



Gallia County Local Schools

4836 State Route 325 • Patriot, Ohio 45658
Phone (740) 379-9085 • Fax (740) 379-9136
www.gallialocal.org

Testimony before Senate Select Committee on Housing

Sandra Plantz-Homeless Liaison/Director Federal Program & Gifted for Gallia Co Local SD

November 27, 2023

Chair Reynolds, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Senate Select Committee on Housing, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony that may be helpful as you problem solve for housing shortage solutions. My name is Sandra M. Plantz, and I am the Local McKinney Vento Homeless Liaison for the Gallia County Local School District, located in Southeast Ohio. I have 10 years' experience working with rural homeless children and families and 35 years in education.

I have seen the number of homeless children and families soar in these years, especially in most recent. In the past five years, our district averages 153 homeless students in a school district population of about 2,100 students, which equates to 7% of our entire population. This is significantly higher than Ohio's state Homeless population percentage of less than 1% (.09) in 2023. Many want to say that this is due to drug addiction or not working. However, the families I work with, this is not the case. Our families are working poor, with low paying jobs below the poverty line. If they do secure housing for high rent, then they quickly get behind on either rent or utilities, and soon find themselves evicted. If we had more affordable housing these families would not choose to be doubled up living with family or friends. Gallia County has only one Domestic Violence/Homeless shelter, which opened in July 2022, that houses women/children with 16 beds and it is always full. To emphasize that the vast majority of our homeless children are doubled up with family or friends and moving place to place sometimes weekly. Which is due to a major low-income housing shortage in our area. The available housing to rent or purchase, is not affordable, sometimes to even most middle-high income families. Other major issues that result in homelessness for these families are low paying entry-level jobs, and unreliable transportation and/or no public transportation. Gallia County has no public transportation system and our county is spread out over 466.5 square miles. If you live outside the city limits, with no transportation it is next to impossible to keep a job.

Homelessness affects our students tremendously. Students who face homelessness in our district, as others suffer with chronic absenteeism/truancy issues, health issues, malnutrition, sleep deprivation, lack of personal hygiene, poor achievement, trauma-related social-emotional issues, lack self-esteem, high credit deficiency and dropout rates. I can support these families and reduce some barriers for them, which helps to prevent truancy with local resources and Title I grant- McKinney Vento set-asides. I can provide emergency clothing (up to 3 days), school supplies, and some hygiene products. I also work to secure transportation for students, which is very creative at times. There are times I cannot get transportation to them, due to not knowing where they will be staying or moving frequently. It takes a day or more to make new transportation arrangements. I have used the COVID-19 grant funding to provide additional support to put in washing machines and dryers and created ready rooms and pantry rooms in all my schools. I work



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closely with all the community agencies to offer beyond what I can provide in clothing, meals, household items and furniture. These things are necessary, and help the students feel better about coming to school to eat, shower and use hygiene products, get clean clothes, and have the essential school supplies. However, the one thing that I cannot assist with is housing. I can do nothing to provide them shelter. In a pinch, I have access to a ministry that will provide a one-time emergency 3-day hotel. Nevertheless, at the end of that, the family, nor social service agencies still cannot secure housing in 4 days. The waiting lists for any limited HUD housing in our area is typically up to a yearlong wait, sometimes longer. Occasionally the families get lucky and get moved up due to other criteria to secure housing.

During the pandemic, we did not see as many evictions. However, my numbers of homelessness, typically moving into the area with intensive needs, including housing doubled. Several of these children and caregivers did not have family in the area so nowhere for them to double up and our communities lack of shelters, or rentals, or HUD housing only intensified the issues. We have more homeless now on the streets, park/woods, in cars, abandoned housing, tents, the fortunate ones can secure a used camper, anywhere to get out of the elements and sleep. Once families could get housing, during the pandemic there were funds for rental assistance. Now that is not the case, their funds have dried up and no longer available and families are being evicted again at alarming rates. Previous Homeless families that were securely housed with rental assistance are now being evicted without that extra help on payments.

I had a family that I had worked with for over a year homeless, find housing and be stably housed for a little more than a year, just get evicted the day after Thanksgiving. I have them in a hotel until Tuesday, and then we are not sure what will happen. The one youth, a 19-year-old boy who is a junior in high school, has been homeless off and on his whole life. This has caused him to be credit deficient. I am worried about him now getting to school and graduating. It would be easier to just quit. I have seen many drop outs, credit deficiency truancy, behind their peers in achievement due to not being in school several days or weeks at a time.

I have one family- with 3 kids currently ages 9, 11, 13. This family has been homeless almost a year now. Last Christmas their property owner collected December's rent and informed them she had sold the house they needed to be out by January 8th. From January 2023 until now, this family has floated between four relative homes, staying about a week at a time. They had jobs. The locations they were staying were outside my district, so I gave gas cards each week so they could transport the kids to and from school, all while trying to work and secure housing along with other social services. Finally, due to overuse, the transportation became unreliable and kept breaking down. They missed work several times, and were laid off. This just made the issues worse, without jobs they cannot afford to fix the car, get kids to school, nor secure housing. These students are more than a year behind their classmates, in trouble for truancy, and suffer embarrassment and isolation from peers. I am worried, since it has been such a long period with no housing available that this family is hopeless, with much depression and anxiety. All the children are seeing counselors to try to help.



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I have very few success stories, and that is not due to lack of effort on my part as homeless liaison or our school districts staff members that have failed these students, we are the exception to that. We identify them and then have gone above-and-beyond for these students some say. However, it is not turning the tide since housing is the main element in this equation that we have no control over, solution to, or power to fix. Stable, low-income housing is the main issue standing in the way of success of these students. These future citizens will be part of a perpetual cycle, if we as a state do nothing about solving it.

I had the privilege of being asked to do a story on rural homelessness for the New York Times magazine last year. The story, *"Lost in Ohio"* was featured in the October 2, 2022 issue, by reporter Samantha Shaprio. This story also just won the 70th Annual Scripps Howard Award for Excellence in Narrative Human-Interest storytelling on October 28, 2023. I do not say that to brag, if you know me at all, I am a behind the scenes person, but what I am, is an advocate for youth, especially the most vulnerable youth. I agreed to do the story and more recently the video featuring my homeless students, only to bring much needed awareness to the issue of high rural homelessness in the state of Ohio, and other states. If you know the problem exists, then I was hopeful that those who do have the power and authority to make the necessary changes and create solutions for housing in Ohio would recognize the need to do something.

I am grateful for the dedication and work of our state government officials. I know this is a massive issue to tackle, but I believe in you and others working together for all Ohioans, especially those with no voice in this, our homeless youth, who are silently crying out for your help to ease their suffering and better their tomorrows.

Respectfully submitted,

Sandra Plantz

Homeless Liaison and Director, Federal Programs & Gifted

Email: gl_splantz@gallialocal.org

Phone: 740-379-9085, ext. 10024

Resources to support Testimony:

- 1) New York Times Magazine Story link –*"Lost in Ohio"*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/29/magazine/rural-homeless-students.html>
- 2) **Excellence in Narrative Human-Interest Storytelling, honoring Ernie Pyle: The New York Times Magazine Video – "Lost in Ohio"**