

Center for Children's Advocacy

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

Proposed Senate Bill No. 408 AN ACT CONCERNING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a statewide private, non-profit legal organization. The Center provides holistic legal representation for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. I am an attorney at the Center and Director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project, which provides legal services to teens throughout the state. In addition, I am the chair of the Homeless Youth Workgroup of the Reaching Home campaign, the statewide campaign for preventing and ending homelessness. The Campaign developed a public-private partnership to implement a statewide framework to prevent and end homelessness based on the federal Opening Doors plan. The workgroup consists of state agency partners, private providers and advocates. More information about the Reaching Home Campaign and the workgroup can be found here: <http://pschousing.org/runaway-and-homeless-youth-workgroup>.

I write today in support of An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness. This bill serves to require the Commissioner of Housing, in consultation with the Commissioners of Children and Families and Social Services, to develop a plan to ameliorate youth homelessness, including determining the number of homeless youth and devising strategies to address homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth.

The Department of Housing is a critical partner in this process due to their role administering the housing assistance continuum for adults and families. It makes sense for them to support the development of a similar array of options appropriate for youth. Though there are many reasons a youth may become homeless, it is not uncommon that youth become homeless due to family homelessness as a result of poverty. Poverty is not a reason for child welfare involvement into a family. In fact Conn. Gen. Stat. § 46b-120 expressly states that a child is neglected only if there are reasons other than being "impoverished" to find neglect. Also, runaway and homeless youth often hide from child welfare and will not engage with this system. As such, the Commissioner of Housing is the appropriate lead on developing a plan, in concert with other state agencies.

The 2013 study, "Invisible No More: Creating opportunities for youth who are homeless," conducted by The Consultation Center at Yale University¹, documented both the lack of crisis housing and supports in Connecticut as well as the vulnerability of these youth. The study interviewed 98 homeless youth as well as key stakeholders and found:

- 32% dropped out of school;
- 12% reported that their school told them they could no longer attend;
- Several youth reported that they had traded sex for money (7.1%), a place to stay (8.2%); and drugs or alcohol (4.1%);

¹ Gordon, D, Hunter, B. (2013). "Invisible No More: Creating opportunities for youth who are homeless." Available at: <http://www.pschousing.org/files/InvisibleNoMoreReport.pdf>.



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- 23.5% of the youth first experienced sexual intercourse at age 12 or under;
- 66% were unemployed and 26% were employed part-time;
- 41% reported being in their current living situation for less than 3 months;
- 70% reported moving two times or more in the past year; and
- ¼ of the young people reported considering suicide over the last year.

We also know that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth are over-represented among the homeless youth population. Nationally, 20-40% of youth experiencing homelessness self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ), which is disproportionate to the percentage of LGBTQ youth in the general youth population.² In CT, “Invisible No More,” found that 23% of the youth who were interviewed identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure and 3.1% were transgender.³ These youth leave home for the same reasons as other homeless youth, yet are faced with family and societal rejection due to their sexual orientation. Once out of their homes, LGBT youth are more at risk for sexual abuse and exploitation.⁴

These statistics are sobering. They tell us that without a safe place to go homeless youth in Connecticut are falling through the cracks of the various systems they touch.

The data is echoed in the voices of the kids who call me on a regular basis saying they have no place to go. One such young person is “Mellissa” from the greater Hartford area. She is eighteen years old, staying on friends’ couches and trying to finish high school. Her mother and father are experiencing homelessness and she is on her own. Her teachers said she does very well when she is in school but her grades have been suffering as she moves around. She texted me to ask how she might be able to get some food because she cannot get food where she is staying. Her needs are imminent and she is too old for child welfare involvement. Sadly, her story is not uncommon.

To address these needs, the Homeless Youth Workgroup recently completed a ten month planning process. In early Spring we will be releasing the “Blueprint” describing critical next steps to address the needs of youth such as Mellissa.

Included in the Blueprint are steps to address immediate housing needs of youth who are homeless and providing specialized outreach to homeless youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender.

This bill will help to bolster the necessary next steps.

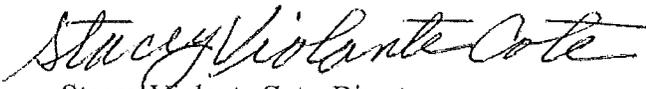
Thank you for your time and consideration.

² See U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, “LGBTQ Youth Homelessness In Focus,” at http://usich.gov/issue/lgbt_youth/lgbtq_youth_homelessness_in_focus/ (last visited February 2, 2015.)

³ Gordon, D, Hunter, B. (2013). “Invisible No More: Creating opportunities for youth who are homeless.” Available at: <http://www.psychousing.org/files/InvisibleNoMoreReport.pdf>.

⁴ See U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, “LGBTQ Youth Homelessness In Focus,” at http://usich.gov/issue/lgbt_youth/lgbtq_youth_homelessness_in_focus/ (last visited February 2, 2015.)

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stacey Violante Cote". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Stacey Violante Cote, Director
Teen Legal Advocacy Project

