
February 10, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

On behalf of the undersigned national and local organizations, we urge you to support federal policies to confront the social crisis of youth homelessness in America. Each year, the United States has over 2,000,000 youth experiencing homelessness with over 110,000 living day-to-day on the streets. Half of the 110,000 youth are minors (17 years or younger) and half are youth 18 to 24 years old.

Most homeless youth flee homes with histories of abuse, neglect, and severe conflict, often compounded by mental health disabilities and alcohol or chemical dependency. Some youth are rejected or abandoned by their parents. Homeless youth exist in urban, suburban, and rural areas and all socio-economic classes. However, youth of color, youth with disabilities, youth from families with the lowest incomes, gay and lesbian youth, and former foster care youth are overrepresented.

Once homeless, youth are exposed to amplified levels of harm. Homeless youth experience physical assaults and rape in street environments. They are at constant risk of solicitation, sexual exploitation, and recruitment by gangs. Research studies of street and shelter youth show significantly elevated rates of mental health disabilities, chemical and alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, chronic illnesses, and suicide as compared to their housed peers.

Significant National Deficit of Homeless Youth Services and Housing

Most homeless and runaway youth often experience short episodes of homelessness and then return home or find alternative places to live. However, some youth will be unable to safely return to their families. At least 15 percent will experience long-term homelessness in street environments. Therefore, communities that are effective in addressing youth homelessness offer a spectrum of services:

- (a) prevention, early intervention, and outreach services to enhance family functioning and divert youth from homelessness,
- (b) crisis intervention services, such as respite shelter tied to family reunification and referral to social services, and
- (c) long-term housing models when family placements are not an option.

Most American communities lack capacity in all areas, but the most acute needs are for early intervention services tied to family preservation, and long-term housing options when youth cannot safely return home.

Federal Response to Homeless Youth is Grossly Inadequate

Homeless youth are a distinct group and constitute over 15 percent of the American homeless population. Each year approximately 110,000 youth live on the streets and lack housing assistance. Fewer than 4,000 youth annually receive long-term housing assistance through federal programs. The current responses through HHS and HUD have not had an appreciable impact in housing the tens of thousands of youth surviving in street environments.

Recommendations to End Youth Homelessness

Unaccompanied, homeless youth are a distinct, special needs population requiring targeted support and investment to escape homelessness and return to a setting where they can develop and thrive. We urge you to establish administrative and policy priorities to achieve the following:

Respond to the emergency of youth homelessness with expanded housing resources

The current recession will mean increased stress on families, increased child abuse, low employment opportunities for older adolescents and young adults, and decreases in local and philanthropic investment in homeless youth services. The federal government must offer significant investment and resources dedicated to a spectrum of housing opportunities:

- Expand housing opportunities for homeless youth, ages 18 to 24, as they transition into adulthood. Federal investment should offer emergency resources to respond to the 55,000 homeless youth, ages 18 to 24, which live long-term on the streets or in public spaces. Older youth are particularly vulnerable and in need of housing support since they are too old for foster care and child welfare service options. A spectrum of youth housing models exist to offer rental assistance and case workers focused on achieving positive future outcomes for youth participants.
- Pursue funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) Act sufficient to solve the problem. The HHS RHY Act offers a spectrum of services, including family reunification, emergency shelter, outreach, case management, and transitional housing programs, which could assist the 55,000 young teenagers, ages 12 to 17, surviving on the streets.

Create and implement a strategy to end homelessness among youth

The federal government lacks a roadmap and coordinated response to ending youth homelessness. Research, data, programmatic evaluation, and coordination of federal resources are all lacking. A systematic approach to identify best practice interventions and bolster accountability of existing federal programs serving homeless populations to meet the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth is warranted.

- Identify effective housing and youth development models. HUD and HHS should complete an analysis and report to the President and Congress on housing models appropriate for homeless youth and recommendations for expanding the supply of housing options.
- Conduct a national count of homeless youth that includes an estimate of long-term housing needs not met through foster care, family reunification, or RHY Act funded transitional housing programs.
- Recognize youth as a special needs population in federally supported surveys and data collection. HUD's point-in-time homeless surveys and the Homeless Management Information System should include data elements inclusive and relevant to homeless youth.
- Identify poor child welfare practices leading to youth homelessness. Research and report on the accessibility and delivery of child protective services to older adolescents and the lack of family preservation services for abused and neglected older adolescents.
- Quantify inappropriate institutionalization of adolescents. Research and review whether there exists an over-reliance on group home and institutional placements for teenagers in child welfare services and analyze whether independent housing models for older adolescents in the child welfare system would create better outcomes than group home residential settings.

With support from all relevant agencies and Congress, we can solve this problem and provide a better future for all young people in America.

Organizations in support of these recommendations:

ADAP Fund
Advocacy for the Poor
Advocates for Adolescent Mothers
Affordable Housing and Homeless Alliance
Ain Dah Yung (Our Home) Center
Ali Forney Center
Alternatives To Family Violence
American Humane Association
Ark of Safety Center Inc.
Arnette House
Aspen Interlink
Bill Wilson Center
Bloomington Hospital Community Health Education
Bridge Over Troubled Waters Inc
Brookwood Florida
Brownsville Adult Literacy Council, Inc.
California Coalition for Youth
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark
Catholic Social Services Host Homes
Catholic Voices for Economic Justice
Central Texas Youth Services Bureau, Inc.
Cherokee County Schools McKinney-Vento Program
Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness
Choices, Council on Domestic Violence
CHRIS Kids, Inc.
Church on the Street
City of Carrollton, GA Housing Authority
City of Columbus, Ohio
City of Gary Community Development Dept.
City of Hinesville
City of Myrtle Beach
Cleveland Housing Network
Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio
Coastal Horizons, Inc.
Committee Against Domestic Abuse
Community Mental Health Center, Inc.
Community Services Of Stark County, Inc.
Community Youth Services
Comprehensive Counseling Network
Corporation for Supportive Housing
Corporation for Supportive Housing - New Jersey
Covenant House
Covenant House New Orleans
Crisis Center, Inc.
Crittenton Women's Union
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
Deborah's Place
Denver Area Youth Services (DAYS)
Eckerd Community Alternatives
Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services
Empowering Our Communities in New Mexico
Faith Temple Christian Center
Family Connection
The Family Health Center of Worcester
Family Promise - Salt Lake
Family Resources
Family Resources
First Presbyterian Church, Dallas –
The Stewpot Community Ministries
Florida Network of Youth and Family Services
For Empowerment of Women, Inc.
Freeport West Inc./StreetWorks Collaborative
Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission –
Sanctuary Youth Services
Frontier Health
Gateway Homeless Coalition, Inc.
Gentry House, Inc
Georgia Coalition to End Homelessness
Global Justice Ministries
Grand Rapids Area Coalition to End Homelessness
Green Chimneys NYC Division
Gulfcoast Legal Services, Inc.
Gwinnett Children's Shelter
Haven House Services
Hazard Perry County Community Ministries, Inc.
The Home for Little Wanderers
Homeless Alliance of Western New York
Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County
Homeless Leadership Network of Pinellas County
The HomePlace Shelter Inc.
The House of T.I.M.E Inc.
The Housing Authority of South Bend
Indiana Coalition on Housing and Homeless Issues
Inspiration Corporation
Interfaith Hospitality Network of North Kentucky
Jackson County School District #9

Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network, Inc.
 Janus Youth Programs, Inc.
 Jesus Community Center Shelter for the Homeless
 The Jubilee Organization
 Juvenile Law Center
 Kentucky Interagency Council on Homelessness
 L.A.S.T Transition House
 Lambda Legal
 Larkin Street Youth Services
 Leadership & Renewal Outfitters
 Light of Faith Ministries: Project LIFT
 Lighthouse Ministries
 Lighthouse Youth Services
 Living Room, Inc.
 Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota
 Lutheran Social Service Youth Programs
 Making It Possible to End Homelessness (MIPH)
 Marks Path of Naples
 The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
 Mental-Health-Advocate. US
 The Methodist Home of Kentucky
 Metropolitan Community Church,
 Global Justice Ministries
 Metropolitan Community Church, Homeless Youth Services
 Minnesota Council of Child Caring Agencies
 The Mockingbird Society
 Montgomery Area Family violence Program, Inc.
 MS Children's Home Services
 National Alliance to End Homelessness
 National Assembly
 National Black Justice Coalition
 The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund
 National Low Income Housing Coalition
 The National Network for Youth
 New Direction House of Lawrence, Kansas
 New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
 New Moms, Inc.
 Northeast Indiana Continuum of Care Organization
 Oasis Center, Inc.
 Ordinary People NFP
 Park Place Outreach
 Pathfinders
 PathStone Corporation
 Pathways Mentoring Program
 Pennsylvania Coalition to End Homelessness
 Pinellas County Coalition for the Homeless, Inc.
 PIONEERFY, Inc.
 Plann B
 Potomac Planning & Evaluation Group
 Preble Street
 Public Council
 Rainbow Haven Transitional Housing, Inc
 Rainbow Village Inc.
 Resident Owned Business Initiative, Inc.
 Rising Out of the Shadows (ROOTS)
 River Organization
 Rochester Area Family Y- LINK Program
 The Salvation Army National Headquarters
 School on Wheels, Inc.
 Sea Haven, Inc.
 Sea Haven, Inc.
 Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League
 Share
 Shaw House
 Shelter Association of Washtenaw County
 Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children
 Somerville Homeless Coalition, Inc.
 Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council
 St. Johnsbury Area Youth Service Bureau dba
 Northeast Kingdom Youth Services
 StandUp For Kids - Atlanta
 StandUp For Kids - Denver
 StandUp For Kids - Ft. Lauderdale
 StandUp For Kids - Orange County
 StandUp for Kids-Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill Program
 Stepping Stones, Inc.
 Supportive Housing Providers Association - Illinois
 Synergy Services, Inc.
 Taking It By Force Outreach Ministry
 Teen Living Programs
 Tempro Development Company, Inc.
 Tennessee Valley Family Services
 Texas Homeless Network
 Texas Network of Youth Services
 True Colors, Inc. Sexual Minority Youth and Family
 Services of CT
 Union Mission, Inc.
 Urban Peak
 Urban Residential Development Corporation
 Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition

Veterans Services of America, Inc.
Veterans Transitional Housing Group
Voices for America's Children
Volunteers of America of Illinois
Volunteers of America of KY, Inc.
Waking the Village
Walker's Point Youth and Family Center
Walkin' In My Shoes, Inc.
Washington County Youth Service Bureau/
Boys & Girls Club
Wellspring
Williamsburg Transitional Housing
With Friends, Inc
Withers Swash Park Ministry of First Baptist, MB
Young Adult Guidance Center
Youth Connections, Inc.
Youth Crisis Center, Inc.
Youth Service Bureau of Joseph County, Inc.
YouthCare