

Unaccompanied Youth

“Unaccompanied Youth” are typically age 12-21, but, in some circumstances can be much younger. Reasons for not being in the care of a parent or guardian vary widely, but many are involuntary forced to leave by a parent or other adult in the household. Forced emancipation, parental abandonment, teen pregnancy and gender issues are common reasons why teens are “kicked out.”

Other youth may choose to leave home on their own, or "runaway". While many adults assume that youth who runaway are rebellious, this is seldom the case with unaccompanied youth who wish to remain in school. Most leave because they do not feel safe at home and have no other safe, regular living arrangement. Family conflict, physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, family mental health difficulties, or family addictions are issues that often result in homelessness for unaccompanied youth. Without a safe, regular living arrangement and not knowing where they will sleep each night, "couch surfing," living in abandoned buildings, shelters, cars, or campgrounds becomes a way of life.

Other youth may leave home due to issues of family economic hardship. This is often the case with families who are living in extreme poverty and cannot properly take care of the needs of older children in addition to those of younger siblings. These youth often choose to leave to reduce the economic burden at home.

Unaccompanied youth are without doubt a school district’s most vulnerable and at-risk students. In the past four years in USD383, 47% of the identified unaccompanied homeless youth failed to graduate.

Success in school is a strong predictor of the ability to overcome poverty and becoming independent. For many unaccompanied youth, school is the safest, most predictable place in their life. So, no matter the reasons for not living at home, the USD383 FIT Program’s primary goal is to assist unaccompanied youth in achieving educational stability and providing the necessary support to stay in school. This can include support in enrolling in school, staying in school, getting to school every day, providing free school meals, providing transportation, providing tutors, school supplies, basic clothing/hygiene needs as well as referrals to other community resources.

Every school district is required to appoint a homeless liaison. In USD383, this individual is Cheryl McCormick (FIT Program Coordinator) whose duties regarding unaccompanied youth include:

- Helping unaccompanied youth choose and enroll in a school, after considering their wishes and preferences.
- Informing unaccompanied youth of their rights to transportation and assisting them in accessing transportation.
- Providing unaccompanied youth with notice of their right to appeal school or school district decisions and ensuring that youth are immediately enrolled in school pending resolution of disputes.

If in the course of your work with students you suspect any student of any age does not have parental support, please contact:

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