

California Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council

Request for White Papers: Reducing the number of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness

Thank you for allowing me to submit my comments. As a professional working with homeless youth and young adults for over 30 years, I humbly offer my insight **regarding resource prioritization in order to sustain parity for homeless youth and young adults (HYYA)** in the State of California. I am a native of northern California and after an absence of 40 years I have returned, this time, to the Southern California Inland Empire's desert valley.

My credibility as an expert in homeless youth and young adult services comes from a 30+ year history of working with street outreach programs, HIV testing sites, shelters, drop-in centers, transitional living programs and training centers across the country. For 20 years I was the Director of Education and Public Information for the Coalition for Homeless Youth (CHY) (also known as the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services), I was also the Executive Director of that Coalition towards the end of my time in NY. I will reference my professional experience with organizational systems and regional and statewide policy development to address serving HYVA from a policy standpoint as well as that of best practices and systemic service coordination

During my time at CHY, I provided training conferences and instituted a statewide training institute serving thousands of professional youth workers and advocates. During this time (as well as my time counseling and providing outreach to runaway, homeless and trafficked youth [RHY]) I provided professional development training on best practices and evidence-based practices to meet the intersectional needs of homeless and runaway youth and homeless young adults. From 2007 until my departure I trained over 1500 professional youth workers through web-based platform, in order to meet the diverse staffing schedules of street outreach and overnight shelter workers.

To ignore the unique traits and any lack of a specific system to address youth homelessness only risks exacerbating that crisis. The factors impacting youth homelessness are complex and differ from those impacting other homeless populations. Youth homelessness is unique because young people:

- Are still undergoing physical, emotional, psychological and social development. They are adults-in-progress with unique strengths, deficiencies and fundamental needs.
- Enter into homelessness with little or no work experience.
- Are often forced into leaving their education prior to completion (i.e., junior high and high school) as a result of their homelessness.
- Experience high levels of criminal victimization, including sexual exploitation and labor trafficking.
- Often become homeless before developing basic life skills, such as cooking, financial management, housekeeping and job searching.
- Additionally, young parent families experiencing homelessness have little to no access to basic needs, have difficulty accessing temporary income assistance, and lack education pertaining to health, sexual safety and parenting.

Since returning to California, I immediately met with RHY and programs serving you experiencing and at risk of homelessness to gauge the current state of youth homelessness in California. This included state representatives, CoC's, housing, RHY experts, social service, advocacy and capacity building agencies. Among a number of issues that are mirrored by states with a similar makeup to California, I came to understand that in order to build consistency in best practice and maintain regulatory oversight that remains appropriate to the population of youth experiencing homelessness and the agencies charged with serving their needs, a structurally systemic statewide model needs to be established.

A Way Home America’s National Framework to End Youth Homelessness

An end to youth homelessness means every community has a system in place to prevent the vast majority of young people from experiencing homelessness, and for those who do, can respond immediately to resolve the crisis and set them up for future stability and success.

This requires every community to:

- Bring all community systems and stakeholders to the table
- Collaborate with young people
- Focus solutions on those who are disproportionately impacted by homelessness

GOALS	STRATEGIES	IMPACT
Ensure Youth Homelessness Is Rare	PREVENTION An effective prevention system keeps young people who are at-risk from experiencing homelessness in the first place; coordinating across systems to connect at-risk youth to both housing and set of supportive services to meet their needs	Fewer young people become homeless
Ensure Youth Homelessness Is Brief	CRISIS RESPONSE An effective crisis response system quickly identifies, shelters, and connects young people experiencing homelessness to housing; coordinating outreach and housing interventions, and moving young people toward stabilization	Communities identify, shelter, and move any young person who does experience homelessness to housing and stabilization quickly
Ensure Youth Homelessness Is One-Time	STABILIZATION Effective stabilization ensures young people remain housed after their crisis by providing supportive services across sectors to meet their needs; creating a set of service options from healthcare, childcare, education and employment, and behavioral health, and case management to help young people navigate those systems	Young people remain stably housed and thrive

While the work of ending youth homelessness happens locally, federal resources and infrastructure are essential to our progress. With the support of HCFS and this Administration, these solutions will put us on the path to ending homelessness for all young people.

PREVENTION Make Youth Homelessness Rare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Address Housing Instability Directly with investments for rental assistance paired with supportive services for all young people with unstable housing. ⇒ Support Transitions to Stability for young people in Foster Care and Justice systems through exit planning including housing and services. ⇒ Invest in Long-Term Stability and ensure young people most at risk have access to and can connect to a network of supportive services. ⇒ Fund Solutions to Scale, for both existing and emerging solutions.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Bring Every System to the Table by incentivizing or requiring cross-sector collaboration. ⇒ Coordinate Assistance across systems and providers, with collaboration guidelines and standards.

<p>CRISIS RESPONSE</p> <p>Make Youth Homelessness Brief</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Ensure Strategies Are Tailored to address the individual needs of all youth and address racial and LGBTQ inequities. ⇒ Fund Solutions to Scale, for both existing and emerging solutions.
<p>STABILIZATION</p> <p>Make Youth Homelessness One-Time</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Ensure that Youth Have Access to Housing that is safe, stable and affordable. ⇒ Prioritize Young People Exiting Homelessness for access to educational and employment opportunities. ⇒ Remove Barriers to Services like healthcare, childcare, financial and rental assistance by opening eligibility, increasing case management funding, and ensuring systems are trauma-informed. ⇒ Strengthen Personal and Family Supports by prioritizing young people's personal support systems and providing family reunification, when appropriate. ⇒ Fund Solutions to Scale, for both existing and emerging solutions.

A Structural Systemic Model

Creating a streamlined system for oversight and support needs to honestly occur prior to or concurrent with defining evidence-based practices. Such a systemic model would be staffed with youth work professionals and advocates with working expert knowledge and experience of Runaway and Homeless Youth and Youth Adult characteristics and culture, as well as the unique cultures required of the programs serving these youth. I have observed that counties do not consistently have a system for identifying, coordinating and facilitating the services needed for youth at risk of homelessness. Currently, it seems CoC's fall into that role, and it is my understanding that only a handful of CoC's are skilled in positive youth development and adequately identifying and meeting the needs of RHY. As a result, one of the reasons that the Point In Time survey for youth proves inefficient is that youth experiencing homelessness do not function similarly to the adult homeless population and CoC's, by and large, are not skilled in targeting the needs of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

Research proves that the longer the episode of homelessness as an adolescent, the greater risk of becoming chronically homeless as an adult. To best address this, we **recommend that there be established an aggressively funded statewide governmental agency charged to specifically oversee the needs of youth homelessness**. Such a funded agency could establish a progressive and proactive state-sourced funding structure for housing and supportive services for RHY.

The majority of funding for housing for homeless youth programs in California comes to local programs through the federal government (DHHS and HUD), I **recommend a state system to mirror those federal structures in regards to length of stay and age parameters**. This is not to suggest that California should not strive to lead the way in expanding RHY housing and services in regards to capacity and access. I have found that federal models are often influenced through consistent implementation on statewide levels. This has happened with Human Trafficking, Trauma-Informed Care, Harm Reduction as well as the age expansion for Transitional Housing and Lengths of Stay for Emergency and Transitional Housing.

In order to sustain best practices across a state as diverse and large as California, I **recommend that county-localized RHY commissions or bureaus be established to provide oversight for state-originated funding designed for Emergency and Transitional Housing, Case Management, Street Outreach, Drop-In and Supportive Services**. Currently, California provides an extremely small amount of statewide funding for Runaway and Homeless Youth that is overseen through Emergency Management

Services. Creating appropriately funded localized HYA bureaus allows each county to assess design a structural system of care to meet the unique needs of their county. In New York State, each county has a Youth Bureau that oversees youth services and resources for that county. Unfortunately, Runaway and Homeless Youth issues become diluted in a generalized all-youth system.

Homeless youth can be very mobile. Having a **structural system for oversight will also aid counties to establish localized Coordinated Response and Coordinated Entry Systems that would reduce young people from falling through the cracks and feed data to a statewide system, allowing California specificity in its data.**

Rural Mapping of Homeless Youth

Having established Rural Street Outreach Programs across the country, I have found that many counties initially deny the existence of homeless youth until a proper mapping of their county has been conducted to show that rural homeless youth do, in fact, exist and require some of the same services as urban youth experiencing homelessness.

Accurate Counting of Homeless Youth

HUD's Point In Time counts are often the foundation to public funding. At this point there are under a dozen counties who are adequately prepared to count homeless youth and young adults. Urban centers are slowly mastering this by understanding the unique attributes of homeless youth, but rural communities, do not always have the resources to expand their capacity. On a federal level, the Point In Time count still struggles with a means to identify youth who are "couch surfing", a common means of survival for many youth occurring mostly outside of hyper-urban settings.

Vocational Rehabilitation Centers + Homeless Youth and Young Adults

Currently, aside from available housing, many RHY run into challenges when trying to access services from Vocational Rehabilitation Centers (VRC's). I **recommend California create a bridge of understanding of youth experiencing homelessness among its Vocational Rehabilitation Centers.** By establishing RHY-informed and engaged VRC, youth are properly given the skills and resources to aid them in sustaining permanence once housing is achieved.

Regarding Professional Development, any and all programs and staff serving Runaway and Homeless Youth should be trained and experienced in the areas of:

- **Positive Youth Development** – Meeting the young person from a strengths-based approach to services only ensures that youth are invested and engaged in their own health and success. Positive Youth Development is a comprehensive evidence-based model that ensures that young people are empowered.
- **Trauma-Informed Care** – In order to survive without a permanent form of housing, most HYA are regularly exposed to traumatic events. Prior to being homeless, many have experienced many forms of trauma, primary or secondary. Having professionals working with HYA on all levels of care that instill a trauma-informed approach prevent the young person from experiencing organizational abuse when they access services.
- **Harm Reduction** – plays a similar role to Trauma-Informed Approach, but works with the young person to realistically approach their state of homelessness by identifying less-harmful coping

strategies. Whether it be their experiences with coping through substance use, survival sex or violence.

Emergency Housing Length of Stays - fund a stream of homeless youth housing that is longer than the emergency shelter 30 day limit. Federal law says runaway or homeless youth may spend 28 days, at a crisis shelter, and up to 18 months, or more if they are not yet 18 when the limit is reached, at a transitional independent living facility. I have recommended increasing the length of stay to 60 days, or 120 with the consent of a parent or guardian, at a crisis shelter and up to 24 months, or more if they entered before the age of 21, at a transitional independent living facility.

By extending shelter time limits, we are giving runaway and homeless youth much-needed stability and providing them with an opportunity to make the good and healthy choices that will keep them on the pathway to success. All of the professionals I have worked with and trained across the country have agreed that young people experiencing crisis spend the first 2-3 weeks in shelter just beginning to feel safe. Due to the limited resources of permanent housing in California, it requires a greater amount of time to broker a permanent form of residence for a youth experiencing homelessness.

Youth Program Quality Assessment

The Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA)[®] is a validated instrument designed to measure the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It has been used in community organizations, schools, camps, and other places where youth have fun, work, and learn with adults. The Youth PQA is suitable for youth in grades 4 - 12. For children in grades K - 6, the School-Age PQA is developmentally appropriate. I have recently used the YPQA to assess the Impact and Effectiveness of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs on Homeless Youth across New York State (see attached study report). The Weikert Center is in the process of redeveloping the tool to meet the unique services RHY programs provide.

The Youth and School-Age PQA evaluate the quality of youth experiences as youth attend workshops and classes, complete group projects, and participate in meetings and regular program activities. For staff, the Youth and School-Age PQA self-assessment process is a great way to see what is really happening in their programs and to build professional competencies.

What do the Youth and School-Age PQA assess?

- Safe environment
- Supportive environment
- Interaction
- Engagement
- Youth-centered policies and practices
- High expectations for youth and staff
- Access

Each domain contains items that focus on specific elements of best practice.

How do the Youth and School-Age PQA work?

The Youth and School-Age PQA are evidence-based assessment tools. Evidence is gathered through observation and interview. Program staff or an outside specialist observe program activities, take notes, and then conduct an interview with a program administrator. Notes, observations, and interview data are used as evidence to score items. Item scores are combined to create an overall program quality profile. Their online [Scores Reporter](#) is a web-based data reporting application for entering scores, producing reports, and storing data over time.

Low-Threshold Services – Due to the still developing of the adolescent brain, impulsivity still plays a major role in the young person’s life. Of course, with HYA, there are benefits to gently establishing ground rules and structure, as long as the young person is effectively involved and informed, however, some HYA are in such states of homelessness where they are not ready to fully engage in a structured program. In order to not disconnect from these youth programs are recommended to institute low-threshold services. For example, this can be a broader schedule in service time and scenarios where youth can be engaged informally. A young person might be high when entering a program. With federally funded programs, youth are required to not be admitted or removed. With low-threshold programs, if the young person is not disruptive and adequately communicative it is more likely safer for the young person to be in the safety of a program than exposed to the higher risk of being on the street in their current state.

Host Homes – The Host Home model was developed to provide short term, safe and nurturing shelter to a HYA in family settings. Agencies providing services to assist runaway and homeless youth and their families, recruit, train and supervise host families willing to provide short term shelter to young people in need of a safe place to stay. Some Runaway and Homeless Youth agencies have active host home programs as their sole means of providing shelter for youth and some have congregate shelter programs as well. Host Home programs exist throughout rural, urban and suburban areas.

Cost Effectiveness: Host home programs often provide a more economical means of providing shelter for youth, particularly in areas where there are smaller numbers of young people to be served or where the population is dispersed over a large geographic area. Shelters are expensive to run and costs are essentially the same even when the census of young people utilizing services fluctuates. While the costs for staff are constant in host home programs, host families function on an as needed basis and are usually volunteers.

Rapid Rehousing Models for Homeless Youth

Rapid re-housing (RRH) for youth (defined as less than 25 years of age) is an evolving model that can be implemented using the PH-RRH component type under HUD’s Continuum of Care (CoC) Program. Successful programs that HUD has profiled use a variety of funding sources (e.g., HUD, HHS, private and foundation funding, etc.); however, each has developed replicable, CoC-eligible, promising practices for:

Rapidly moving youth into permanent housing;
Offering short- to medium-term financial assistance; and
Providing developmentally appropriate case management and services. While running a HUD- funded program using FUP vouchers to get homeless families into permanent housing through Solid Ground in Seattle, I confronted a continued challenge for young families getting into permanent housing: ageist bias. Many young people seeking permanent housing are often seen stereotypically and problem residents. I instituted a team of housing search specialists who functioned as a broker between the youth, the youths support agency and the landlord/property owner. The young person gained credibility having a collaborative team that could justifiably vouch for the youth. With that system of support in place and the agency having access to Rapid Rehousing dollars and a youth-sensitive model, meeting the immediate and time-sensitive housing needs of Homeless youth proved extremely useful!

Staff Training and “Cross Pollination” of Service Agencies

One issue I am finding in my workings with Runaway and Homeless Youth agencies and advocates is that there is a strong need for instituting a required foundation of knowledge through professional

development around best practices and evidence-based strategies. Also, while I am currently working with the National Network for Youth and Cornell University's Institute for Educational Leadership's Vocational Rehabilitation Youth Technical Assistance Center on a Practice Brief on Runaway and Homeless Youth for Vocational Rehabilitation Centers nationwide, there is an impactful benefit for intersecting service agencies addressing youth homelessness to all be at the same table when addressing the needs of homeless youth.

Conclusion

In the Inland Empire, specifically in the desert communities, we are working to build a regional coalition/network of Homeless and runaway youth providers. Through my over three decades of experience working directly with homeless youth and in coalition-building with the agencies serving their unique needs, I have found that this builds consistency in best practices. This also strengthens the cohesiveness when building and sustaining a continuum of care.

In further regards for a statewide unique county-specific HYA commission or bureau, many programs throughout counties exist unaware of each other. This is a huge gap in coordinated care. If there exists a unifying statewide system of oversight for each county-specific HYA care, the state would be able to coordinate services and ensure that staff receive a specific number of required training hours in HYA issues that could be regulated.

Thank you for taking the time to review my comments and recommendations. I have only touched upon a few of the foundational components here and would be more than willing to address others in the future.

I strongly believe that fighting the crisis of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness with a sturdy and engaged collaborative that is well-trained and collectively networked will effectively aid the State of California in reducing and preventing Youth and Young Adult Homelessness!