



Center for
Children's
Advocacy



Program Review and Investigations Committee, October 3, 2013

Testimony on behalf of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Workgroup, PRI Study of DCF Services to Prepare Youth Aging out of State Care

My name is Stacey Violante-Cote, and I am an attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy, and the Director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project, which provides legal services to teens throughout the state. I am submitting this testimony as the Chair of the Connecticut Runaway and Homeless Youth Workgroup of the Reaching Home Campaign.

Reaching Home is the campaign to build the political and civic will to prevent and end homelessness in Connecticut. Reaching Home is focused on ending homelessness among youth as part of its effort to implement *Opening Doors –CT*, the state's blueprint for ending homelessness that is aligned with the federal Opening Doors plan.

I am here to testify about the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) services to prepare youth aging out of state care as they relate to the intersection of child welfare and homelessness. Youth who have touched the child welfare system are at high risk for homelessness due to multiple compounding factors, including exposure to severe trauma, frequent school transfers and unmet special education needs, multiple out-of-home placements, and few opportunities to learn/practice basic life skills. Additionally, research has revealed a distinct subgroup of youth who age out of foster care who experience a wide range of psychosocial problems, and pose significant challenges to the community. These young people are the most likely to be incarcerated, otherwise institutionalized, homeless, and/or to have experienced high residential mobility (Courtney et al., March 2010).

Reaching Home actively supports a comprehensive statewide planning process for the creation of housing and services to address the risk factors contributing to youth homelessness through its Runaway and Homeless Youth Workgroup, a diverse group of stakeholders including key state agencies, advocacy intermediaries, and direct service providers. Please note that while DCF, CT Department of Education, CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS), and CT Judicial Department participate and are critical partners on this Reaching Home initiative, they are not in positions themselves to endorse this testimony.

Youth who are on their own cross several jurisdictions and service delivery systems—child welfare, education, juvenile justice, mental health, and law enforcement. DCF is responsible for some of these systems – child welfare, children's mental health, and juvenile justice. National experts have identified vulnerable subpopulations who are overrepresented within youth homelessness, including LGBTQ youth; pregnant/parenting youth; youth involved with juvenile justice and foster care systems; and victims of sexual trafficking and exploitation. They are at risk for sexual abuse, being lured into prostitution, physical abuse, criminal justice involvement, illness, and suicide (National Network for Youth). This Workgroup is engaged in efforts to quantitatively and qualitatively understand the service delivery gaps that affect these youths' housing stability in Connecticut and to create supports that ensure quality provision of services to youth that help them transition to adulthood. Through our work, we have identified several points of transition from DCF that put young people at risk of becoming homeless.

Youth transitioning from the child mental health system (DCF) to the adult mental health system (DMHAS) are vulnerable to falling through the cracks of the two systems and becoming homeless. There is little data about this transition time. Anecdotally, we know youth from the child welfare system who do not successfully engage with the state's adult mental health system are at a greater risk of ending up homeless since housing is often tied to a willingness to receive treatment. There are concerns that a "one-size-fits-most" approach to serving these youth does not lend itself to the progressive engagement necessary to meet the housing and service needs of youth transitioning from DCF. This committee should examine whether DCF and DMHAS consistently use personalized, evidenced-based, trauma-informed practices when treating youth transitioning from one mental health system to the other.

Additionally, DCF reported 1,002 incidents of children/youth fleeing DCF care in 2012. Without a safe place to go, they are exposed to dangers such as domestic minor sex trafficking—DCF reported 136 children and youth who were victims of prostitution in CT between April 2008 and December 2012. Almost all of these victims are kids who are involved with the child welfare system. At this time, DCF does not have a clear policy or practice as to how each area office is to respond when a youth runs from care. Recently, the Department has agreed to create a new policy to address this concern and has agreed to engage with this workgroup in creating the policy. It is essential that this study examine the development of this new policy, to ensure that improved DCF practice guarantees that no youth is forced to transition from DCF care by running away.

Youth who are discharged from DCF, either by way of child protection or juvenile justice, require strong discharge planning processes in order to avoid later homelessness. Best practices dictate that discharge plans include a process for consultation with youth, that discharge planning begin immediately upon being taken into care, and that it focus on safe housing, services and the provision of identity documents upon release (Nat'l Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, *Alone Without a Home*, p 186, Sept. 2012). Anecdotally, we understand from our work with youth in juvenile justice placements that these youth in particular have very little "say" in where they will go upon release. As a result, safe and healthy post-incarceration placement options are often missed, and these youth, who often have unaddressed mental health needs, become homeless. Ironically, this puts them at greater risk of future criminal justice involvement. This committee should examine DCF's discharge planning at every step in order to reduce the number of youth leaving DCF care and experiencing homelessness and its associated consequences.

Finally, currently, youth are allowed to remain in DCF care after age 18 only if they are in a college or vocational program or in a program to address a barrier to employment. However, once separated from DCF, youth have very few educational options and consequently struggle to finish high school or pursue secondary education. This is particularly true of youth who do not qualify for DCF's re-entry program. They are often the "overage" and "under-credit" population who don't know where to turn. As a result, the most vulnerable group of youth transitioning from DCF's care – those who were not yet ready for higher education – are the group for whom the agency does the least.

Many homeless kids have touched the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and poorly managed transitions increased their risk of homelessness. We hope that you will consider the critical role of housing stability options and the interconnections across the issues and needs identified above as you assess the status of DCF services for youth aging out of state care.

Thank you.