

Special Commission on
Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

FY15 Status Report

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Executive Summary

The Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (the Commission) was established through Outside Section 208 of the FY2013 Budget, signed into law on July 8, 2012. The Commission was charged with researching and making recommendations relative to services for unaccompanied homeless youth, with the goal of ensuring a comprehensive and effective response to the unique needs of this population. The legislation required that the Commission's work include: (i) an analysis of barriers to serving unaccompanied youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender; (ii) an analysis of barriers to serving unaccompanied youth under age 18; (iii) an assessment of the impact of mandated reporting requirements on youths' access to services; (iv) an assessment of the Commonwealth's ability to identify and connect with unaccompanied youth; and (v) recommendations to reduce identified barriers to serving this population.

In order to accomplish this task, the Commission convenes four Working Groups to analyze the issues and provide recommendations. The Commission's Working Groups include: 1) Identification and Connection; 2) Barriers to Serving Youth Under Age 18; 3) Barriers and Services for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and/or Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth; and 4) General Services and Housing.

As Massachusetts continues to make strides in addressing the needs of some of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable youth, the Commission is pleased to be able to submit this status report on the second year of our work. Through the efforts of the Commission, Massachusetts has executed its first-ever statewide census of youth experiencing homelessness. This first-in-the-nation initiative will allow the Commonwealth to begin to appropriately gauge both the scope of need and types of services these young people may require. LGBTQ-identified youth in particular, who may require specific services (particularly for transgender youth), will have their responses closely analyzed in the review of census data.

In the previous report the Commission issued a series of recommendations that were intended to guide its work over the course of the months to follow. This report serves as a status update on the second year of the Commission's activities to implement or further the work of those recommendations, and to identify and support youth experiencing homelessness.

Identification and Connection

The Identification and Connection Working Group is charged with assessing the Commonwealth's ability to identify and connect with unaccompanied homeless youth and capture an accurate count of unaccompanied young people who are experiencing homelessness in the Commonwealth.

Recent Activities

Between December 2013 and February 2014, the Commission implemented the first statewide survey of unaccompanied homeless youth (Youth Count) in the nation. This work was conducted through the Commission's Identification and Connection Working Group (Working Group), in collaboration with the state's 18 Continuums of Care (CoCs), youth service providers, and youth/young adults who served as youth ambassadors. A final report on the 2014 Youth Count was released in October 2014. (Attachment A)

That report provides a process evaluation as well as analysis of survey results. A total of 2,510 surveys were returned, and 795 of those respondents met the Commission's definition of an unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. Nearly 94% of the unaccompanied youth were between the ages of 18 and 24, which reflects the CoCs limited access to youth under 18. There is racial and ethnic diversity, with 42.1% reporting their race as white, 21.8% reporting their race as African-American or Black, and 35.2% reporting they are Hispanic/Latino/Latina. Over half (55.1%) of respondents were female, though this may have been skewed by outreach strategies. Most respondents indicated they were straight (80%). All responses for lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, and "other" total 14.1% of the total respondents meeting the state definition, with 1.2% of youth identifying as transgender (this includes some youth who also identified as LGBTQ). Thirty-seven percent of respondents meeting the state's definition of unaccompanied homeless youth were enrolled in some type of educational program, and 64.2% reported having some form of income. Rates of history of involvement in foster care and criminal justice systems were significant. Results indicate that 32.1% of respondents had a parent that had previously experienced homelessness.

While there are many lessons to draw from the results of this first-in-the-nation statewide count, there are some limitations to the information presented. The count was not intended or designed in such a way as to reach every single unaccompanied homeless youth. The goal was to treat this count as a pilot wherein each CoC could begin exploring effective strategies for conducting a count that could be built upon for the future, while simultaneously giving the CoCs and the Commonwealth a better understanding of the extent and character of youth homelessness in various regions. Given this limitation and others discussed in the report, the Commission recommends that the results be considered as a snapshot, providing preliminary information about the scope of unaccompanied youth homelessness and the opportunities and barriers for youth experiencing homelessness. The report concludes with a set of recommended policy initiatives to consider to enhance future Youth Counts.

Upcoming Activities

The survey findings and feedback from the 2014 Youth Count will inform the development and implementation of the 2015 Massachusetts Youth Count, which has been funded through the 2015 Massachusetts state budget process. The Working Group will oversee the implementation of the 2015 Youth Count, and has begun the planning process for the count that is scheduled to take place in late January/early February 2015. As in 2014, each of the 18 Continuums of Care will be offered grant awards to provide for some of the associated costs of conducting the Youth Count, with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) serving as the administrative agent for these grants. The Working Group hosted a half-day conference in November 2014 to bring together all stakeholders for peer learning and information-sharing and will provide ongoing technical assistance to CoCs throughout the fall and winter. Lastly, the Working Group will conduct a series of focus groups with unaccompanied youth who have experienced homelessness to garner their input into the revision of the survey tool and count methodology.

The Identification and Connection Working Group will lead the efforts to analyze the 2015 data and compare the results to the 2014 findings. The group also will collaborate closely with the full Commission and various stakeholders to utilize the information gathered and insights gained through the count process in the shared work of ending youth homelessness in the Commonwealth.

Members of the Identification and Connection Working Group

- Co-Chair Liz Rogers, Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness
- Co-Chair Kelly Turley, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Maurie Bergeron, LUK, Inc.
- Carly Burton, Mass Equality
- Alice Colegrove, Department of Public Health
- Caitlin Golden, Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance
- Exa Méndez, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Liz Peck, Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy
- Sarah Slautterback, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Linn Torto, Department of Housing and Community Development
- Yonina Hoffman-Wanderer, Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- Shavon Fulcher, Department of Children and Families
- Ana Camargo, City of Lawrence

The Identification and Connection Working Group had assistance from two interns over the course of the year. Kassie Bertumen from MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning and Elisa Bresnahan from UMass Boston's Program for Women in Politics and Public Policy provided significant assistance in planning and evaluating the 2014 MA Youth Count.

Barriers to Serving Youth Under Age 18 and Barriers and Services for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and/or Questioning Youth

The **Barriers to Serving Youth Under Age 18 Working Group** is charged with cataloguing the barriers, both in regulation and in statute, which may unintentionally prevent unaccompanied youth from seeking or obtaining services. The Working Group was also directed to research and discuss mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect and licensing provisions that may impact the provision of services to unaccompanied homeless youth. The Working Group has combined efforts with the Barriers and Services for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender, Queer, and/or Questioning Working Group, which is tasked with analyzing the specific needs of and specific barriers facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, as well as recommending any specific service delivery alternatives that may be needed to address these barriers. Many of the barriers facing youth under age 18 also affect LGBTQ youth and so the work in addressing those obstacles is complementary.

Introduction

Initial recommendations made in the Commission's preliminary report focused on training for mandatory reporters and service providers. Recommendations also concentrated on enhancing the working relationship between schools, service providers and state agencies providing services to unaccompanied homeless youth. In particular, the Barriers Working Group proposed that the state consider possible changes in training methods and ways to increase collaboration among state agencies.

The Barriers Working Group and the LGBTQ Working Group are jointly implementing a research plan that will provide a deeper understanding of the context and working relationships within which mandated reporting occurs, therefore laying a foundation from which to develop appropriate and effective recommendations. Both Working Groups have begun to examine the results of the 2014 Youth Count to understand the demographics of the young people surveyed and their ability to access services. Analysis of the focus group discussions facilitated by the Commission with unaccompanied homeless youth will provide additional insight into the reasons for youth homelessness and the best interventions. The Barriers Working Group will use its analysis of this data to develop a strategy for more targeted research that will provide a deeper understanding of the reasons why many youth remain disconnected from many of the services available to them. The LGBTQ Working Group will work with the survey developers to ensure that questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity are appropriate and understandable for young people. We will also build upon the outreach to LGBTQ service providers and community members to encourage greater participation in the survey by LGBTQ youth.

Implementation activities

In line with last year's report, the Barriers Working Group has spent the past year focused primarily on two activities: (1) revising, planning and beginning to implement its mandated reporting project, jointly with the LGBTQ Working Group; and (2) working with the Identification and Connection Working Group on its data collection efforts, and initiating further analysis of the survey and focus group data in order to identify productive and more targeted ways to better explore when and how unaccompanied homeless youth are most likely to access services.

The mandated reporting project

In the Commission's 2013 Status Report, the Barriers Working Group described a research project that focuses on the relationship between schools and the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and seeks to: (1) describe the ways in which schools currently provide support for unaccompanied homeless youth; (2) identify factors that increase and enhance communication between school personnel and DCF officials around unaccompanied homeless youth; and (3) make recommendations regarding the need for additional guidelines and/or training with respect to the implementation of mandated reporting of unaccompanied homeless youth. Ultimately, the goal of these recommendations is to strengthen – and avoid harming – existing networks, while ensuring that all youth are able to access basic services.

The Barriers and LGBTQ Working Groups have determined that it would be most productive and effective to implement this project jointly, due to the groups' overlapping interests in mandating reporting and the importance of ensuring that the research is sensitive to issues that may have particular salience for youth who identify as LGBTQ. The project includes two components, including research interviews with DCF personnel and with school-based personnel. The two working groups have been working with members of the Commission to refine the DCF component of the research plan, in order to ensure that the plan can be implemented effectively and will produce relevant findings. This component will include one or more focus groups with DCF that began in the fall of 2014. Findings from these focus groups will inform the research plan for the second stage of the research with school-based personnel, which will be implemented in the first half of 2015.

Related activities

Members of the Barriers Working Group have continued to participate in the other Commission working groups in order to contribute to data collection efforts and to ensure that these efforts include a focus on barriers to service provision. Most recently, the Working Group has been active in reviewing the data collected on service access in the 2014 Youth Count, and helping to refine these questions for the 2015 Youth Count. The Working Group has also reviewed the preliminary findings from the Youth Focus Groups conducted by the Commission and will be looking to engage in a deeper analysis of these interviews. The Youth Count and Focus Group data will be studied by the Barriers Working Group and used to develop a more targeted strategy for understanding why unaccompanied youth may refrain from accessing necessary services.

Findings

Although the mandated reporting project has not yet produced findings, it is important to note some of the findings from the Youth Count that relate specifically to accessing services. The Youth Count found that, of those youth who answered the question, nutritional assistance and cash assistance were the most common types of assistance sought. Although the data from the Youth Count shows that family conflict was involved in "four of the top seven reasons a youth was no longer with their parent," only 10.9% of the respondents who met the state definition of unaccompanied homeless youth reported seeking family support. Finally, although a limited number of the survey respondents answered questions about their experience in connecting to services, respondents reported barriers such as waiting lists, lack of transportation and non-responsiveness. The Barriers Working Group will develop targeted research strategies that will

help identify which services the youth themselves most want; why youth do not seek certain types of services; which types of services are hardest to access; what the perceived barriers are in relation to those particular services; and how those barriers can be reduced or eliminated.

Upcoming activities

In the upcoming year, the Barriers Working Group intends to:

- Implement the mandated reporting project, as set forth above;
- Make recommendations based on the findings from the mandated reporting project and a review of mandated reporting literature from around the country;
- Develop, together with the LGBTQ Working Group, an extension of the mandated reporting project to explore issues related to mandated reporting in other service provider contexts; and
- Analyze the survey findings from the Youth Count and the Youth Focus Groups and develop targeted strategies to better understand the perceived barriers that unaccompanied homeless youth face when seeking services.

Members of the Barriers to Service for youth under age 18 Working Group include:

- Joan Meschino, Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- Yonina Hoffman-Wanderer, Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- Danielle Ferrier, Rediscovery / JRI
- Representative James O'Day, Massachusetts House of Representatives
- Khadeejah Ahmad, office of Rep. James O'Day
- Danielle Morrow, office of Rep. James O'Day
- Amy Mullen, Department of Children and Families
- Maureen Messeder, Department of Children and Families
- Ann Capoccia, Department of Mental Health
- Kate Federici, Department of Mental Health
- Kelly Turley, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Exa Méndez, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Maurie Bergeron, LUK
- Ayala Livny, Youth on Fire

Members of the LGBTQ Working Group include:

- Carly Burton, MassEquality
- Senator Harriette Chandler, Massachusetts Senate
- Caitlin Golden, Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance
- Diamond McMillion
- Quianna Sarjeant
- Bobbi Taylor, Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition
- Grace Sterling Stowell, Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth
- Kelly Turley, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless

General Services and Housing

The General Services and Housing Working Group is charged with examining the reports of the other Working Groups and creating a preliminary list of recommended services and housing interventions. These services and housing interventions may include augmentations to existing services or novel approaches that would begin to create the Commonwealth's systemic response to the issue of unaccompanied youth homelessness.

Introduction

The General Services and Housing Working Group was tasked by the Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth with completing an analysis of existing resources by service type and assess for gaps. Homeless youth services and housing models are designed to prevent and end youth homelessness by granting access to safe and stable housing through family reunification, kinship care options, youth-focused supportive housing models, or improving life skills and employment to grant youth access to community housing opportunities.

The General Services and Housing Working Group has in the past year:

- Analyzed services and housing currently targeted to unaccompanied homeless youth in Massachusetts (Attachment B);
- Reviewed the data from the Youth Count;
- Worked with Simmons School of Management to create a financial forecasting model (Attachment C); and
- Reviewed national and state policies in order to assess policy areas that could support the expansion of appropriate service and housing resources for unaccompanied homeless youth.

The Working Group's analysis has revealed a scarcity of services and housing targeted toward the unaccompanied homeless youth population in Massachusetts. As shown in Attachment B, there are significant gaps in youth-focused services and housing in many geographic regions of Massachusetts. **Our most significant finding is the need for additional supportive services, shelter, and housing without which, youth will not have access to appropriate and safe critical assistance.**

The Working Group also reviewed the results of the Youth Count, which showed an insufficient spectrum of services and large geographical areas with no beds or services. In addition, the data showed that this population faces challenges in accessing a variety of services including food, shelter and employment for a number of reasons.

Mainstream adult shelter services, as currently structured, are often not appropriate for this population due to their unique developmental stage, as most programs are targeted to adults and not transition-age youth. In addition, what currently exists is not sufficient in some domains. For example, in Hampden County, where the Youth Count found 196 youth meeting the state definition of homeless, there are only 12 shelter beds targeted for this population, which would meet only 6% of the need documented in the small sample size identified through the survey. In addition, Boston was found to have 198 youth meeting the state definition of homeless, but there are only 51 beds available, which would meet only 26% of the need. Cape

Cod and the Islands, which had 46 youth meeting the state definition, do not have any shelter beds targeted to this population in that region.

Examples of supportive services that currently exist in some locations and have shown to have positive outcomes related to increasing access to services, increasing high school graduation rates, improving youth life skills, and expanding access to safe and stable housing includes: (a) street outreach services, (b) intensive case management services, and (c) family-centered therapy and mediation models. Programmatic data and research has supported the implementation of a spectrum of supportive services and youth housing models.¹

Other examples of model programs include emergency shelter programs that are linked with crisis intervention and family reunification services and youth-focused housing models. Emergency shelter programs have proven to be effective in bridging youth back to familial or natural community connections and housing. Youth-focused housing models (single and scattered site, transitional or permanent supportive housing) programs offer youth an opportunity to improve life skills, connect to advancements in education or employment, and remain stable in community housing options. Both program models are designed to help the youth become independent and successful.

Financial Recommendations:

There is a demonstrated need for additional services, shelter, and housing to prevent youth from dropping out of school and/or experiencing further assault, sexual exploitation, and deprivation in street environments in communities across the Commonwealth. The General Services and Housing Working Group recommends an approach to increasing housing and service capacity based on local/regional needs. It is further recommended that Massachusetts consider creating a state office dedicated to vulnerable, homeless youth or passing a state law offering competitive procurement of services and housing targeted to unaccompanied homeless youth, similar to other states.² In addition, based on the Simmons Financial forecast budget

¹ Report to Congress on the Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs, Fiscal Years 2012-2013, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, Washington, DC. 2013. Reviewing positive outcomes and data on a spectrum of intervention service models established by the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act with data reports from the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS). www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/rhy_report_to_congress_fy1213.pdf. Thompson, Sanna J., and others. "Short-Term Outcomes for Youth Receiving Runaway and Homeless Shelter Services." *Research on Social Work Practice*, Vol. 12, No. 5, 2002, pp. 589-603. Straka, Doreen, and others. *Supportive Housing for Youth: A Background of the Issues in the Design and Development of Supportive Housing for Homeless Youth*. New York: Corporation for Supportive Housing, [2002].

² In 2009, there were 21 states that had some type of legislation enacted that covered runaway and homeless youth services. Several state laws include a process for competitive proposals for funding services, shelter and housing (Minnesota State Section 256K.45). ABA Commission on Homelessness and Poverty; the National Network for Youth; Runaway and Homeless Youth and the Law: Model State Statutes. 2009.
(footnote continued)

analysis of all homeless, youth serving agencies across the Commonwealth (budgets obtained by Danielle Ferrier from Rediscovery at JRI), 70% of the services for unaccompanied homeless youth are funded through private dollars while 30% are funded through federal Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) dollars. Due to limited federal resources and limited state resources dedicated to homeless youth, local programs will not be able to significantly create nor necessarily sustain supportive services or expand shelter or housing units without dedicated state or expanded federal funding.

Based on the Simmons School of Management financial modeling (Attachment C), the true cost of each added service or housing model is able to be forecast. This model allows the projection of the costs of adding services or housing. This model easily can be used in conjunction with the Youth Count to identify intervention models and create a reliable forecast of how to fiscally and regionally add services in a responsible manner.

Based on findings of the Youth Count, we recommend that Massachusetts allocate appropriate resources to expand the current spectrum of accountable and evidence-informed models of supportive services, shelter, and youth-focused supportive housing. The Commonwealth should work with current homeless youth-serving agencies and community advocates to identify priority investments within identified appropriation levels.

Policy Recommendations:

There are several policy discussions that could help support some of the above recommended expansion of services/housing.

Massachusetts should ensure that all agencies within Massachusetts that work with unaccompanied homeless youth adopt The Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth's definition and have a clear policy around homeless, unaccompanied and transition-age youth that transcends Secretariats.

The Commission should provide recommendations to blend funding between Secretariats to allow a comprehensive approach to homeless youth who may also be former foster youth, youth involved with the juvenile justice system, youth with mental or intellectual disabilities, or youth victims of human trafficking.

The Department of Housing and Community Development should conduct a summary audit and analysis to determine the proportion of state appropriations for homeless and affordable housing programs that benefits youth populations (individuals and head of households under 25 years old) to ensure youth have access to mainstream housing capital and operating resources.

The state should provide sufficient resources for vulnerable homeless youth, especially those who have aged out of state care and custody and reject voluntary services offered.

www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/division_for_public_services/ABA_Runaway_eBook.authcheckdam.pdf.

The Commission should conduct further research and evaluation of the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) policy and regulations and make recommendations to ensure youth experience no barriers and have ease of access to mainstream financial assistance benefits and service resources for which they are eligible.

Massachusetts should support efforts to increase federal funding levels and reform federal legislation to expand the U.S. Department of Housing Urban Development (HUD) program eligibility to include youth who are couch surfing and under 25 years old and allow youth who are full-time students to be eligible for housing assistance through HUD without having to go through a challenging process to demonstrate financial independence

The state should evaluate the current state policy on emancipation, evaluate the benefits of creating an emancipation status, set up clear guidelines for eligibility and process for emancipation and align the policy with best practice.

Massachusetts should establish policies that would increase access for unaccompanied homeless youth to obtain identification. Some possible options to explore:

- A system of electronic records for those involved with state systems;
- Establishing policies within youth-serving agencies that mandate the provision of documents to youth leaving systems;
- Waiving of fees for homeless youth to obtain state issued identification; or
- Evaluate if state/federal law allows for the expansion of proof of identity and residency to permit the use of a state issued ID card.

Upcoming Activities:

In the Spring of 2015, the Commission will partner with the Boston University School of Social (BU SSW) work to complete a project where BU SSW Students will analyze the federal (HUD, SNAP, and McKinney-Vento) and state (EOHHS, DCF, DMH, DDS, DTA, and DHCD) level policies that relate to housing/services for youth under 25 years old to determine if the policies have the unintended consequence of creating barriers to services for unaccompanied homeless youth. This evaluation will also include an assessment regarding why Massachusetts state agencies do not currently have consistency related to age eligibility requirements as youth transition from child-serving to adult-serving agencies.

Following the analysis, the students will make recommendations for policy changes to rectify barriers created through policy. These recommendations will be summarized in a white paper.

The Working Group will continue reviewing and analyzing existing state and federal law such as fair housing laws, HUD regulations, education regulations, consistency between age limits, and public assistance benefits and recommend further areas for advocacy.

The Working Group will partner with other states and continue to improve the approach and methodologies of the state-wide count to achieve greater accuracy in determining the incidence of youth experiencing homelessness. This work may involve the development of an interstate working group of service professionals, advocates, and academic researchers.

Members of the General Services and Housing Working Groups include:

December, 2014

- Co-Chair, Lisa Goldsmith, DIAL/SELF Youth and Community Services
- Co-Chair, Danielle Ferrier, Rediscovery/JRI, Taskforce on Youth Aging Out
- Richard Hooks-Wayman, LUK
- Maurie Bergeron, LUK
- Ann Capoccia, Department of Mental Health
- Senator Harriette Chandler, Massachusetts Senate
- Rose Evans, Department of Housing and Community Development
- Caitlin Golden, Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance
- Yonina Hoffman-Wanderer, MA Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- Ayala Livny, Youth on Fire
- Exa Méndez, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Joan Meschino, MA Appleseed Center for Law and Justice
- Linn Torto, Health and Human Services Consultant
- Kelly Turley, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Andrea Cendrowski, Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance