

# Center for **Children's** Advocacy

University of Connecticut School of Law, 65 Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL NO. 6482, AN ACT CONCERNING BIRTH CERTIFICATES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

March 15, 2013

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a private, non-profit legal organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. I am an attorney at the Center and the Director of the Center's Teen Legal Advocacy Project, which provides legal services to teens throughout the state. In addition, I am the Chair of the Connecticut Team on Runaway and Homeless Youth,<sup>1</sup> a statewide group of professionals interested in improving access to services and supports for runaway and homeless youth in the state of Connecticut. The Team is comprised of state agencies including the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Court Support Services Division, and the State Department of Education, as well as private providers throughout the state including The Center for Children's Advocacy, The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, RYASAP, CT Coalition to End Homelessness, True Colors, Partnership for Strong Communities, as well as others.

**I am testifying today to urge you to support Raised Bill No. 6482, "An Act Concerning Birth Certificates for Homeless Youth." This bill will amend current statutes to allow homeless youth who are under eighteen years old to access their birth certificates.** The proposed change would allow certain professionals including school district homeless liaisons and the director or designees of youth and adult shelters to certify that a youth is homeless, thus allowing a youth to directly request a copy of his/her birth certificate. This process mirrors the process outlined in the federal College Cost Reduction Act which allows unaccompanied homeless youth to access federal financial aid for college.

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth states that parental abuse and neglect is a primary cause of homelessness among unaccompanied youth (homeless youth who are on their own).<sup>2</sup> The National Network for Youth estimates that according to studies of a homeless youth sample, 33% had been in foster care, 51% had been physically abused, and 60% of girls and 23% of boys had been sexually abused.<sup>3</sup> We also know that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth are over-represented among the homeless youth population. Multiple studies have found that one out of every five homeless youth (20 percent) is LGBT-identified. This is highly disproportionate to the



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<sup>1</sup> The Connecticut Team on Runaway and Homeless Youth was convened in the summer of 2008 in response to a request by the American Bar Association's Committee on Homelessness and Poverty as well as the National Network for Youth that each state bring together advocates to affect systemic change on behalf of runaway and homeless youth.

<sup>2</sup> "Using What We Know: Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth." 39, Julianelle, Patricia, The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, February 2008, available at [http://www.naehcy.org/dl/uwvk\\_youth.pdf](http://www.naehcy.org/dl/uwvk_youth.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "Unaccompanied Youth: Fast Facts" National Network for Youth, citing YouthCare, Inc., 1998, available at [http://www.nn4youth.org/media/factsheets/FactSheet\\_Unaccompanied\\_Youth.pdf](http://www.nn4youth.org/media/factsheets/FactSheet_Unaccompanied_Youth.pdf).

estimated percentage of LGBT youth in the general population, which is approximately 10 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The data we have in CT is insufficient. (Please see attached summary.) The CT Team on Runaway & Homeless Youth and The Partnership for Strong Communities have commissioned a study which is currently underway and will give a fuller picture of the number and needs of homeless youth in our state.

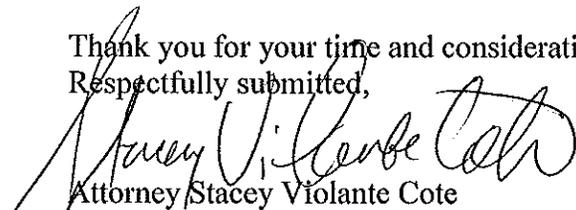
Removing barriers for homeless youth to access supports and services is critical. The dangers for minors who are living on their own are many. Homeless youth are targets to be lured into the life of prostitution (also called domestic minor sex trafficking). They are at risk for physical abuse, sexual abuse, illness and suicide.

For some homeless youth, school may be the only safe and stable environment available. Yet, without a parent or guardian to assist them, enrollment in school may be denied or delayed, particularly when the youth does not have access to required enrollment documents like a birth certificate. Connecticut State Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youths has indicated that the proposed changes would help both school districts and homeless students to expedite school enrollment. The American Bar Association and the National Network for Youth recently published a book entitled "Runaway and Homeless Youth and the Law: Model State Statutes," where they emphasize the importance of homeless youth having access to identification documents, including birth certificates. The book also notes other states which have provided for flexibility in birth certificate requests (Pennsylvania, Maryland, Mississippi, and Texas).<sup>5</sup>

This bill would remove one of the many obstacles faced by unaccompanied homeless youth who are attempting to access supports to move out of homelessness. I get the calls from youth who are on their own and cannot get copies of their birth certificates in order to seek employment, register in school, get a state identification card, apply for food assistance or cash assistance, or become involved in a job training opportunity. Providers for homeless youth also tell us that youth who cannot access their birth certificates can experience delays in accessing health insurance and thus needed mental or medical health care. **Please support Raised Bill No. 6482. This bill provides a no-cost way to eliminate obstacles for homeless youth.**

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Attorney Stacey Violante Cote

Director, Teen Legal Advocacy Project

Chair, CT Team on Runaway and Homeless Youth

<sup>4</sup> "Incidence and Vulnerability of LGBTQ Homeless Youth," National Alliance to End Homelessness, Solutions Brief, December 8, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Horton-Newell, Amy, Meyer, Katie & Trupin, Casey. "Runaway and Homeless Youth and the Law: Model State Statutes," pp 111-113 (2009).

# Connecticut's Invisible Population: Homeless Children and Youth

- This is the invisible population because no one knows how many unaccompanied homeless youth (youth who are on their own) are in CT.
- Most youth are "couch surfing" and staying with others for short periods of time.
- Homeless youth are counted differently by each state agency, or not counted at all.
- Homeless youth are at risk for sexual abuse, being lured into prostitution, physical abuse, illness and suicide.

## How many homeless youth are there?

Homeless children/youth enrolled in public school.

2804 Students in 2011/12 School Year (CT State Department of Education)

Many children/youth run away from DCF care.

1002 Incidents in 2012 (CT State Department of Children & Families (DCF))

Many depend on getting food and hygiene products from outreach services.

1774 Youth Provided with Health & Hygiene Products Through Street Outreach Programs in CT

5414 Youth Provided with Food or Drinks Through Street Outreach Programs in CT

(National Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS))

Without a safe place to go, children/youth become victims of prostitution.

136 Children/Youth Who Are Victims of Prostitution in CT (April 2008-Dec 2012) (CT DCF)

## Where do they go?

Minors are turning to:

**The streets:** 8666 CT Street Outreach Contacts (Sept 2011-Aug 2012) (RHYMIS)

**The few youth shelter providers in CT:** 87 Minors in Youth Shelters (Sept 2011-Aug 2012) (RHYMIS)

**Couch surfing:** No Data

**18-21 year old's in adult shelters:** 743 in Fiscal Year 2012, 666 in Fiscal Year 2011

(CT Homeless Management Information System)

## What are their needs?

Access to safety and services. Current obstacles:

- **Not enough safe places to sleep:** There are only 15 shelter beds statewide for youth under 18 years old.
- **Not enough providers:** Only 4 agencies in CT provide crisis intervention, respite services or street outreach services for minors who are homeless. **None are in Hartford.**
- Access to employment, health care and school is complicated when minors cannot access their **birth certificates**, required by many agencies and providers, without parent/grandparent consent.
- **Not enough data** about the number of unaccompanied homeless youth and the barriers they face in our state systems.