

Posted December 13, 2017 06:46 pm

By Times-Union editorial board

Thursday's Editorial: Duval and the state see surge of homeless children in schools



Freshmen honor students London Finckbone (from left, seated) and Alyona Lee portray a homeless family during a refugee simulation exercise Tuesday, September 27, 2016 at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida. The simulation places students in the position of refugees, homeless and poor people by showing them the difficulties of finding work, transportation, schools for their children and other life challenges. (Will Dickey/The Florida Times-Union)

The Duval County Public School system is educating a large number of children in poverty.

They bring massive numbers of stresses to the classroom, living in broken homes in crime-infested neighborhoods, the victims of multiple traumas.

Now add a further complication. There are more homeless children in the school system than most of us realized.

In Duval County there were a total of 2,256 homeless children in 2015-16. The numbers in neighboring counties are significant as well.

Clay: 840 students.

St. Johns: 816

Nassau: 445

Baker: 41

A new report from the Shimberg Center for Housing Studies at the University of Florida and Miami Homes for All describes the situation. It was made possible by a grant from JPMorgan Chase.

In the 2015-16 school year, a total of 72,601 school children were identified as homeless. Most of these were doubled up in housing. Some were staying in motels, shelters, transitional housing or unsheltered locations.

The shocking statistic is that the number of homeless students more than doubled — from 33,889 in 2007-08 to 72,601 in 2015-16.

The increase is caused by two factors:

- The Great Recession hit families on the edge hard.
- School districts are doing a better job of identifying homeless children in school.

Homeless students are more prone to mental illness and to be victimized by crime and sexual exploitation.

Much of the homeless is due to jobs that don't pay a living wage. Other factors are a lack of education of parents and poor transportation.

So what happens to homeless students? Simply, take all the issues affected students from low-income families and add another level of trauma.

Homeless students, logically, are more likely to be absent from school.

They are less likely to do well in their studies.

They're more likely to be disciplined.

However, there are services available under the federal McKinney-Vento Act.

- Homeless students can be immediately registered in school.
- They can receive transportation to their school of origin if it's in their best interest.
- Basic items can be provided to them such as hygiene kits, clothing, school supplies and food.
- Providing financial aid for extracurricular activities.

The larger issue involves the need to provide housing for extremely low-income families. Florida has long had this housing shortage, which is why the trust fund under the Sadowski Act was established.

A portion of documentary stamp taxes are assigned to the fund. It's a brilliant device. As housing sales are made, a portion of the tax proceeds help to fund affordable housing.

The fund is expected to generate over \$290 million in revenue in the current fiscal year but the Legislature appropriated just \$137 million and swept the rest into the general fund.

A worker receiving Florida's minimum wage can afford to pay \$421 in monthly rent but the average rent available is \$1,075. But in Florida's service economy, many jobs are part-time and don't even provide enough hours for those willing to work.

That fund has consistently been raided by the Florida Legislature even though it has a proud history of being one of the best managed public-private partnerships in the state, and a source of jobs in the hard-hit construction industry.

Federal programs that provide tax incentives for these kinds of housing projects need to be protected and expanded.

Local governments need assistance networks to help identify homeless youth and provide assistance to them. and their families. Rural counties especially are often missing these services.

The report makes a number of important recommendations:

- With a \$26 billion shortage of public housing in the nation, the federal government needs to fund more projects.
- More funding for extremely low-income families is needed by the national and state governments.
- More set-asides are needed for affordable housing.
- Federal block grants that provide flexibility are useful for local housing.
- Parents who receive housing assistance need other kinds of aid to pull out of poverty such as job training and transportation.