

Joint Committee on Children, March 6, 2014

Testimony of Alicia Woodsby, Partnership for Strong Communities, on HB 5304 An Act Preventing Homelessness for Youth Under the Care of the Commissioner of Children and Families

Good afternoon, chairs and members of the Joint Committee on Children. My name is Alicia Woodsby, and I'm the Interim Executive Director of the Partnership for Strong Communities, a statewide nonprofit policy advocacy organization dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness, expanding affordable housing, and creating strong communities. The Partnership staffs two statewide campaigns – Reaching Home and HOME Connecticut. Reaching Home is the campaign to build the civic and political will to prevent and end homelessness in Connecticut.

I submit this testimony in support of HB 5304, An Act Preventing Homelessness for Youth Under the Care of the Commissioner of Children and Families. HB 5304 prohibits the discharge of youth from DCF care to homeless shelters, motels or other temporary arrangements likely to lead to homelessness, and provides aftercare for 45 days; requires the provision of legal representation for youth who are subject to involuntary termination from DCF care; and ensures that every child has a permanency plan that includes a caring adult resource.

Children aging out of DCF care are at risk of homelessness. The Reaching Home campaign created a public-private partnership to implement Opening Doors-CT, a statewide framework to prevent and end homelessness based on the federal Opening Doors plan. The primary focus of the campaign is on people who are chronically homeless, veterans, families with children, and youth. Addressing the needs of runaway and unaccompanied youth is a major area of focus with a statewide Workgroup dedicated to the development and implementation of a multi-faceted approach.

In December 2014, the Reaching Home Campaign helped to release the state's first comprehensive study and report on runaway and homeless youth developed by the Yale Consultation Center. We know from the study that these children and youth touch multiple state systems with limited levels of obligation or responsibility for their well-being.

The study quickly identified 98 unaccompanied youth who were homeless in Hartford, New Haven, New London, and Bridgeport. 32% of the kids in the Study had dropped out of school; 23% of these youth first had sexual intercourse at age 12 or under; 50% were arrested at least once in their lifetime; and about half of the young people reported family contact with DCF. These young people had experienced multiple traumatic events, including rape, being attacked with a weapon, and the murder of a close family member or friend, among others. 25% of these kids considered suicide over the prior year.

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness identifies youth involved with foster care systems as a vulnerable subpopulation that is overrepresented within youth homelessness. In 2012, almost 20% of youth exiting foster care in Connecticut were discharged to "Shelter," "Friends" or "Unknown." Unaccompanied youth who are homeless are an invisible population particularly vulnerable to the deprivations and consequences associated with homelessness. Research suggests costly and avoidable trajectories for these youth who are at risk for sexual abuse, being lured into prostitution, physical abuse, criminal justice involvement, illness and suicide. Mark Courtney's research revealed a distinct cohort of former foster youth who experience a wide range of psychosocial problems, and pose significant challenges to the community. They're mostly male, and the most likely to be incarcerated, otherwise institutionalized, homeless, and/or to have experienced high residential mobility. 82 % report a criminal conviction since age 18. Two-fifths have not finished high school/GED. They're also the most likely to report mental health/substance use problems, have the lowest reported levels of social support and the highest rate of victimization.

Passing this bill is a critical step toward increasing the likelihood of positive life outcomes for these youth.

Thank you very much.

[X]

Thanks,

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