

Number of homeless students at Jackson Public Schools quadruples

Posted by **By Claire Cummings** | **The Citizen Patriot** March 29, 2009 00:08AM

In a family of six children ages 1 to 10, homework time is naturally full of distractions. It's even more difficult to concentrate when you are homeless, says Kee'nu Harris, 10, the oldest child.

Inside the Jackson Interfaith Shelter is a small room Tomara Harris and her six children call home.

They share three sets of bunk beds where the three school-aged children read and do homework each night while their siblings take turns getting bathed. None of the rooms have doors to block out noise from other guests.

Harris' children are among a growing number of homeless students attending Jackson Public Schools.

"We didn't tell anybody because we didn't want people to know we stayed in a shelter," said Jakarta, 9, a third-grader at Hunt Elementary School.

In 2006-07, there were 34 students classified as homeless — 33 in elementary and one in high school.

This year, that number has more than quadrupled to 143 students — 139 in elementary, one in middle school and three in high school — or about 2 percent of the roughly 6,370 students enrolled in the district this fall.

And that's only the homeless students the district knows about.

By law, schools are required to do all they can to get homeless students to school and break barriers that might keep them from attending and succeeding.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act defines homeless children and youths as being those "who lack fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence." It includes those who live in shelters, share housing with others because of economic hardship or stay in cars, parks, abandoned buildings, camping grounds, shelters or motels.

National estimates in recent years have pegged the homeless- children population at 1.5 million. But that number is expected to grow with the economic downturn.

A recent report shows that Jackson's jump in homeless students is not unusual.

Of the roughly 1,700 schools surveyed nationwide this fall, 330 said they had the same number of homeless students or more in the first months of school than in the entire previous year, according to a December report by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and First Focus.

The report cites the economic downturn and rise in foreclosures as the culprit.

The majority of homeless students in Jackson are living in motels or in temporary housing with multiple families because of economic hardship, said Willye Pigott, the district's director of federal programs who works as the homeless student liaison.

She said she hasn't run across any students living in vehicles or on the street yet.

Because of the sensitive nature of the issue, educators can't ask a student outright if they are homeless, Pigott said.

But teachers, principals and other school staff notice patterns, such as students who come to school without proper or clean clothing, and contact the administration.

Parents and guardians also receive a form from the district in their enrollment packet that explains who qualifies and what services the district provides to homeless students, she said.

The district has been receiving grant money for four years based on its number of homeless students.

The funds pay for transportation costs, such as cab rides to school from motels, clothing, tutoring and personal hygiene items.

Pigott takes families to shop at Meijer.

"They're thinking about 'Where am I going to stay?' or 'Will I have transportation home?' or 'I don't have clothes,'" she said.

"All of that can affect the well-being and a child's ability to concentrate and to do their best in school."

Four years ago, the district received between \$8,000 and \$9,000 in grant money.

This year, it was increased to \$15,000 because of the need, Pigott said.

The federal stimulus package recently signed by President Obama is expected to allocate \$70 million for homeless students, some of which Pigott said will most likely trickle down to Jackson.

Kitrina Sims, manager of Interfaith Shelter, said there have been lots of calls from people interested in staying at the shelter but many never show up, choosing to stay with friends and family instead.

For those who do stay, the shelter provides help finding jobs and housing.

Harris and her children were one of three families staying at the shelter, which is not full, as of March 20, Sims said.

"Especially the school-age children, we see where it affects them in school," said Sims.

"For the older kids, it's embarrassing."

Officials from several other school districts in Jackson County said they have no homeless students this year, but a charter school official said she's seen an increase in homeless students.

"This is the first year we've ever had any homeless families," said Kim Norton, curriculum director at the da Vinci Institute in Summit Township.

There, seven students are homeless, six in primary school and one in high school, Norton said. The district had 260 students in the fall.

"Even for our small group, that's significant," she said.

Some families who are designated "homeless" actually do have their own place.

Sarah Bailey's three children are counted in Jackson's figure because the district paid for a taxi to transport them from a motel to school after high levels of lead were discovered in their home.

"They did that for nine days," she said. "A lot of people don't know that (homeless funding is) out there."

Her children, however, did not like being called homeless, she said.

Although the term homeless still has a stigma, some say the McKinney-Vento Act, with its broad definition of homeless, is shedding more light on the issue of transient families.

About 20 percent of early Head Start families, including pregnant mothers to children age three, typically have no permanent address, according to the Jackson Community Action Agency.

And case managers believe that number is growing.

"The bigger story is there are many, many families that simply go from home to home from neighbor to neighbor from place to place," said Mary Cunningham DeLuca, director of children's programs for Community Action Agency.

With the reauthorization of Head Start in 2007, students classified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act are also automatically eligible for Head Start, allowing Community Action Agency to identify and work with families earlier, she said.

For many, school is the only stability they know, she said.

Harris, a single mother, brought her children to Jackson from Memphis in the fall and they stayed in a shelter for a short time until they found a four-bedroom apartment.

Until recently, she was going to Baker College to become a phlebotomist technician and also worked in the college's maintenance department.

But her son was diagnosed with ADHD and could possibly be bipolar, so she was dropped from classes and work after missing too many days to take her son to treatment.

Without a job, she couldn't afford rent.

But finding another place big enough for her family is proving to be a challenge, especially with year-long waiting lists for low-income housing.

Harris has only a short time left until her 90 days are up and she has to leave the shelter with her children.

State rules require emergency shelters to house people for only 90 days if the shelters want to receive grant money.

For now, church and school are their most stable routines. Three nights a week, they take the bus to church for Bible study. And every morning, the school bus picks them up to take them to Hunt Elementary.

"They love school," Harris said. "I want to keep them there."