

January
2026

Teen Centers as Vital Resource in Utah Schools

Findings from needs assessment of youth and young adult homelessness in Utah's Mountainland and Balance of State Continuums of Care (CoCs)

About Youth and Young Adult Homelessness in Utah

In Utah, there has been a **34% increase in students (Kindergarten through 12th grade) experiencing homelessness since 2020 – over 15,000 students statewide are reported to lack a regular, fixed nighttime residence.**¹ These statistics are likely an undercount – not including those who are disengaged from educational systems or feel uncomfortable reporting their housing status to formal systems. In one effort to combat these concerning statistics, during the Legislature's 2023 General Session, The Policy Project was successful in securing \$15 million in state funding and \$2.7 million in private funding to create and expand Teen Centers in schools across Utah. According to The Policy Project, by the end of 2025, a total of 72 Local Education Agencies in Utah received grant funding to build a Teen Center, and 86 schools had one open serving an estimated 87,200 students each year.¹ This funding marks a significant investment in resources for youth and young adults across Utah.

Many youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are often doubled up, couch surfing, living in hotels, living outdoors,

or in a car. Many young people face stigmas when seeking help or resources. **Teen centers are positioned to help reduce stigmas in accessing school-based services through all-student inclusion.**

"The Teen Centers...are one of the best things that we could have ever done for our teenagers who are at risk or who are actively homeless. They help the kids figure out a place to shower, a place to do laundry, and a place for food . . ." - Service Provider in Davis County

The Value: Teen Centers offer Tangible, Relational, and Educational Support, Free from Stigma

Because **teen centers offer tangible, essential resources and relational support,** Teen Centers were highlighted throughout the state as one of the most significant formal resources for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. While exact provisions vary from center to center, most **Teen Centers offer a range of essentials to any student, which may**

include washers and dryers, showers, food pantries, clothing, hygiene items, and school supplies. Throughout the state, community collaborations, contributions, and ongoing support from The Policy Project staff were noted as integral to maintaining Teen Centers. **Meeting tangible needs with personal support is fundamental to student success and educational outcomes.**

“Teen centers are so important because you have that person that’s there, that’s building relationships with students saying, ‘Why were you not at school today,’ type of thing, and ‘How can I get you to school?’ It’s knowing these kids and getting to know them. So that’s one of the biggest things that I think Teen Centers have done.”

- Service Provider in Utah County

The value of teen centers has been emphasized in communities where they are present, and a desire to establish them has been expressed in communities where they are not. Creatively, some communities established teen centers in converted houses or in their local libraries. Wherever they are located, **teen centers create trusted access points for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness**, increasing students’ willingness to disclose their situations and seek support. The presence of these centers has allowed McKinney-Vento numbers to increase – not because homelessness has suddenly increased, but because **hidden homelessness has become visible.**

The Problems: Limitations of Reach and Unsustainable Funding Practices

While teen centers were consistently described as transformative resources, they are limited in their reach as **they are not designed to provide overnight shelter.**

“The reason the Teen Living Center was made was that Teen Centers can’t house students overnight. That’s where the Davis School District and Switchpoint combined and said, ‘We’re going to put it together, so students have a house to sleep in at night’.”

- Service Provider in Davis County

While models such as the Teen Living Center in Davis School District address critical gaps in providing overnight shelter, **Teen Centers remain the only accessible formal support available to youth experiencing homelessness in other communities.**

“The Teen Center is doing really great work. But otherwise, here in this community, we have absolutely zero other homeless services. Zero.”

- Service Provider in Carbon County

When Teen Centers function as the primary or only formal support for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, their sustainability becomes a critical concern.

Teen Center grant funding primarily covers building costs, but not staffing or operational expenses. This funding structure has contributed to some Teen Centers closing, as some schools are unable to afford dedicated staff to maintain them and instead shift operational responsibilities onto overextended teachers or school personnel.

The Solution: Sustained Funding for Teen Centers, including Staff

Throughout the state, **Teen Centers are highlighted for having a positive impact on student well-being, educational engagement, and access to essential resources.** Recognizing the funding necessary to sustain Teen Center operations and staffing, especially in smaller districts and schools, some communities offered suggestions:

“If Teen Centers are going to be a sustainable program in education, there needs to be funding for designated full-time district-level employees as a model for how it works in a school district, where you have a student Family Resources Department, which has a McKinney-Vento office. There needs to be a legislatively-funded, district-level Teen Center coordinator in the Family Resources Department . . . Teen Centers can coordinate an entire family’s needs because they’re able to have Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act compliant conversations because they’re part of the educational team and are highly educated in McKinney-Vento law.”
- Service Provider in Davis County

1. The Policy Project. (n.d.). *Teen Resource Centers*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/632a19bed8242953abb6e1d6/t/6938e726da845b1ad83bdb48/1765336870855/Teen+Center+One+Pager.pdf>