

**Testimony of
David Baker, Youth Advocate, National Network for Youth
Hearing on “Strengthening Federal Support to End Youth Homelessness.”**

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services
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Good afternoon Subcommittee Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today.

My name is David Baker and I am a proud Youth Advisory Council Member with National Network for Youth and a Support Specialist with the YMCA Youth & Family Services department in San Diego, California. I am eager to advocate for young people experiencing homelessness in America and to share with you the impact that two Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs had on my life.

I came here from San Diego to demonstrate the potential of opportunity youth, when given the tools and resources, and am eager to express the value and absolute necessity of federal programs like the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. I have not only reaped the benefits as a youth in need, but I am now a provider who uses my lived experience to develop my organization’s basic center, transitional living, and street outreach programs.

I come from a background of extreme-poverty and intergenerational homelessness. This means that my mother was born into homelessness and her mother was also born into homelessness. The trauma that my mother incurred from her childhood led her to cope with alcohol and drug use. This toxic mix of covering trauma with substance use kept us living in shelters or out of a suitcase in some stranger’s home.

Unfortunately, there was no place to help my mother address her trauma. The shelter would kick us out for bed rotation at 7 in the morning and the liquor store was open by 9. I would go to school knowing that my only support system would be broken by the time I got out. All I wanted was peace for her because I knew it would mean stability for me.

I recognized the vulnerability of our situation and I became my mother’s protector. I knew that all she had to combat traffickers, drug dealers and abusive boyfriends was little 9 year old me. Nobody would recognize the abuse that I endured because the bruises were inside, on my mind and soul. I would do absolutely anything to avoid indicating to anyone that I was in such a predicament because I didn’t want to be taken away from my mother, so I internalized this trauma like my mother did when she was a child and the cycle of unhealed trauma continued.

Food, housing and financial insecurity continued to plague my household and by 16 years old I understood that we just didn't have enough resources to meet my basic needs. So instead of being a burden on my already struggling mother, I chose to run away. I didn't know where I was headed, but I knew that I would have to break the cycle if things were ever going to be different. I know now, that this is an extremely common occurrence where a youth's living conditions are so bad that they see the streets as a place of opportunity.

However, what I found on the street was the opposite of opportunity. I found the threat of imprisonment, trafficking and even death. My stark reality created a hopelessness that led me down a path of destruction that intersected with the juvenile and adult justice system on multiple occasions.

Years went by with no diversion opportunities or support offered to me and I found myself couch surfing as a freshman in college. After hurdling the barriers to be able to receive financial aid as a homeless youth, I got my first check and bought an old car that I could sleep in. This became my home; the backseat was my bedroom; the passenger seat was my kitchen and the San Diego County Sheriff was my alarm clock waking me up every morning to remind me that my safe place was temporary.

After completing multiple homeless vulnerability assessments, I still found myself sleeping in the backseat of my car. I came to realize that there just weren't enough housing opportunities for non-foster homeless youth. Also, as a young person, I didn't want to enter a traditional adult HUD shelter or program because I didn't identify with the population there and I did not feel safe. This living situation continued until I received a call from a YMCA Youth & Family service transitional living program that could house me for a year and a half. This opportunity completely changed the trajectory of my life.

My apartment was state of the art with stainless steel appliances and hardwood floors, which displayed a level of care that I was unfamiliar to. This space was designed with dignity. I found myself surrounded by trauma-informed professionals who genuinely wanted the best for me. For the first time ever, I had a support system that was not broken or damaged.

During my time in the transitional living program I became very intentional about my personal development. I earned an associate's degree in business management and another in sociology. I also used my experience as a homeless youth to help my peers. YMCA Youth & Family Services recognized my goodwill and hired me on as a peer-support specialist. I flourished in that role and was soon promoted to a position that allowed me to have more of an impact on the services we provided.

Today, I facilitate workshops across San Diego County that teach essential tools to youth in our basic center and transitional living programs to address their trauma. My wellness workshops include skills like emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and thoughtful decision-making. I also hold an entrepreneur workshop that features a comprehensive crash course on financial literacy. This information was transformative for me as a youth and I am grateful to be a service

provider teaching these tools and skills and being a real-life example of what youth can overcome and achieve with access to these services and housing.

I am here today to ask you to help other young people like me who are all across America. There are so many of us who need these programs, but don't have access to one because the federal investment is so small compared to the need. Please know that every dollar you invest, tells a young person like me, that they are not defined by their family or life circumstances. You tell a young person that their potential and dreams matter and should be given a chance to flourish. When you invest in us, our entire society benefits.

Through programs funded by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act I was given a foundation to build a life of prosperity. I was given a chance to change my family history forever. Before, I was a hopeless youth with no hope in sight, but today I am so much more than a statistic. I am a taxpayer, an exceptional entrepreneur, and last but certainly not least, I am an advocate.

Sincerely,

David Baker