



YouthAction Community Leadership Course Meeting the Needs of Homeless Youth in NYC

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 a sixty-nine year old 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 course, 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. Students heard from experts in the field, analyzed relevant statistics, and conducted site visits to organizations that provide services, conduct research, and/or work to influence public policy for homeless youth. The following is a summary of the group's findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Providers of shelter and services for homeless youth have an enormous need for additional resources to adequately serve this population. In recent years, state funding for the Runaway Homeless Youth (RHY) system in New York City has declined drastically. The New York City Council has provided, through discretionary spending, the majority of the funding for the RHY system. Because City Council spending comes in the form of one-year restorations, service providers must fight for a share of the shrinking budget each year. Therefore, **we recommend an increase in funding for the RHY system in New York City that is baselined in the city budget so that service providers can adequately meet the needs of the homeless youth population.** Below is an outline of the specific funding increases and policy changes YouthAction is advocating for.

Youth crisis shelters turn away homeless youth on a regular basis. Many times, these youth are referred to the adult shelter system which may be unsafe and, unlike youth shelters, do not provide appropriate services to help homeless youth become independent. Sometimes, homeless youth are forced to sleep on the street, which exposes them to drugs, sexual exploitation, and violence.

- We **recommend** that New York City maintain and baseline current funding for youth shelter beds as well as increase funding for more shelter beds.

Transitional independent living programs provide homeless youth with longer-term shelter than crisis shelters and provide additional services to help them become independent. State and city funded programs allow youth up to 21 years old to stay in transitional living programs for up to 18 months, which may not be adequate time to prepare youth for independence. Additionally, due to lack of space in these shelters, youth may be on the waiting list for transitional independent living programs for up to a year.

- We **recommend** that New York City provide funding to increase the number of beds in transitional independent living programs for homeless youth.
- We **oppose** New York City's proposal to reduce the maximum length of stay in transitional independent living programs to 12 months from 18 months.
- We **recommend** that New York State policy be changed to increase the maximum age for youth to reside in transitional independent living programs to 24 years old.
- We **recommend** that New York State policy be changed to increase the maximum length of stay for youth to reside in transitional independent living programs to 2 years.



- We **support** ongoing after care services for youth who leave transitional independent living programs.
- We **support** efforts to provide LGBTQ youth with a safe living environment that is affirming of their sexual identity.

Homeless youth have a wide range of serious needs, including health and mental health issues; illegal drug use; physical, emotional and sexual abuse; and sexual exploitation to name a few. It is important to provide intensive, individualized services to these youth on a case-by-case basis so that they may overcome these barriers to independence.

- We **support** the efforts of RHY drop-in centers to conduct comprehensive intake assessments and individualized case management for homeless youth.
- We **recommend** increased funding for RHY service providers so that they may hire or train staff to specialize in meeting the unique needs of homeless youth.
- We **recommend** the development of collaborative efforts that allow separate RHY service providers to more efficiently work together so that homeless youth may have access to all RHY services citywide.

Despite the stereotypes that exist about homeless youth, many of these young people work, attend school, and have the skills to live independently. However, many cannot afford the high rents of New York City apartments, so they remain homeless.

- We **support** the efforts of RHY providers to reunite young people with their families and heal those relationships so that young people have a support system to fall back on.
- We **recommend** that New York City create more affordable housing units in NYC and designate a portion of them for youth exiting the RHY system.

Youth Voice

The statements below were made by YCLC participants in response to the following question: **What can New York City government do to better meet the needs of homeless youth?**

"Funding for homeless youth shelters is a necessity that cannot be ignored or avoided. If the youth are our future, more funding for these programs can help ensure these youth have the tools to change the future for the better."

"Homeless youth need people to truly believe, support, and encourage them. More homeless youth need to be able to access the programs essential for their personal, emotional, and mental growth."

"The best thing the government can do is let the children know that there is always someone to turn to."

"I believe New York City as a community needs to be more understanding and supportive of the needs and hardships each homeless young person faces every day."

"To better meet the needs of homeless youth, public officials should hear the stories of the people and see through their eyes. New York city needs to increase funding for homeless youth services so no one is turned away in their time of need."

"Many people think that homeless youth are just children running away for small reasons, but they are strong individuals that are full of potential."