

**Testimony for Housing Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly
February 3, 2015 Hearing on S.B. No. 408
AN ACT CONCERNING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS
By Kristen Granatek, Manager of Technical Assistance and Program Services
Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness**

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Representative Porter, Senator Winfield,
Representative Bulter, and Members of the Housing Committee:

Thank you for hearing my testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH), and for your consideration of matters of importance to homeless youth in Connecticut.

I would like to encourage you to address the needs of Connecticut's homeless youth by supporting S.B. 408, An Act Concerning Homeless Youth.

There are too many children and youth right now in CT without a home, and without a safe place to go in times of crisis, living on the streets or moving from couch to couch, often under highly unsafe circumstances. Some are homeless with their families, as a result of poverty. Some have left home and are homeless on their own, with few supports.

These homeless youth are a hidden population, often not appearing to be homeless, attempting to fit in among their peers and not draw attention to themselves. Many fear DCF or foster care. They are often not connected to formal supports, either because they are unaware of resources or because they avoid the limited available services. Some homeless youth are not able to attend school. They are at extremely high risk of being physically or sexually assaulted and victimized. They may engage in prostitution or survival sex or become victims of human trafficking. Runaway and homeless youth often couch surf, spending weeks at a time sleeping at friends' or acquaintances' homes. Those without other alternatives will seek out abandoned buildings or unlocked cars as places of refuge, or live outside behind buildings or in parks. They have extremely limited options, with few dedicated shelter beds available to them – a total of only 13 statewide – and insufficient outreach services to find them and provide support.

The 2013 study, "Invisible No More: Creating Opportunities for Youth who are Homeless," conducted by The Consultation Center at Yale University, and co-sponsored by CCEH, documented both the lack of crisis supports for youth who are homeless and the vulnerability of these youth. The study interviewed 98 homeless youth and found:

- 32% dropped out of school;
- 12% reported that their school told them they could no longer attend;
- 66% were unemployed and 26% were employed part-time;
- ¼ of the young people reported considering suicide over the last year;
- 7.1% reported that they had traded sex for money and 8.2% traded sex for a place to stay

Currently, no state agency is specifically tasked with leading efforts to meet the needs of these youth. The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness supports an interagency approach to addressing the needs of this population. Their needs span a range of state agencies, and these agencies must work together in close partnership to support these young people.

CCEH looks forward to working with leaders in the legislature and with our colleagues at the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Social Services, and the Department of Housing through an interagency approach. In addition to the agencies named in S.B. 408, we encourage collaboration with the State Department of Education, as well. SDE is a critical link to homeless youth in the school systems and must be included in this approach. Through collaboration across these agencies, we can develop an appropriate array of services and housing options to meet the needs of young people experiencing homelessness in Connecticut.

I urge you to support an Act Concerning Homeless Youth. Thank you.

Overview – Connecticut Homeless Youth Count

Youth homelessness presents significant challenges to homeless providers. Conventional methodologies for collecting data on this sub-population are ineffective because homeless youth are less accessible than their adult counterparts, difficult to track down, and often unwilling to talk to the adult volunteers who seek to engage them. As a consequence, we have a very poor understanding of the scale of the issue and consequently have difficulty supporting our providers in effectively serving the needs of this population. CCEH has evaluated dozens of efforts around the country to count homeless youth, and have designed a state count of homeless youth based on the emerging best practices and lessons learned from other communities. Connecticut will be the first state to engage in a statewide effort to count homeless youth.

In order to obtain an accurate picture of the scale of youth homelessness in Connecticut, CCEH plans to undertake our count through the following two methods:

1. Basic State Count: Conduct a coordinated, standardized count across the state over one to two weeks in January. Provider-based leaders in each region will be trained to train others and promote the count in their area. This count will use a survey and distribution model deployed in a wide variety of service settings used by youth (including soup kitchens, shelters, mental health centers, and libraries). This count will collect data on youth who are visible to service providers within a certain timeframe or who can be encouraged via social media or other marketing means to come to specified settings during that timeframe. Care will be taken to utilize standardized trainings, instruments and protocols.

2. Special Focus Areas: In approximately five selected areas, CCEH will conduct an expanded project that includes: (1) the same approach as above, and also (2) peer-based estimation projects in local high schools, and (3) in-depth surveying of, or focus groups with, unstably housed youth to gather information about their awareness and use of local services. In addition, for added depth, we will ask youth service providers to supply their most recent annual data on homeless and unstably housed youth. Though not part of the official count, this is nonetheless a way to go deeper into numbers and characteristics of homeless youth in particular (and very different) areas of the state.

In the Focus Areas, we will include a school-based estimation project which will consist of a one-page survey to all students in grades 9-12 asking students for information about peers, friends and acquaintances who are unstably housed or homeless. The survey will meet Runway and Homeless Youth Data Standards and will be modeled on best practices already developed nationally.

Outcome: The count will provide reliable information to indicate the number of youth across Connecticut who experience homelessness, and – equally important – to understand the patterns and characteristics of this population. Characteristics such as: how long episodes of youth homelessness last, number of episodes of homelessness, social networks, family relationships, and whether it is possible for a youth to return home. Better data on youth homelessness will strengthen the ability of agencies to advocate for resources to address this issue, and for a better framework to allocate those resources.