

Vital Documents

Helping Youth Experiencing
Homelessness Access IDs,
Birth Certificates, and Other
Essentials for Stability



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 for YOUTH

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About this Policy Brief

This brief was published November 2025 by the [National Network for Youth](#) (NN4Y). NN4Y is the nation’s leading network of young leaders and youth homelessness providers. NN4Y envisions a world where every young person has a safe place to call home, with multiple opportunities to achieve their fullest potential. Together with our partners, youth homelessness providers, and young people with lived expertise of homelessness, NN4Y transforms systems through centering youth, policy advocacy, and supporting communities.

It was developed through NN4Y’s work in partnership with Baker McKenzie on the [I Am Here: Vital Document Legal Hotline for Youth](#) (1-888-870-DOCS), a free, dedicated legal hotline for youth experiencing homelessness to help obtain essential identification and vital documents like birth certificates, state IDs, and Social Security cards. It reflects the needs and experiences shared by youth experiencing homelessness, and the service providers calling on behalf of young people.

If you have immediate questions about accessing vital documents, you can call or text the hotline directly at 1-888-870-DOCS (1-888-870-3627). The hotline operates Wednesdays from 12:00–8:00 PM Eastern, but callers are encouraged to call or text at any time and leave a message. All voicemails and texts will be returned.

Introduction

Access to vital documents, including birth certificates, government-issued identification (IDs), and Social Security cards, is essential for navigating everyday life in the United States. They are required to access housing, employment, healthcare, education, public benefits, transportation, and financial institutions. For youth experiencing homelessness—particularly those who are experiencing homelessness on their own and under the age of 18—possession of these documents can mean the difference between safety and vulnerability.

However, youth experiencing homelessness face systemic and often insurmountable barriers to obtaining their vital documents. This creates a cycle of instability, making it even harder for young people to secure the safety, stability, and opportunities they need to thrive.

This policy brief examines the systemic barriers youth experiencing homelessness face when trying to obtain their vital documents and highlights the inconsistent state laws and procedures. It concludes with concrete policy recommendations for federal and state governments to remove these barriers and establish clear pathways for youth access.

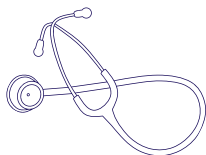
Ensuring that every young person—regardless of housing status, age, or family situation—can obtain their vital documents is not only a matter of administrative reform, it is a matter of helping our young people access safety, opportunity, and human dignity.

Definitions

- **Youth and young people:** Individuals under the age of 25.
- **Minors:** Individuals under the age of 18.
- **Vital documents:** Official records including birth certificates, government-issued IDs, and Social Security cards, that verify a person's identity and are required to access housing, employment, education, and other benefits.
- **Homeless:** A youth who cannot live safely with a relative and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement.¹ This includes youth who are experiencing hidden homelessness, such as couch surfing or living in motels.
- **“Experiencing homelessness on their own”:** Youth who are experiencing homelessness without a parent or guardian.

Why Access to Vital Documents Matters

In order to fully engage in day-to-day life in the United States, a person needs to have access to their vital documents. These are needed for routine tasks.



Picking up prescriptions or receiving medical care.



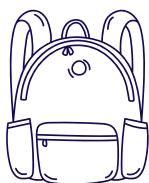
Entering government buildings, sometimes including libraries.



Boarding buses, trains, or flights.



Establishing a mailbox or picking up packages.



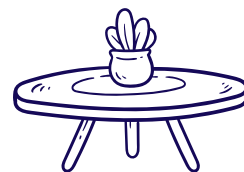
Enrolling in school or workforce programs.



Opening a bank account.



Applying for jobs, health insurance, or public benefits.



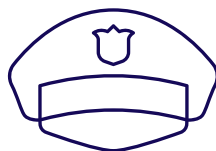
Renting an apartment.

Critical Situations

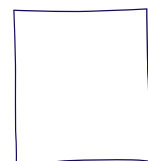
They are also needed for less common (but very critical) situations.



Accessing emergency shelters.



Encountering law enforcement.



Proving citizenship or immigration status.

For youth experiencing homelessness, including minors experiencing homelessness on their own and young parent families, these routine activities can become insurmountable challenges. **Without vital documents, they face systemic exclusion from the opportunities and services necessary for them to achieve stability and self-sufficiency.**

Obtaining vital documents is not an easy process for anyone.² But for youth experiencing homelessness, it's even more difficult because of housing instability, financial insecurity, and the absence of support from a parent/guardian or trusted older adult. Additionally, many state laws require parental consent for minors to obtain vital documents. This is an impossible hurdle for minor-aged youth who are estranged from or abandoned by their families—the majority of those who are experiencing homelessness.

These legal, familial, and logistical barriers create a vicious cycle: without vital documents, youth cannot access housing, education, employment, or benefits, and without access to these supports, they remain trapped in instability and homelessness. Experiencing homelessness at a young age greatly increases the risk of chronic homelessness—research shows that up to 40 percent of chronically homeless adults first became homeless before age 25.^{3, 4, 5}

Life for a youth experiencing homelessness is already hectic enough. The challenges they face don't occur in isolation—they are layered on top of what are already chaotic and unstable living conditions.

Young people navigating homelessness are often focused on immediate survival: securing food, avoiding unsafe situations, finding a place to sleep. Requiring them to complete complex bureaucratic processes, travel to agencies, or track down documents across state lines places an enormous burden on youth already stretched beyond their limits.

– William Woelki, National Youth Advisory Council

Barriers Youth Face in Accessing Vital Documents

Due to their unstable and complex circumstances, many youth experiencing homelessness face significant obstacles to obtaining their vital documents, including a government-issued ID, Social Security card, and birth certificate.

Lack of Existing Documentation

Because identification is required to apply for other forms of identification, youth without any identification or vital documents are caught in a Catch-22. For example, most states require a government-issued ID to request a certified copy of a birth certificate. But to obtain a government-issued ID, you typically need a certified copy of your birth certificate.

Parent or Guardian Consent

Minors experiencing homelessness face some of the most severe and complex barriers to obtaining vital documents, due to estrangement, foster care involvement, or histories of abuse. For many, involving a parent or guardian is not only impractical but unsafe. There are no specified allowances for minors to obtain their birth certificate or a state-issued ID without parent or guardian permission in at least 24 states.⁶ These restrictions disproportionately impact minors experiencing homelessness on their own, leaving them without the documents they need to access shelter, education, employment, or health care.

Lack of Support for Required Signatures and Verification

Youth experiencing homelessness are often disconnected from family members, guardians, and formal systems of support.⁷ As a result, they may have no one to assist with notarized signatures, required attestations, or other verification documents needed to access vital records. Many application processes assume the presence of an adult or authorized representative, making it difficult—or even impossible—for youth to obtain essential documents independently.

Inability to Prove Residency

Proof of residency is a common requirement for obtaining vital documents. Youth experiencing homelessness rarely have utility bills, leases, or official mail in their name. Many jurisdictions do not recognize temporary housing, drop-in centers, or affidavits as valid proof. Some jurisdictions accept letters from shelters or youth service providers, but this practice is not widespread or standardized across states.

Cost of Documents and Fees

The cost for a birth certificate is generally between \$10 and \$35 for the first certified copy, while a government-issued ID card can range from approximately \$10 to \$82. Specific costs vary by state and may include additional fees for expedited shipping or card upgrades. While some states allow fee waivers for individuals experiencing homelessness, the waiver process often requires documentation from a service provider—another hurdle for youth who may be disconnected from systems of care.

Complex and Inaccessible Application Processes

Navigating the complex vital documents application process can be difficult for anyone, but particularly for youth experiencing homelessness. Each state's requirements vary significantly and can be difficult to locate online and to follow correctly. Many applications must be completed in person during regular business hours at agencies that may be far from where youth are staying. This creates a significant barrier, as youth experiencing homelessness often lack reliable transportation and the time to navigate these requirements.

Example: Obtaining a Birth Certificate

The process of obtaining a birth certificate varies by state—below is a real example of one of those processes, and the potential barriers a youth could face.

- **Cost and Fees:** \$15, plus an additional \$15 to expedite.
 - **Barriers:** *Having the funds and/or a means to pay, including cash or debit card.*
- **Timeline:** Not specified.
 - **Barriers:** *The time it takes to obtain the birth certificate may be preventing the youth from accessing housing, education, employment, or critical services.*
- **Required Identification:** One form of primary identification, including a state-issued ID, a U.S. passport, or a certificate of citizenship. Alternatively, two forms of secondary identification, including an expired government-issued ID, a voter registration card, or a health insurance card.
 - **Barriers:** *Access to copies of one or more of the required verification methods.*
- **Additional Requirements:** To print and complete a form that requires information such as mailing address, mother's full name with maiden name, and father's full name.
 - **Barriers:** *The ability to access the necessary form online, print it out, and complete it correctly (young people may not know their parents' names or be able to find that information; young people experiencing homelessness may not have an address to use on forms).*
- **Complete by Mail or In Person:** By mail, the applicant must submit photocopies of their identification, a copy of their completed form, and the required payment. In person, the applicant must go during regular business hours with all the required documents and payment.
 - **Barriers:** *A way to photocopy identification verification, to print the form, pay, and mail in. A safe and reliable mailing address to receive the birth certificate. If in person, the time to schedule an appointment during the state's regular business hours, transportation to appointment.*
- **Out of State:** For applicants born in this state but who now reside outside of it, they need to complete the mail-in process and can only receive their certificate by mail.
 - **Barriers:** *A safe and reliable mailing address.*
- **Access for Minors:** In this state, youth over 14 or emancipated minors can obtain their birth certificate without permission from a parent or guardian. There are no specified allowances for minors to obtain their birth certificates without parent or guardian permission in at least 24 states.⁸

Example: Obtaining a Social Security Card

The process of obtaining a social security card begins with visiting ssa.gov and completing a survey to determine which specific process you'll need to go through. **Barriers:** *Internet and a device that can access the internet.*

If you are a minor experiencing homelessness on your own, then your survey answers include your age range and that you are not the parent or the legal guardian. The survey then ends with, “You may not be eligible,” and tells you to call the Social Security Administration, “if you think you have a valid reason to apply.” **Barriers:** *Phone service and a phone; no parent or legal guardian; time to spend speaking with an agent and a safe, quiet place to do it; an understanding of what the agent will require from you and the ability to do it; the ability to navigate complex, bureaucratic systems.*

If you are over 18 and experiencing homelessness, your answers may include that you are a United States citizen living in the United States, but you have no mailing address. In this case, the website tells you that you must make an in-person appointment and bring an original copy of one of the following:

- U.S. driver's license or non-driver's state-issued ID.
- U.S. passport or passport card.
- U.S. military ID card.
- Health insurance or Medicaid card that shows your name, age, birthday, and photo.
- Medical record from a clinic, doctor, or hospital that shows your name, age, birthday, treatment date within the last two years, and signature or stamp from the provider.
- Employee ID that shows your name, birthday, and photo.

You must also print out a form to bring with you to your in-person appointment. If your form and identification are accepted, the Social Security Administration will mail the card to you 14 days after they approve your application. **Barriers:** *Access to an original copy of one of the verification methods; the ability to print out and complete the necessary form; the time to schedule an appointment during regular business hours; transportation to your appointment; lack of a reliable, safe mailing address to have your card sent to; the time it takes to obtain a Social Security card may be preventing the youth from accessing housing, education, employment, or critical services; an understanding of what the agent will require from you and the ability to do it; the ability to navigate complex, bureaucratic systems.*¹³



Tip for Youth

Obtaining a Social Security card is **free**. Avoid third-party companies that will charge you a fee to complete the process for you. Stick to the information you find on “.gov” websites.

Example: Obtaining a Government-Issued ID

Following the passage of the federal REAL ID Act, a REAL ID is required for activities under federal jurisdiction, such as boarding a flight or entering a federal building. States are not required to issue REAL IDs, but only five states still offer a non-REAL ID option. As such, most young people will have to comply with REAL ID requirements, as well as any additional requirements their state may impose. Some states charge an additional fee to get a REAL ID.

The following is required to obtain a REAL ID under federal law:

- Official documentation that certifies full legal name and birthday—this could include an original birth certificate, U.S. passport, or a Permanent Resident Card.
 - **Barriers:** *Access to an original copy of one or more of the identification verification methods.*
- Verification of Social Security number—this could include an original Social Security card or another specified government form or pay stub that shows name and Social Security number.
 - **Barriers:** *Access to an original copy of your Social Security card or one of the verification methods.*
- Two proofs of address to verify residency in the state you're applying for an ID from. This could include a deed, mortgage statement, lease agreement, utility bill, or bank statement—verification requirements are determined by state.
 - **Barriers:** *Not being able to verify residency due to homelessness.*

In addition to the REAL ID requirements, states can impose their own requirements, too. These can include parent or guardian consent for minors (there are no specified allowances for minors to obtain a state-issued ID without parent or guardian permission in at least 24 states⁹), fees to obtain an ID, additional required forms, and the process to obtain an ID—in person, by mail, online, or otherwise. All of these create additional barriers for youth experiencing homelessness.

Additional Challenges: Less Frequent, But Just As Critical

Transgender Youth

Many transgender youth experiencing homelessness face additional legal and bureaucratic obstacles when seeking to update their documentation with their correct name and gender.¹⁰ In many states, legal name changes require a court order, and gender marker changes may require medical documentation or other official verification. These requirements can be especially burdensome for youth without stable housing or legal support. Best practice recommends that states permit youth to make these updates without requiring court or medical documentation—particularly for those experiencing homelessness—so that their identification accurately reflects their identity and supports their safety and well-being.¹¹

Youth with Disabilities

Youth with disabilities experiencing homelessness may face compounding accessibility barriers when trying to obtain vital documents. Application processes, websites, and in-person office visits are often not designed with accessibility in mind, creating obstacles for youth who need assistive technology, plain language forms, or physical accommodations. Limited access to support persons or representatives, long wait times, and lack of staff training in disability inclusion further isolate these young people.

Immigrant Youth

Immigrant youth experiencing homelessness often face unique legal and documentation hurdles. Many lack access to original birth certificates or government-issued IDs from their country of origin, and may face confusion or fear when interacting with government systems. Language barriers, limited translation services, and inconsistent verification policies can all prevent immigrant youth from obtaining U.S. identification. Additionally, uncertainty around immigration status can make youth hesitant to apply for documents that might expose personal information.

Identity Theft Among Homeless and System-Involved Youth

Youth experiencing homelessness and those in foster care are at elevated risk for identity theft—sometimes by family members, caregivers, or the adults they live with.¹² The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act requires child welfare agencies to provide free credit checks to foster youth ages 16 to 18, and to assist them in resolving discrepancies.¹³ However, this law remains under-implemented—a 2024 report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that most foster youth were not offered these services.¹⁴

I Am Here: Vital Document Legal Hotline for Youth



I AM HERE: Vital Document Legal Hotline for Youth

A free, dedicated, state-specific legal assistance hotline for youth experiencing homelessness.

1-888-870-DOCS

*Voicemails and texts are welcome and will be returned.

NATIONAL NETWORK
for YOUTH
**Baker
McKenzie.**

In 2025, National Network for Youth and Baker McKenzie launched the [Vital Document Legal Hotline for Youth](#). This is a free, dedicated legal hotline for youth experiencing homelessness to get help obtaining essential vital documents.

Basic information about the hotline:

- **Call or Text:** 1-888-870-DOCS (1-888-870-3627)
- **Hours:** Every Wednesday from 12 to 8 PM Eastern | 11 AM to 7 PM Central | 10 AM to 6 PM Mountain | 9 AM to 5 PM Pacific
- **Outside of Operating Hours:** callers can leave voicemails and texts that will be returned.
- **Callers:** Any young person and those helping them. Youth experiencing homelessness are strongly encouraged.
- **Phone Operators:** Pro bono legal professionals and lawyers.

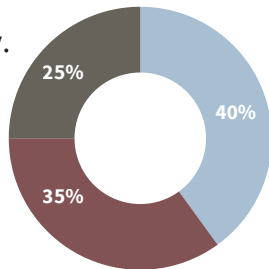
Hotline Findings

Youth are reaching out for help.

35% **Youth under age 26** seeking help in obtaining their vital documents.

40% **Providers or school workers** calling on behalf of a young person.

25% Did not specify.



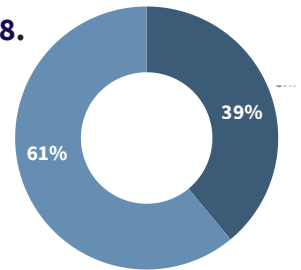
Many youth in need of help are minors.

Some minors, including as young as 16, had been kicked out of their home and had no familial support.

39% Callers **under the age of 18.**

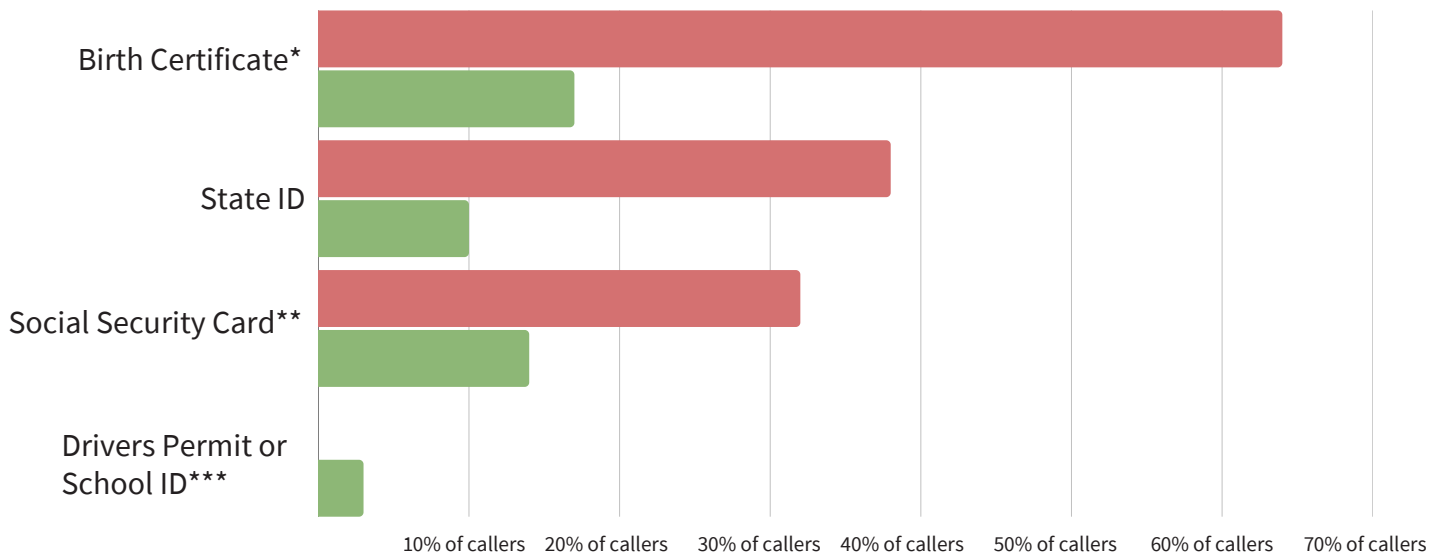
61% Callers **18-26 years old.**

*this graph is of total callers under the age of 27.



Most youth require multiple documents, but very few possess even one.

■ Needed help accessing this document. ■ Already had this document.



*For some that had their birth certificate, it was not the original, or it had recently been stolen.

**For some that had their social security card, they only had the number and not the physical card.

***Fewer than 1% of callers requested help accessing a drivers permit or school ID.

Barriers Callers are Facing

All cases are anonymized, and some details have been changed or summarized to protect privacy while accurately representing the types of challenges youth and caregivers encounter.

Need One Document to Access Another

- A caller had an electronic copy (on his phone) of his state ID, but no birth certificate or social security card.
- A caller, adopted by his aunt, who has the necessary documents but is unable to provide them, only knows his Social Security number and cannot obtain a physical state ID.

Parental or Family Challenges

- A 16-year-old caller, recently kicked out by her parents, asked about obtaining a driver's license, but her parents are unwilling to sign the learner's permit application.
- A caller was kicked out by her parents, who refused to return many of her documents, including her Social Security card.
- A school social worker called on behalf of two of her students, both seeking state ID and gainful employment.
 - Student 1 had a copy of their birth certificate, but a parent was unwilling or unable to assist Student 1 in obtaining an ID.
 - Student 2 had a controlling parent who was denying student 2 access to obtaining an ID.
- A caller asked on behalf of a 16-year-old experiencing homelessness, asking how to obtain a birth certificate. The child has a parent and is not emancipated, but the parent is not involved.
- A caller requested help applying for a birth certificate for a 14-year-old child whose father is unknown, mother is deceased, and who currently has no legal guardian

Caregiving Responsibilities

- A caller, serving as kinship guardian for her brother, needs to obtain a replacement Social Security card, but their mother is withholding his documents.
- A caller caring for her 8-year-old niece, whose mother is incarcerated, reported that the mother does not have any form of identification.

Policy Recommendations

Federal Policy Recommendations

At the federal level, clear standards can ensure consistency across states and systems. By setting nationwide guidelines for how youth experiencing homelessness access their vital documents, the federal government can remove the inequities created by varying state policies.

Federal Agencies

- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which oversees the implementation of the REAL ID Act, should issue guidance for states to accept alternative documentation for youth experiencing homelessness to verify their identity, including letters from shelters, schools, or social workers.
- Federal agencies, including the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and DHS should develop and disseminate best practices for assisting unaccompanied youth in obtaining their vital documents to reduce burdensome, bureaucratic requirements.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should continue to implement the recommendations from its report findings that foster youth were not assisted with credit and identity thefts, ensuring that states are complying with their mandate to support these youth.¹⁵

Legislation

- The U.S. Congress should amend the REAL ID Act, allowing states to waive any fees to obtaining vital documents to youth experiencing homelessness.¹⁶
- Congress should establish a federal grant to incentivize and support state policy changes, including the above recommendation, to streamline document access for homeless populations, especially minors experiencing homelessness on their own.

State Policy Recommendations

The patchwork nature of state identification requirements leaves too many youth experiencing homelessness without access to their vital documents. Removing these systemic barriers and standardizing trauma-informed, youth-accessible policies across all states is essential to ensuring that all young people—regardless of age or housing status—can access the documents they need to secure the housing, education, employment, and services they need to be safe now and in the future.¹⁷

Eliminate or Waive Fees

- States should eliminate or waive vital document fees for youth experiencing homelessness.
- **Example:** In the District of Columbia (DC), DC-born residents experiencing homelessness can obtain their birth certificate for free.¹⁸

Create Alternative Verification Pathways

- Accept letters or affidavits from shelter providers, school counselors, or youth-serving organizations in place of traditional proofs of identity or residency.
- **Example:** Wisconsin allows individuals without a fixed address to use a letter from a homeless shelter or a public or private social service organization as proof of residency.¹⁹

Remove Parental Consent Requirements

- Permit unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness to apply for and receive their own identification and birth certificates without parental or guardian consent.
- **Example:** Arkansas allows unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness to work with a McKinney-Vento homeless liaison at their school to obtain a birth certificate and driver's license for free. Unaccompanied minors can also take driver's education courses for free.²⁰

Simplify Information and Increase Accessibility

- Ensure the state's requirements and processes for obtaining vital documents are clear, youth-friendly, and easily accessible online.
- Ensure processes are fully compliant with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements by ensuring ADA-compliant digital and in-person services and training staff to provide inclusive, trauma-informed assistance that meets diverse accessibility and communication needs.
- Ensure that all processes for obtaining vital documents are fully accessible to immigrant youth by removing language and procedural barriers. This includes offering multilingual and plain-language materials.
- Develop guides and checklists for youth and service providers that are updated annually. These would include what verifying documentation is needed, what exceptions there are for youth experiencing homelessness and for minors on their own, and resources of providers, lawyers, or others who can help youth complete the processes.

Train and Equip Public Agencies

- Educate frontline staff on the unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness. This would include encouraging trauma-informed and youth-centered customer service practices, such as using chosen name and pronouns, avoiding judgmental language, offering to meet in private spaces, and inviting input from young people who have gone through the processes to improve them. Training should also include increasing accessibility for youth with disabilities and immigrant youth.

Conclusion

Access to vital documents is foundational to every young person's future. For youth experiencing homelessness on their own, these documents are lifelines, serving as gateways to safety, stability, and opportunity. Yet for too many, accessing them remains an impossible feat due to bureaucratic and financial barriers. Vital documents are not luxuries—they are necessities. Federal and state policymakers must act to modernize systems, remove obstacles, and create clear, trauma-informed pathways to access. Doing so is essential to ensuring that all youth have a fair chance to survive, thrive, and build a stable future.

Endnotes

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13. Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act. [§106\(b\)\(3\)\(I\)](#).
14. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General. (2024). Most Children in Foster Care Did Not Receive Credit Checks and Assistance. <https://oig.hhs.gov/reports/all/2024/most-children-in-foster-careis,-did-not-receive-credit-checks-and-assistance>.
15. *ibid*.
16. This amendment could be modeled after the Virginia state legislation [HB1617](#), which “provides that when a homeless youth seeks to receive a certified copy of a vital record, including his birth record, or his DMV-issued learner's permit, driver's license, special identification card, or identification privilege card or permit, no fee shall be assessed.” At the federal level, this amendment could state “no fee *may* be assessed,” instead of “no fee *shall* be assessed,” understanding that an unfunded mandate could place a financial burden on some states.
17. For more information about best practices for states, see the American Bar Association’s report, [Model State Statutes: Youth and Young Adult Homelessness](#).
18. No Fee Birth Certificate Program. DC Department of Human Services. <https://dhs.dc.gov/service/no-fee-birth-certificate-program>.
19. Wisconsin Department of Transportation. (2025). Residency Documentation for Homeless Individuals. <https://wisconsindot.gov/Documents/dmv/shared/homeless-residency.pdf>.
20. Arkansas Code. [§§ 9-25-101 to 9-25-106](#).