



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
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on

Ending Youth Homelessness

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Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Reed, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) efforts to meet the Obama Administration's goal of ending youth homelessness, and how HUD is working alongside the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), other federal partners including the Departments of Education (ED) and Health and Human Services (HHS), and communities across the country to prevent and end youth homelessness in the United States.

Introduction

I am Secretary Castro's Senior Advisor and point on ending homelessness, an issue that is a top priority for him and for this Administration. At HUD, we are deeply committed to this effort and there is a HUD-wide team devoted to the work on homelessness. Many members of the HUD team have backgrounds in the local homeless assistance world prior to coming to HUD and we bring this experience to the work that we do every day.

I came to Washington, D.C. in 2010 after 11 years running a non-profit in Minnesota called Hearth Connections, a program that created supportive housing options for single adults, families, and youth experiencing homelessness. It was while I was there that I saw first-hand the

challenges that young people experiencing homelessness face in their transition to adulthood. Most of the young adults that came into our programs had experienced incredible trauma and had survived horrendous circumstances. We were able to provide them a safe and non-judgmental place to call home, allowing them to simply be teenagers moving into their twenties. For a young person who lacks a supportive family environment and a stable place to call home, getting your feet on the ground can be impossible. Those of us who have worked in this field know the difference that the stability of a home, coupled with the right types of supports, can make in the lives of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.

Once in DC, I began to see how those on-the-ground challenges that I witnessed in Minnesota were playing out on the federal stage. How youth need choices that include a variety of interventions that can address their circumstances. How it was difficult to craft policy responses at the federal level without a shared national vision for what was needed to end youth homelessness, and how important it was to develop a comprehensive strategy for measuring, addressing, and preventing homelessness. I am pleased to testify here today about the action we have taken to meet these goals and make real progress towards ending youth homelessness.

Opening Doors and the Framework to End Youth Homelessness

When *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* was released in June 2010, the Administration made a commitment to prevent and end homelessness among families, youth¹ and children by 2020. That commitment accompanied the shorter-term goals of ending chronic and Veteran homelessness. The goal of ending homelessness for youth was set on a longer timetable than those strategies needed to end chronic homelessness, where a large body of research exists. We also knew that there were fundamental gaps in our understanding of the

¹ In *Opening Doors*, and for the purposes of this testimony, unless otherwise clarified, when we state the term “youth,” we mean unaccompanied youth and young adults (including young adult head of households) through the age of 24.

prevalence of homelessness among youth. In order to get a better understanding of these populations, we would need to work across federal agencies to develop a path forward.

Following the release of *Opening Doors* I co-led an effort to tackle that challenge. Seven federal agencies—including HUD—were convened along with community stakeholders to develop a roadmap for preventing and ending youth homelessness. This roadmap, known as *The Framework to End Youth Homelessness*, was ratified by the full USICH Council, and included two key strategies that remain at the heart of what we must achieve if we are to effectively prevent and end homelessness among youth:

- Achieving better national data on unaccompanied youth and young adults; and
- Improving the capacity of programs and systems working to end youth homelessness.

However, our progress to end youth homelessness and carryout these strategies will be hindered if Congress limits HUD's ability to target its funding to youth or expands overall eligibility for our programs. Either of these two changes would overload already-stretched homelessness systems and likely result in a marked increase in street homelessness. Currently, HUD's Continuum of Care program funds approximately 251,000 units with related supportive services, not nearly enough to house the 578,424 people, including youth, that were living on the street, in shelter or transitional housing on a given night in January 2014. Expanding the definition of homelessness will make these already limited housing and supportive services resources even scarcer, especially for persons—including youth and young adults—living on the streets, in an overnight shelter, or living in unsafe situations to avoid a night in one of these locations.

Though changing the definition would be harmful, the intensified debate about the definition over the past year has been helpful in bringing light to several areas where HUD can improve our existing work and communication with key stakeholders. We know that by working together we can address the important concerns that have been raised, and meet our shared vision of ending youth homelessness without expanding the definition of homelessness or preventing HUD from

strategically targeting funding. The remainder of this testimony outlines key actions HUD has taken and plans to take in this regard.

Improving National Data on Unaccompanied Youth and Young Adults

Measuring homelessness among youth has been a long-standing challenge, and with the release of *Opening Doors* we knew it had to improve. HUD has two principal ways in which it collects data on people experiencing homelessness: a snapshot through the annual point-in time count, and longitudinal information about the people who touch the homeless services system collected through Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). Both of these methods pose challenges to accurately counting youth experiencing homelessness. These two information collection methods, and all studies and information collections mentioned within this testimony are covered under the Paperwork Reduction Act, and published in the Federal Register periodically for public comment.

Before tackling the problem of insufficient data collection on youth, HUD first had to decide exactly what we meant by the term “youth” because, historically, HUD had only defined youth to be unaccompanied persons under the age of 18. After consultation with federal partners and public comment, in 2012 HUD expanded the term “youth” to mean any person under the age of 25, including parenting youth and young adults.

Youth experiencing homelessness are often not connected with services or shelters frequently due to limited local resources, and - the providers serving homeless youth are not participating in the local HMIS - and they therefore have not been included in HMIS data reported to HUD. Young people also are not necessarily found sleeping in encampments under the highway overpasses or in emergency shelters - or in the usual places where many communities look for adults experiencing homelessness. Instead, many youth do everything they can to avoid those situations, including couch-surfing in dangerous situations, or even resorting to trading sex for a place to sleep. To improve our data, we knew we would have to provide more guidance to communities and partner with experts in serving this population.

Our first step was a collaboration with USICH, HHS, and the Department of Education on a place-based effort to improve methodologies for counting homeless youth, an effort we called *Youth Count!* The lessons that we learned from *Youth Count!* informed new point-in-time count guidance we provided to all communities in 2014 and 2015. In addition to clearer and more comprehensive guidance, in 2013 HUD began requiring communities to distinguish between youth under the age of 18, young adults aged 18-24, and adults 25 and over. While we know it is still not complete, we are beginning to see a clearer picture than we did in 2010 about the prevalence of homelessness among youth and young adults. As communities improve and refine their methodologies we expect that data collection through the point-in-time count will continue to improve, and over the next several years, we may even see the point-in-time count for youth increase.

Our second step was to improve data collection in HMIS. In partnership with HHS, HUD worked to ensure that the data we require communities to collect was aligned with the standards used by HHS for its Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) program. We are also working together to encourage collaboration between youth-serving providers and the larger local community homeless services system. The result of this collaborative effort was the integration of the RHY management information system (RHYMIS) with HMIS at both the national and local levels. Just this month, youth providers funded through RHY began entering data into HMIS, which is giving HUD, HHS, and communities much better information about homeless youth and the programs they use.

Both the point-in-time data and data collected through HMIS are reported annually in the *Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR)*. As we improve our data collection on youth, you will see this improvement reflected in the AHAR. These data help us to understand at the local and national levels what our systems look like and help us to benchmark progress. However, these are not the only data we use to fully understand the complex dynamic of homelessness—particularly for youth and young adults—and how the systems are functioning. We rely on numerous data sources, including program data from HHS, the Department of Education and other federal agencies, as well as the American Housing Survey, which captures

information about doubled up households and worst-case housing needs. We encourage communities to use their Housing Inventory Counts, HMIS data and other relevant data sets to measure progress and performance locally as well.

What the Most Recent Data Tells Us

The interim step between improving the data and improving the capacity of the systems that serve them is painting an accurate picture about the scope of youth homelessness. We can do this by knowing the number and characteristics of youth experiencing homelessness as well as by understanding the impact of the resources already in place to serve them. While we acknowledge that the data we have currently is not perfect, by combining data from multiple sources we can gain a much better understanding of the number of youth experiencing homelessness and the targeted interventions that will end their homelessness.

The most recent point-in-time count estimated that there were 45,205 unaccompanied homeless youth, most (38,931) of whom were between the ages of 18 and 24, on a single night in January 2014. Nearly 6 in 10 unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18 were living in unsheltered locations, and 46 percent of youth aged 18-24 were similarly unsheltered.²

While there is a body of research that acknowledges the prevalence of family conflict for those young people who become homeless, it is less clear about the precipitator for these particular families. The research doesn't yet tell us with precision the catalyst that causes youth and young adults to separate from their families and find themselves doubled-up, couch surfing, trading sex for a place to stay, or living on the streets.

² <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2014-AHAR-Part1.pdf>

Recent studies have found that as many as 40 percent of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT).³

Other studies have shown a relatively high rate of homelessness among some young people who have ‘aged out’ of foster care, ranging anywhere from 11 and 36 percent⁴. These studies also demonstrate that these youth tend to be precariously housed or face housing instability once they age out, even if they do not end up on the streets or in shelters. One study in Detroit found as many as 33% of youth had lived in a doubled-up or couch-surfing situation since they aged out.⁵ It is important that we understand these patterns in order to develop meaningful solutions for the young adults who need them the most.

While the RHY program at HHS does not issue a report specifically describing the annual number of youth experiencing homelessness, they do submit a biannual report to Congress with the number of youth served through RHY programs, and they have shared with HUD that in FY 2014 2,927 youth entered the Transitional Living Program (TLP), 31,755 youth entered the Basic Center Program (BCP) and 4,786 youth were provided services to prevent entry into the BCP. Additionally, 4,842 youth were turned away from TLP and 2,425 youth were turned away from BCP in FY2014. A major limitation to the data is that neither count is reliably unduplicated.

The Department of Education’s most recent data reported that more than 1.2 million students experienced homelessness over the course of the FY 2012-FY 2013 school year, including 75,940 unaccompanied youth.⁶ This includes students who are living in doubled-up situations. While neither the point-in-time count data nor the annual data from HMIS include children and

³ http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/fysb_sop_summary_final.pdf
<http://fortytonone.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/LGBT-Homeless-Youth-Survey-Final-Report-7-11-12.pdf>
⁴ http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/pdf/HousingFosterCare_LiteratureReview_0412_v2.pdf
⁵ http://www.huduser.org/portal/publications/pdf/HousingFosterCare_LiteratureReview_0412_v2.pdf
⁶ <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1011-1213.pdf>

youth living in doubled-up housing situations, the American Housing Survey does, and HUD uses this data to understand families living in doubled-up situations.

No one data set tells the whole story of youth homelessness, the collective data that we do have tells us that far too many youth and young adults are living in dangerous, unsheltered circumstances— and it is our priority to get every young person out of those dangerous circumstances. It also tells us that we must redouble our efforts to work with local child welfare systems to promote the long-term well-being of these youth and young adults.

Current Capacity and Programs

HUD's Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) and Continuum of Care (CoC) programs fund a wide variety of interventions that are used by local CoCs to serve youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, including homelessness prevention, emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, or permanent supportive housing. While the Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) program is formula-based funding that is allocated by state and local government entities, jurisdictions must compete for CoC Program funds. CoCs have discretion to prioritize funding for projects that meet local needs, within parameters set by HUD, in the national competition.

In FY 2014, HUD awarded \$79 million to more than 500 projects that primarily serve youth experiencing homelessness in the CoC Program. The majority of this funding was for transitional housing programs. Many more projects serve at least some youth. HUD awarded funding to over 3,700 projects that plan to serve some youth aged 18-24. These projects will spend approximately \$200 million to serve youth.

HUD also provides housing assistance to a significant number of youth through its mainstream affordable housing programs. Currently, as reported to the Public and Indian Housing Information Center (PIC) nearly 60,000 of the households that HUD serves through its Housing Choice Voucher and Public Housing programs are headed by youth or young adults, representing over \$700 million of funding annually. While these resources are not all targeted to homeless

youth, they provide additional assistance to youth with affordable housing needs, and can prevent those youth from experiencing homelessness.

HUD's spending on targeted programs for homeless youth has complemented the Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) programs funded at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In FY2014 HHS administered a total of \$114.1 million to RHY programs. That included funding for the Street Outreach Program (\$17.1 million to 109 grantees), the Basic Center Program (\$53.35 million to 299 grantees) and the Transitional Living Program (\$43.65 million to 200 grantees). Together, these investments made up the Federal government's biggest targeted investments in providing housing for youth experiencing homelessness.

There are three major challenges to the way the current set of targeted homelessness resources are spent on programs for youth experiencing homelessness.

- First, there are significant gaps in the array of interventions for youth experiencing homelessness. For example, there is a shortage of crisis beds for youth across the country resulting in a large number of youth being unsheltered on any given night. At the same, it is important to recognize that if Congress just provides for a wider age range or longer length of stay without also providing additional resources, programs would only be able to extend their services to some by denying services to others.
- Second, there is limited evidence on the cost effectiveness of interventions targeted to homeless youth. We need to develop an understanding about the full array of developmentally appropriate interventions that will work for youth and which strategies and program design elements are most cost-effective.
- Third, the federal government and partner communities are only beginning to have the knowledge needed to articulate a multi-stakeholder, systems-level approach that connects practices and procedures among multiple service providers to improve a targeted set of outcomes for homeless youth, and approaches the problem as a whole community, rather than taking a program-by-program approach.

Improving the Capacity of Programs and Systems Working to End Youth Homelessness

In order to ensure that communities are moving towards system-level approaches that are inclusive of all homeless populations, HUD has implemented and promoted policies, such as improving system-level performance, implementation of best practices such as Housing First, and the use of coordinated entry systems—the key to ensuring that the homelessness response system is as effective at serving all homeless populations as possible. Shifting to a systems/community-level crisis response system is never easy work— yet the process undoubtedly leads to a demand for better-performing projects and a shift toward interventions that make an impact. HUD is leading the way with these shifts, and I would like to outline some of our thinking and action as it relates to building a systems-level approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness.

First, it is important to note that HUD recognizes that youth and young adults need interventions that are targeted to their developmental stage in life. An often-repeated criticism of HUD’s work in ending homelessness among youth is that our programs have not historically focused on or effectively addressed the specific developmental needs of youth. This understanding is a core value for the Department and is reflected in the policies and programs HUD is working to implement.

We understand that reconnection to family is an important pathway out of homelessness for some youth. Family support – sometimes in the form of financial support and/or housing, other times in the form of support to improve family functioning such as counseling – is often the factor that can be a young person’s pathway out of homelessness. For the most part, the family reunification efforts of the Basic Center Program at HHS have been the primary intervention for family reunification. As noted before, we have also invested heavily in transitional housing for youth, mostly because it has been seen as the only developmentally appropriate intervention. But we need to expand the array of youth-appropriate options available.

We are encouraged that many communities around the country are experimenting with other types of housing assistance for youth and young adults: prevention and rapid-rehousing, service-

enriched affordable housing, and supportive housing—and doing so in a developmentally appropriate way. We need to test the impact of these interventions on the outcomes that matter for youth—education/employment, well-being, permanent connections, as well as housing—and test their cost-effectiveness for youth. And as Ms. Lauper noted, we have partnered with the True Colors Fund to pilot an initiative to prevent homelessness for LGBTQ youth.

HUD firmly believes that the principles of Housing First should apply to youth and young adult targeted programs and that programs such as rapid re-housing and supportive housing that have traditionally focused on adults could also be effective for youth if designed to address their needs. Such a Housing First philosophy for youth should provide access to housing with no preconditions, promote choice and self-determination, promote support and recovery that includes work to address risk factors and build on protective factors, provide adaptable and flexible individualized supportive services, and promote meaningful and deliberate participation in the community. Youth-specific Housing First programs should include services that navigate reunification with family where appropriate, establish positive and permanent connections with other adults, or incent education in addition to employment.

Over the past few years, HUD, in partnership and consultation with Federal partners, has taken on several youth-specific initiatives. These efforts are helping us advance our knowledge about how many youth and young adults are experiencing homelessness, and improve the capacity of local jurisdictions to end youth homelessness.

- As noted previously, for the first time in 2013, HUD asked communities to report their point-in-time estimates in three separate age categories: under 18, 18-24, and 25 and older, allowing HUD to specifically report national data on young adults ages 18-24.
- In 2013, together with USICH, HHS, and the Department of Education, HUD implemented *Youth Count!*, an interagency initiative to develop promising strategies for counting unaccompanied homeless youth, up to 24-years-old, through innovative implementations of HUD's 2013 point-in-time count. The goal of this initiative was to learn promising strategies for conducting collaborative point-in-time counts of unaccompanied homeless youth that engage CoCs, RHY providers, Local Educational

agency (LEA) homeless liaisons, and other local stakeholders; and to conduct credible point-in-time counts that gather reliable data on unaccompanied homeless youth. HUD took lessons learned from *Youth Count!* and translated them into guidance for counting youth in the 2015 Point-in-Time Count Methodology Guide for all CoCs.

- In 2013, in partnership with HHS, HUD released new data standards the Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS) that included specific-elements for HHS' Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) program. HHS and HUD have integrated systems so that data collected by the RHY program can eventually be included in the Annual Homeless Assessment Report.
- In 2014, HUD began an initiative to prevent homelessness among LGBTQ youth and young adults in two communities—Cincinnati and Houston. The two communities receive targeted technical assistance from HUD and from the True Colors Fund, as well leveraged technical assistance from sister federal agencies. The two communities are working to develop and implement a comprehensive community-wide plan to prevent homelessness among LGBTQ youth.
- In 2014, in response to stakeholder feedback and misinformation about eligibility for our programs, HUD published a document clarifying that youth and young adults sleeping in a place where they are being abused or trafficked or fearful of abuse should be able to access emergency shelter, and the documentation required for them to do so should be straightforward and place as little burden on youth as possible. Such misinformation about which youth are eligible for HUD's homelessness programs is dangerous and can lead to eligible youth and young adults being turned away from life-saving programs. While the rules about who can receive housing and services funded by HUD can sometimes seem tricky to navigate, there are circumstances that should always be clear—primarily that no youth or family should ever have to sleep in an unsheltered location or in a place where they are abused or trafficked or fearful of abuse. People facing these circumstances that have no other alternatives are able to access, at a minimum, our emergency shelter services, but may also be eligible for programs like transitional and permanent housing.

- In the FY 2013-2014 Continuum of Care Program competition, HUD included youth homelessness as one of the Department's policy priorities, assigning points to questions about youth homelessness, and collecting baseline information on what CoCs are doing to end youth homelessness in their communities. HUD accompanied this with youth-focused messaging highlighting the importance of a youth-inclusive homelessness response system.
- In March of 2015, HUD released a notice to recipients and subrecipients receiving ESG, CoC or Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) funds that provides guidance regarding how best to provide shelter to transgender persons—including transgender youth—in a single-sex facility. The notice also provides guidance on appropriate and inappropriate inquiries related to a potential or current client's sex for the purposes of placing transgender persons in temporary, emergency shelters, or other facilities with shared sleeping areas or bathrooms.
- To further our understanding of the challenges associated with preventing and ending homelessness among youth aging out of foster care, in 2013 HHS invested \$5 million a year to develop model interventions for that unique population. This year, HHS is investing another \$3.5 million a year to 5 of these communities to further refine and implement their models, and begin evaluation of the projects. We hope that this data will further our knowledge base and help us refine our plans for preventing and ending youth homelessness, and HUD is a willing and active partner in this work.

In addition to these efforts, HUD is also working diligently to ramp up youth and young-adult efforts in the coming years, in coordination with our federal partners.

- HUD is working with the Department of Education on a series of technical assistance products to help schools and CoCs collaborate more effectively. These include guidance to CoCs and LEAs about models of collaboration, and a HUD definition and program eligibility crosswalk for local education and homeless service stakeholders.
- HUD is working on guidance to clarify documentation requirements in HUD-funded homelessness programs for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness. This

clarification is intended to ensure that documentation is not a barrier to any youth experiencing homelessness accessing HUD's programs.

- HUD is working with HHS to continue to build the relationship between RHY program providers and CoCs, by releasing guidance to CoCs about working to invite and include RHY program providers into HMIS as well as governing bodies and committees, to further develop the community-wide planning and systems-level thinking that is needed for coordinated entry and a community-wide approach to ending youth homelessness.
- In FY 2015, we plan to incentivize increased collaboration between youth homelessness stakeholders and CoC planning bodies. It is HUD's intent to send a strong message to CoCs, particularly those that have historically not been inclusive of youth-serving programs, that this is a top priority for HUD. CoCs that have a plan in place to meet the goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020 will be more competitive in the FY 2015 competition.
- Thanks to a demonstration authority granted by this committee in 2015 appropriations, HUD will be releasing guidance to public housing authorities describing efforts to align the Family Unification Program (FUP) with the Family Self-Sufficiency Program to achieve better outcomes for homeless youth who have aged out of foster care.
- In addition to the \$2.48 billion requested for Homeless Assistance Grants in the President's FY2016 budget, HUD requested \$177.5 million for special purpose vouchers for people experiencing homelessness, and a \$20 million request for additional FUP vouchers for families and youth. HUD also proposed in this budget that the FUP vouchers be available to eligible youth aging out of foster care for a period of up to five years, up from the current period of 18 months.
- The President's FY2016 budget also requests funding to implement research on youth homelessness through our Office of Policy Development and Research.
- In the next Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), HUD plans to include additional measures of homelessness and housing instability, utilizing data from the Department of Education and Census Bureau to better describe doubled-up households.
- Following this hearing, the White House will be hosting a policy briefing for stakeholders from all over the country who are working to end youth homelessness.

We should also note that HHS has several requests in the President's FY2016 budget that indicate their commitment to addressing the challenges that youth experiencing homelessness face.

- One proposal would allow child welfare agencies to use Chafee Foster Care Independence Program funds to serve young people formerly in foster care through the age of 23 if they provide foster care to youth up to age 21. To demonstrate HHS' continued commitment to permanent homes for all youth, the proposal also includes a provision to further reduce the number of youth who age out of foster care by eliminating another planned permanent living arrangement as a permanency goal.
- The reauthorization proposal for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act increases funding to support the RHY program and provide funding to perform a periodic estimate of the incidence and prevalence of youth homelessness. This request includes an increase of \$5 million to provide additional program services in the Transitional Living Programs (TLP) and to expand transitional services for LGBTQ youth.

Building Momentum Toward the Goal

HUD agrees that more is needed to address the needs of youth and families experiencing homelessness – that will take hard work at the local and national levels in conjunction with targeted investments from Congress. I hope that this testimony has illustrated for the Committee that the team at HUD is committed to doing the hard work. We would like to work together with Congress to find ways to expand available resources and capacity to serve more families and youth, while continuing to prioritize assistance to those who have nowhere else to turn. USICH partner agencies have committed to more fully engaging mainstream resources too.

Madame Chairman and members of the Committee, I hope this discussion has been helpful to your understanding of HUD's vision for its contribution to the work with HHS, USICH, and other federal partners on ending homelessness among youth and young adults. With your support, HUD looks forward to continuing these efforts and working to reach our goal of ending youth homelessness once and for all. Thank you for this opportunity.