

June 2010

## **Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Policies**

### **Independent Student Designation**

The Higher Education Act includes numerous amendments designed to increase youth access to post-secondary education. New amendments include: 1) youth who are unaccompanied and homeless or at risk of being homeless; 2) youth who are/were in foster care, orphans, or wards of the court at age 13 or older; 3) emancipation or legal guardianship; and 4) youth who fall into the category of “unusual circumstances.”

Being designated as an “independent student” is important for youth because:

- Youth are exempt from providing parental information on their FAFSA; and
- FAFSA calculations will, therefore, only consider the applicant’s information, thus leaving potential for greater offers of financial aid.

Students should be given two copies of the verification form or letter supporting “independent” status; one copy for the student’s records and one for the post-secondary education Financial Aid Office, should it be requested by them. The school or service provider should also keep a copy of the verification in case the student loses the form or letter due to his or her mobility and life circumstances.

### **Students Who Are Unaccompanied and Homeless/Risk of Being Homeless**

#### **Homeless Verification Form**

Students who are unaccompanied (not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian) and homeless, or students who are unaccompanied, self-supporting, and at risk of becoming homeless, can be designated as an “independent student” for FAFSA by the following people:

- Public school homeless liaison;
- Director of a HUD-funded shelter;
- Director of a Runaway Homeless Youth Agency shelter; or
- Post-secondary Financial Aid Administrator (FAA).

Homeless liaisons, shelter directors, and FAAs may complete an *Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Verification* form to give to the student to have on hand should it be requested by the college Financial Aid Office. The applicant cannot be receiving any financial support from a parent or guardian to qualify for “independent student” status.

#### **Letters of Support from the Homeless Liaison**

There are several situations where youth who are unaccompanied and homeless may request a letter of support for FAFSA from their district’s homeless liaison. This letter differs from the verification form that is described above in that it does not, in and of itself, provide independent student status.

✓ **Identified as Homeless While in High School and Graduated**

Youth who were identified as homeless while attending school, graduated, and are either seeking admission into a post-secondary institution, or are seeking financial aid for their sophomore, junior, or senior years, may ask the district homeless liaison to verify that they were an unaccompanied homeless youth while attending public school. The homeless liaison may prepare a letter substantiating the youth's continued unaccompanied youth status. The post-secondary FAA is required to make the decision if the student will qualify as "independent" for FAFSA.

✓ **Not Identified as Homeless While in High School and Graduated**

Youth who were never identified as homeless while in high school may approach their public school's homeless liaison and ask for a letter to support their application as an "independent student" for FAFSA. The youth should obtain other letters of support and verification as well. The FAA will make the decision if the student will qualify as "independent" for FAFSA.

✓ **Homeless After Graduation from High School**

Youth may ask the homeless liaison of their public school district to write a letter of support. The youth should obtain other letters of support and verification as well. The FAA will make the decision if the student will qualify as "independent" for FAFSA.

Please give the student two copies of the verification form or letter, one to keep for their own records and one to give to the Financial Aid Office if requested. Not all post-secondary institutions will ask for verification. The school or service provider should also keep a copy of the verification in case the student loses the form or letter due to her or his mobility and life circumstances.

**Foster Care/Orphan/Ward of the State**

Students who were in foster care, an orphan, or a ward of the state at age 13 or older can be designated as an "independent student" through verification by the school, county, tribal, social service, and community agency staff for FAFSA purposes. A letter or *Foster and Adopted Youth Verification* form needs to be prepared by the staff person confirming "independent" status to give to the student. Youth who were adopted after their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday do not need to include their adoptive parent's income, assets, or other information for purposes of determining federal student financial aid.

Please give the student two copies of the form or letter, one to keep for their own records and one to give to the Financial Aid Office if requested. Not all post-secondary institutions will ask for verification. The school or service provider should also keep a copy of the verification in case the student loses the form or letter due to his or her mobility and life circumstances.

**Emancipated or Legal Guardianship**

Youth who are emancipated minors or are in legal guardianship, as determined by a court, can also apply as an independent student for FAFSA purposes. A letter needs to be prepared by an agency staff member confirming "independent" status to give to the youth.

Please give the youth two copies of the letter, one to keep for their own records and one to give to the Financial Aid Office if requested. Not all post-secondary institutions will ask for verification. The school or service provider should also keep a copy of the verification in case the student loses the form or letter due to his or her mobility and life circumstances.

## **Unusual Circumstances**

School and community agency staff may write a letter explaining why an unaccompanied youth qualifies as an independent student due to “unusual circumstances” if the youth does not fit any of the above criteria and is self-supporting. The youth should contact the Financial Aid Office and speak with the Director to find out what their particular procedure is. Often times the student must submit a letter explaining her/his situation, and then obtain a letter from the school (on school letterhead) or from an adult non-family member who can corroborate the story. It is then up to the discretion of the FAA to determine if s/he will use her/his “professional judgment” to give the student a “Dependency Override” and make the student “independent” for FAFSA purposes. If a youth transfers to a new institution, the FAA in the new post-secondary institution may accept the previous FAA’s determination, but is not required to accept it. The new FAA may choose to make her or his own determination.

Examples of unusual circumstances include:

- Parents are incarcerated;
- Students have left home due to an abusive family environment; or
- Students are unable to locate their parents.

Please give the student two copies of the letter, one to keep for their own records and one to give to the Financial Aid Office. The agency, school, or non-family member should keep a copy of the letter in case the student loses the form or letter due to her or his mobility and life circumstances.

## **Verification**

If verification from a school or community agency is not obtained, or if conflicting information is received, the FAA will make a case-by-case determination for applicants seeking “independent” status for FAFSA.

## **Dependency Status**

Below is the complete list of questions asked on the 2010-11 FAFSA to determine dependency status for financial aid:

46. Were you born before January 1, 1987?
47. As of today, are you married? (Also answer “Yes” if you are separated but not divorced.)
48. At the beginning of the 2010–11 school year, will you be working on a master’s or doctorate program (such as an MA, MBA, MD, JD, PhD, EdD, graduate certificate, etc.)?
49. Are you currently serving on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces for purposes other than training?
50. Are you a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces?
51. Do you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011?

52. Do you have dependents (other than your children or spouse) who live with you and who receive more than half of their support from you, now through June 30, 2011?
53. At any time since you turned age 13, were both of your parents deceased, were you in foster care, or were you a dependent or ward of the court?
54. Are you or were you an emancipated minor as determined by a court in your state of legal residence?
55. Are you or were you in legal guardianship as determined by a court in your state of legal residence?
56. At any time on or after July 1, 2009, did your high school or school district homeless liaison determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless?
57. At any time on or after July 1, 2009, did the director of an emergency shelter or transitional housing program funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless?
58. At any time on or after July 1, 2009, did the director of a runaway or homeless youth basic center or transitional living program determine that you were an unaccompanied youth who was homeless or were self-supporting and at risk of being homeless?

Information about FAFSA policies and procedures can be obtained through the Wisconsin Education Opportunity Program (WEOP) at <http://dpi.wi.gov/weop/>. Link for map of WEOP locations in Wisconsin is [http://dpi/wi/gov/homeless/pdf/weop\\_map\\_bw.pdf](http://dpi/wi/gov/homeless/pdf/weop_map_bw.pdf). Please contact the office which serves your area.

Feel free to contact the Financial Aid Office at the college/university the student you are working with is planning to attend, or the FAFSA hotline at 1-800-4-FED-AID (1-800-433-3243).

Contact Mary Maronek, Coordinator, Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, at (608) 261-6322 or [mary.maronek@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:mary.maronek@dpi.wi.gov) for more information on homeless issues.