



# A HOME FOR TORI

*Finding Resources to Help Adult Homeless Teens*

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### PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Ensuring School Safety, Engaging  
Communities

**T**here are kids that change you; kids who touch your life in ways that shape who you become. When I first met Tori, a returning fifth-year senior, I didn't know she would be one of those kids. Tori taught me how to be persistent. She taught me about tenacity. She taught me about what homelessness looks like for our kids.

When my principal encouraged Tori to come back for one more semester of school to get her high school diploma, she was living with a co-worker from a local fast-food restaurant. But in October, that co-worker returned

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home, and Tori couldn't keep her apartment. She couch-surfed for a few weeks and lived in a borrowed car for four days before she finally came in to her counselor to explain why she had been absent and asked for help. Unlike many of our homeless students, Tori was 18.

Her counselor and I teamed up to find housing. Working with our district McKinney-Vento liaison, we tried to access many of our typical routes for resources, which were dead ends

due to Tori's age. She was an adult in the eyes of the agencies and not eligible for resources for teens. It was an adventure in frustration. We spent hours on the phone, mostly on hold, only to find out that a program wouldn't apply to Tori. It was going to be the end of the month before Tori could get an appointment with ACCESS Point for 4 Housing, the coordinated entry program in Pierce County. Progress was incredibly slow. I would call one agency and be

told no, only to call back, speak to someone else, and be given access to another program, another agency, another doorway into potential housing.

Finally, the REACH Center in Tacoma let us know ACCESS Point 4 Housing was at the center once a week and could get Tori an appointment. Working through ACCESS Point, Tori could qualify for “diversion,” a program to help pay her deposit and first/last month rent when she found a place to rent. However, that was a Catch-22. Tori couldn’t find a place

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that (a) she could afford or (b) would rent to an 18-year-old on her own. We were now on two weeks of Tori sleeping in a car.

In the meantime, I contacted every politician I could think of to discuss the problem for homeless adult-teens in our public schools, and while I got responses from several saying they understood the seriousness of the situation, there didn’t appear to be much willingness to change the system. Through Tacoma Mayor Marilyn Strickland’s office, our McKinney-Vento liaison was authorized to give Tori a few nights at a local motel. In the end, my

friendships in the community found a family that would rent a room to her, and Tori finished her diploma in November. She’s now in community college.

I wish I could say Tori’s story is unique, but it isn’t. With this experience, I am better navigating systems in my community for resources, and Tori turned me into an advocate for better systems for our homeless teens. ■

**Here are some quick tips for helping homeless youth:**

- Compile a list of resources for both counselors and administrators of community resource providers. Many school nurses may have access to resources. A good place to start: <http://www.commerce.wa.gov/serving-communities/homelessness/office-of-youth-homelessness/>
- Know your McKinney-Vento liaison. Actively participate in your district’s establishment of their system for providing resources.
- Learn what the process is for getting access to emergency housing in your district and your county. Go beyond city resources. Know your county connections.
- Build relationships with agencies early. Make personal connections, but know many agencies have high turnover rates and employees change quickly.
- Don’t give up. Ask questions about alternatives, ask about other agencies. Call back, the next person you talk to may have another alternative.
- Help the student tell their story. Telling a compelling story can help gain access.
- Say “thank you.”



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