



Statement for the Record
of
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Los Angeles, California

on behalf of the

National Network for Youth

before the
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
Committee on Financial Services
U.S. House of Representatives

October 11, 2007 Hearing on
*Reauthorization of the
McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*

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Statement Summary

Part I – About the National Network for Youth

The National Network for Youth is a membership organization that champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services.

PART II – Unaccompanied Youth Primer

Runaway and homeless youth are the most vulnerable of our nation's disconnected youth. Between one million and three million U.S. youth experience an unaccompanied situation annually. Unaccompanied youth become detached from parents, guardians and other caring adults due to a combination of family and community stressors.

Part III – Unaccompanied Youth and HUD McKinney-Vento Programs

It is without question that homeless youth organizations should be able to turn to the McKinney-Vento programs of the U.S. Department of Housing as a source for financing the housing and services needs of homeless youth.

Recently, pressure has been turned on homeless youth providers to maintain their HUD McKinney-Vento funds in the context of the Administration's chronic homelessness initiative.

Part IV – HUD McKinney-Vento Reauthorization

HUD McKinney-Vento programs could support more young people if Congress would roll-back current restrictive administrative policies, strengthen the law so that all homeless subpopulations may have equal access to HUD McKinney-Vento funds, and increase authorization and appropriations levels.

The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (H.R. 840) meets NN4Y's basic criteria for reauthorization of HUD McKinney-Vento programs. As such it enjoys our full support.

The Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act (S. 1518) misses the mark on most of our criteria for McKinney-Vento reauthorization. Accordingly, NN4Y does not yet support S. 1518. We hope that the full Senate will improve it prior to passage.

Part V – Beyond HUD McKinney-Vento

Reauthorization of HUD McKinney-Vento must be considered just one part of a larger effort to prevent and end homelessness, including youth homelessness. Congress must take bold steps, such as those offered in the **Place to Call Home Act**. **We encourage Members of Congress to join as co-sponsors to the Place to Call Home Act**. We call on this Subcommittee to hold a hearing on that bill's permanent housing provisions

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Part I – About the National Network for Youth

The Network for Youth is pleased to testify before the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity at its hearings on reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. It is an honor for us to testify, as it is the first opportunity in the 33-year history of the National Network to appear before this Committee.

The **National Network for Youth** (NN4Y), founded in 1974, is a nonprofit membership organization that **champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services**. NN4Y provides its members and the general public education, networking, training, materials and policy advocacy with federal, state, and local lawmakers. NN4Y is committed to ensuring that opportunities for development and permanence be made available to youth who face greater odds due to abuse, neglect, exploitation, homelessness, lack of resources, community prejudice, differing abilities, barriers to learning, and other life challenges.

NN4Y's membership includes community-based, faith-based, and public organizations that provide an array of services to youth and families in the U.S. states and territories as well as some international locations. NN4Y's organization members provide the full gamut of preventive, interventive, and developmental supports to youth and families in high-risk situations, including street-based crisis intervention, emergency shelter, transitional and independent living arrangements, permanent housing, individual and family counseling, lifeskills, parenting, and health and wellness education, physical and mental health treatment and care, and education, workforce development, arts, and recreation services. Collectively, NN4Y member organizations serve over 2.5 million youth annually. In addition, youth, youth workers, and regional and state networks of youth-serving organizations belong to NN4Y.

We were founded as the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services to be the membership association of grantees funded under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. The bulk of our organization members continue to provide housing and services to youth in runaway and homeless situations. **Many of our members participate in the continuum of care planning processes used nationwide to distribute HUD McKinney-Vento funds. Some of our members are HUD McKinney-Vento project sponsors.** Others have had projects rejected because homeless youth are sometimes (and erroneously) viewed as the sole responsibility of public systems other than housing and homeless assistance, even though those very systems may decline to serve youth. It is from that base of experience that we offer recommendations for strengthening HUD McKinney-Vento programs.

Part II – Unaccompanied Youth Primer

Runaway and homeless youth are the most vulnerable of our nation’s “disconnected” youth. We refer to these two populations collectively as “unaccompanied youth.” Like other disconnected youth, unaccompanied youth experience separation from one or more of the key societal institutions of family, school, community, and the workplace. Their disconnection is accentuated by their lack of a permanent place to live, which is not only disruptive in and of itself, but also indicative of the larger socioeconomic instability they are experiencing.

Between one million and three million of our nation’s youth experience an unaccompanied situation annually, according to various estimates derived from government studies and data sets. Some of these estimates do not include young adults ages 18 and older within their scope.

Unaccompanied youth become detached from parents, guardians and other caring adults – legally, economically, and emotionally – due to a combination of family and community stressors.

Family Stressors – Many of our nation’s unaccompanied youth are compelled to leave their home environments prematurely due to severe family conflict, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by an adult in the home, parental neglect, parental substance abuse, parental mental illness. For other youth, the values and traditions with which their families operate prescribe that the young person separate economically from the family unit upon reaching the legal age of majority or after graduation, in some cases regardless of whether the youth is actually prepared for independent adulthood. Others are expelled from the home due to parental inability to accept the sexual orientation, parenting status, mental or addictive disability, or normal adolescent behavior of their child. For still other young people, their families are simply too poor to continue to bear the financial burden of providing for the youth’s basic needs. Others are abandoned as their parents are incarcerated. Youth in families that are experiencing homelessness may be separated from the family unit—and become homeless on their own—so that emergency shelter or domestic violence services can be secured for the remaining family members, or to squeeze most of the family into means of habitation that are too small for all of its members.

Community Stressors – State custodial systems – including child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, addiction treatment, and developmental disabilities—which have responsibility for ensuring the safety and protection of children and youth who are not properly cared for by parents and guardians – are failing in general to accept older youth into their custody due to financial limitations and policy disincentives. Many of the young people who do come in contact with public custodial systems are not adequately prepared for independence and residential stability during their period of custody nor provided an aftercare arrangement to support them after the custodial relationship has ended. Many of these young people have no home environment to which to return. Youth with mental illness,

addiction, and other disabilities face discrimination when searching for an independent living arrangement.

Many unaccompanied youth who are psychosocially prepared for independent adulthood are not economically ready for self-sufficiency. Inadequate educational preparation, lack of employment skills, short or non-existent work histories, language barriers, and undocumented immigration status all contribute to the relegation of many youth to unemployment or to low-wage jobs—neither of which generate income sufficient for acquiring affordable housing.

Policy barriers also stand in the way of permanency for unaccompanied youth. In some jurisdictions, youth below the age of majority are prohibited from entering into leases or other contracts on their own behalf. "One strike" laws prohibit individuals with criminal histories from residency in public and assisted housing and prohibit juvenile ex-offenders from returning to their families. And, federal, state, and local public and assisted housing programs rank young people low, if at all, among their priority populations for assistance.

Regardless of the causal factor, unaccompanied youth, when left to fend for themselves without support, experience poor health, educational, and workforce outcomes which imperil their prospects for positive adulthood. This results in their long-term dependency on or involvement in public health, social service, emergency assistance, and corrections systems.

Part III – Unaccompanied Youth and HUD McKinney-Vento Programs

The federal government, through the **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act** (RHYA) has established funding streams to support outreach, family reunification, shelter, and transitional living programs targeted to unaccompanied youth, all in an effort to provide a basic level of support for these vulnerable young people regardless of the state in which they are living.

Federal RHYA programs are a substantial and reliable funding stream to homeless youth organizations. But they do have limits. Among them:

- Youth emergency shelters receiving federal RHYA funds may only serve youth through age 17. These shelters are not available to young adults.
- The RHYA does not authorize funds for grants for supportive services only, other than street outreach. RHYA is not a suitable funding source for homeless organizations that have residential services capacity for youth and are looking for a supportive services match.
- RHYA grant awards are capped by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at \$200,000, far below the actual cost of operating a program. RHYA grantees must secure funds from other sources to operate high-quality programs.

More housing and services for homeless youth are needed across the Nation. The basic living needs of too many of our nation's unaccompanied youth are not being met through state and local child welfare systems or permanent housing and homeless assistance programs. Furthermore, few states have established funding streams targeted to unaccompanied youth. RHYA basic center and transitional living projects served approximately 55,000 youth in FY 2005, yet estimates of the U.S. unaccompanied youth population are one million at minimum, suggesting that at least approximately 950,000 of the nation's unaccompanied youth are not able to access RHYA services.

It is without question then that homeless youth organizations should be able to access McKinney-Vento programs of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as an additional source for financing the housing and services needs of homeless youth. HUD McKinney-Vento programs do provide some communities an invaluable source of financial assistance for housing opportunities and services supports for homeless youth. The programs finance services that complement programs for homeless youth initiated through federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) programs, or that develop housing and services for young adults not eligible for RHYA housing due to age limitations within that program.

None of the victories homeless youth providers have achieved in accessing HUD McKinney-Vento funds have come easily. **For years homeless youth advocates and providers had to fight hard just to get seats at the homeless assistance planning tables in their community.** Then they had to earn the community's grudging support for our project proposals. We have even had to contest HUD policy, since reversed, which established that HUD McKinney-Vento funds could not be used for unaccompanied minors because those minors "should" be the responsibility of parents or legal guardians, or of child welfare systems.

More recently, pressure has been turned on homeless youth providers to maintain their HUD McKinney-Vento funds in the context of the Administration's chronic homelessness initiative. The initiative has pushed communities to direct more of their HUD McKinney-Vento funds to permanent supportive housing for a precisely targeted subset of the homeless population – one that completely excludes unaccompanied homeless minors, as well as families with children and youth.

Part IV – HUD McKinney-Vento Reauthorization

HUD McKinney-Vento programs are critical to bringing emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent housing, and supportive services to some homeless youth and young adults. **HUD McKinney-Vento programs could support more young people if Congress would roll-back current restrictive administrative policies, strengthen the law so that all homeless subpopulations may have equal access to HUD McKinney-Vento funds, and increase authorization**

and appropriations levels for the programs. These represent our general principles for judging reauthorization measures being considered by Congress.

Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act

The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (H.R. 840) meets our basic criteria for reauthorization of HUD McKinney-Vento programs. As such it enjoys our full support.

Among the provisions particularly helpful to homeless youth and young adults, the HEARTH Act:

- **Amends the HUD definition of homeless individual to encompass the diverse living arrangements of youth and young adults in homeless situations.**

The definition of “homeless individual” in the McKinney-Vento statute restricts the meaning of that term to persons living on the street, emergency shelters, and other locations not fit for human habitation. Excluded from this definition – and thus from federal homeless assistance for which eligibility is conditioned on the individual meeting the McKinney-Vento criteria for homelessness – are individuals and families living in the housing of others due to loss of housing or economic hardship, and in motels, hotels, and campgrounds when there is no adequate alternative accommodation.

Shared housing and motels are the very living arrangements commonly deployed by unaccompanied youth, due to factors such as: 1) the lack of youth-specific shelters in the community; 2) no vacancy in youth shelters in the community; 3) prohibitions on mixing minors and adults, and young adult reluctance to live in shelters with older adults; 4) shelter admission policies that may serve to deny a youth or young adult from entry, such as age restrictions on children in the shelter, sobriety requirements, immigration status, and other factors; and 4) developmental, linguistic, or cultural weaknesses of the shelter that make the placement unsuitable for the youth.

Exclusion of shared housing and motel/hotel/campground living arrangements from the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless individual renders HUD and other federal homeless assistance programs that use the HUD definition inaccessible to thousands of homeless youth and young adults annually.

The primary objection to adding additional living arrangements to the HUD definition of homelessness appears to be that so doing will create greater competition for limited funds among all homeless populations and will require a tremendous infusion of public funding. The National Network for Youth views the definition issue as matters of inclusion and equity within the HUD McKinney-Vento program and of service coordination between HUD and other homeless assistance programs. Resource implications of supporting persons in shared housing and other

“non-covered” living arrangements exist currently and merit Congressional response regardless of whether we describe them as homeless or merely as very poorly housed.

- **Restores flexibility to geographic areas to select project sponsors among all eligible activities and eligible subpopulations, without federal priorities, preferences, incentives or bonuses.**

Current federal homeless assistance policy (evidenced by the chronic homelessness initiative, the 30 percent set-aside, and the permanent housing bonus) has created both a perception and practice of favoritism of some people experiencing homelessness over others. This direction is leading both lawmakers and the general public to differentiate in a practically and emotionally damaging way between the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor.”

The consequences of homelessness do not discriminate based on one’s disability status. Exposure to inclement weather, physical and verbal abuse, theft of one’s belongings, communicable diseases, and loss of esteem affect all people without safe places to live. All homeless persons need permanent places to live for their survival, safety, stability, economic viability, and quality of life. And no homeless subpopulation has easier access to mainstream housing assistance than other subpopulations – it is extremely difficult for all people experiencing homelessness.

In the case of unaccompanied youth and young adults, their barriers to mainstream housing assistance include laws that prohibit minors from entering into leases; lack of savings to pay security deposits and first month rent; low-wage work or school enrollment that do not generate income at levels needed to pay rent; and subsidized housing eligibility requirements that place working persons (including youth and young adults) without children at a disadvantage in terms of housing access. There are no easy “work-arounds” to these barriers other than the development of permanent housing assistance targeted explicitly to youth and young adults.

The current HUD practice of reserving at least 30 percent of McKinney-Vento resources for permanent housing solely for persons with disabilities has nearly entirely foreclosed the McKinney-Vento program as a financing source for permanent housing opportunities for homeless youth.

- **Requires geographic areas to establish community homeless assistance planning boards.**

We support current practice and the HEARTH Act requirement that geographic areas seeking HUD McKinney-Vento funds establish community homeless assistance planning boards for the purposes of identifying service gaps, prioritizing needs, completing applications for funding to HUD, and monitoring funded projects within the geographic area. The scope of stakeholders that HEARTH indicates should be considered for inclusion in the community boards has our full support, particularly

language around the expected participation of people experiencing homelessness, people formerly experiencing homelessness, and relatives of homeless persons; advocates for unaccompanied youth; homeless education liaisons, and grantees under other federal homeless assistance programs.

Some homeless youth organizations report difficulty in being included in the continuums of care covering the geographic areas in which they operate programs. Continuums of Care are established not solely to develop an application for HUD McKinney-Vento funds, but also to serve as planning and decision-making bodies on homelessness generally. As such, the special concerns and resources of homeless youth and homeless youth-serving organizations must be part of those community deliberations.

We recommend that grantees under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program be added as required members of collaborative applicants. Also, regional or local units of state child welfare agencies and state juvenile justice agencies should be added as members of collaborative applicants.

- **Includes family support and discharge planning as eligible prevention activities.**

There is widespread interest within Congress and stakeholder groups to add homelessness prevention as an eligible activity for HUD McKinney-Vento funds. In the context of youth homelessness, prevention is not limited to financial assistance for eviction prevention, utility payments, or relocation assistance to new permanent housing. It should also include family strengthening services to keep youth from leaving their families and family support to help youth reunite with them. It may also mean pre-release and post-release planning to ensure youth exiting child welfare and juvenile justice settings are released into stable living arrangements.

- **Establishes community board duties helpful to homeless youth and children.** We support requirements that applicants and grantees for HUD McKinney-Vento funds address in their applications and progress reports compliance with the following worthy expectations:
 - Expectation that applicants provide in their application plans reviews of local policies and practices related to discharge planning from institutions, including child welfare and juvenile justice facilities; access to mainstream benefits and services; and zoning and land use policy and practices.
 - Expectations that applicants make plans and report progress on steps taken in the geographic area of the applicant to eliminate laws that penalize persons experiencing homelessness based upon their status as homeless, including their status as runaway or homeless youth.
 - Expectation that collaborative applicants review the policies and practices related to school section and enrollment to ensure that homeless children and youth and their parents are able to exercise their educational rights under the education title of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

- Expectation that collaborative applicants review the policies and practices related to the placement of families with homeless children and youth in emergency shelters to ensure that the young persons are placed as close as possible to their school of origin.
- Inclusion within collaborative applicants' performance reports information about the numbers of children and youth served by the applicant and children and youth reunited with their families by the applicant.

Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act

The Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act (S. 1518), as passed by the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, misses the mark on most of our criteria for McKinney-Vento reauthorization. Accordingly, we do not yet support S. 1518. We hope the full Senate will improve CPEHA prior to passage.

Among the provisions of CPEHA for which we seek improvement:

- **Definition of Homeless Individual.** The Committee-approved amendments to the definition of homeless individual are an improvement over current law and merit commendation. That being acknowledged, we do not support clauses in these newly-eligible living arrangements that require people to have changed primary residences three or more times in the past year or two or more times in the past 21 days in order to be considered homeless. First, these clauses would force people to move repeatedly before they could become eligible for homeless assistance, or to delay homeless assistance to them until after they have moved repeatedly. Second, it will be difficult for homeless people to prove, and homeless service providers to verify, multiple moves.
- **Community Homeless Assistance Planning Boards.** We are disappointed that the Committee-approved bill neither requires collaborative applicants to form community boards nor elaborates for collaborative applicants the range of stakeholders that should be involved in planning and application development.
- **Permanent Housing Set-Asides.** The Committee-approved bill preserves the permanent housing set-aside for persons with disabilities and adds a permanent housing set-aside for homeless families. Still missing from any set-aside are homeless individuals without disabilities, which would include unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults without disabilities. We prefer the curtailment of permanent housing set-asides.
- **Selection Criteria.** The Committee-approved bill eliminated from the original bill many of the application selection criteria that would have been helpful to homeless children and youth.

Family Unification – One provision in CPEHA which we do favor is its prohibition on HUD McKinney-Vento-funded family shelters and family

housing from denying admission of a whole family or a youth member of the family on the basis of the age of any of the children. This practice is harmful to families and is a causal factor of youth homelessness. It must be stopped. **We urge the Financial Services Committee to include equivalent language in the HEARTH Act prior to passage.**

PART V – Beyond Homeless Assistance

Reauthorization of HUD McKinney-Vento must be considered just one part of a larger effort to prevent and end homelessness, including youth homelessness.

Congress must take bold steps, such as those offered in the **Place to Call Home Act**. The Place to Call Home Act (H.R. 3409) is comprehensive legislation to prevent, respond to, and end runaway and homeless situations among youth. The bill includes provisions in the homeless assistance, housing, child welfare, juvenile justice, public health, education, workforce investment, teen parenting, and immigration areas. **We encourage Members of Congress to join as co-sponsors to the Place to Call Home Act.**

The bill's permanent housing provisions include:

- An increase in budget authority under the project rental assistance component of the Housing Choice Voucher program to finance 20,000 rental assistance vouchers for homeless youth. The vouchers would be administered by Runaway and Homeless Youth Act grantees. (Sec. 601)
- Removal of the 18-month time limit on Family Unification vouchers for transitioning foster care youth. (Sec. 602)
- Extension of eligibility for Family Unification vouchers to transitioning foster care youth through age 24. (Sec. 602)
- A requirement that states and localities include youth and young adults as a special needs population in their public housing agency plans and their comprehensive housing affordability strategies. (Sec. 603)
- A requirement that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a study on housing assistance to low-income youth. (Sec. 606)
- Amendments to federal "one-strike" eviction and screening laws to prohibit public housing authorities from excluding or evicting the entire families or households of persons with criminal records. (Sec. 104)
- A Sense of Congress that the States shall establish a right for minors to enter into contracts for necessities without parental consent. (Sec. 604)

Adoption of these provisions as a stand-alone measure or by integrating them into permanent housing legislation moving through Congress will make a decisive impact in reducing youth homelessness. **We urge the Financial Services Committee to begin the process of considering these recommendations by holding a hearing on the permanent housing needs of the nation's youth and young adults.**

Witness Biography

Elizabeth Gomez, MSW

Executive Director

Los Angeles Youth Network, Los Angeles, California

Ms. Gomez is currently the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Youth Network, a private non-profit organization providing services to runaway, homeless and foster care youth. Her specialized training includes comprehensive program development for runaway, homeless and foster youth. Ms. Gomez has worked with youth since 1980. She has a comprehensive background in residential youth programs, from mandated judicial placement to voluntary entry. She serves on community advisory boards as well as private and state boards. Ms. Gomez has also presented at conferences and provided training regarding youth issues, youth development, prevention, crisis intervention, suicide intervention, stress management and program development. In addition she provides technical assistance to youth programs both locally and nationally.

EDUCATION

M.S.W. – California State University, Long Beach

B.S.W. - Syracuse University, New York

EXPERIENCE

Executive Director - Los Angeles Youth Network

Program Director - Los Angeles Youth Network

Shelter Coordinator - Los Angeles Youth Network

Asst. Director of Youth Services - Travelers Aid Society of Los Angeles/Teen Canteen

Case Manager - Travelers Aid Society of Los Angeles/Teen Canteen

Residential Supervisor - Better Outlook Center, Florida

Youth Aide - State of New York, Limited Security Facility

AFFILIATIONS

Board Member – The California Wellness Foundation

Chair, Board of Directors - California Coalition for Youth

Past Board Member – Hollywood Chamber of Commerce

Past Commissioner - California State Commission on Juvenile Justice Crime & Delinquency Prevention

Past Advisory Board Member - Violence Prevention Initiative, The California Wellness Foundation

Past Steering Committee Member - California Youth Authority Status

Offender Task Force