# Supporting youth with developmental disabilities who are experiencing homelessness

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**Resources from The Arc of King County**

Our outreach and advocacy services include information and referral, individual and family support, and civic engagement services. We do not offer legal advocacy or professional advocacy services, but staff guide people through resources and options, and walk alongside in them in their journey. We support across all topics, including special education and housing. All services are in English and Spanish, with specialized support for African American families.

Ask line:

* [ask@arcofkingcounty.org](mailto:ask@arcofkingcounty.org)
* [preguntas@arcofkingcounty.org](mailto:preguntas@arcofkingcounty.org)

Website resources

* List of services: <https://arcofkingcounty.org/services/>
* Resource guide: <https://arcofkingcounty.org/resource-guide/overview.html>
* Español: <https://arcofkingcounty.org/espanol/espanol.html>

**1 in 6 kids has a disabling condition**

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 17% of children have a condition that affects their development. These include developmental delays, learning disabilities, complex health conditions, physical disabilities, chromosomal disorders, and conditions like ADHD and autism. Whether you realize it or not, you are likely supporting someone with a disability.

# What to know

1. Understand civil rights. There is a legal basis for inclusion
2. Understand that “inclusion” is not just integration (or simply putting people with and without disabilities in the same spaces). Inclusion infers those spaces and experiencesare DESIGNED, RESOURCED, and SUPPORTED with diverse needs in mind
3. Understand that segregation can be harmful. In schools, it separates kids from content experts and has a negative impact on social and emotional development
4. Understand that rejection IS harmful. Restraints, isolation, suspensions, “soft removals” take a toll. Staff resort to these practices when they do not have the tools and resources to support youth appropriately
5. Access to support in your native language and culture is critical. People need access to staff or navigators who can support with culture and language. Ideally, they should be the same culture and speak same language.

**CRITICAL TO KNOW & FOLLOW:**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (“Section 504”)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II

* If you are embracing these laws, you are creating inclusive spaces

These apply to ALL public services - housing, public schools, city, county, and state social services

* If you get ANY type of federal funding (grants, etc) then Section 504 applies.
* If you are a state or local agency (including school districts), or a contractor for local public service, then ADA Title II applies.
* There are also laws around language access

Are you compliant?

Do you have a shelter/school that is designed to be EQUALLY accessible, that offers EQUAL opportunity to benefit, and that offers services in an integrated setting, to the maximum extent possible?

* If you use universal design – assume and plan for diversity and differences – then you are likely compliant. If you rely on people to figure out how to adapt to you, then you are likely not.

Environment is critical. You need to be inclusive and accessible. But the legal protections extend beyond built environment. There are legal requirements for equal access, integration, and equal opportunity to benefit that should be driving program, services, curriculum, etc. For the people we support lighting, noise, smells can also be critical to accessible environment.

The more you can make your program/school/class accessible and inclusive, the better off kids experiencing homelessness will fare. Do they feel belonging? Membership?

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**2. Is staff aware of problem-solving approaches to behavior support?**

* Resource: Dr. Ross Greene. His nonprofit: Lives in the Balance, <https://livesinthebalance.org/>
  + (Author, The Explosive Child, Lost at School, Raising Human Beings, and more)
  + Coming November 15 (via Zoom), for a free training of his model: <https://www.facebook.com/events/606109004582856>

De-escalation strategies are important, but if you are working with youth who are neurodiverse, who are experiencing trauma, or both, you need resources to help the youth work through issues. **Behavior is a form of communication**.

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Outside of school

1. Being in a shelter is often the link to services. That’s where families get connected.
2. It is critical for the family – and especially the student with a disability – to feel safe. If shelter system is not an option, then is there a trusted family member or friend they can stay with?
3. Shelters are not ideal for people with conditions like autism, but we have referred families to Popsicle Place, and they have shared that it was OK. Not ideal, but OK.
   1. Concerns with shelters are mostly environmental – the physical set up can be triggering. Fluorescent lighting, sounds, limited privacy
   2. Adults with IDD often have a family caregiver. Most youth leave K-12 at age 18, but students who continue K-12 with transition services may be enrolled up to age 21. Shelters need accommodate older students with IDD together with their caregiver (usually their parent). Some people may need access to an emotional support animal
   3. Shelters can be especially triggering for people who experience anxiety or panic attacks, “overwhelm”, or autism burnout. The environment can be triggering; this can be compounded by the dread of experiencing an episode in public.
   4. Students will carry this into school. They may be in a perpetual state of dysregulation
4. If you aren’t flagging a need for heighted support, chances are no one is identifying their unique needs. The tools used to prioritize who most needs housing support often fail to prioritize people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Result: Lots of people who need support with adaptive functioning are not getting the support they need to stay stably housed. They may also struggle in shelters. Delayed support + Shelter somewhat (or very) hostile to their needs = people living in cars, on the street, couch surfing. People NOT getting support to stay housed.
5. If you suspect and intellectual or developmental disability, connect them to DSHS Developmental Disability Administration, or King County’s and Developmental Disability and Early Childhood Supports Division. They may have some set-aside housing vouchers

In school

In schools – ALL STUDENTS are general education students. All programs need to be accessible to them. Kids with IEPs don’t belong to “spec ed staff.” They are your students.

**Accommodations**

Every student with a disability has a right to accommodations. Doesn’t matter whether they qualify for special education services

* Advocate for a 504 plan with accommodations that can help kids regulate. (If they have an IEP, accommodations can be documented there.) Example: If they feel the urge to run, where can they go?
* IEPs are a more formal, involved process; 504 plans can be quicker to put in place
* 504 plans do not take the place of IEPs (individual education programs). If the student needs specialized instruction or related supports like therapies, then they need an IEP. But if they are experiencing a lot of dysregulation – eloping, outbursts, self-harm – and for whatever reason don’t qualify for special education services, then accommodations can help kids manage triggers

MAKE SURE YOUR COLLEAGUES HONOR ACCOMMODATIONS!

**Trauma**

Trauma affects executive functioning. When experiencing trauma, like homelessness, even people without conditions that affect adaptive functioning will struggle to remember meetings and due dates, filling out paperwork, following through. If someone has a mental health condition, or a condition like autism, ADHD, or a sensory processing disorder, trauma is going to compound their symptoms and affect executive functioning.

Students with disabilities who are also experiencing trauma likely need:

* **Empathy**. Not silent empathy. Affirm what they are experiencing, the strength it can take just to show up, or the effort they are putting into something. It helps people de-escalate and re-regulate
* **Flexibility**. Find a way to support them so they can experience success
* **Structured support** with executive functioning. Have someone to remind them/support them
* **Safe spaces in the school** – this can include quiet places where they can de-escalate; a room without fluorescent lighting; a safe staff member. These are spaces they choose to go to. These are not locked closets or cells
* **“Control” can be fluid** – if something happens that dysregulates someone, they can stay in a heightened state. Situations they might usually be able to manage might become overwhelming

Keep in mind many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have co-occurring mental health conditions (research suggests 30 to 40%).

**Keep in mind**

Getting an IEP in place, or accessing social services is not easy. There are many hoops to jump through.

Many youths with disabilities are not appropriately flagged for evaluation, especially students of color and highly mobile students; their parents may struggle with follow up if they are experiencing trauma and feeling the effects on executive functioning

**In general**

* If you have a sense that the person is homeless, help them find shelter - a friend or family member to stay with so they feel SAFE. If they are in a shelter, hopefully they will connect to resources. Reach out to us (we have offer housing navigation support) – [ask@arcofkingcounty.org](mailto:ask@arcofkingcounty.org)
* Educators: Be extra compassionate and extra flexible.
* Educators: Good communication internally among school staff will reduce stress on students
* Not having an address is a barrier to getting services.
* Take time to help kids with executive functioning – reminders, etc. They may shut down.
* Make sure you have culturally equipped counselors. Trauma looks different in each community/population.
* Questions about transporting IEPs? <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-happens-to-your-childs-iep-if-you-switch-schools>