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LIVING ON THE STREET: FINDING SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

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CONTENTS

STATEMENTS OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS

	Page
Feingold, Hon. Russell D., a U.S. Senator from the State of Wisconsin, prepared statement	21
Leahy, Hon. Patrick J., a U.S. Senator from the State of Vermont	1
prepared statement	36

WITNESSES

Hounsou, Djimon, Actor and Advocate, Los Angeles, California	3
Hutchins, Michael, Residential Manager, Spectrum Youth and Family Services Burlington, Vermont	6
Kilbane, Jerome, Executive Director, Covenant House Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	11
Redmond, Mark, Executive Director, Spectrum Youth and Family Services, Burlington, Vermont	4
Wagner, Victoria A., Chief Executive Officer, National Network for Youth, Washington, D.C.	9

SUBMISSIONS FOR THE RECORD

Garcia, Janet, Deputy Director, Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families, Director, Division for Children, Phoenix, Arizona, statement	23
Hounsou, Djimon, Actor and Advocate, Los Angeles, California, statement	27
Hutchins, Michael, Residential Manager, Spectrum Youth and Family Services, Burlington, Vermont, statement	29
Illinois Collaboration on Youth, Denis Murstein, Executive Director, Chicago, Illinois, statement	31
Kilbane, Jerome, Executive Director, Covenant House Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, statement	33
National Alliance to End Homelessness, Nan Roman, President, Washington, D.C., statement	38
Pinkham, Kreig, Director, Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs, Waterbury, Vermont, statement	43
Redmond, Mark, Executive Director, Spectrum Youth and Family Services, Burlington, Vermont, statement	47
Wagner, Victoria A., Chief Executive Officer, National Network for Youth, Washington, D.C., statement and attachment	49

VerDate 0ct 09 2002 12:54 Jun 13, 2008 Jkt 042785 PO 00000 Frm 00003 Fmt 5904 Sfmt 5904 S:\GPO\HEARINGS\42785.TXT SJUD1 PsN: CMORC

LIVING ON THE STREET: FINDING SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 2008

UNITED STATES SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY,
Washington, D.C.

The Committee met, Pursuant to notice, at 10:06 a.m., in room SD–226, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. PATRICK J. LEAHY, A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF VERMONT, CHAIRMAN

Chairman LEAHY. Good morning. We're going to talk today about youth homelessness. It's an issue on which we should share a common concern. America is the wealthiest Nation in the world and the problem of youth homelessness is shockingly high. This is not just in larger cities, but smaller communities and rural areas, as is much of the area I represent in the State of Vermont.

We're going to hear from several witnesses who are going to speak firsthand about the challenges young people face when they have nowhere to go. They also show the potential within young people who face the most harrowing obstacles, if they're given a chance. One of these homeless went on to become an Oscar-nominated actor; another now works with homeless youth in my home State of Vermont and is on his way to great things. So, I look forward to hearing from all of these witnesses.

Homeless youth is a problem around the world. It affects these young people most directly when they're homeless, but it really affects and endangers the future as well, theirs and everybody else's. There remains a problem, and our wealthy country means we need to redouble our commitment and our efforts. We need to support those in small towns and communities across the country who work on this problem every day and see it firsthand.

Now, the Justice Department estimated that 1.7 million young people either ran away from home or were thrown out of their homes in 1999. 1.7 million. Another study suggested a number closer to 2.8 million in 2002. Now, whether you're talking about 1 million or 5 million, young people become homeless for a variety of reasons, including abandonment, running away from an abusive home, having no place to go after they've left State care.

An estimated 40 to 60 percent of homeless kids are expected to experience physical abuse, 17 to 35 percent experience sexual

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abuse while on the street. Homeless youth are also at greater risk of mental health problems. Now, many receive vital services in their communities, but a very large number of them remain a hidden population.

The Runaway Homeless Youth Act is the way in which the Federal Government helps communities across the country protect some of our most vulnerable children. It was first passed the year I was elected to the Senate. That was 1974. We have reauthorized it several times over the years. I've worked with Senator Specter, Senator Hatch, and others on both sides of the aisle, and I hope we can reauthorize it again this year.

Now, some have tried to end these programs, but a bipartisan group of Senators said no. This law, the programs it funds and provides a safety net that gives young people a chance to build lives for themselves. It helps reunite youngsters with their families.

Considering the increasingly difficult economic conditions as we go into a recession being experienced by so many families around the country, now is the time to recommit ourselves to these programs, not to let these programs expire.

Under the Act, every State receives a basic center grant to provide housing and crisis services for runaway and homeless youth and their families. Community-based groups around the country can apply for funding through the Transitional Living Program and Sexual Abuse Prevention Street Outreach Grant program, to provide longer term housing to homeless youth between 16 and 21, but also to help them become self-sufficient.

In Vermont, the Vermont Coalition for Runaways, the Homeless Youth, the New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services, and Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington all receive grants under these programs. They've all provided excellent service.

Recently we learned that the street outreach programs in Vermont served nearly 10,000 young people. Think of that number. We are a State of only 600,000 people and we helped 10,000 young people. Replicate that in the other 49 States or in a country of 300 million.

So, the topics are difficult. They deserve our attention. We have a distinguished panel of witnesses today of the people working directly with youth in the streets today in rural places like Vermont, those who are lending their names and voices to a worthy cause. It's necessary that we find ways to approach this.

[The prepared statement of Senator Leahy appears as a submission for the record.]

So what I'm going to do, I'm going to introduce each witness and ask them to speak, and then we'll go into questions.

Djimon Hounsou is an Academy Award-nominated actor. He's an advocate on behalf of homeless youth. We had a chance to chat prior to this hearing and he was kind enough to not correct my French when we were speaking French. He's best known for his roles in films such as Amistad, when I first saw him, the film, In America, and Blood Diamond, which, as difficult as it is to watch, I would urge everybody to see to see what's happening the world today. He's won numerous awards, including an NAACP Image Award and a National Board of Review Award. He testifies today

based on personal experience. He was born in West Africa. He moved to Paris at age 13 in order to get a better education. While living in France as a youth, he became homeless. So we will begin, Mr. Hounsou, avec vous.

STATEMENT OF DJIMON HOUNSOU, ACTOR AND ADVOCATE, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Mr. HOUNSOU. Thank you, Chairman Leahy and members of the Committee for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which serves our country's troubled and neglected adolescents that are so in need of our assistance.

My name is Djimon Hounsou and I can address this issue personally, having experienced the very problem that we are discussing.

It is known to some that this cause is of personal importance to me and connects on a deeply intimate level. While I stand before you today accomplished and successful in the eyes of society, I haven't always been so fortunate. After leaving my home at an early age and moving to France, I lived on the streets for some time, fighting for survival and searching out for nothing more than my daily necessities for a meager existence. I lived out my days in hunger and desperation.

So this cause is not merely some distant charity that I contribute to from my home due to feelings of guilt or goodwill, but my concern comes from an intimate understanding of the situation that these children face.

This issue is as relevant today as it was in 1991, at the last hearing on the matter. We cannot ignore this crisis any longer. The mostly silent problem of homeless and disconnected youth in our country will not simply disappear.

The RHYA is important because kids need to dream. The hopes and dreams of homeless youth who live on the street, however, are stifled and crushed and there is no room left for a vision of the future. When you lack the basic necessities required for survival, everything else fades away and you are left with nothing but the aching desire for food and shelter. I believe in the beauty and importance of our youth and I believe that we have the responsibility to protect and nurture the generation beneath us to preserve our future and theirs. Therefore, we need to champion causes such as the RHYA and the National Network's Place to Call Home campaign, and find other ways to help safeguard and teach our youth.

It is a sad state of affairs when the richest country in the world has over 2 million children and adolescents living on the streets. This should not be seen as a crisis, but a crime. It should not be taken lightly or overlooked. It is wonderful that we live in such a generous country that is able to help so many others in need around the world, but let us not forget the people closest to home.

Now, the question is not whether we can afford to fund such a cause, the question is how can we afford not to? The homeless children of our country and the kids that have run away who choose to live on the streets rather than to deal with their family lives deserve not only a better, brighter future, but a better today.

In summary, I urge the Committee to quickly reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act so that community-based orga-

nizations can provide a much-needed safety net for youth in runaway and homeless situations.

I also encourage you to support the National Network for Youth's Place to Call Home campaign, a comprehensive public policy platform that seeks to prevent and end homelessness among our youth. If we have learned anything over the last 30 years, it is that young people's chances of becoming productive, contributing members of society are greatly increased when they are given the opportunity to realize and pursue their dreams. We need to guard and preserve the innocence and purity of the youth of our country and help cultivate and encourage their hopes and dreams. Without a home, food, and clothing, children do not have even the opportunity needed to rise above their circumstances.

So I thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for taking leadership on the important issue of runaway and homeless youth, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Thank you.

Chairman LEAHY. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hounsou appears as a submission for the record.]

Chairman LEAHY. Mark Redmond will be our next witness. He's the executive director of Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington, Vermont. He's worked there since 2003. Is that correct?

Mr. REDMOND. That's correct.

Chairman LEAHY. He spent almost 27 years volunteering and working for various nonprofit organizations on behalf of homeless, runaway, and at-risk youth, including the Domos Foundation Stamp for Connecticut and Covenant House in New York. Mr. Redmond's book, The Goodness Within: Reaching Out to Troubled Teens With Love and Compassion, was published in 2004. He's also written articles and essays that have been featured in major nationwide publications. He received his bachelor's degree from Villa Nova, his master's degree from New York University.

Mr. Redmond, you and I also chatted briefly this morning, and I'm delighted to have you here. Please go ahead.

STATEMENT OF MARK REDMOND, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SPECTRUM YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES, BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Mr. REDMOND. Thank you, Chairman Leahy and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to address the fundamental role of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in serving young people in our country who are disconnected from family and other supports, many of whom end up living on the streets.

I'm the executive director of Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington, Vermont. We're the largest provider of services to homeless and at-risk youth in the State. We've been in existence since 1970. In fact, Senator Leahy was one of our early board members. We're also a longstanding member of the National Network for Youth.

The Act authorizes three distinct programs. Spectrum is the only nonprofit in Vermont which receives funding for, and provides services in, all three areas. The first program within the continuum is

called Street Outreach. We hire professional, credentialed adults and college students from nearby St. Michael's College and the University of Vermont, and our staff are out every day connecting with scores of homeless youth in Burlington. Some of them are living in abandoned box cars down by Lake Champlain, some of them live in the woods out by the lake, others live behind restaurants on Church Street. Our staff are out there every day. They know them by name. They're distributing sandwiches, blankets, sleeping bags, clothing, gloves, anything to meet their most basic needs.

Our outreach staff use these contacts to build trusting relationships with youth so we can get them off the streets and into our shelter. We also have a drop-in center as part of our outreach program, right off the main pedestrian mall in downtown Burlington. Every day of the year, homeless youth can come in and receive a free hot lunch, free hot dinner, change of clothing, shower, do their laundry, and there's a free health clinic right next door run by the Community Health Center of Burlington where they can see a doctor a nurse.

We have four job developers on staff to help kinds find jobs. We have a full-time teacher on staff to help them get their GED or their high school diploma. We even have a part-time person to help kids get into college. We have licensed mental health and substance abuse counselors on staff because we know that mental illness, alcoholism, and drug addiction are prevalent among this population.

The second program model of the Act is called Basic Center. Basic Center funds support our 12-bed shelter, which is right above the drop-in center. That, too, is open every day of the year. From the moment a youth arrives, the message is: how can we support you in developing a plan that will get you off the streets permanently? Our shelter staff also work closely with young people's families to support reunification, if that is possible.

The third component of the Act is called the Transitional Living Program. At Spectrum, this consists of a nine-unit SRO, single-room occupancy, building which is a few blocks away from the shelter. If a young person is in our shelter and cannot be safely reunified with his or her family, he or she then transitions over to the longer term SRO where they get a Section 8 lease and their own room. They can stay there for up to 18 months. A few years ago we developed an after-care support, allowing you to successfully graduate from the SRO, to receive a Section 8 voucher to take out into the housing market.

Other young people will go into a college dorm, they'll go into Job Corps, or State safe and stable living situations. Just a month ago, we even had one young man who, 2 years ago was homeless, living in a truck, came to Spectrum, went through our programs, and after he graduated he decided he wanted to become a Marine. Two weeks ago, he graduated from Paris Island boot camp, and today he's a Marine. So, our mission is to help homeless youth develop a plan that leads to self-sufficiency and independent living.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act supports all of this work that we do, which is why it's so important to reauthorize it before it sunsets in September. A few recommendations that would strengthen the Act. First, the small State minimum for Basic Cen-

ter should be increased to $200,000. It's only $100,000 now. That's all that the entire State of Vermont receives right now, and Spectrum only receives $18,000 of that. So, it's very difficult to operate a program on so little money.

Second, the authorization levels for the consolidated account should be $200 million, and the Street Outreach programs authorized at $30 million. Spectrum has been level-funded since 1994, so you can only imagine how costs have risen in 14 years, while the grant amount stays the same. With more funding available, we could assist youth in exiting the streets, connecting them to school and to the workforce.

Finally, please extend the amount of time a young person can remain in a transitional living program from the current 18 months to 2 years.

Thank you, Senator, for this opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Chairman LEAHY. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Redmond appears as a submission for the record.]

Chairman LEAHY. I should note for anybody who's watching us, when you talk about the number of homeless people in Burlington and sleeping out, I was showing some of you a picture earlier that my grandson took in our home of Vermont just 6 weeks ago with a 10-foot snow bank behind it from where they'd been plowing our driveway. Vermont is not a southern State. We can have temperatures literally 10, 15 degrees, 20 degrees below zero in the wintertime, as well as very severe weather. This is just to put in context what being homeless there can be. I never know each week when I go home what the weather is going to be because it changes and it can be severe.

Now, Michael Hutchins is a residential manager at the Spectrum Youth Co-Op in Burlington, Vermont. Mr. Hutchins, I hope you won't mind that I'd point out that you've overcome addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, and homelessness. I mention those things because you're not speaking in the abstract when you speak here. You had a drug overdose in 2002. After that, you became a client at Spectrum's Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter, and 3 years later became part of their residential team. You're currently enrolled at Springfield College's School of Human Services in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, working a bachelor of science degree in human services, with concentration in addiction studies. Again, an example of having people who are testifying here, not speaking about some abstract concept.

Mr. Hutchins, it's all yours.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL HUTCHINS, RESIDENTIAL MANAGER, SPECTRUM YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES, BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Mr. HUTCHINS. Thank you very much. I work as a residential manager at Spectrum Youth and Family Services. At the Youth Co-Op, we house up to six teenaged youth, ages 15–19, who are in the foster care system. I can identify with the youth that I have the opportunity to work with because I know what it is like to be

homeless, and I know how difficult it is to be struggling with addictions and mental health issues, as these young men are.

I first came to Spectrum in May of 2002 as a client in the shelter. Just 1 week prior to my arrival, I had barely survived a drug overdose in the club that I worked at down in Orlando, Florida. Unlike the experiences of most runaway and homeless youth, there had been no immediate family conflict between my adoptive mother and myself.

My mother is a renowned psychologist who has specialized in child and family counseling for almost as many years as I am old. She had a lot of work to do when she adopted me, as I had 6 years' worth of physical and sexual abuse that had occurred while I was in the care of my biological mother. My experience of abuse is common among youth who experience homelessness. Studies have shown that between 40 and 60 percent of homeless youth have experienced such abuse during their childhood. So, my adoptive mother was my saving grace and I'm very lucky to have her as my parent.

The large part of the problems I encountered down in Florida, most specifically the addiction and the homeless and the overdose, were due to the fact that I wanted to prove my independence, not just to myself, but to anyone and everyone who might have said I wasn't going to make it out on my own.

Back then, going back home to Vermont from Florida, getting support from my family was not really an option for me, as I was trying to figure out who I was, what I believed in, what I wanted to do with my life, and without my decisions being influenced by my mother's opinions.

Another factor that played a part was the fact that, as an adopted adolescent who hadn't heard from his biological mother in years, I wasn't sure if I felt that I belonged to anybody. So after a 3-month binge on narcotics, my body finally fell out from beneath me. I went into seizures on the ground outside of the club and my heart had stopped beating on the way to the emergency room. The EMTs had to resuscitate me in the ambulance and I awoke in a hospital bed several hours later, alone, homeless, broke, and terrified. The only thing that I possessed in that moment was the realization that I wouldn't be alive much longer if I didn't get help.

So with the help of family members and friends of the family who work in the field of human services, the referral to Spectrum came swiftly to my list of options. My other choices included joining the military, moving to Philadelphia to live near my brother, or staying in Orlando and risking death yet again. So I chose Spectrum because I wanted to be closer to home and people that I know who cared about me.

So once I arrived at Spectrum and made the decision to stay dedicated to getting my life on track and clear of narcotics, it only took me 2 months to earn my way out of the shelter and into Spectrum's transitional living program, the SRO.

During my 18-month stay there, I went through intensive inpatient treatment at Conifer Parks Drug Rehabilitation Center in Schenectady, New York, intensive outpatient treatment in the form of group therapy which met three times each week at a Burlington facility called Day One, and attended Alcoholics Anonymous and

Narcotics Anonymous meetings nearly twice a day for several months.

Everyone on my Spectrum treatment team—my case manager, counselor, doctor, and the workers in the jobs program and the education department—as well as all the residential managers who worked in the shelter and the SRO, all helped me achieve my ultimate goal: to live independently in the community as a self-sufficient young adult.

Once I successfully completed the three phases of the SRO program, I moved into an apartment with a friend that I'd made while working as a seasonal worker at a video game store. About a year and a half later, after working as a shift supervisor at a McDonald's restaurant and assistant store manager at the video game store, it didn't really take me long to realize that, as proud as I was to have the managerial skills that I had learned, it wasn't rewarding enough work.

So I remembered a conversation I had with our residential director, Elise Brokaw, and I'd asked her if she thought I would make a good staff member some day. She told me to give it a year out on my own and then to come back and talk to her and she'd be glad to have me on board.

So as soon as I got hired at Spectrum, I quit my job at the video game store and after 6 months of working part-time respite I was taken on as full-time staff. I have worked there for almost 3 years. It's been amazing to watch these young individuals work on treatment goals similar to those that I had once set for myself. It is highly rewarding to be able to assist and support them through their difficult struggles. Now instead of helping people make decisions on which video game to buy or whether to super-size their meal, I am able to help them make important decisions about their lives.

When a youth tells me that I don't understand what they're going through, I can tell them now that I know exactly how they are feeling. I believe my experience as a Spectrum client gives hope to the youth that I work with so they can see proof that success through this program is, indeed, possible. I've even had them ask me if I thought they would make a good staff member someday, so things have come around full circle.

I can only hope that the youth that I work with, as well as the thousands and thousands of homeless and runaway youth in this Nation today, will be able to share their own success stories like mine, and encourage others to improve the quality of their lives as well.

Without the funding that the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act provides to organizations like Spectrum nationwide, those success stories might never occur. If Spectrum Youth and Family Services had not existed on May 19, 2002, I would not be standing before you today.

So I profess to you that I believe in this system wholeheartedly, and I implore you to not only reauthorize this Act before it expires, but to focus in the years to come on how we as a Nation can improve the quality of the lives of youth who believe they don't have a brighter tomorrow.

Chairman LEAHY. Thank you, Mr. Hutchins. I appreciate you being here. We'll have questions in a few minutes.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hutchins appears as a submission for the record.]

Chairman LEAHY. Victoria Wagner, is the president and CEO of the National Network for Youth, a national membership organization that represents the needs of homeless youth to policymakers and lawmakers. Prior to working with the National Network for Youth, Ms. Wagner served as the CEO of Youth Care, a multi-million dollar agency devoted to homeless and runaway youth from 1985 to 2004. Is that correct?

Ms. WAGNER. That's correct.

Chairman LEAHY. She served on the boards of numerous organizations, including the International Forum for Child Welfare, the Child Welfare League of America's International Committee, and the Council on Accreditation.

Again, in keeping with the previous three, she can speak from experience. Ms. Wagner was a former runaway herself. She's devoted her career to changing the lives and circumstances of runaway and homeless youth.

Ms. Wagner, the floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF VICTORIA A. WAGNER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Ms. WAGNER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to be here with such a distinguished panel.

As you said, my roots in this really were 40-some years ago. I was sexually abused for 2 years by a stepfather. I ran away from home as a result of that. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act did not exist. There was no one there to reach out a hand, there was no one there to help troubled youth.

As a result, I went in front of a judge and I was locked up for a year for nothing more than running away. During that year, I decided that it was important to me to try to change what happened to runaway youth and I've spent my career doing that. I deeply, deeply believe in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. It is the only source of money in this country that allows a young person to walk in the door of a program without going through a State, without going through police, or some other kind of gatekeeper and get help.

We need to fund it at much higher levels. We need to make sure that there are not long waiting lists. Behind me sits the executive director of one of the oldest runaway programs in the country, Sasha Bruce Youthwork. It is one mile from here. It has a waiting list of a year for young people to get into transitional housing. I find that, personally, deeply disturbing.

As you said, the National Network for Youth represents 400 organizations across the country. Between them, they serve 2.5 million young people annually. Last year, we launched a sweeping campaign called the Place to Call Home campaign that looks at legislative issues, policy issues, and program issues that relate to runaway and homeless youth.

As you said, it's difficult to know the size of the homeless youth population. Some estimates are 1.7 million, some estimates are

higher. What I know personally is that it is a crime to have a young person on the streets of America that's homeless. Young people—not surprisingly—they still report family conflict, drug and alcohol problems within the home, and increasingly family poverty, as reasons for leaving home.

When I worked as a street outreach worker and an executive director, we heard stories of young people literally being left by their families during a move and the children having nowhere to go.

The National Network has submitted written testimony, as I'm sure you know, with a number of policy recommendations, but I would like to highlight some of our priority recommendations.

The first of those, which I don't think should be a surprise, is to ask HHS every fifth year to do a national estimate of the prevalence of runaway and homeless episodes among youth. It's very difficult to have appropriate guidance and funding when our numbers are such a guesstimate, and I honestly think they are a guesstimate.

There was a study done by HHS in 2003 that recommended doing such prevalence studies every 5 to 10 years. Nothing has been done since that. We would really urge you to make that part of this reauthorization.

Obviously, my second priority is to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. We certainly echo Mr. Redmond's recommendations on the funding levels. I would certainly ask for higher if I thought there was any chance. I believe that a country that's been—

Chairman LEAHY. So would I.

Ms. WAGNER. Yes. Okay. Well, why don't we, you know, divert some funds from other places and take care of our children, is what I would say.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth programs are remarkably successful. When Djimon and I had breakfast this morning, we were talking about what works. Is there something that works? Well, these programs work. That is what is so appalling, that we know that they work and yet we don't fund them. They decrease drop-out rates, increase young people going into college, help families get back together, and reduce physical abuse. They do many, many positive things. Last year, they served 740,000 young people. Of those, only 7 percent were provided housing because of lack of funding for housing.

My third priority recommendation is to develop performance standards. There are performance standards now for Basic Centers. We believe that performance standards are necessary across all three of the programs.

And finally, my last recommendation is to ask for an appeals process. Over the last 3 years, in more communities like those you represent, we have seen a greater need. We are seeing more and more grants go in, and often what is written gets missed by reviewers. I personally have had calls from a number of organizations saying, I answered this question on this page and yet I was turned down. There is no process now for a grantee to appeal that decision? We would be happy to talk with you about our technical recommendations, but that's our fourth recommendation.

There are certainly solutions. I see that I'm out of time.

Chairman LEAHY. Everyone's whole statement will be made part of the record.

Ms. WAGNER. Okay.

Chairman LEAHY. Including any recommendation.

Ms. WAGNER. Our biggest recommendations, I've just given you, and all of our written recommendations you have. But thank you very much for letting me testify.

Chairman LEAHY. I think it would be safe to say you don't see the problem going away.

Ms. WAGNER. True.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Wagner appears as a submission for the record.]

Chairman LEAHY. Senator Specter has been a tremendous help in these programs throughout his years, both as a member of this Committee and as a member of Appropriations. As often happens, most of us have four or five committee meetings going on at the same time. I know I have several others. He is stuck in one. But he wanted me to welcome Mr. Kilbane.

Jerome Kilbane has worked for community-based organizations since 1988, assisting homeless, runaway, and at-risk youth. He's currently the executive director of the Covenant House in Pennsylvania, and Senator Specter wanted you to testify. He's held that position since 1999. In fact, you are responsible for starting up in Pennsylvania, in Philly, as I recall. From 1994 to 1999, he held various positions with the Covenant House in Atlantic City, New Jersey, including associate executive director. He received both bachelors and master's degrees from St. Johns University.

Mr. Kilbane, thank you for coming. Go ahead, please.

STATEMENT OF JEROME KILBANE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COVENANT HOUSE PENNSYLVANIA, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Mr. KILBANE. Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Leahy and members of the Committee, for allowing me to testify today.

As you said, my name is Jerome Kilbane. I'm the executive director of Covenant House in Pennsylvania, located in Philadelphia. Covenant House International has been serving homeless and runaway youth since 1972. We serve kids under the age of 21. We began working with homeless and runaway youth 2 years before the actual enactment of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

But since its inception, Covenant House has served over one million homeless youth throughout all of our sites. Last year alone, through Covenant House International, 65,000 kids were served. Sixty-five percent of the kids who come to Covenant House are between the ages of 18 and 21. They are the youth who are between the youth system and the adult system. Often, they are overlooked and invisible.

Covenant House Pennsylvania, as you stated earlier, was started in 1999. Since that time, we have served probably 10,000 kids. But last year, 3,500 young people came to our doors and received services. We provided emergency shelter and support services for over 500, and it looks like this fiscal year that number will be up 20 percent.

We have a continuum of services, as many of the providers do, that starts with street outreach. Our major therapeutic tool is not our services, it's our relationships. It's beginning to reach out to kids to say, you have a place to go to, that you're worth more than being on the street. I think that is the message that we have to send to all of our young people.

It may surprise many to learn that there is a large homeless population in the State of Pennsylvania. Homeless youth are largely invisible, as I said, and they're homeless for many reasons. Over half of the kids who come to Covenant House either age out of the foster care system or are abandoned. They're essentially thrown to the streets.

At last count, there were 40 transitional housing beds in the entire State, in the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We served 500 young people in our shelter alone. The math just doesn't add up.

We are beginning a project to expand the transitional housing beds for youth in the City of Philadelphia by building an 18-unit program in the Kensington section. That gives 30 beds. But the reality of it is, again, it is not nearly enough.

I think what was stated earlier is that programs work. Over 80 percent of the kids who left our transitional housing program moved to a safe, stable living environment. You know, our kids do not need sympathy, they need empathy and choices and the support to do it.

I was going to talk about a young lady who was given a scholarship through St. John's University who came to us homeless, was abused, and has recently graduated. But I want to talk a little bit about an experience I had. About a year ago, I got a phone call by a young man who had been to Covenant House. His name was Wesley. Wesley's goal after being through our crisis center was to enter the military. I got a phone call saying that he was killed in Iraq and we, Covenant House, was the last known address. I thought to myself the tremendous responsibility that we had, that when he was writing down what was the most important thing in his life, he said a homeless shelter.

I cannot talk to you about the importance of this funding. The reality of it is, we'll give statistics about the numbers of kids on the street tonight, but the reality of it is, it's because of this funding that there are tens of thousands of kids who do not need to be on the street, who have a place to go. That is something that we need to celebrate. It's only because of you and the support that you've given to us, and the need to reenact this legislation.

I cannot say enough that this makes a difference in thousands of kids' lives who have no other place to go, who have no one else to turn to. It's because of that that I think that's one of the things that we can say that we're proud of. So I'd like to thank you for your support and to ask, please, I come with my hat in my hand and I beg and ask you to please, please, support us again.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kilbane appears as a submission for the record.]

Chairman LEAHY. Thank you.

I hope nobody will think this is political to say, but as a matter of priorities, you talk about the young man who was killed in Iraq,

the amount of money we've spent in Iraq this week so far—it's not even noon on Tuesday—would fund all these programs several times over. At some point in our country, in thinking about our youth, we'd better start thinking about what our priorities are as a Nation. That's something that is not a Democratic or Republican view, but as Americans we have to start asking, what are our priorities?

I look at my children. Our son, Mark, went in the Marine Corps out of Burlington High School. I look at our children, our grandchildren, and others. They have families with a stable life. But I also know a lot of people, and have met a lot of people both when I was a prosecutor and since I've been in the Senate, who do not have, the people you've talked about.

Mr. Hounsou, you mentioned in your testimony the issue of homeless children. It's one that you can personally relate to. It's not just as some who take on a cause du jour, you do this because it means something to you.

When you were a teenager, struggling with homelessness—and I realize it was in a different country—but what kind of programs or assistance would have been most helpful to you?

Mr. HOUNSOU. Well, Mr. Chairman, my recollection, is that while I was growing up in France and was homeless, was that there was no facility that was geared towards homelessness. All I remember is that during the hard times that I was on the street, and those times were mostly the wintertimes when I didn't have enough warm clothes to sustain the harsh weather outside, I found myself mostly—being sent to a juvenile—sort of the juvenile prison to spend the night. So my experience was, within the course of 3 or 4 years before I was discovered on the street by a fashion designer and my life sort of turned around eventually. But there was no structure in place when I was growing up in France. There was no structure for homelessness, for homeless youth.

Another one of the things that I found difficult for homeless youth is that I think we all have the sort of understanding that when you're homeless, you ought to be—the outlook is you're dirty, long hair, haven't washed for a long time, and don't have clean clothes on. So that is society's image of the homeless. But I think one thing that most of us are missing is that young men and women, mostly within the age of 16, 17, 18 years old, are always trying to look their best, while going out, searching for a minimum to eat, searching out for help to find a place to sleep.

So, obviously we're all trying to look somewhat clean as we're searching for a better tomorrow. So I think most people look at that as, well, you're not really homeless, you look quite decent, you look quite clean, you're not really homeless. But there was no structure really in place to educate you, or someone to champion you, or to direct you in the right place, to the right facilities, or to the right people, to someone that can help. So that was my experience, growing up in France.

Chairman LEAHY. You talk about, to get a warm place to sleep they had to put you in a juvenile prison.

Mr. HOUNSOU. Right.

Chairman LEAHY. Were there no mentors?

Mr. HOUNSOU. There was no mentor. You were just given a letter. I was just given a letter to go to a juvenile prison to spend the night, and that was it. Yes.

Chairman LEAHY. Were you treated differently because of the color of your skin, as homeless?

Mr. HOUNSOU. I can't really say that, in the sense that I didn't know any other homeless. I certainly wanted to distance myself from being with the group of homeless, because I didn't see any solution coming out of being in a group of kids that can't find means or ways to get out of the streets. It was not necessarily helpful, so I was just navigating through the city and trying to find help or assistance.

Chairman LEAHY. But there wasn't anything like a shelter you could go knock on the door and say, here, I want to do something.

Mr. HOUNSOU. No.

Chairman LEAHY. I want school, I want a job, I want whatever, can you help me out.

Mr. HOUNSOU. No. There weren't any shelters of the sort, no.

Chairman LEAHY. Would that have made a difference?

Mr. HOUNSOU. That would have made a tremendous difference. I think there were probably some structures in place in France, but not to my knowledge at the time. I think that probably now it's definitely better today than it was before, but there weren't any shelter facilities, no.

Chairman LEAHY. And you weren't separated by language. Your first language is French.

Mr. HOUNSOU. Yes. My first language is French, so it was not a question of language.

Chairman LEAHY. Let me then switch continents. Mr. Redmond, you serve a predominantly rural area in your work. For those who are watching, the largest city in Vermont is 38,000 people. Where I live, in a town of 1,200 people, it is more typical in Vermont. I live on a dirt road. My nearest neighbor is half a mile away—in this case, my son and daughter-in-law. That sets up a different thing. But you still have a lot of runaway and homeless youth, as you talked about.

Can you refer to some of the particular problems within a rural area, how you reach out to these homeless, these runaway youths? Because if we have about 10,000 in Vermont, they're not all in the Burlington area, which has at least a certain urban core to it. They have to be all over the State.

Mr. REDMOND. Right. That's true. Thankfully, Kreig Pinkham's here today. He's head of the Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs. There is a whole network of programs around the State that are there to help. Because you're right, they're not all in Burlington; they're in St. Johnsbury, they're in Brattleboro, they're in Bennington. So there's a series of smaller programs. Spectrum is the largest one. For a certain percentage of kids, Burlington becomes the downtown, and Church Street in Burlington is the downtown of the downtown. That's why we're right there. We're a block away from that, so that's important.

So I think you're right. There are different challenges with a rural setting and those programs adapt in the way that they can. The program model we have was recently replicated in St.

Johnsbury, which is probably the second or third largest in Vermont, because they saw the success that we were having. So I think the key to this Act is to provide enough flexibility so a State that has, like in Philadelphia, a high concentration of homeless youth, it can do what works there, and in a State like Vermont, can replicate programs that fit them the best.

Chairman LEAHY. Let me go into it a little bit further. You mentioned St. Johnsbury. Even that has a basic defined downtown. We don't have a downtown where I live. It's spread out over a large area. Not untypical of other parts, like the Northeast Kingdom where my wife was born, places of that nature, how do you find homeless? Where do they go?

Mr. REDMOND. Where do kids go from those communities?

Chairman LEAHY. Yes.

Mr. REDMOND. They're linked into—I mean, word of mouth is the biggest. Kids will hear about programs through the police, through counselors. But word of mouth among other homeless youth is the biggest network. So they will know where these different resources are. Some cities have apartments, supportive apartment programs. So finding them is never a problem. I mean, the beauty of the Act also has an outreach component, and that's key for us.

As I said earlier, we have these staff and college students who are out every day and they know where these kids are, and they're connecting with them. These are young people who haven't had a good experience with adults, they haven't had a good experience with agencies and different institutions. So that's why I think it's key to engage them with young people—we hire college students—who can really connect with them and build relationships. A lot of it is just the relationship building part that's the key to the work, in my opinion.

Chairman LEAHY. Well, then let me go to somebody who has experienced all parts of this, Mr. Hutchins. What I understand from your testimony, you were helped by some of these programs. What type of assistance—if you had to go and pick any one type of assistance, what was most valuable to you?

Mr. HUTCHINS. I think the 18 months that I spent in the transitional living program helped me the most because it provided me stability. I wasn't, you know, moving back and forth from place to place or sleeping on people's couches. I had, you know, my own room. I paid rent. I had my own key to the door. I had a secure, safe place to stay and reside while I worked on my issues.

Chairman LEAHY. What about counseling? Did you get that during that time?

Mr. HUTCHINS. Yes. Sometimes twice a week. Usually we try to get our youths to see counselors once a week.

Chairman LEAHY. When you're talking to homeless youth and they can see you dressed like you are now, in a suit and tie, you might get the, "what the heck do you know, how do you know?" Obviously, you can go to your own experience and say. But is there anything that—when you sent to Spectrum, any piece of advice or help that you find yourself going back and passing on to people who you're now trying to help or is it all varied from person to person?

Mr. HUTCHINS. Everyone's experience varies. What they need to do to get their lives on track will vary. But I think the biggest piece of advice is, you really need to want it.

Chairman LEAHY. Do what?

Mr. HUTCHINS. You really need to want to get your life back on track. We don't just hand youth a brand-new life, and here you go. It's a lot of work. You really need to dedicate yourself, and it's incredibly worth it once you get through.

Chairman LEAHY. Well, let me follow that a bit. Suppose you have a young person, an alcoholic, drug dependence, extremely angry from whatever put them there. It could have been a situation like Ms. Wagner or somebody else had. It's one thing when, in a case like you had, you wake up in a hospital and you say, this kind of sucks, you know. There's got to be something better than this, because the morgue is two floors down. I could have ended up in there, too.

But is there some way of reaching, before someone reaches that point? That's pretty cataclysmic. When I was State's Attorney in Burlington in Chittenden County, we saw some of these homeless youths. But I did see them in the morgue. I did see them in the morgue. They hadn't sought the help. You said your heart stopped a couple of times. Their hearts stopped and stayed stopped.

Is there anything you can do to reach them before they hit that point? What I'm trying to reach for is, is there a way of convincing somebody you really want to turn your life around before they reach that conclusion on their own?

Mr. HUTCHINS. I think that's something we all try to figure out, how to stop someone from hitting that ultimate rock bottom. But it's really hard to get someone to really want to turn their life around until they've experienced that. So, unfortunately, people hit rock bottom and stay there. It's something I struggle with every day when I am working with someone who is, you know, not making the greatest decisions for themselves.

I know from my experiences, me standing there and wagging my finger at them and telling them what not to do is only going to make them go out and do it. It's always a difficult task to figure out, you know, what's going to motivate them, how to get them motivated to turn things in a different direction and figure things out for themselves and become empowered and realize that they can be independent and make good decisions for themselves.

Chairman LEAHY. Finger wagging. Dealing with even younger children, I understand what you're saying. But I imagine the temptation must be there to say, listen up, I was there, pay attention, and to hit the right point.

That sort of leads me to the next question. Ms. Wagner, you talked about your running away. They locked you up. Is that still happening today?

Ms. WAGNER. Oh, it's definitely still happening, yes. In the mid 1980s, there was a technicality placed in the Juvenile Justice Act called the Valid Court Order exception that created a loophole in the core requirement a for no longer locking up runaways and other kids for status offenses. Status offenses could be truancy, running away, things that if you or I did wouldn't be a crime. In

2004, over 400,000 young people were arrested or held in custody because of those kinds of status offenses.

Chairman LEAHY. Give me that number again.

Ms. WAGNER. Four hundred thousand. So in a lot of ways, I mean, we haven't totally turned back the clock. The really, really good news is that we have the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. I guess I would like to add that having someone on the street to reach out a hand to a young person, I think, makes a critical difference. But the fact that we're still locking up young people is absolutely appalling, and worse is that they are locked up often for long periods of time.

Chairman LEAHY. Now, we have NIS–MART, too. For those who aren't used to acronyms, it's the Department of Justice that funds the National Incidence Studies of issuing, abducted, runaway, and thrown-away youth. I have to read it to remember all the words on it.

Tell us a little bit about that study. Is it adequate or can we make it better?

Ms. WAGNER. Well, I think there are some big pieces missing from that study. For one thing, kids who didn't return home weren't counted, so if you remained homeless, you weren't counted in that study. It only included young people under 18. It didn't look at street youth—we've talked all the way through this, that homeless youth do not look like homeless adults. They don't sit with shopping carts or match the image Djimon spoke of. It's different. They often go from place to place, they couch surf. They become invisible and they try to blend in.

Chairman LEAHY. It could be a kid going back and forth to school.

Ms. WAGNER. Certainly. Kids that go to school, kids that sleep on their best friend's couch, kids unfortunately that turn tricks on the street because the first person they find is a john that will pick them up, all of those kinds of kids. But they are invisible. They do not get counted. They do not come to attention. We need a study that is a really thorough prevalence study that helps identify those kids and tells us what is the nature of this problem and how do we address it?

Chairman LEAHY. Can such a study be done? Assuming adequate funding and all, can it be done?

Ms. WAGNER. I think it can be done. In 2003, there was a report—a pretty thorough report released by HHS looking at different methodologies of studies, looking at costs for those studies, looking at how they could be done. There has been some work done very recently in New York with Colombia University. The University of Washington has looked at how to pilot a study. We honestly looked at an earmark to try to do a study. However that study is done, I don't think you can make adequate funding and policy decisions without being able to really say how many young people are homeless on the street.

Chairman LEAHY. Well, we've talked a lot about rural areas. Mr. Kilbane, in Philadelphia, which of course has a lot more population than our whole State, do you know how many homeless are living in your city? Do you know how many young people need services and are not getting them?

Mr. KILBANE. No. I cannot give you an exact count, for a variety of reasons. One, is that we can say there are probably anywhere between 5,000 to 7,000 kids in care—in the Child Welfare system, for example—in the City of Philadelphia. A portion of those are going to age out and you have, I guess, some studies that have shown a 50 percent chance of being homeless if you age out of the foster care system. So, we can look at that.

We are the largest provider of—

Chairman LEAHY. Explain what you mean by "age out" just so that—

Mr. KILBANE. Sure. Essentially, once you turn the age of 18 you're no longer eligible to receive support through the Child Welfare system across the country. Now, many cities, towns, or States have a process where young people, if not adopted, move from the foster care system into adulthood. There is some attempt to transition them, but often they are under-funded and under-serviced so many of the kids ending up becoming homeless. We want a 51-bed program in Philadelphia. We averaged, in the last 6 months, a census of over 60. So, I have more kids than I have beds for. But because we have an open intake policy which says anyone who shows up at our doors the first time is admitted, no questions asked, as long as they're under the age of 21. I think we have a moral obligation to accept them.

So I can give you—and I think what's been established—is a guesstimate. It's a guesstimate. But the reality of it is, is that we are serving predominately youth between the ages of 17 and a half and 21. I'm not even talking about kids who are under the age of 18, so there might be many, many more. One of the realities is, because we are 80 percent privately funded, Covenant House is, that niche population that no one really is serving enough of, is that group between 18 and 21. So, we have kind of—

Chairman LEAHY. How do people find out about you?

Mr. KILBANE. I think what was said was very profound: half of the youth who come to Covenant House are referred by other kids. So, they're our best spokepeople. About 10 percent of the kid who come to our Basic Center or our crisis center are there through our outreach program. You asked the question about, you know, how do we get kids who are in need, how do we get them to make the right choices? The only answer that I've been able to come up with is that we have to be present to them. What that means is, I can give you a statistic that says about 40 percent of the kids who go through our crisis center move from the crisis center to a safe, stable living environment.

Of the other 60 percent, overwhelmingly most of them return back to the crisis center. What that means is, the programs that say "three strikes, you're out" or put a limit on that don't work. We forget, I think, at times that we're dealing with adolescents, and adolescents are very difficult. They want to make their own decisions. They're going through tremendous turmoil, often. And I'm talking about adolescents who are in stable living environments. So when you place stress, homeless—

Chairman LEAHY. Even the Chairman was an adolescent at one time and I can think of some things I would have wrung my kids'

necks if they'd done the same thing. If they see this transcript they're going to say, "Dad, what was that?" [Laughter].

Mr. KILBANE. I think that we need to be present to them so that when they're ready to make that decision we say, welcome, come in. We can't say, no, you're out. Now, we can say to them, look, you have to make right choices and expect natural consequences of those choices. But I think the reality of it is, being present to them really helps with success. What we do know is that repeated attempts at trying to straighten your life out, your success rate goes up.

Chairman LEAHY. Would everybody else agree with that? Ms. Wagner, you're shaking your head yes.

Ms. WAGNER. I've actually been involved—when I was in my previous job at Youth Care, we did a number of research projects for the University of Washington and really looked at a process of young people that the more times they tried, they stayed in care longer and longer, and how important it is to have open-door policies. There's a lot of research that I wish you had time to hear that we'd be happy to provide you.

Chairman LEAHY. Well, when we close this out, we'll keep the record open. If there are other things you want to add, send it to the Judiciary Committee and we'll add it to the record.

Mr. Hutchins, do you find that same thing, the more they try, the better the chance that they may succeed?

Mr. HUTCHINS. I think one of the best examples is in our shelter. The basic expectation is, you get up on time, you do a chore, you come back for curfew on time, you go to bed on time. If those basic expectations aren't met, you get a certain accumulation of points before it counts as one strike. So, you have a bit of time before you can accumulate three strikes.

Then you have to face being not in the shelter for a night to kind of get a little bit of a wake-up call and say, I'm not doing what I need to be doing. This is going to happen again when I go back, so maybe when I go back I should do the things that I'm supposed to do. People sometimes go back out there for a night a couple times, but eventually they learn. It's all about the learning process. So, the more times, the better the success.

Chairman LEAHY. Do you agree with that, Mr. Redmond?

Mr. REDMOND. Yes. It's interesting, listening to Jerome's statistics. We are very similar, even though they're two different locales: 44 percent of our kids in our shelter do make it to safe and stable housing. The other 50-plus percent, is it the second time, the third time, the tenth time? Who knows? Why does it click on the tenth time for one kid and it clicked on the first time for another? Who knows. But I think they're all correct. It's important that we be there to give kids multiple chances to succeed.

Chairman LEAHY. Mr. Hounsou, you have spoken about this. You must hear from people. I would assume you hear from kids who have made it. Do you?

Mr. HOUNSOU. Oh, yes. I've heard from kids that were homeless. Also, it's a tragic problem in the sense that homeless kids meet other homeless kids, and basically they end up either in prostitution, because there's no other way of coming out and being self-sufficient, and to be self-sufficient, you do kind of have to have a place

to sleep so that you can allow yourself to dream about your future and what you want to accomplish tomorrow. But drug abuse and prostitution is the number-one thing that hits homeless kids.

Chairman LEAHY. Well, let us hope that—I'll be at a meeting with 20 or 50 other Senators later today. I'm going to be talking about this hearing. Let's hope we get reauthorization, but let's also do it in a flexible enough way that if we find things that work better than other things, that we can put the emphasis on that. This country ought to be able to afford it. Some of us, like myself, feel that this country can't afford not to do this, because we lose part of our soul if we don't.

We stand in recess. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:14 a.m. the hearing was adjourned.]

[Questions and answers and submissions for the record follow.]

SUBMISSIONS FOR THE RECORD

Senator Russell D. Feingold
Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth"

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on the critical topic of protecting runaway and homeless youth. This is a very important issue that affects thousands of families throughout the country, including in my state of Wisconsin.

The lack of affordable and safe housing for all Americans is a key contributor to homelessness among adults and young people and much more needs to be done to create additional affordable housing in our country. Increasing numbers of Americans are facing housing affordability challenges and I have heard from many Wisconsinites concerned about the lack of affordable housing, homelessness, and the increasingly severe cost burdens that families have to undertake in order to afford housing.

There are a number of steps that Congress should take this year to provide Americans with more stable affordable housing options and one such step is to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA.) While the lack of affordable housing contributes to homelessness among our youth, many other issues also impact homelessness among young people ranging from instability at home and abusive situations to disengagement in school and a lack of space in shelters. Homelessness affects millions of young Americans every year and we must do a better job of addressing the educational, housing, and health care needs of these young people through the reauthorization of the RHYA.

Effectively addressing the causes of homelessness requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates supportive services, housing placement, and assistance in locating employment and educational opportunities. The various programs in RHYA, including the Basic Center Program, the Transitional Living Program, and the Street Outreach Program, provide this sort of multifaceted approach that combines immediate shelter needs with counseling, educational, and other services. Advocates who work on homelessness issues in Wisconsin have told me about the important funding that RHYA provides for their work throughout the state and have let me know how much more difficult it would be to get their work done without the RHYA programs.

Shelter is one of our most basic needs and too many young Americans are struggling to have that basic need met. Much more needs to be done to prevent these young people from running away or becoming homeless in the first place,

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including improving the quality of schools and employment opportunities as well as providing counseling services for families. We must also take steps to improve and reauthorize the RHYA programs to provide better opportunities for those youth who have run away or are homeless to help bring stability and safety to their lives.

I look forward to working with the Chairman and this Committee in the coming weeks and months to reauthorize the RHYA and improve the delivery of housing and supportive services to our young people in Wisconsin and throughout the country.

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Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

Written Testimony
Hearing on "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226
10:00 A.M.

Testimony Submitted by: Janet Garcia
Deputy Director Governor Napolitano's Office for Children, Youth and Families
Director, Division for Children

Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA). I strongly urge expeditious action to strengthen, update and reauthorize this vitally important program.

In my current position with the Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families, Division for Children, my duties include overseeing the implementation of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevent Act (JJDPA) in Arizona. As I am sure you are aware, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program was originally authorized as part of the 1974 JJDPA as an alternative to criminalization of youth who were in difficult family and personal situations, often beyond their control. Although the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act became a stand alone program some time ago, the importance of these programs in meeting the requirements of the JJDPA act cannot be overemphasized. By providing youth with safe alternatives and services including reunification and strengthening of families or, when that is not possible, assisting youth to develop independent living skills, complete education and find stable employment RHYA programs prevent youth from becoming involved with the juvenile justice system.

Prior to taking my current position in 2005, I was the Executive Director of Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development (Tumbleweed). Tumbleweed is a community-based non-profit agency located in Phoenix, Arizona, serving runaway, homeless abused, abandoned and delinquent children. During my 20 years with the agency, we developed a continuum of services for at-risk, runaway and homeless youth. The agency received funding from the Basic Center, Transitional Living and Street Outreach Programs authorized under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. In addition to our programs for runaway and homeless youth, Tumbleweed operated programs for youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This array of services and range of

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youth system involvement allowed me to observe first hand the interaction between programs and the potential consequences of failing to address the needs of runaway and homeless youth.

During my tenure at Tumbleweed, I had the pleasure of partnering closely with other Arizona programs serving runaway and homeless youth including Open Inn, Inc. based in Tucson and serving communities in Southern and Northern Arizona and Our Family Services serving the Tucson area. Both of these programs are funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program and provide a range of services to youth and their families.

I have also had the opportunity to visit approximately 10 programs in California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska as a **Peer Monitor** for federally funded Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs. This experience has allowed me to observe the crucial function that these program have in each of these states. While the state operated services for children vary widely from state to state, the need for this safety net of programs that are directly available to youth and families in crisis is apparent in every case.

Importance of runaway and homeless youth programs to Arizona & the Nation

Runaway and Homeless Youth funding supports programs in Arizona that are key building blocks in our efforts to respond to the needs of vulnerable youth and to strengthen families and communities. For example, Tumbleweed's eight bed shelter, funded by the **Basic Center Program**, provides shelter and services to over 200 runaway youth each year. Through aggressive outreach and services to families, approximately 90% of these youth are reunited with family, be it a parent or an extended family member. Nearly 90% of youth who are contacted 30 days later remain with their family. Were it not for the intervention of this program many of these youth would have entered the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, or, worst of all, joined the culture of the street where victimization, addiction, mental illness and hopelessness are rampant. Our office is a funding partner for agencies serving runaway and homeless youth in Arizona because we believe strongly that the best way to address juvenile delinquency is to prevent entry into this system by offering effective support to youth and families so that they can stay together as a functional family unit.

Unfortunately, there are youth in our communities who come from families too fractured to reunite. Sometimes parents are physically not available because they are incarcerated or deceased. In other cases, parents have mental health and addiction issues and are unable to care for their teenage children. Other families push their child out because of disagreements over lifestyle or economic hardship. When families cannot or will not complete the job of raising their children and no other supports are available the consequences are severe to both the individual youth and to the community. These young people have not learned the skills to succeed in the community and are at great risk of victimization, school dropout, unemployment and poverty. All of these factors increase the likelihood of dependence on government services and/or involvement in the criminal justice system.

The **Transitional Living Program** provides a safety net for youth who do not have a family to assist them. Through the safe housing, support and services offered through this program, youth who are homeless are proving that they can be successful. I had the opportunity recently to visit

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Tumbleweed's Young Adult Program, a federally funded Transitional Living Program. Remarkably, 7 out of the 15 residents who are ages 16 and 17 had completed their GED or High School Diploma and were in post-secondary training and education programs. The remaining 8 were all actively involved in secondary education programs. With a relatively small investment, these youth will have the skills and the education to be contributing members of the community.

Finally, the **Street Outreach Program** provides the mechanism for reaching out to the most disconnected of Runaway and Homeless Youth. For many youth, reaching out to other adults is unthinkable because the adults who they have trusted have violated that trust in extreme ways on multiple occasions. For some youth, choosing the streets with all of the danger and hardship that this choice brings is preferable to taking the risk that they will again be injured by those who purport to care for them. The Street Outreach Program allows staff, including trained peers, to locate disenfranchised youth, provide basic comfort services and, over time, develop a relationship that can lead to the development of trust, the return of hope, and a reconnection to supportive services.

Across the nation, we know that youth who age out of foster care are more likely than their peers to become homeless. This trend holds true in Arizona. The Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families and the Interagency and Community Council on Homelessness are working together with our Child Welfare System to strengthen the link between Street Outreach Programs and the Foster Care Independence Act funded Chafee Independent Living Program to assure that when homeless youth are identified, they are able to take advantage of the services of this system for youth aging out of care and that services are coordinated to avoid duplication.

Recommendations

As you consider the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, I urge you to consider the following:

- It is critically important that the funding level for these programs is increased. I urge you to authorize the consolidated account which funds the Basic Center Program and the Transitional Living Program at $200 million and the runaway prevention account which funds the Street Outreach Program at $30 million for FY 2009.

  Current funding levels for RHYA programs does not allow for services to be provided to many of the youth and families who desperately need them. Nationally, only about 50,000 of the estimated 1 to 3 million runaway and homeless youth receive residential services provided by the Basic Center and Transitional Living Program. In Arizona, there are an estimated 5,000 runaway and homeless youth. The latest report published in December, 2006 by the Arizona Department of Economic Security on the Current Status of Homelessness in Arizona reported only 24 emergency shelter beds and 34 transitional shelter beds are available for unaccompanied, homeless youth in the state of Arizona giving the state the capacity to serve approximately 700 or 14% of the homeless youth in our state.

  My experience with Arizona programs and with programs I have visited in our region is that most programs receive only 25% to 45% of their funding from RHYA programs. The

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remainder is leveraged from other state, local, public and private funding sources. An increase in funding will allow Arizona and other states to more adequately meet the demand for services in their community.

- The Reauthorization of the Act should emphasize the utilization of a **Positive Youth Development** approach in the delivery of services. This approach which emphasizes the active participation of every youth in every aspect of their lives is supported by adolescent development science and is considered best practice for serving all youth and especially youth in at-risk situations. The basic tenants of Positive Youth Development include that:

  1) Youth need positive adult role models in their lives;
  2) Youth need others to believe in their potential by having high expectations of them and;
  3) Youth need to be actively engaged in decision making regarding their lives and their community.

  These are things that we as parents strive to offer our own children and that we must also strive to offer all young people in our community.

- It is important that we work to educate ourselves and the public about the issue of youth homelessness and the services that are most effective in assisting young people in this situation to long-term success. First, it is important that a process be in place to regularly and systematically develop a reliable estimate of the number of unaccompanied youth in our nation. It is important that we have in place meaningful evaluation of various models for emergency, transitional and permanent housing for unaccompanied youth and of programs of outreach to bring youth into services. And, finally, it is important that both the scope of youth homelessness and the programs that work to serve them be communicated widely so that the public is educated on this largely invisible and widely misunderstood population.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on this important issue. I would be pleased to provide any further information that would be helpful in your consideration of the Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

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Testimony of

Djimon Hounsou

Actor and Advocate

Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect "Runaway and Homeless Youth

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Leahy and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which serves our country's troubled and neglected adolescents that are so in need of our assistance. My name is Djimon Hounsou and I can address this issue personally, having experienced the very problem that we are discussing.

It is known to some that this cause is of personal importance to me and connects on a deeply intimate level. While I stand before you today, accomplished and successful in the eyes of society, I haven't always been so fortunate. After leaving home at an early age and moving to France I lived on the streets for some time - fighting for survival and searching for the daily necessities. I lived out my days in hunger and desperation. So this cause is not merely some distant charity that I contribute to from my home due to feelings of guilt or good will. My concern comes from an intimate understanding of the situation that these children face.

This issue is just as relevant today as it was in 1991 at the last hearing on the matter. We cannot ignore this crisis any longer. The mostly silent problem of homeless and disconnected youth in our country will not simply disappear.

The RHYA is important because kids need to dream. The hopes and dreams of homeless youth who live on the streets, however, are stifled and crushed, and there is no room left for a vision of the future. When you lack the basic necessities required for survival everything else fades away and you are left with nothing but the aching desire for food and

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shelter. I believe in the beauty and importance of our youth, and I believe that we have a responsibility to protect and nurture the generation beneath us to preserve our future and theirs.

Therefore, we need to champion causes such as the RHYA and the National Network's Place to Call Home Campaign, and find other ways to help safeguard and teach our youth. It is a sad state of affairs, when the richest country in the world has over two million children and adolescents living on the streets. This should not only be seen as a crisis, but a crime, and should not be taken lightly or overlooked. It is wonderful that we live in such a generous country that is able to help so many others in need around the world, but let us not forget the people closest to home. The question is not whether we can afford to fund such a cause. The question is how can we afford not to? The homeless children of our country and the kids that have runaway who choose to live on the streets rather than deal with their family lives deserve not only a better, brighter future, but a better today.

In summary, I urge the Committee to quickly reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act so that community-based organizations can provide a much-needed safety net for youth in runaway and homeless situations. I also encourage you to support the National Network for Youth's Place to Call Home Campaign, a comprehensive public policy platform that seeks to prevent and end homelessness among our youth. If we have learned anything over the last 30 years, it is that young people's chances of becoming productive, contributing members of society are greatly increased when they are given the opportunity to realize and pursue their dreams.

We need to guard and preserve the innocence and purity of the youth of our country, and help cultivate and encourage their hopes and dreams. Without a home, food, and clothing children do not have even the opportunity needed to rise above their circumstances.

I thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for taking leadership on the important issue of runaway and homeless youth and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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Embargoed: April 29, 2008

U. S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Hearing

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

The Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

Oral Testimony

Michael Hutchins

Residential Manager, Spectrum Youth and Family Services

Hello. My name is Michael Hutchins; I live in Burlington, Vermont, and I am 25 years old. I currently work as a Residential Manager at the Spectrum Youth Co-op, a group home in which Spectrum Youth and Family Services houses up to six male youth, ages 15-19. While I myself have never been through the foster care system, as these young men have, I do know what it is like to be homeless and I know how difficult it is to be struggling with addictions and mental disorders, as these young men are.

I first came to Spectrum in May of 2002, as a client in the shelter. Just one week prior to my arrival, I had barely survived a drug overdose at the nightclub I worked at down in Orlando, Florida. After a three-month binge on narcotics popular to the circuit culture—such as ecstasy, cocaine, crystal meth, Special K, and GHB—my body finally fell out from beneath me. I went into seizures on the ground outside of the club; my heart had stopped beating on the way to the emergency room and the EMT's had to resuscitate me in the ambulance. I awoke in a hospital bed several hours later, alone, homeless, broke, and terrified. The only thing I possessed in that moment was the realization that I wouldn't be alive much longer if I didn't get help.

With family members—and friends of family members—that work in the field of Human Services, a referral to Spectrum came swiftly to my list of options; other choices included joining the military, moving to Philadelphia near my brother, or staying in Orlando and risking death yet again. I chose Spectrum, because I wanted to be closer to home and people I knew. Once I arrived at Spectrum and made the decision to stay dedicated to getting my life on track and clear of narcotics, it only took me two months to earn my way out of the shelter and into Spectrum's transitional living facility: the Single-Room-Occupancy program. During my 18 month stay at the SRO, I went through intensive inpatient treatment at Conifer Park's drug rehabilitation center, intensive outpatient treatment in the form of group therapy which met three times each week at a Burlington facility called "Day One," and attended Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings nearly twice a day. Everyone on my Spectrum treatment team—my case manager, my counselor, my doctor, my workers from the JOBS Program and the Education Department—as well as all the residential

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managers who worked in the shelter and the SRO, all helped me achieve my ultimate goal: to live independently as a self-sufficient young adult out in the community. Once I successfully completed the three phases of the SRO program, I moved into an apartment with a friend I had made while working as a seasonal worker at a video game store.

While living with my friend and successfully paying rent, bills, and previous debts, I first attained employment as a Shift Supervisor at the local mall's McDonald's restaurant, and not too long after that I returned to the video game store as an Assistant Store Manager. It did not take long for me to realize that as proud as I was to be in a managerial position, I definitely did not want to be in retail for the rest of my life. It was around this time that I recalled a conversation I had with Elise Brokaw, our Residential Director, in which I asked if she thought I would be a good staff member some day. Her reply was, "let's give it a year out there on your own, and then come see me. We'd be glad to have you." I applied for part-time respite work at the Co-op and gave my two week notice to my store manager the second I was hired at Spectrum. Despite having never worked in the Human Services field, I had incredible confidence that having been through the program myself would be an incredible asset and an efficient tool I could use while working with youth whose shoes I had been so recently standing in.

Now that I have worked here at the Co-op for almost three years, it has been amazing to watch these young individuals work on treatment goals similar to those I had once set for myself; it is highly rewarding to be able to assist and support them through their difficult struggles. Now, instead of helping people make important decisions on which video game to purchase, I am helping people make important decisions about their lives. When a youth tells me that I don't understand what they're going through, I can tell them that I know exactly how they are feeling. I believe my experience as a Spectrum client gives hope to the youth I work with; they can see proof that succession through this program is indeed possible, and I've even had a few of them ask me if I thought they would make good staff members themselves some day.

I can only hope that the youth that I work with, as well as the thousands and thousands of homeless and runaway youth in this nation today, will be able to share their own success stories and encourage others to improve the quality of their lives as well. Without the funding that the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act provides to organizations like Spectrum nationwide, those success stories might never occur; if Spectrum Youth and Family Services had not existed on that 19th day of May, in 2002, it is more than probable that I would not be standing before you this very minute.

I profess to you today that I believe in this system whole-heartedly, and I implore you to not only reauthorize this act, but to focus in the years to come on how we, as a nation, can improve the quality of the lives of those youth who believe there will be no brighter tomorrow.

Thank you very much for your time.

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Illinois Collaboration on Youth

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UNITED STATES SENATE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
HEARING ON "LIVING ON THE STREET: FINDING SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH"

WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF REAUTHORIZATION OF THE RUNAWAY AND HOMLESS YOUTH ACT
Tuesday, April 29, 2008
Washington, DC

The **ILLINOIS COLLABORATION ON YOUTH (ICOY)** provides this written testimony in support of programs and services for unaccompanied youth, and the direct service organizations that serve them.

The Illinois Collaboration On Youth is a statewide membership organization, which advocates on behalf of young people and their families, and provides support for organizations and individuals that serve them within their communities. ICOY is comprised of more than 60 youth service organizations throughout Illinois, each providing critically needed services for youth and their families in their local communities. These direct service organizations provide services to many youth and their families who have experienced and been affected by homelessness and periods of unaccompaniment. The need to maintain and increase access to these services is imperative – there are not enough services available to meet the need of the young people who are attempting to access these supports.

Programs that serve youth who have runaway or are experiencing homelessness (RHY) are critical. Without this frontline intervention and support, many young people would fall through the cracks of the system and have nowhere to turn. RHY programs are geared to intervene prior to youth entering the child welfare or juvenile justice system. We know that keeping youth with their families (when possible) and in communities of origin, with the necessary supports, diminishes the possibility that they will need to enter the more costly and restrictive juvenile justice, child welfare or mental health systems. From programs that reach out to youth while they are on the streets, to those that reunite youth with families and provide counseling and

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supports to keep the family together, to those that offer transitional living services to support youth who have no other choice than to live independently, these programs promote the positive and healthy development of young people within their communities.

In order for youth service organizations to be able to continue to provide these services effectively -- outreach to unaccompanied youth on the streets, family reunification and support, education and life skills, and transitional living services -- there are some specific areas that need to be addressed. These areas include funding, best practices when working with youth and families, and research and public education on experiences of youth who are in unaccompanied situations. Specifically, ICOY supports:

- expeditious passage of the Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act;
- increased authorization of appropriation levels to $30 million for the runaway prevention account, and $200 million for the RHY consolidated account;
- inclusion of positive youth development as a critical component in the development and delivery of services to unaccompanied youth; and
- research studies on the national prevalence of situations of unaccompanied youth and young adults.

In addition, direct service organizations that are funded by the federal government to perform these services need to continue to partner with and be supported by the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB). Historically, this partnership has benefited the federal government, the direct service organizations, and the youth and families served. In addition to supports, direct service RHY organizations also need an avenue to communicate concerns regarding the competitive grant process, so as to ensure accuracy and accountability in funding decisions for both direct service providers and FYSB. Toward this end, ICOY supports:

- development of performance standards for the RHY direct service organizations;
- provision of opportunities for research and demonstration projects that are conducted every two years; and
- development of a standardized appeal process for unsuccessful RHY funding applications.

The Illinois Collaboration On Youth is greatly appreciative of this opportunity to provide this written testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

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United States Senate
Senate Judiciary Committee
Written Testimony – Illinois Collaboration On Youth

Testimony of

Jerome Kilbane

Executive Director, Covenant House Pennsylvania

Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on the "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect "Runaway and Homeless Youth

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Chairman Leahy and the members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to the crucial role the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act plays in serving the many suffering children who have too often been discarded by family and main-stream society.

My name is Jerome Kilbane and I am the Executive Director of Covenant House Pennsylvania, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Covenant House Pennsylvania is an affiliate of Covenant House International and a member of the National Network for Youth.

Covenant House International has been serving runaway and homeless youth under the age of 21 since its creation in 1972 in New York City's Lower East Side. Covenant House's creation precedes the enactment of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and responded to the same issues that Congress eventually did recognize through RHYA's enactment. However it is as true today as in 1972, that the need for services for homeless and runaway youth far outstrips the supply. We miss a great opportunity to prevent youth from becoming totally disconnected from mainstream society and from becoming chronically homeless by underfunding this statute and not amending it to respond to changing needs of America's at-risk youth. We are in a time of budget cuts and economic tightening. Now more then ever, we should recognize the value of preventative services which help young adults become productive and healthy adults. What Covenant House, and what the RHYA does, is try to intervene in a young persons life when they are in crisis and help them stabilize and reach their potential. Our investment in these youth will bring us positive returns. If we do not meet the needs of these at-risk youth, they are likely to enter the more costly child welfare and juvenile justice systems or linger on the street without the skills or resources to make it on their own.

Since its inception, Covenant House International has served over one million young people in need throughout all of its sites. Last year alone, Covenant House International worked with 65,000 youth on the street who had nowhere else to turn but here in their

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most desperate moment. 65% of the total youth CH serves are between 18-21 years of age, a rather invisible population that are too old for the Child Welfare System and too young for the adult system. Covenant House is the bridge for this gap, serving an extremely unique population.

Of those 65,000 served last year, Covenant House Pennsylvania provided services for 3,525 young people. Covenant House Pennsylvania has been providing services to runaway, homeless and at-risk youth under the age of 21 in the Philadelphia area since 1999. Covenant House Pennsylvania is now the largest provider of shelter and services to homeless and runaway youth in the Commonwealth.

Covenant House has built a continuum of services that meets the complex needs of homeless and runaway youth. Similar to the continuum of services funded by the RHYA, our continuum consists of Street Outreach, a Crisis Center, and a Transitional Living Program. I would like to report that in 2007, our Outreach and Community Service Center had contact with over 3000 youth. Our Crisis Center served 500 youth and our transitional living program served 24 youth.

Covenant House's continuum is designed to help youth move from the street to independence, which begins with our Street Outreach Program and Community Outreach Center. In Fiscal Year 2007, these programs made contact with over 3,000 different young people throughout the Philadelphia area. The next step in our continuum is our Crisis Center, a 51-bed emergency shelter in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. This program operates from a policy of Open Intake, which means any young person under 21 who comes through our doors for the first time is admitted, no questions asked. In Fiscal Year 2007, 500 unduplicated young people, with an average daily census of 38 youth in the shelter. The third step in our continuum is our transitional living program, "Rights of Passage", currently an 8-bed facility near Temple University. Last year 90% of the youth served in the Crisis Center were 18 years or older. Most could not return home and because of factors such as unemployment, limited education and a lack of independent living skills had little chance of making it on their own. This is where our Rights of Passage Program has been crucial.

5 years ago, an 18-year old girl came to our doors, scared and hungry. Her family had moved to out of state and left her behind. She had been raped, and found herself with nowhere to turn. A friend had suggested Covenant House and although she was hesitant to enter a shelter, she came in. This shy young woman stayed with us for a few months, before applying for a scholarship program through and partnership with Saint Joseph's University. She was selected, and received a full scholarship. Last May, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, acquired a job at a local mortgage firm, and has been volunteering her time with Covenant House Pennsylvania's Young Professionals.

While youth have varying paths to homelessness, it is important for this Committee to understand that a large number of youth who we served are foster care alumni.

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Over 40% of the young people we serve annually have been involved in the Child Welfare System, and 21% have "aged-out" of foster care. It should shock Congress and the general public that so many youth who were removed from their families for their own protection and care are being raised by a system that then releases them to homelessness when they turn 18. We understand the stress that most child welfare systems are under and that it is the infants and young children who receive much of the public's attention, but we should be very concerned that our child welfare systems are producing so many homeless youth. I do not suggest these stressed agencies be punished, but rather that they are held accountable for the fate of the youth they raise AND that increased funding is provided through the RHYA to respond to the needs of these vulnerable youth. In 2005, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had 5,611 children in foster care over the age of 16, with 942 "aging-out" of care. In 2006, the City of Philadelphia alone had 1205 children in foster care over the age of 17, with over 300 "aging-out" of care. This is a significant number of youth who are highly vulnerable to becoming homeless and for whom we have the opportunity to intervene and limit their cost to society and maximize their ability to become productive and contributing members of society.

At last count, there were under 40 transitional living program beds in the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania specifically serving runaway and homeless youth. With 500 young people in shelter at Covenant House in Philadelphia alone, there is an obvious disconnect between the number of young people in need and the number of transitional beds available. We also are aware that there are many large rural areas that have no shelters or transitional living programs for homeless youth, and that this disconnect between need and supply can lead to devastating consequences. Covenant House Pennsylvania has begun a campaign to construct a brand new 30-bed "Rights of Passage" facility in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia to help address this problem. While this project will increase the number of transitional living beds in the Commonwealth by about 75% it still does not meet the need of the homeless youth in Philadelphia or the rest of the state.

It is imperative that the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized before it expires later this year. We are in a unique position where we actually know what services and supports work and help young adults get off the street and into work and stable housing. The outreach, basic center, and transitional living continuum of services is a good one that is effective, but we must provide greater access to youth in need, and this would require increased funding. In closing, I would make the following suggestion to strengthen this legislation:

- The Federal Government should provide more help to youth aging out of the foster care system. Meaningfully addressing the needs of this population has the potential to greatly reduce the number of homeless young adults. This could be done through increasing the funding for Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and require that states dedicate some of those funds to meet the housing needs of aging out youth. Similarly, these goals could be met through passage of the Place To Call Home Act [H.R. 3409].

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Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Committee On The Judiciary
Hearing On "Living On The Street:
Finding Solutions To Protect Runaway And Homeless Youth"
April 29, 2008

Today the Committee turns to the topic of youth homelessness. It is an issue about which we should share a common concern. The prevalence of youth homelessness in America is shockingly high. It is a problem that is not limited to large cities, but affects smaller communities and rural areas, as well.

We will hear from several witnesses who can speak first-hand about the significant challenges that young people face when they have nowhere to go. These witnesses also show the potential that is within young people who face the most harrowing obstacles, if they are given a chance: One has gone on to become an Oscar-nominated actor, and another now works with homeless youth in my home state of Vermont and is on his way to great things. I look forward to learning from all of our witnesses their perspectives concerning what we can do to help keep our nation's youth safe.

Homeless youth is a problem around the world. It affects those young people most directly, but affects and endangers the future of us all. That it remains a problem in the richest country in the world means we need to redouble our commitment and our efforts. We need to support those in small towns and communities across the country who work on this problem every day and see it firsthand.

The Justice Department estimated that 1.7 million young people either ran away from home or were thrown out of their homes in 1999. Another study suggested a number closer to 2.8 million in 2002. Whether the true number is 1 million or 5 million, young people become homeless for a variety of reasons, including abandonment, running away from an abusive home, or having no place to go after being released from state care. An estimated 40 to 60 percent of homeless kids are expected to experience physical abuse, and 17 to 35 percent experience sexual abuse while on the street, according to a report by the Department of Health and Human Services. Homeless youth are also at greater risk of mental health problems. While many receive vital services in their communities, others remain a hidden population, on the streets of our big cities and in rural areas like Vermont.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is the way in which the Federal Government helps communities across the country protect some of our most vulnerable children. It was first passed the year I was elected to the Senate. We have reauthorized it several times over the years and working with Senator Specter, Senator Hatch and Senators on both sides of the aisle, I hope that we will do so again this year. While some have tried to end these programs, a bipartisan coalition has worked to preserve them and all the good that they do. I remember when Senator Specter came to the Senate in the early 80's and his leadership in saving these programs as the chair of our Committee's subcommittee on juvenile justice. This law and the programs it funds provide a safety net that helps give

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young people a chance to build lives for themselves and helps reunite youngsters with their families. Given the increasingly difficult economic conditions being experienced by so many families around the country, now is the time to recommit ourselves to these principles and programs, not to let them expire.

Under the Act, every State receives a Basic Center grant to provide housing and crisis services for runaway and homeless youth and their families. Community-based groups around the country can also apply for funding through the Transitional Living Program and the Sexual Abuse Prevention/Street Outreach grant program. The transitional living program grants are used to provide longer-term housing to homeless youth between the ages of 16 and 21, and to help them become self-sufficient. The outreach grants are used to target youth at risk of engaging in high-risk behaviors while living on the street.

In Vermont, the Vermont Coalition for Runaway and Homeless Youth, the New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services, and Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington all receive grants under these programs and have provided excellent services. In one recent year, the street outreach programs in Vermont served nearly 10,000 young people. Reauthorizing this law will allow them to continue their enormously important work.

These topics are difficult but deserve our attention. We have a distinguished panel of witnesses today, and they bring with them unique and personal perspectives about this important issue. From the people working directly with the youth on the streets today in rural places like Vermont, to stars lending their names and voices to a worthy cause, finding solutions to this growing problem is an effort we can all support. I thank our witnesses for being here today and look forward to their testimony.

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Testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee

By

The National Alliance to End Homelessness
Nan Roman, President

Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth
Hearing: April 29 2008
Testimony Submitted May 8, 2008

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The Alliance analyzes policy and develops pragmatic, cost-effective policy solutions. We work collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity to make homelessness rarer and briefer for individuals and families. We provide data and research in order to inform policy debates and educate the public and opinion leaders nationwide.

The Alliance appreciates the leadership of Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Specter and the Committee in addressing the needs of homeless youth. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) is one of the few federal programs targeted specifically to homeless children and youth. The RHYA supports local communities' critical outreach, shelter, family reunification, and transitional housing options for youth who are homeless.

The Alliance encourages you to strengthen the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to better assist communities in targeting limited public resources toward those interventions that provide the best outcomes for vulnerable, homeless youth. To that end we recommend the following for consideration and inclusion in the reauthorized statute.

Research

Basic research is lacking on the number of homeless youth, their characteristics, and the nature of their homelessness experience. Similarly lacking is

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comparative evaluation of the various interventions that can help youth end their homelessness. While the RHYA programs successfully meet some of the emergency needs of homeless youth (to the extent of their funding), if we are going to make progress on ending youth homelessness, more information is needed.

The first step is to create a baseline of the number of homeless youth, as well as how they experience homelessness (how many stay homeless only a day or two; how many for weeks; how many never reunify with family; etc.). Further, we need to know what interventions end homelessness for distinct subpopulations of homeless youth, including recent young runaways, couch hopping disconnected and homeless youth, and street-dependent young adults. Finally, we need to know how homelessness among youth affects their use of other publicly funded systems including mental health, child welfare, corrections, and substance abuse treatment, in order to assess the effectiveness of various interventions. This type of research has led to improvements in the adult homelessness system, which have in turn resulted in decreases in homelessness among adults in many cities across the nation.

While the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development collects data on homeless people through both point-in-time surveys and management information systems, these efforts generally overlook homeless youth, leading to significant under-counting of the population. Research examining the national prevalence and incidence of youth homelessness was last conducted in the 1990's and did not include youth over the age of eighteen.

In order to help us improve our homeless youth programs, make them more outcome-oriented, and maximize their effect, the Alliance recommends that the following research projects be included in the RHYA reauthorization.

Recommendations:

- *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should, every five years, conduct a national estimate of the prevalence of homelessness among youth and young adults ages 12 to 24.*
- *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should conduct a study assessing reductions in the use of publicly funded systems of care (mental health, child welfare, corrections, substance abuse treatment, etc.) resulting from interventions funded through the RHYA, as well as the cost savings associated with such reductions.*
- *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should examine the outcomes (in terms of recidivism to homelessness, repeat incarcerations, mental health hospitalizations, and in-patient substance abuse treatment) of key housing models. Outcomes should be examined for the two years following the program intervention.*

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Special Populations

Although research on homelessness is inadequate, it does indicate that minority and special needs populations are disproportionately represented. In particular, African American and American Indian youth; youth with mental illness; pregnant and parenting youth; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population. To ensure that the needs of these youth are met, communities should identify the presence and prevalence of such groups among their homeless youth population and use federal resources to proportionately meet their needs. Included among the strategies to meet the needs of such special populations may be programming that is culturally competent, special outreach and staffing strategies, staff and board training programs, innovative interventions, and more.

Recommendation:

- *As part of the application process for funding from the RHYA programs, prospective grantees should demonstrate their ability to meet the needs of special homeless youth populations in their community, including: youth of color; youth with disabilities; pregnant and parenting youth; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. Such youth should receive any special outreach and services required to address their particular needs.*

Authorization level

Even the data currently available indicates that the RHYA programs are woefully oversubscribed and fail to meet the need for critical emergency services. The Congressional Research Office reports that of the 740,000 efforts youth made to access assistance from the programs during 2007, only 50,000 were met with emergency shelter or housing assistance. Not only is it a tragic squandering of the promise of these young lives, but failing to address the needs of youth in crisis can result in a lifetime of expensive public-sector interventions in the areas of mental health and addiction treatment, health care, and corrections. Increased resources for RHYA are required to address even the most basic needs of homeless youth.

Recommendation:

- *We recommend authorized appropriations levels of $200 million for FY 2009 for the homeless youth consolidated account (and such sums as may be necessary in subsequent years); and $30 million for FY 2009 for the runaway prevention account (and such sums as may be necessary in subsequent years).*

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Performance standards

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has developed performance standards for the Basic Center Program funded under RHYA. The Alliance recommends that FYSB also develop performance standards for the remaining RHYA programs. They should include rapid return to stable housing. Development of standards should be accomplished in consultation with grantees, service providers, experts, and consumers, and should be subject to public comment. Such standards will improve the outcomes of the programs over time.

Recommendation:

- *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should develop performance standards for RHYA direct service grantees. Such standards should include rapid return to stable housing.*

Appeals

The lack of a formal funding appeals process impedes the transparency of funding decisions. The appeals process should not be burdensome or lengthy, and the Administration should be given the authority to structure the policies and procedures to ensure ease and accessibility.

Recommendation:

- *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should develop a process for appealing funding decisions.*

Length of Stay

Current data collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS) indicates that the average length of stay for youth in shelter is over the 14 days allowed by the RHYA. Fourteen days is not long enough for programs to deal with the complex family issues, stabilize youth in crisis, reunify youth with their families, or find suitable placements. This time limit should be extended.

Recommendation:

- *Allow extensions from the statutory limit of 14 days to 30 days for stays in Basic Center Programs, when allowed by state law, in order to increase outcomes of family unification and appropriate mental health treatment for homeless youth.*

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Eligibility age

In order to achieve standardization across the country, it is necessary to clarify the age of those youth who are eligible to be served by RHYA-funded Basic Youth Centers.

Recommendation:

- *Specify that a young person is able to receive assistance from Basic Center Programs up to his or her 19th birthday, when this is not in conflict with State law.*

Our nation cannot afford to squander its young people. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs support a critical network of organizations that are often all that stands between vulnerable youth and disaster. We should use our increasing knowledge to improve the programs, focus them more squarely on outcomes, and adequately support them both to meet all emergency needs and to become the vehicle for eventually ending youth homelessness in our nation.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is deeply grateful for the Committee's leadership and support on the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and thanks you for the opportunity to submit testimony. We look forward to working with Congress to secure timely passage of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

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Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

Written Testimony
Hearing on "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226
10:00 A.M.

Testimony Submitted by: Kreig Pinkham
Director of Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

My name is Kreig Pinkham and I am the Director of the Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs (VCRHYP), a coalition of thirteen community-based service agencies that provide a safety net for runaway and homeless youth in Vermont. In that role, I also Chair both Vermont's State Advisory Group on Juvenile Justice and National Network for Youth's National Council on Youth Policy. I'm submitting this testimony in support of the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is central to VCRHYP's history and service approach. The Coalition was formed 26 years ago as three community youth service agencies agreed to collaborate around a limited amount of federal runaway funding then available to the state of Vermont. While the funding was never adequate to support the full array of services at any one of these agencies, it provided the cornerstone for an experiment in grant management that continues as an exemplar of the collaborative approaches that work for Vermont. From this initial agreement to share limited resources has grown a statewide system of support for runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth that serves between 800 and 1,000 youth each year.

Currently, federal funding through RHYA supports Basic Center Program services at eight separate Vermont agencies (under one grant), Transitional Living Program services at nine agencies (under three separate TLP grants) and Street Outreach Programs at six agencies (through two separate grants). These services are typically located in the largest municipalities within Vermont's counties, and are located to be as accessible to youth and families living in Vermont's rural communities as possible. While each program reflects the difference of individual communities and agencies, all thirteen share a common purpose: to serve as an indispensable resource to families experiencing crises and to aid youth on the run, homeless, or who are considering leaving home.

Through VCRHYP agencies, youth have access to caring adults and supportive wrap-around services including individual and family counseling, life skills classes, educational and vocational support, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health counseling,

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the provision of necessities such as food and clothing, and referrals to an array of other services located within the VCRHYP agencies or the broader community. One of the most important services that VCRHYP agencies provide is safe shelter: an alternative to a couch at a friend's house, the back seat of a car, or a tent in the woods. Be it a 14-year-old experiencing a crisis, whose family needs nurturance and a few days of respite while they can work to settle differences, or a 19-year-old who was told at 18 that it was time to be on her own, regardless of her readiness, VCRHYP services offer an alternative to the uncertainty, fear and danger of life without a place to call home.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act provides much more than just funding for Coalition agencies. In addition to being the impetus for the formation of the Coalition, as a recipient of RHYA funding, VCRHYP has received training and technical support through the T&TA system established through the Act. We've also benefited from invaluable direction in the formation of data elements tracked through the Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Management System (RHYMIS) that has shaped the creation of Vermont's own database for runaway services. Further, before they were removed from the grants process, the performance standards for RHY service promulgated by HHS's Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) provided the backbone for the Coalition's understanding of best practice approaches to service provision to this vulnerable population. As a worker new to the field of youth-work, my introduction to Positive Youth Development came through materials produced by FYSB.

As chair of Vermont's Juvenile Justice State Advisory Group (SAG), I see the services offered through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act as a vital component of our state's efforts to reduce youth's involvement with the juvenile or adult court system. Our data indicates that nearly half of the youth that VCRHYP members serve come from families with some direct history with the state's child welfare system, and roughly a quarter have had some direct involvement with either that state's JJ or adult corrections system. Roughly 50% have undergone at least some limited mental health assessment, and struggle regularly with education issues. Nearly all of them come from families wrestling with regular family conflict and at least a third voluntarily report a history of emotional, physical or sexual abuse. In short, they are youth and families facing a multitude of economic and social stresses looking for direct assistance. In the absence of this assistance, the youth we serve are apt to continue in a fairly predictable path - leading to continued patterns of criminality for some, depression and the continuity of generational poverty for others. While RHY services are not the lone silver bullet for these youth, for many of them, RHY workers represent the first adults who have ever treated them with the respect they needed in order to begin to see themselves in a new, more hopeful way.

VCRHYP has tried to be a voice for a reasoned understanding of the differences in service delivery between rural and urban communities. It is substantially different to provide services to homeless youth when they have access to public transportation and comparably ample community resources and social networks than it is to provide the same type of services to youth in rural towns with limited or no public transport – youth whose street may be an old dirt road ten miles from town and whose employment,

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educational and social resources may be virtually inaccessible to them in a moment of crisis. However, despite necessary differences in service delivery and approaches, the field is relatively united in its ideas regarding how to improve the aide we can provide to youth regardless of where they are coming from, or where they would like to call home.

I'd like to take a moment to discuss how some of the improvements put forward by the National Network for Youth would benefit services from my own perspective overseeing programs in Vermont. The National Network for Youth is supporting an increase in the authorization levels. The competition for these grants is incredibly tight and programs that are being funded are operating on the same base grant amounts that they were receiving ten or more years ago. While the costs associated with adequate care rise seemingly daily, a funding approach that supports level funding amounts to an annual revenue loss as the only reward for service. An increase in the appropriation levels would allow for the possibility of future funding increases that could either fund additional programs or begin to make the argument for an increase in the maximum grant awards; either way, more services could be delivered to more youth.

The Network is also supporting an increase to the small state amounts for Basic Center Grants. Vermont is considered a state with a population size that limits our Basic Center Program allotment to $100,000. While Vermont has found ways to maximize that award through effective collaboration, five VCRHYP agencies receive no Federal funding for Basic Center, and several receive little more than the funding required to compensate staff time needed to enter data into the Federal RHYMIS system. An increase in the small state award to $200,000 would be a tremendous benefit to small states, particularly when these grants are shared among multiple communities in an effort to provide comprehensive statewide coverage.

VCRHYP also strongly supports the National Network for Youth's call to increase the lengths of stay for Basic Center and TLP services. The TLP counselors at the VCRHYP agencies are saying that it is growing increasingly unrealistic to prepare even a highly functioning homeless youth for successful independence within the 18 month window allowed under the guidelines for TLP. Rising housing, fuel and food costs, combined with increased competition for low-wage jobs in a struggling economy, make for hard times for a young person trying to make it without support from family. TLP workers report that 18 months is just enough time to stabilize a youth and set them on the right track before program termination precipitates a whole new crisis. The addition of six additional months of service could make an enormous difference to TLP clients struggling to improve credit history, establish positive renter credentials, accumulate a small bank account and maybe even begin the path toward higher education.

VCRHYP also shares the Network's hope that the Federal performance standards be written back into all materials associated with RHY programming. To put it simply, grantees should be expected to explain how they will measure to a universally held set of performance standards in the grants that they write, and HHS/FYSB should be prepared to monitor grantee performance based on the same performance standards. These should

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set the base standard of care for all RHY grantees regardless of community or service approach.

Among the National Network for Youth's recommendations are a series of national activities and studies that include: requiring HHS to develop a national prevalence count of unaccompanied youth and young adults; requiring HHS to establish research, evaluation and demonstration priorities that are informed by the field; requiring HHS to conduct economic and social studies documenting the benefits to communities who act to intervene by providing supports for unaccompanied youth; and the support of a public awareness campaign to raise the awareness of the needs of this population and of the services available to them. Ultimately, each of these requests is about improving our knowledge and understanding of the field so that we may serve the population better.

Allow me to end with a personal reflection. I came to this field with no personal or emotional attachment to the work, save a desire to do good for my community and sympathy with youth and youth issues. I came from a supportive home with two loving parents that had been high-school sweethearts. I have two brothers who are my best friends to this day. In truth, my experience of family ran tragically counter to many of the youth served by RHY programming. In an effort to support my work, my parents agreed to become trained as shelter parents for the VCRHYP agency that serviced their community. They struggled to identify with some of the challenges that the youth they sheltered were facing, but they stayed with it and have sheltered a number of youth through some very tough times. One young man in particular resonated with them. His father had been in and out of jail and his mother had repeatedly told him that he was worthless and wanted nothing to do with him. This young man's lack of family involvement were severe enough that ultimately foster care was the only viable solution for him, but for a time he was a Basic Center client housed with my parents. This brief 15-day stay established a relationship that lasts to this day. Three years later, they still pick him up every Sunday to take him to Church and have stayed involved in his life, going so far to become licensed foster care providers in order to provide respite support for his current foster family. This youth still struggles with anxiety over going back to live with his father, he still struggles with being a teen in the foster system, and he still worries about what kind of man he will become, but he can do all of this knowing that he has at least two adults willing to wrestle those issues with him. He, and thousands of youth like him are why we need you to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

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Embargoed: April 29, 2008

Testimony of

Mark Redmond, MPA

Executive Director, Spectrum Youth and Family Services

Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on the "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect "Runaway and Homeless Youth

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Leahy and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to address the fundamental role of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in serving young people in our country who are disconnected from family and other supports, many of whom end up living on the streets.

I am the Executive Director of Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington, Vermont, wherewe are the largest provider of services to homeless and at-risk youth in the state. We have been in existence since 1970 -- in fact, Senator Leahy was one of our early board members. We are also a long-standing member of the National Network for Youth.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act authorizes three distinct programs. Spectrum is the only nonprofit in Vermont which receives funding for and provides services in all three areas.

The first program within the continuum is Street Outreach. We hire professional, credentialed adults, and college students from nearby St. Michael's College and the University of Vermont and train them to work with this high needs population. Our staff are out every day connecting with the scores of homeless youth in Burlington who are in the abandoned boxcars by Lake Champlain, in the woods near the lake, or living behind restaurants. Our staff know the youth by name, distributing sandwiches, blankets, sleeping bags, gloves, and clothing daily to meet their most basic needs. Our outreach staff use these contacts to build trusting relationships with the youth so that we can get them off the streets and into our shelter.

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We also have a drop-in center as part of our street outreach program, right off of the main pedestrian mall in Burlington. Every day of the year, homeless youth can come in and receive a free hot lunch, hot dinner, change of clothing, shower, and access to laundry facilities. There is a free health clinic right next door, run by the Community Health Center of Burlington, where they can see a doctor or nurse. We have four job developers on staff who help kids find employment. We have a full-time teacher to help them get back into high school or take the GED and a part-time staff person who helps them get into college. We have licensed mental health and substance abuse counselors on staff, because we know that mental illness,alcoholism, and drug addiction are prevalent among this population.

The second program model of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is called the Basic Center Program (BCP). BCP funds support our 12-bed shelter, which is located above the drop-in center. It too is open every day of the year, and from the moment a youth arrives, the message is, "how can we support you in developing a plan that will get you off the streets permanently?" Our shelter staff also work closely with young people's families to support reunification, if that is possible.

The third program component of the Act is the Transitional Living Program. At Spectrum, this consists of a 9-unit SRO (Single Room Occupancy) building a few blocks away from the shelter. If a young person is in our shelter and cannot be safely reunified with his or her family, he or she then transitions over to the longer-term SRO, where they get a Section 8 lease and their own room. They can stay there for up to 18 months. A few years ago, we developed an aftercare support allowing youth who successfully graduate from the SRO, to receive a Section 8 voucher to take out into the housing market. Others go on to a college dorm, Job Corps, or other safe and stable living situations. Just a month ago, we even had one young man who previously had been homeless -- living in a truck -- leave us successfully to graduate from Paris Island boot camp, as a full-fledged U.S. Marine. Our mission is to help homeless youth develop a plan that will lead to self-sufficiency and independent living.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act supports this work, which is why it is so important to reauthorize it before it sunsets in September. I do offer a few recommendations that would strengthen the programs, however: First, the small state minimum for the Basic Center Program should be increased to $200,000 from $100,000. This is currently all that the entire state of Vermont receives, and Spectrum only receives $18,000 of that, making it very difficult to operate a program. Second, the authorization levels for the consolidated account should be $200 million and the Street Outreach Programs should be authorized at $30 million., Spectrum has been level-funded since 1994, and you can only imagine how costs have risen in 14 years while the grant amount stays the same. With more funding available, we can assist youth in exiting the streets and connecting them to school and the workforce. Finally, please extend the amount of time a young person can remain in a Transitional Living Program from 18 months to two years.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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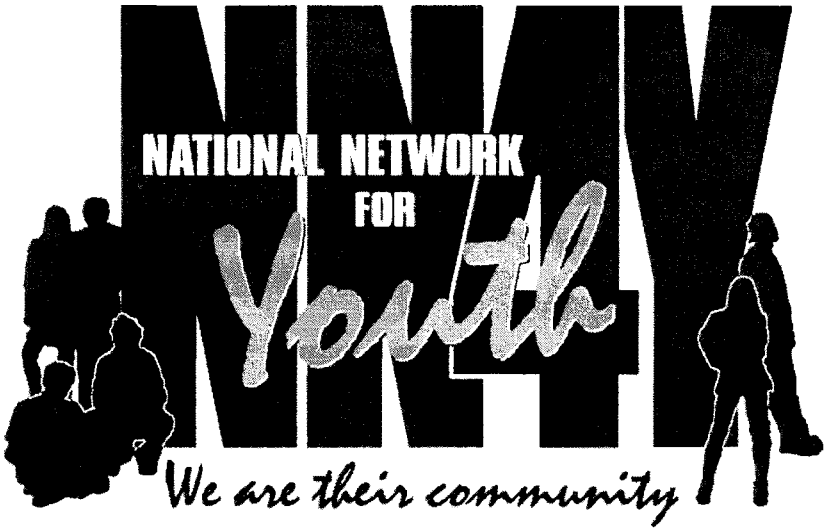

Statement for the Record of
Victoria A. Wagner, MA
Chief Executive Officer
National Network for Youth

before the
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

Hearing on
"Living on the Street:
Finding Solutions to Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth"

April 29, 2008

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, as President and CEO of the National Network for Youth, I welcome the opportunity to appear before you to discuss solutions for protecting runaway and homeless youth. Runaway and homeless youth programs were first established by Congress in 1974 to serve as an alternative to incarceration. In the 60's and 70's, an alarming number of runaway youth were being locked up in unsafe detention centers. I was among the thousands of youth who had been incarcerated for running away from home and languished in locked custody for a year.

The National Network for Youth is a non-profit membership-based organization with members in each state that collectively serve over 2.5 million youth annually. Founded in 1974 to advocate for the passage of the first Runaway Youth Act, the National Network for Youth is the nation's leading organization on youth homelessness. Last year, the National Network for Youth launched its Place to Call Home Campaign, which seeks to build the conditions, structures, and supports to ensure lifelong connections for runaway, homeless, unaccompanied and disconnected youth. The reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is one component of our Place to Call Home Campaign.

ISSUES CONFRONTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

While it is difficult to estimate the number of youth who experience homelessness, evidence suggests that the size of the homeless youth population is substantial and widespread. The U.S. Department of Justice estimated that in 1999, nearly 1.7 million youth under the age of 18 experienced a runaway/throwaway episode.[1]

Youth consistently report family conflict as the primary reason for becoming homeless. Many are compelled to leave their home environments prematurely due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by others in the home. Further studies have demonstrated that once on the street youth have difficulty meeting their most basic needs and fall prey to further abuses. In many Communities, RHY funds are the only resources that provide immediate accessible services to young people.

NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH'S PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES

The National Network for Youth has submitted written testimony outlining our full set of public policy recommendations. Today, I will focus my oral testimony on our priority recommendations.

Priority Recommendation #1: Require HHS to develop every fifth year, directly or via contract, a national estimate of the prevalence of runaway and homelessness episodes among youth and young adults.

In 2002, the Senate Appropriations Committee expressed concern about the lack of research on this high risk population, instructing HHS to develop a plan for estimating the incidence of

[1] Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., Sedlak, A. (2002). *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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runaway and homelessness episodes among youth and to monitor trends. In response, HHS released a report in 2003 which outlined various research methodologies and options for conducting prevalence studies. The report recommended administering studies at regular 5-10 year intervals.

This reauthorization period offers Congress an opportunity to provide leadership and implement the recommendations of the 2003 report by requiring HHS to conduct prevalence studies at five-year intervals. Because runaway and homeless youth are among the most understudied and undercounted populations, there are significant barriers to informing sound public policy and practice decisions.

Priority Recommendation #2: Reauthorize and increase authorization levels for Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs. The runaway and homeless youth consolidated account, which funds emergency shelter and transitional living programs should be authorized at the $200 million level, and the runaway prevention account should be authorized at the $30 million level

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) Programs are critical to reconnecting youth to education, work, and caring adults, and in assisting youth in making a successful transition to self-sufficiency. The last federally funded evaluation of RHYA programs demonstrated that the programs reduced drop-out rates; doubled school attendance; increased college attendance; increased employment rates; reduced parental physical abuse; and improved family relationships for unaccompanied youth.

In FY2007, RHYA programs served over 740,000 youth, but only 7% were provided with emergency shelter or transitional housing. According to the federally-administered Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS), 6,800 youth were turned away from the Basic Center and Transitional Living Programs during FY2007. An increase in authorized levels for Runaway and Homeless Youth programs would help communities meet the most basic needs of this vulnerable population of youth and help states in complying with federal law to Deinstitutionalize Status Offenders.

Priority Recommendation #3: Require HHS to develop performance standards for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act grantees.

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have developed performance standards for the Basic Center Program. To ensure higher quality services for youth, the National Network for Youth recommends that HHS develop performance standards for all three RHYA programs. The standards must be fully integrated into the competitive bid process, monitoring, evaluation, and technical assistance. We anticipate that the new performance standards will ensure consistency among providers, serve as a developmental tool for program managers, and increase positive outcomes for youth accessing services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

Priority Recommendation #4: Require HHS to develop a process for considering appeals for reconsideration of unsuccessful RHYA applicants.

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There is a critical need for a transparent, formalized appeals process for applicants who are denied funding. There is currently no process for grantees to appeal and essential programs are closed as a result of lack of grant reviewer accuracy. We envision that the appeals process would only be open to a limited group of applicants who score within 5 points of the fundable range and who can demonstrate that the original application included responses to questions that the review panel did not identify.

SOLUTIONS TO PROTECTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act must be considered just one part of a larger effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. Congress must take bold steps, such as those offered in the National Network's **Place to Call Home Campaign** which includes a comprehensive public policy agenda to prevent, respond to, and end runaway and homeless situations among youth. These steps will bring us closer to making sure that every runaway and homeless youth is connected to a safe and stable home, caring adults, workforce, and education.

We encourage Members of this Committee to support the Place to Call Home Campaign by swiftly reauthorizing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; supporting the First Step Forward Act, Senator Schumer's youth reentry legislation; and the National Network's recommended provisions on the issue of deinstitutionalization of status offenders within the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which also sunsets this year. These steps will bring us closer to making sure that each runaway, homeless, and unaccompanied youth is connected to a safe and stable home, caring adults, and opportunities in education and the workforce.

Mr. Chairman, we are deeply grateful for your leadership and support on the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and I look forward to working with you and the Committee to ensure a timely passage.

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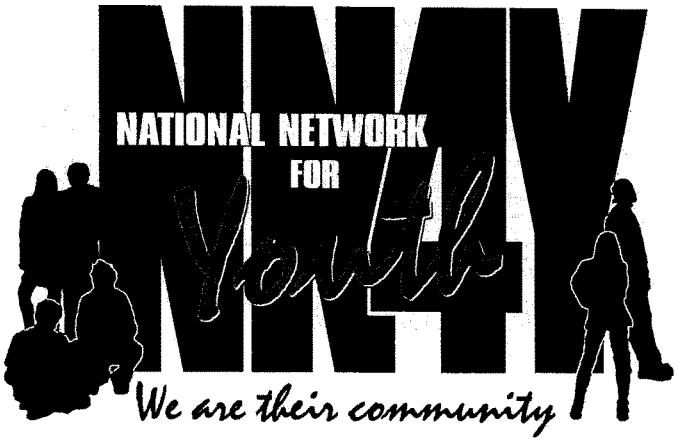

Written Statement for the Record
of the
National Network for Youth

For the
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

Hearing on
"Living on the Street:
Finding Solutions to Protect Runaway and Homeless Youth"

April 29, 2008

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The **National Network for Youth**, founded in 1974, is a nonprofit membership organization that champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services. The National Network provides its members and the general public with education, networking, training, materials and policy advocacy with federal, state, and local lawmakers.

The National Network for Youth's membership includes community-based, faith-based, and public organizations that provide an array of services to youth and families in the U.S. states and territories as well as international locations. In addition to service providers, youth workers, youth, and regional and state networks of youth-serving organizations are among our membership base. Members provide a full continuum of core prevention and intervention services to youth and families in high-risk situations, including street-based crisis intervention, family reunification services, emergency shelter, and transitional and independent living programming. Our members also provide supportive services including life skills, health and wellness education, physical and behavioral health treatment and care, education, workforce development, arts, and recreation services to ensure that young people are connected to school, work, caring adults, and their communities. Collectively, National Network for Youth member organizations serve over 2.5 million young people annually.

Last year, the National Network for Youth launched its Place to Call Home Campaign, which seeks to build the conditions, structures, and supports to ensure lifelong connections for runaway, homeless, unaccompanied and disconnected youth. The four cornerstones of the campaign include: 1) Public Policy Advancement and System Change; 2) Best Practices; 3) Public Awareness; and 4) Research and Knowledge Development. The reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is one component of our Place to Call Home Campaign.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

While it is difficult to estimate the number of youth who experience homelessness, evidence suggests that the size of the homeless youth population is substantial and widespread. The U.S. Department of Justice estimated that in 1999, nearly 1.7 million youth had a runaway/throwaway episode.[1] In 1995, the Research Triangle Institute reported a significantly higher number, estimating that 2.8 million youth experience a runaway or homelessness episode over the course of a year.[2]

Youth consistently report family conflict as the primary reason for becoming homeless. Many are compelled to leave their home environments prematurely due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by others in the home. Across studies of homeless youth, rates of sexual abuse

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[1] Hammer, H., Finkelhor, D., Sedlak, A. (2002). *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

[2] Greene, J., Ringwalt, C., Kelly, J., Iachan, R., Cohen, Z. (1995). *Youth with Runaway, Thrownaway, and Homeless Experiences: Prevalence, Drug Use, and Other At-Risk Behaviors.* Volume I: Final Report. Research Traingle Park, NC: Research Triangle Institute.

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range from 17 to 53 percent, and physical abuse ranges from 40 to 60 percent.[3] Others are forced out of the home due to parental disapproval of school problems, drug or alcohol use, the pregnancy, parenting status, sexual orientation, or other circumstances of their children.

Regardless of the causal factor, homeless youth, when left to fend for themselves without support, experience poor health, educational, and workforce outcomes, greatly minimizing their prospects for making a successful transition to adulthood.[4] In one study of street youth between the ages of 13 and 17, 57 percent reported having spent at least one day in the past month with nothing to eat, 42 percent had been physically assaulted, and 13 percent had been sexually assaulted.[5] The high levels of victimization and disconnection among runaway and homeless youth often results in involvement in costly public health, social service, emergency assistance, and corrections systems.

NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) is scheduled to sunset in 2008 and merits extension. In addition, new issues have emerged that affect runaway and homeless youth service providers and the young people they serve , and that require a Congressional response. **The National Network for Youth urges Congress to swiftly reauthorize and strengthen the programs and the administration of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.** We offer the following recommendations for RHYA reauthorization.

Funding

1. Increase authorization levels for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs. The runaway and homeless youth consolidated account should be authorized at the $200 million level in FY 2009 and "such sums as may be necessary" in each of FY 2010 through FY 2013. The runaway prevention account should be authorized at the $30 million level in FY 2009 and "such sums as may be necessary" in each of FY 2010 through FY 2013.

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs play a critical role in reconnecting homeless youth to education, work, and caring adults, and in assisting youth in making a successful transition to self-sufficiency. The last federally funded evaluation of RHYA programs demonstrated that the programs reduced drop-out rates; doubled school attendance; increased college attendance; increased employment rates; reduced parental physical abuse; and improved family relationships for unaccompanied youth.

In FY 2007, RHYA programs served over 740,000 youth, but only 7% were provided with emergency shelter or transitional housing. The other 93% received critical services to meet basic needs through the Street Outreach Program (SOP). According to the federally-administered Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS), 6,800 youth were

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[3] Robertson, M., and Toro, P. "Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, and Policy. Fosburg, L. and Dennis, D. (Eds.), *Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research.* Washington, DC:
[4] Greenblat, M. & Robertson, M.J. (1993). Homeless Adolescents: Lifestyle, Survival Strategies and Sexual Behaviors. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 44: 1177-1180.
[5] Ibid.

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turned away from the Basic Center Program (BCP) and Transitional Living Program (TLP) during FY2007. Thus the most basic needs of homeless children and youth -- namely safe and stable housing -- are unmet, with hundreds of thousands of homeless youth forced to remain on the streets or in precarious housing situations. An increase in authorized levels for the Street Outreach (runaway prevention) account and the consolidated account, which funds residential-based services, would help communities meet the most basic needs of this vulnerable population of youth.

2. Increase the RHYA Basic Center Program (BCP) allotments for small states and for territories. The minimum BCP allotment for states with small youth populations should be increased to $200,000. The maximum BCP allotment for U.S. territories should be increased to at least $100,000. **Did you mean to say minimum for states and maximum for territories?**

BCP formula allotments to states with small youth populations are limited to $100,000. This amount makes it difficult for HHS to fund more than one basic center in each such state, even though the geographic swath of many such states tends to be wide. BCP allotments to territories are limited to $40,000. This amount is hardly enough to even serve as seed money for Basic Center Programs to leverage non-RHYA funds.

Basic Center Programs provide critical services that assist states in complying with the Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders core requirement mandated under the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA). The lack of community based alternatives, such as Basic Center Programs, often results in the juvenile justice system's overreliance on incarceration of status offenders. A recent report released by the Justice Policy Institute concludes that the inappropriate incarceration of status offenders contributes to future delinquent behavior and results in poor educational, health, and employment outcomes.[6] Serving youth in community-based alternatives significantly increases runaway youths' chances of obtaining an education, a job, and a strong connection to caring adults, thus deterring future delinquency.

3. Permit HHS to redistribute unexpended BCP funds to other BCP applicants for a one-year grant period, after which time the amount should be returned to the BCP general pool for re-allocation. RHYA grantees and applicants would benefit from greater transparency and standardization in the manner in which HHS reallocates "unrequested" BCP allotments from states lacking applicants to qualified BCP applicants from states that have exceeded the state's allotment.

RHYA Project Admission and Length of Stay Criteria

4. Limit Basic Center Programs provision of shelter services to only individuals who are less than 18 years of age, with an exception for Basic Centers located in states with child-caring facility licensure laws that permit a higher age. RHYA grantees and applicants would benefit from clarification on the maximum age of youth permitted to receive emergency shelter through a Basic Center Program. Current law permits Basic Centers to provide emergency shelter to youth "not more than 18 years of age," which some interpret to mean ages 17 and

[6] Holman, B. and Ziedenberg, J. (2006). *The Dangers of Detention: The Impact of Incarcerating Youth in Detention and Other Secure Facilities.* Justice Policy Institute, Washington, D.C.

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under and others interpret to mean through age 18. To resolve confusion in the field, we recommend that the maximum age for emergency shelter services through a BCP be extended to youth "who are less than 18 years of age," which is in alignment with the maximum age used in the formula for allocating BCP funds. However, grantees should be given the discretion to serve youth over age 17 if the child-caring facility licensure law in which the Basic Center is located permits a higher age.

5. Allow extensions in lengths of stay in Basic Center Programs from 14 days to up to 30 days and in Transitional Living Programs from 18 months up to 24 months, on a case-by-case basis, provided that the state child-caring facility licensure laws permit longer lengths of stay. RHYA grantees report difficulty in ensuring safe exits for some of their program participants within the timeframes required by current law. Providing grantees with flexibility to keep some of their participants in services beyond the target exit date would allow a greater level of individualized support for those unaccompanied youth at greatest risk of unsafe program exits.

RHYA Applicant Eligibility, Use of Funds, and Funding Conditions

6. Add public entities as eligible applicants for Street Outreach Program funds. Eligibility for the Street Outreach Program (SOP) is limited to private nonprofit organizations, whereas eligibility for BCP and TLP residential-based services is open to public organizations as well as private nonprofit organizations. Extending SOP eligibility to public organizations would allow public entities receiving either BCP and/or TLP funds to build a full continuum of RHYA services. A full continuum of services within one agency minimizes multiple disruptive placements, which would allow youth to develop positive, trusting relationships with caring professionals.

7. Clarify that RHYA funds are to be distributed to organizations and not directly to program participants. The President's FY 2007 budget request included a proposal to reserve a portion of TLP funds for vouchers that would be distributed directly to participants for the purchase maternity group home services. Appropriations Committees in both chambers of the 109th Congress, in consultation with their authorization committee counterparts, concluded that a voucher arrangement was neither authorized by the statute, nor in the best interest of either the pregnant and parenting youth or the youth service provider. Accordingly, the committees rejected the proposal in report language to accompany the FY 2007 Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bills. Current law should be amended to clarify that RHYA funds are to be made available for distribution to youth-serving organizations and not directly to program participants.

8. Require Basic Center and Transitional Living Programs to have a written emergency management and crisis response plan in place, as a condition for receiving federal RHYA funding. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita focused national attention on the need to ensure more effective responses to emergencies and crises, including by youth service providers. The 109th Congress recently amended the Older Americans Act and the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act to ensure that congregate care providers funded through these programs have emergency management and crisis plans in place. A parallel requirement should be established for RHYA Basic Center and Transitional Living programs.

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Federal Program Management

9. Require HHS to develop performance standards for RHYA direct service grantees. At one time, HHS had developed program performance standards for Basic Center Programs and was in the process of developing program performance standards for TLP and SOP grantees. These standards provided guidance to grantees on the minimum expectations of program performance. HHS has suspended standards development due to the lack of clear instruction in the RHYA statute to support their development and implementation.

To ensure high quality services for youth, the National Network for Youth recommends that HHS develop performance standards for all three RHYA programs, in consultation with the field and experts. The standards must be fully integrated into the competitive bid process, monitoring, evaluation, and technical assistance. We anticipate that the new performance standards will ensure consistency among providers, serve as a management tool for program design and development, and improve positive outcomes for youth accessing services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

10. Require HHS to develop a process for accepting and considering appeals for reconsideration from unsuccessful RHYA applicants. As competition for the limited pool of Runaway and Homeless Youth Act funding increases, so does the demand for a transparent, fair, and formalized appeals process for applicants who are denied funding. Every grant season, the National Network for Youth and Members of Congress receive calls from high quality and experienced runaway and homeless youth programs that were denied funding. Currently, the only option for unsuccessful grantees in seeking reconsideration is to exercise rights under the Freedom of Information Act. Unfortunately, this process does not sufficiently address these issues, as it imposes serious lag times and does not authorize the Administration to reconsider decisions. In response to this issue, the National Network recommends that FYSB develop a formal appeals process to ensure fairness and transparency within the administration of grants.

The intent of this recommendation is not to shift FYSB's focus from its current priorities to unnecessary and burdensome administrative tasks. On the contrary, we envision that the appeals process would only be open to a limited group of applicants who score within 5 points of the fundable range and who can demonstrate that the original application included responses to questions that the review panel did not identify. Our members have opportunities to appeal funding decisions on the state and local level and seek a similar avenue on the federal level. Our recommendation allows flexibility for FYSB to develop the appeals process that would work within their current staffing structure and budget.

11. Add a finding on the applicability of positive youth development to the delivery of services to unaccompanied youth. Inclusion of a finding on positive youth development in the RHYA statute is important for encouraging grantees to apply strength-based, youth development principles to the development and implementation of their programs.

12. Add a statutory definition of "runaway youth" identical to the definition of that term in the Code of Federal Regulations. The RHYA statute does not include a definition of "runaway youth." However, that term is defined in the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 1351.1) as "a

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person under 18 years of age who absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of his or her family." For the convenience of policymakers, RHYA grantees, and the general public, the current regulatory definition of "runaway youth" should be inserted into statute.

National Activities

13. Require HHS to develop each fifth year, directly or via contract, a national estimate of the prevalence of unaccompanied situations among youth and young adults.

Current research on homeless youth has major limitations, including a lack of large representative samples, reliable and valid measures, and comparison groups. Because runaway and homeless youth are among the most understudied and undercounted populations, the paucity of empirical evidence creates barriers to informing sound public policy decisions and the development of effective prevention and intervention services.

In 2002, the Senate Appropriations Committee expressed concern about the lack of research on this high risk population, instructing HHS to develop a plan for estimating the incidence of runaway and homelessness episodes among youth and to monitor trends. In response, HHS released a report in 2003 entitled "Incidence and Prevalence of Homeless and Runaway Youth," which outlined various research methodologies and options for conducting prevalence studies. The report recommended administering studies at regular 5-10 year intervals.

This reauthorization period offers Congress an opportunity to provide leadership and implement the recommendations of the 2003 report by requiring HHS to conduct prevalence studies at five-year intervals. The most recent federally funded study on runaway youth, The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Youth (NISMART-2), estimates that 1.7 million youth under age 18 left home or were asked to leave home in 1999. While the sample size for NISMART-2 was three times the size of its first administration and therefore provided more accurate information on this youth population, there are still limitations. The most obvious limitation is that NISMART-2 failed to include older homeless youth, given that the sample population was restricted to those under the age of 18. Further, NISMART-2 did not include youth who did not return home and remained homeless -- the most at-risk subpopulation of homeless youth. A more accurate prevalence study must include youth who utilize homeless services, youth who remain on the street, couch-surfers who do not have stable housing, and other unaccompanied youth who do not utilize traditional services. A five-year interval prevalence study will provide policy makers and the field with important information to better serve this vulnerable population of young people.

14. Require HHS to establish research, evaluation, and demonstration priorities every two years and to provide an opportunity for public comment on such priorities. The RHYA grants HHS authority to make grants for research, evaluation, demonstration and service projects. RHYA grantees, youth, advocates, and other stakeholders have limited to no input into the identification or prioritization of issues to be studied or evaluated.

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15. Require HHS to conduct, directly or via contract, a cost-benefit analysis study comparing the efficacy of runaway and homeless youth programs to public human services systems, including juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, public assistance and other systems that youth utilize during emergencies. While it is intuitive that interventions that resolve homeless situations among youth are more cost-effective to the public in the long-term, there has yet to be conducted an authoritative cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate this assertion. A cost-benefit study would inform federal, state, and local policymakers about the type and level of investments in health and human services programs for children, youth, and families.

16. Authorize HHS to conduct, directly or via contract, a public information campaign to raise awareness of the unaccompanied youth population and their service and support needs. Runaway and homeless youth are a largely invisible or misunderstood population. Lack of public awareness of this group of young people, their life circumstances, and the interventions available to support them and end their homeless situations, allows homelessness to persist among the nation's youth.

SOLUTIONS TO PROTECTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act must be considered just one part of a larger effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. Congress must take bold steps, such as those offered in the National Network's **Place to Call Home Campaign**. The Place to Call Home Campaign includes a comprehensive public policy agenda to prevent, respond to, and end runaway and homeless situations among youth. Proposed legislation addresses reform issues around juvenile justice, child welfare, education, workforce development, teen parenting, homeless assistance, and housing.

We encourage Members of this Committee to support the Place to Call Home Campaign by swiftly reauthorizing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; supporting the First Step Forward Act, Senator Schumer's youth reentry legislation; and supporting the National Network's recommended provisions on the issue of deinstitutionalization of status offenders within the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which also sunsets this year. These steps will bring us closer to making sure that each runaway, homeless, and unaccompanied youth is connected to a safe and stable home, caring adults, and opportunities in education and the workforce.

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