

Q: What if the student is over 21 and not yet 24?

A: Students who are older than 21 but not yet 24 and who are unaccompanied and homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless qualify for a dependency override.

Q: How much verification does the college need? Is the letter from a liaison, a HUD shelter or a Runaway and Homeless Youth provider enough?

A: FAAs are not required to verify the answers to the homeless youth questions unless they have conflicting information. A documented phone call with, or a written statement from, one of the relevant authorities is sufficient verification. It is not conflicting information if the FAA disagrees with an authority's determination that a student is homeless. FAAs also may accept verification from recognized third-parties such as other private or publicly funded homeless shelters and service providers, financial aid administrators from another college, college access programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP, college or high school counselors, other mental health professionals, social workers, mentors, doctors, and clergy. FAAs are urged to use discretion and respect student privacy. Policy reports and Child Protective Services reports are not necessary.

ⁱ All legal statements in this brief are from the CCRAA and the AVG 2010-11, pages 28-30.

ⁱⁱ 42 U.S.C. §11434A(2).

PLACE ON AGENCY LETTERHEAD

**Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Verification
For the Purposes of Federal Financial Aid**

Re: Name of Student

DOB: x/x/xxxx

SSN: xxx-xx-xxxx

Current Mailing Address of Student (if none, please list name, phone number, and mailing address of current contact): _____

I am providing this letter of verification as a (check one):

- A McKinney-Vento School District Liaison
- A director or designee of a HUD-funded shelter: _____
- A director or designee of a RHYA-funded shelter: _____
- A financial aid administrator: _____

As per the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (Public Law 110-84), I am authorized to verify this student's living situation. No further verification by the Financial Aid Administrator is necessary. Should you have additional questions or need more information about this student, please contact me at the number listed above.

This letter is to confirm that NAME OF STUDENT was:

Check one:

an unaccompanied homeless youth after July 1, 2011

This means that, after July 1, 2011, NAME OF STUDENT was living in a homeless situation, as defined by Section 725 of the McKinney-Vento Act, and was not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian.

an unaccompanied, self-supporting youth at risk of homelessness after July 1, 2011.

This means that, after July 1, 2011, NAME OF STUDENT was not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, provides for his/her own living expenses entirely on his/her own, and is at risk of losing his/her housing.

Authorized Signature	Date
Print Name	Telephone Number
Title	
Agency	

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH

Who are Unaccompanied Homeless Youth? Unaccompanied homeless youth are young people who lack safe, stable housing and who are not in the care of a parent or guardian. They may have run away from home or been forced to leave by their parents. Unaccompanied youth live in a variety of temporary situations, including shelters, the homes of friends or relatives, cars, campgrounds, public parks, abandoned buildings, motels, and bus or train stations.

Between 1.6 and 1.7 million youth run away from their homes each year.ⁱ Generally, youth leave home due to severe dysfunction in their families, including circumstances that put their safety and well-being at risk. Unfortunately, physical and sexual abuse in the home is common; studies of unaccompanied youth have found that 20 to 50% were sexually abused in their homes, while 40 to 60% were physically abused.ⁱⁱ Unaccompanied youth do not receive financial support from their parents and do not have access to parental information.

Who are McKinney-Vento School District Liaisons? Under subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, every school district is required to designate a liaison for students experiencing homelessness. Homeless liaisons have a number of legal responsibilities under the Act, including identifying youth who meet the definition of homeless and are unaccompanied. The education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act is overseen by the U.S. Department of Education. For more information, see:
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/homeless/legislation.html>

What are HUD-funded Shelters? The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers funding for homeless shelters and services under Title IV of the McKinney-Vento Act. These funds are distributed to communities through a competitive grant process. For more information, see: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/programs/index.cfm>

What are RHYA-funded Shelters? The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services administers the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs. These programs provide funding for Basic Centers, Transitional Living Programs, and Street Outreach Programs that serve runaway and other unaccompanied homeless youth. For more information, see:
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/youthdivision/index.htm#sub1>

ⁱ Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., & Sedlak, A. (2002). "Runaway / Thrownaway Children: National Estimates and Characteristics." *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children*. Washington DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. See also Greene, J. (1995). "Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors." *Research Triangle Institute*. Washington DC: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services; National Runaway Switchboard, <http://www.1800runaway.org/>.

ⁱⁱ Robertson, M. & Toro, P. (1999). "Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, and Policy." *Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*. Washington DC: U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development. Retrieved July 18, 2007 from <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/3-Youth.htm>. See also MacLean, M.G., Embry, L.E. & Cauce, A.M. (1999). "Homeless Adolescents' Paths to Separation from Family: Comparison of Family Characteristics, Psychological Adjustment, and Victimization." *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(2), 179-187.