

Testimony Supporting S.B. 408 An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness

Edie Joseph
Committee on Housing
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Representative Butler, Senator Holder-Winfield, Representative Rose, Senator Osten and distinguished members of the Committee on Housing:

I am a Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that promotes the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

On behalf of Voices for Children I am here today to **strongly support Senate Bill 408, An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness**. Underlying our work at Voices for Children is the fundamental belief that *all* children, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, ability, and geography are able to achieve their full potential. Without stable, secure, and permanent homes, youth are less likely to be healthy, to succeed in school, and to become a part of a well-trained workforce. **In requiring the Department of Housing (DOH) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to create a plan to eradicate youth homelessness, the legislature would be taking a critical step towards helping Connecticut's most vulnerable children, thereby advancing the wellbeing of our state as a whole.**

The Partnership for Strong Communities *Reaching Home Campaign*, a diverse group of stakeholders and advocates fighting youth homelessness, explains, **“Runaway and unaccompanied youth are an invisible population in Connecticut.** Most are couch surfing or staying with others for short periods of time. They are counted differently by each state agency, or not counted at all, as they are not identified by adult shelter system or point in time counts. They're at risk for sexual abuse, being lured into prostitution, physical abuse, criminal justice involvement, illness and suicide.”¹ The *Reaching Home Campaign* commissioned Yale University to conduct a comprehensive study of youth homelessness in Connecticut, which showed the following trends:

- 89% of the young people were sexually active with an average of 5.6 sexual partners
- 23.5% first experienced sexual intercourse at age 12 or under
- 27% of the kids received special education services
- 32% dropped out of school
- 53% had contact with the Department of Children and Families (DCF)
- 37% had been removed from the home by DCF
- 49% moved more than 6 times in their lifetime
- 50% were arrested at least once in their lifetime
- 39% reported having been incarcerated in jail, prison, juvenile detention or a residential facility²

This legislation builds on the important work that advocates and policymakers have already done in our state in compiling information about, and combating, youth homelessness. **We urge the Department of Housing and the Department of Children and Families to utilize and seek out the expertise of organizations and experts, such as the Partnership for Strong Communities *Reaching Home Campaign* of which Connecticut Voices for Children is a member, who have spent years bringing to light the conditions and seeking to find solutions**

to end youth homelessness. In addition, we urge the creators of the plan to utilize and seek out the voices of youth who have experienced homelessness or housing instability themselves, as youth know best the challenges they face.

In addition to the study's stated goals of "determining the number of homeless youth and devising strategies to address homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth," we strongly recommend that the study address the unique needs of young people involved in state systems, particularly young people who leave the care of DCF without a permanent home. Youth who "age out" of DCF care are some of our state's most vulnerable residents. In many ways, these are the young people who our child welfare agency has failed – after being removed from their families to protect them from abuse and neglect, DCF has been unable to reunify these children with their families, transfer their guardianship to a loving family member, or find them an adoptive parent. As such, upon reaching a designated age, these young people will see the State agency that has been their statutory parent suddenly cut off all support. In spite of the fact that many of these young people still suffer from the after-effects of the trauma to which they have been subjected, and have been raised in a range of institutional or non-family settings that have afforded them few opportunities to develop basic relationship and life skills, they will be forced to transition into their impending adulthood with few permanent connections or mentors to guide them.

National research suggests that youth who age out of foster care are far more likely to become homeless than their peers in the general population; in fact, foster care involvement is a known pathway to youth homelessness in Connecticut.³ This is in part because youth often transition from foster care with little income or savings. In addition, many young people aging out of care also still have unaddressed mental health needs. The most comprehensive study of youth who have aged out of foster care found that by age 24, 24% will have experienced homelessness, and 37% will have couch surfed.⁴ Discharges to locations that have the potential to be unstable are alarmingly common in Connecticut. Over the period from 2010 to 2012, 1,118 youth were discharged from DCF care.⁵ Of these, 21% were discharged to unstable placements such as living with friends (11%), an unknown location (9%), or a shelter (1%).⁶ **A recent survey of 100 young people currently experiencing homelessness found that half reported involvement with the Department of Children and Families (DCF).**⁷ Young people who age out of foster care and become homeless are, along with a host of other negative outcomes, particularly vulnerable to domestic minor sex trafficking.⁸ **In addition to this plan, we urge DCF to consider expanding foster care to age 21 for all young people, as allowed under the federal Fostering Connections Act. Keeping youth in care and providing them supports and services to age 21 can help prevent young people exiting into homelessness.**⁹

We applaud this bill's intent to combat youth homelessness, and are confident that together, advocates, policymakers, and young people themselves can utilize their collective expertise to craft an effective and sustainable plan. Connecticut Voices for Children is eager to lend our research and expertise as this study commences. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Thank you,

Eddie Joseph
Policy Fellow
Connecticut Voices for Children

¹ “Youth Homelessness: Identifying Solutions to Address Their Needs,” Fact Sheet, Reaching Home Ending Homelessness: A Campaign of the Partnership for Strong Communities, Available at http://www.psychousing.org/files/RH_YouthHomelessness.pdf.

² See, Derrick Gordon and Bronwyn Hunter, “Invisible No More: Creating Opportunities for Youth Who Are Homeless,” The Consultation Center, Yale University School of Medicine. 2013. Available at <http://psychousing.org/files/InvisibleNoMoreReport.pdf>.

³ See, Mark Courtney et al., “The Midwest Evaluation of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. 2011. Available at http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest%20Evaluation_Report_4_10_12.pdf.

⁴ See, Mark Courtney et al., “Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth,” Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. 2011. Available at <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>.

⁵ See, data provided via e-mail by Rachel River, “Data Request for 18yrs Old and over Discharged,” Department of Children and Families. December 18, 2013. Available upon request.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See, Derrick Gordon and Bronwyn Hunter, “Invisible No More: Creating Opportunities for Youth Who Are Homeless,” The Consultation Center, Yale University School of Medicine. 2013. Available at <http://psychousing.org/files/InvisibleNoMoreReport.pdf>.

⁸ Human Trafficking: What Youth Workers Should Know About Human Trafficking, www.Anysyb.net/Human%20TraffickingYouthBureauConference.pptx.

⁹ For more on implementing Fostering Connections, see Connecticut Voices for Children’s “Because Relationships Matter: Improving Opportunities and Outcomes for Young People in Foster Care,” December 2014, Available at <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/because-relationships-matter-improving-opportunities-and-outcomes-youth-foster-care>.