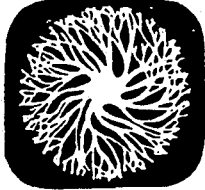


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The National Network

of Runaway and Youth Services, Inc.

Leading the Nation as a Voice for Youth

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**TESTIMONY
OF THE
NATIONAL NETWORK OF
RUNAWAY AND YOUTH SERVICES**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
HUMAN RESOURCES
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**HEARING ON
THE REAUTHORIZATION OF
THE RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT
FEBRUARY 11, 1992**

**PRESENTED BY
J. HOWARD FINCK, CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF RUNAWAY AND YOUTH SERVICES**

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**U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice**

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THE NATIONAL NETWORK OF RUNAWAY AND YOUTH SERVICES

Chairman Martinez and members of the Education and Labor Subcommittee on Human Resources, my name is J. Howard Finck. I am the President of a multi-service youth and family agency called Friends of Youth in Redmond, Washington. I am also the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services. I am here today representing the National Network, our members, and the thousands of young people who are living without the support of their families, the State, our schools, and other institutions as they struggle toward adulthood.

Thank you for holding this hearing today and thank you for giving the National Network the opportunity to speak before this very important panel on matters that could literally save the lives of so many disenfranchised young people. I would like to tell you about the National Network, trends our members have reported regarding runaway and homeless youth, the current status of youth alternative services, and our recommendations regarding the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.

The National Network

The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services represents over 900 youth-serving, community-based agencies and organizations from across the country, as we advocate for young people in high-risk situations and their families. Through advocacy and public education, training and technical assistance to community-based agencies, national meetings and conferences, and the development and dissemination of information, educational materials, and model programs, the National Network challenges both the field of youth services and the nation to provide positive alternatives for youth in high-risk situations. We want all of our young people to have the opportunity to be safe and to grow up to lead healthy and productive lives. We also believe in working hand-in-hand with the leaders of our collective future: youth. We involve youth as board members, in policy and program formulation, in testimony before decision makers, and in public education efforts.

Youth in High-Risk Situations

The National Network and several of our member agencies testified before this Subcommittee last session about services to runaway, homeless, and other youth at risk. As you know, youth who runaway or become homeless characteristically are running from years of chaos, conflict, parental alcoholism and drug abuse, and sexual and physical abuse. They represent every strata of our society. In fact, often their only commonality is their desperation, the street and too often, the embrace of adults whose only wish is to use and exploit them.

Brief History of RHYA

In 1974, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) was enacted as part of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act to: respond to the increasing numbers of youth who were running away from their family homes; to prevent delinquent behavior on the part of these youth during runaway episodes; and to assist communities in developing alternatives to lock up for youth who were not involved in criminal activity, but were status offenders (e.g., runaway, truant, curfew violations). The resulting federally-funded program to provide crisis intervention and shelter services was built and still rests on the bedrock of these objectives and the belief that young people should be diverted whenever possible from the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems.

Changes in the nature of family life in America, service providers' willingness to ask families and youth in crisis what they needed and then attempt to provide it, and Congress' deepening understanding of these youth and how they came to be on their own have led to a dynamic program that has experienced steady growth in its size, sophistication, and scope of services. First, in recognition of the numbers of young people whose only option was to live out their adolescence on the streets, RHYA was amended in 1977 to add homeless youth to those eligible for services. In later reauthorizations, the program was expanded to include families in the basic services to facilitate reunification (1980) and amended to create a transitional living component to help homeless youth transition into adulthood (1988). While several dozen community-based projects were funded in 1975 at a cost of approximately \$5 million, by fiscal year 1992, an expanded basic-centers crisis and shelter services program supported 350 grantees with a total allocation of \$35.172 million.

Trends Since the Last Reauthorization

There is consensus among service providers that the youth seeking services and their families of origin are increasingly more troubled, as evidenced by more reports of family violence, adult substance abuse, and the effects of an array of economic pressures. The results of a national survey conducted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and released in October, 1991 are consistent with anecdotal reports and smaller studies. They found that:

- o More than 60% of runaway and homeless youth reported physical or sexual abuse by their parents, while 20% reported violence by other family members. (Many service providers believe abuse, especially sexual abuse, is vastly under-reported by youth; reports of past abuse tend to increase the longer youth receive services and presumably, build positive relationships with center staff.)

- o Twenty-nine per cent of the parents of these youth were reported to have alcohol problems, and 24% abused other drugs. In addition, most service providers surveyed believed parental alcohol and other drug abuse was a problem.
- o Almost half of the youth lived in one-parent households, 41% of the youth were from families with long-term economic problems, and about one-third of the youth had no means of support.
- o At this point, many of the youth served have been living without their families for some time. Thirty-eight percent had been in foster care at some time during the last year, 11% were on the street before receiving shelter services, and 11% came from other crisis shelters. Although most youth go to safe alternatives after leaving runaway and homeless youth centers, only 50% of the youth returned to their parent or guardian's home. (The researchers suggest that previous services [e.g., child welfare] did not resolve problems and that many youth and their families have enduring problems that decrease the chances of discharges back "home.")

Many National Network members have come to similar conclusions and believe that these youth need services that are very different than the traditional runaway-youth focus on reuniting youth with their families as quickly as possible: these youth may need help in making peace with their pasts and their families, but only after they have stabilized, received medical and other support services, and given adequate time to form a trusting relationship with the service provider. Transitional living becomes a critical service for youth who can not return home; however, there are less than 80 of these federally-funded RHYA programs across the country.

Members of the National Network have reported additional trends, including increases in the numbers of younger runaways (11-13 years) as well as increases in the numbers of older homeless youth (19-24 years). Increases in the number of youth who have been abandoned by their families, figuratively through not providing emotional support and guidance and literally, by throwing the youth out have also been reported.

Members have also noted increases in the number of youth who are pregnant, have HIV or AIDS, can be diagnosed as having severe emotional or personality disorders, have learning disabilities, or left school when they lost stable and safe living situations. They have also reported increases in the numbers of youth whose behavior

may mirror their earlier family experiences (e.g., violence, abuse of alcohol and other drugs).

Several disturbing trends are also present in the ability of communities to respond to the changes that are taking place in this country and among young people who are in high-risk situations. Many agencies that currently provide the core services of crisis intervention and shelter want to add services based on apparent increases in numbers of troubled families and homeless youth, but they are constrained by the scarcity of "seed money" to add new program components and the fact that most funding rarely follows the child.

In addition, with more than three-quarters of the states facing budget deficits, community-based providers are facing losses in both local and state funding. These budget cuts not only affect program expansion, but the ability of communities to provide an alternative to the more costly juvenile justice, child welfare, and mental health systems. For runaway and homeless youth centers that can remain open, budget cuts also mean continued low wages for staff, loss of positions, and increased staff burn-out at a time when youth in crisis need seasoned and well-trained professionals.

Budget constraints also mean bare-bones services at a time when there is a trend away from shelter services as the first response to troubled families and youth in crisis. Experiences of youth workers and reports by Ira Schwartz at the University of Michigan and others indicate that avoiding out-of-home care is associated with better outcomes for youth and their families. This is consistent with centers' attempts to reunite youth with their families as soon as possible; for many, admitting a youth to a host home or shelter is the last resort.

For youth who are not being abused by family members, some community-based agencies have been able to create intensive home-based interventions that focus on keeping youth at home and empowering families to resolve conflicts and other problems. Home-based services are considered cost effective, even as workers in these programs need to have expertise in many areas and smaller caseloads. Both urban centers and rural areas with less overall services for families and more transportation barriers report the need for more of this type of service.

At the same time, it is believed that home-based services are just one part of a continuum of services that provides solutions for youth in high-risk situations and their families. While promising, home-based services should never supplant the core crisis intervention and shelter services of basic centers and longer-term transitional living programs. Aircraft, for example, always have back-up systems in the event of a failure. Our most important resource, our children, deserve back-up, too.

Consequences of Not Providing Services

A recent report (November, 1991) on homelessness from the Stanford Center for the Study of Families, Children, and Youth found that 52% of the fifty homeless teenagers studied stayed on the streets and did not receive any social services; 48% were served at shelters and drop-in programs for teens. While all these homeless youth shared similar family backgrounds and upset related to being homeless, there were striking differences:

- o Sixty-nine percent of the youth remaining on the streets reportedly had friends who had died or committed suicide compared to 17% of the youth who received shelter. In fact, 62% of the street youth had attempted suicide, while 39% of the sheltered youth had attempted suicide. The street youth (85%) also suffered more pervasive and more serious health problems than youth receiving services (38%).
- o To survive, youth who did not receive shelter services were forced into panhandling, theft, drug dealing, and prostitution: "Among the street teens, fully 88% reported panhandling, 62% reported stealing, 50% [have] dealt or carried drugs, and 42% reported prostitution. Only 25% of sheltered teens panhandled, 21% stole, 17% sold drugs, and none turned to prostitution."
- o In addition to greater alcohol and other drug abuse, street youth were also more sexually active than youth receiving services. All the youth who remained on the streets reported vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse; a smaller percentage of youth in shelter (75%) reported similar sexual activity.

Further, most youth were knowledgeable about sexually transmitted diseases and were aware of safer sex practices. However, both youth living on the streets (46%) and those being sheltered (32%) reported having unprotected sexual intercourse.

Although it could be argued that youth who remain on the streets had multiple and more serious problems before they ever became homeless, researchers, the youth themselves, and service providers tend to agree that street life is meaner, more violent, and more personally destructive for individuals than ever before. The challenge of surviving on their own without safe living arrangements and without the involvement of non-abusive adults quickly overshadow most desires to complete school, get good jobs, and avoid hard drugs, survival sex, pregnancy, and disease. One youth interviewed for the Stanford study remarked, "Why would I

worry about dying from AIDS [or something else] in the future when I don't know if I'm going to survive until tomorrow?"

The isolation of street youth, their mistrust of adults, and their reluctance to get involved with public or private service providers leaves little hope for these children. The Stanford researchers suggest that outreach to these young people is needed; National Network members strongly endorse this view, believing that such outreach needs to be street-based with specially-trained staff.

Although many service providers fear that aggressive outreach activities will mean more youth who will have to be turned away from already overcrowded shelter programs, other service providers want to invest in the strategies that have youth workers going to where runaways and homeless youth congregate, learning their names, and beginning the process of slowly drawing these young people back into the larger community. Lack of resources is the barrier for most of these community-based efforts; however, those agencies that have secured the very scarce funding can recount dramatic transformations and successful outcomes for street youth.

Recommendations

Before I discuss the National Network's recommendations for the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), I would like to comment briefly on the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) and its reauthorization. Until 17 years ago, few resources were available for troubled youth until they broke the law and faced incarceration. Both status offenders and youth who were considered delinquent were crowded into adult jails where they faced abuse and worse. Delinquent youth were sent to training schools that were, in fact, training schools for crime.

There was little prevention and a lot of emphasis on punishment and being tough on crime. It didn't work then, and it is not going to work now. That is one reason we strongly support the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) and urge this panel to keep the mandates of JJDPA undiluted and insist they be implemented without exception. Further, young people who are incarcerated to protect their communities need to receive counseling, education, vocational assistance, and the life skills training that most youth need to transition successfully into adulthood.

We are also concerned about balance and equity in juvenile justice. Young people of color are still disproportionately represented in the system. In addition, many of us hear that young women who are status offenders are still locked up in secure detention. We also hear that young women who are adjudicated do not receive comparable services available to young men.

In addition, it is time to emphasize, strengthen, and expand delinquency prevention efforts.

We began the last decade with juvenile justice reform and prevention efforts funded at \$100 million. After repeated federal attempts to dismantle this program, JJDPDA is currently funded at \$76 million. We believe the minimum authorization level for JJDPDA should exceed \$100 million.

The programs provided for in Title III, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, decrease the probability that youth in high-risk situations will become involved in criminal activity. Over the years, the basic centers crisis intervention and shelter services have been investigated by the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Government Accounting Office (GAO), and others. Consistently, these programs are found to be sound and cost-effective. The National Network very strongly supports the speedy reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth. Its components (i.e., basic centers, the national communication system, training and technical assistance, research and demonstration, and the transitional living program for homeless youth) need to be retained and strengthened.

Those of us who provide direct services to youth in high-risk situations have met young people who refuse short-term services because they are afraid to hope one more time that there is an alternative to the isolation and uncertainty they face moment-to-moment. We also know youth who abruptly leave near the end of a fifteen-day placement in a shelter or host home because they believe they won't have a place to finish the business of growing up after discharge. We are also aware of many homeless youth who need a "family" they can return to and a safety net that is there if they need one; for better or worse, they chose us and we need to be there for them. These are the stories that bring us to encourage you to help us build a continuum of care for runaways, homeless youth, other young people in high-risk situations, and their families.

In considering building a continuum of care, there are so many problems we would like to help youth avoid: alcohol and other drug abuse, gangs, unintended early pregnancy, school drop-out, family violence, sexual exploitation, life-long reliance on public welfare programs, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. However, any prevention program, drug prevention for example, will have less chance of succeeding if a youth is forced to live on the streets where alcohol and marijuana are often not even considered drugs.

If we don't want adolescents to use alcohol and drugs or become involved in other harmful behaviors, we need to make sure that we have adults going to where they congregate to help pull them back into services and into community life, we need to make

sure they have safe places to live, and we need to help reunite them with their families whenever possible; if they are homeless, they need help to transition into adulthood, and when they're on their own or living with their families again, youth workers and counselors need to keep in touch to help maintain the changes the youth have made. In other words, services to youth and families in general, and prevention programs in particular, need to be offered within the context of a continuum of care for youth in high-risk situations.

This continuum of care for youth and their families could range from home-based services to streetwork and basic centers to transitional living and strong aftercare services. Further, regardless of where on the continuum a youth and her/his family enter, they would be treated holistically with an array of services (e.g., health, education, vocational, counseling, advocacy services) that could be provided directly or through a closely coordinated consortium of agencies.

We are pleased that many diverse public and private organizations and agencies are calling for comprehensive services and continuums of care, even while we are concerned that depending on the speaker, similar terms can have very different meanings and applications. The Administration's recently released budget for fiscal year 1993 calls for consolidation of three federal programs targeted for runaway and homeless youth: RHYA basic centers, transitional living, and drug abuse education and prevention (DAP). Although consolidation in concept is intriguing to many of our members, the biggest barrier continues to be the inadequate sums that are available to administer these programs in their present form; the President has suggested consolidation while freezing funding at fiscal year 1992 levels.

Currently, 35 agencies receive grant awards from all three of the federal programs (i.e., basic centers, transitional living, and DAP). The total allocation on average is \$375,000 per agency. If this modest amount is accurate, the President would need to budget at least \$131,250,000 to allow minimum services to the 350 current basic centers grantees. The National Network believes that an appropriation this size would still not adequately fund full basic center services, much less adding the other components. We do not want hard-pressed agencies to have to provide more services for less funding, nor do we want the number of community-based agencies serving youth in high-risk situations to be phased out to provide for larger grants to fewer communities.

In addition, basic center, transitional living, and DAP services do not provide enough as far as providing a comprehensive continuum of care. If Congress or the Administration at some point seek to improve services available to youth in high-risk situations, the budget authority and appropriation need to be at least quadrupled. Further, when we say comprehensive services we

are not referring to state block grants, which often wipe out targeted standards and regulations, and fail to direct dollars to private, nonprofit community-based agencies and the disenfranchised youth they serve.

Any consolidation of existing programs or new legislation that would provide for building a continuum of care and comprehensive (or holistic) services must allow community-based service providers to decide what services are needed to provide expanded quality care. For example, some agencies may receive solid HUD dollars for transitional living, but lack the resources to concentrate on access to health, educational, and/or prevention services. Further, street-based services may not be as critical to some rural communities that wish, instead, to add a home-based services component.

As I remarked earlier, a continuum of services and/or prevention activities are incomplete if basic shelter and stabilization services are compromised in any way. Consolidation as it is now proposed by the Administration and others holds no protections against this happening. In addition, keeping youth off the streets through the basic runaway and homeless youth centers and the transitional living program must remain our highest priority. We believe the numbers of programs should be expanded when possible, but a commitment to strengthen current efforts must also be made.

As the system of community-based services for runaway and homeless youth has grown over the past fifteen years, the need for on-going coordination, active service development and planning, and training and technical assistance for youth workers has significantly increased. To address this need the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services, its ten affiliated regional networks, the National Runaway Switchboard, and the National Resource Center for Youth Services have agreed to collaborate in order to achieve optimal coordination and utilization of resources. Working together, these organizations ensure that community-based agencies and individuals providing services to runaway and homeless youth have access to up-to-date resources that enable them develop and operate quality, responsive programs.

Consequently, the National Network suggests that 10% of both RHYA basic center and transitional living funding should be used to provide federal support for the development, improvement, coordination, maintenance, and evaluation of services to runaway and homeless youth. To achieve this aim, funds should be used for coordination, collaboration, training and technical assistance, research and demonstration projects, evaluation, a national clearinghouse, and activities that enhance services by creating linkages with other federal bureaus or departments.

I would like to think all of us would like to provide runaway and homeless youth with all of the love, support, and resources we give to our own children and grandchildren. A place to stay is necessary but absolutely insufficient in helping young people to grow up and in healing the wounds of years of chaos and abuse. If our own children were troubled, we would get them counseling, if they became ill, we would take them to a doctor even as we attempted to prevent future health problems, and if they were having problems with homework, we would help them with it.

Providing these same services to homeless and runaway youth costs less than incarceration or hospitalization. However, at Friends of Youth in Redmond, Washington, we spend \$1250 on each runaway or homeless youth who receives crisis services and shelter at either of our two sites. Last year we assisted 180 young people in high-risk situations, and the costs of the program was \$350,000 including outreach and our 24-hour crisis line. Our total basic centers grant award is only \$70,000. Luckily for youth and their families in the Seattle area, we are able to make up the difference through local, state, and private sources. Unfortunately, hundreds of communities in other parts of the country, especially rural areas, simply can not raise the money we have.

Basic-centers grantees receive up to \$150,000 and as little as just over \$20,000; the average grant award is \$80,000. Regardless of the dollar amount, runaway and homeless youth basic centers are expected to conform to performance standards. The standards address a variety of performance issues, including:

- o The location and accessibility of services to youth
- o Staff/youth ratios to assure adequate supervision and treatment and maximum resident capacity for centers that have a shelter facility
- o Plans for contacting parents or others and assuring safe return depending on the "best interests of the child" as well as providing for alternative living arrangements if needed
- o Plans for working with law enforcement, social services, schools, and welfare agencies as well as returning youth to correctional facilities
- o Plans for aftercare counseling with youth and their families
- o Statistical records on the youth and families served with individual files kept confidential unless consent is given by the youth and a parent or guardian

o Annual reports and administrative practices

All of us who work with the National Network believe in these performance standards. However, we must see an increase in the budget authority and appropriations so every community can fully achieve not only the standards, but successful outcomes for runaways, their families, and homeless youth. We urge you to set the authorization for the RHYA basic centers program at no less than \$100 million and \$50 million for transitional living to provide a safety net for homeless youth. Further, please help us secure appropriations at these same levels.

The researchers in the Stanford study I referred to earlier, quoted a homeless teenager at one point in their report, who said: "I would rather be homeless. It is cold and miserable on the streets, but it is better than being beaten up by parents who don't care." Each youth worker, administrator, peer counselor, and former runaway or homeless youth in these chambers today could provide very similar statements from youth they have known, who share very low expectations of what life has to offer.

They may assume that love means abuse, that education, careers, and families are an abstraction that exist only on TV, or that they don't need to take care of themselves because they won't live to be thirty. They unfortunately seem to lose the ability to dream at the very point in their lives that they are expected to dream.

Please join the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services in encouraging runaway, homeless, other youth in high-risk situations, and their families to hope once more and to believe that their future is one worth changing for. We very much need your leadership and look forward to working with you in the upcoming months.