



HEALTHY • HOUSED • EDUCATED • SAFE

YouthAction Community Leadership Course Runaway and Homeless Youth

Citizens' Committee for Children's (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City's public and private schools. CCC is an independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week advocacy training program, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on the Runaway Homeless Youth (RHY) system in New York City. Students interviewed experts in the field, conducted site visits to various shelters and service providers, and met with advocates for homeless youth. The following is a summary of the group's findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Shelter

While it has proven difficult to accurately count the number of homeless youth living in New York City, we learned that there are not enough beds in crisis shelters or Transitional Independent Living Facilities (TILFs) to meet the need. We also learned that existing facilities may not have the space to add beds, even if they have the resources to do so.

For youth turned away from RHY shelters, their alternative options are often grim. Some may be fortunate enough to stay with friends or relatives, but others end up on the street or in the subway, increasing their risk of engaging in survival sex (trading sex for money or a place to stay).

Youth shelters are designed to provide a range of supportive services aimed at helping youth overcome homelessness through education, job training, health and mental health care, legal counsel, individualized case work, and more. However, owing to the lack of youth shelter beds, many young people are referred to the adult shelter system. Many who reside in the adult shelter system are chronically homeless, suffer from addiction issues and/or have severe and persistent mental illness. Youth in adult shelters may witness or experience violence, theft of property, or sexual exploitation. Further, adult shelters do not provide the types of supportive services designed to prevent homeless youth from becoming chronically homeless.

- We **recommend** an expansion in the number of facilities that house crisis shelter beds and transitional living programs.
- We **recommend** an increase in funding for youth shelter beds, both in crisis shelters and Transitional Independent Living Facilities.

Length of Stay

Youth in crisis shelters are initially admitted for 30 days, with the possibility of an extension to 60 days. The workers with whom we spoke indicated that this is often not enough time for youth in crisis to stabilize, start receiving services, apply for and then be accepted into a TILF or other affordable housing option. Further, if one cycles out of shelter because of the 30 – 60 day time limit, losing contact with the supports in place there, it is

much more likely that one's applications may lapse and the young person will have to start the process from the beginning.

- We **recommend** an increase in the maximum length of stay for youth to reside in crisis shelters from 60 to 90 days.

After a crisis shelter, the next stop on the continuum of care for homeless youth is often a Transitional Independent Living Facility. TILFs provide even more comprehensive services for homeless youth, helping them learn to save money, do laundry, cook meals, and gain other skills necessary to live independently. New York State law allows youth up to 21 years old to stay in transitional living programs for up to 18 months, which many service providers contend is not always adequate time to prepare youth for independence.

- We **recommend** that the City Council explore Federal and State policy changes that would increase the maximum length of stay for youth to reside in Transitional Independent Living Facilities from 18 to 24 months.
- We **recommend** that the City Council explore Federal and State policy changes that would increase the maximum age for youth to reside in Transitional Independent Living Facilities from 21 to 24 years old.

Supportive Services

Youth may become homeless because they have experienced rejection, abuse, or trauma at home and homelessness itself is often traumatizing for young people. Additionally, youth with severe and persistent mental health issues are over-represented among this population. The psychological effects of trauma and/or mental illness can severely limit a homeless young person's ability to function independently and then to maintain long-term stability.

- We **support** recent increases in funding for mental health services within the RHY system, and recommend additional resources be allocated to support homeless youth with severe and persistent mental illness.
- We **support** the emphasis the RHY system places on preparing homeless youth for independence by providing educational services, job training and placement, financial planning, and skill-building programs.

Affordable Housing

As homeless youth transition out of crisis and become ready to live independently, they face the final hurdle of securing permanent housing. Because of the barriers many have faced with regard to education and employment, youth exiting the RHY system very often cannot afford the high rent of a New York City apartment, even if they are employed. For this reason, many homeless youth apply for the different affordable housing options and subsidies available to New Yorkers. Unfortunately, the application process is complicated and time consuming and even after it is completed applicants can languish on waiting lists for months or years.

- We **recommend** that New York City increase its affordable housing options and subsidies for youth.
- We **recommend** streamlining the application process for affordable housing for youth in the RHY system, recognizing that unique barriers to fulfilling the application requirements may exist for this population due to youth, inexperience, and trauma.
- We **recommend** that youth who qualify for affordable housing be allowed to have one another as roommates to further defray their housing costs.