

**Testimony of
Dr. Melinda Giovengo, PhD, CEO & President of YouthCare
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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Introduction

Good afternoon Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Runway and Homeless Youth Act.

My name is Dr. Melinda Giovengo. For over thirteen years, I have had the privilege of serving as the CEO of YouthCare, one of the largest providers for youth and young adults, ages 12-24, experiencing homelessness in Washington State. I also serve as the Board Chair for the National Network for Youth.

I am honored to share testimony about YouthCare’s work and our support for the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

About YouthCare

YouthCare works to end youth homelessness and to ensure that young people are valued for who they are and empowered to achieve their potential. Founded in 1974, YouthCare was one of the first shelters to serve runaway and homeless youth on the West Coast. Dovetailing with the initial passage of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), YouthCare was also among the first agencies in the nation to receive federal funds for the Basic Center Program authorized through RHYA. Over the past four decades, YouthCare has defined best practices and developed programs that set a national standard for excellence.

YouthCare currently operates fourteen physical sites, which includes our founding Basic Center Program, the Adolescent Shelter. YouthCare serves over 1,500 youth and young adults each year and operates a \$16.7M annual budget. Public dollars comprise approximately 66% of YouthCare’s funding, with almost 20% coming from federal funds.

Through a combination of individualized services tailored to young people’s needs and a trusting relationship with a caring adult, YouthCare ensures that young people experiencing homelessness achieve long-term stability. YouthCare’s comprehensive range of services includes shelter and transitional housing, education and employment training, street outreach and engagement services, and prevention services.

YouthCare's Unique History & Services

From its inception, YouthCare was dedicated to serving populations that were disproportionately at-risk of homelessness, with an emphasis on helping minors, young people who identified as LGBTQ, and young people who were being trafficked and/or sexually exploited. The goal was always to help young people stabilize, build skills, and reconcile with family if safe and possible.

- **Focus on minors experiencing homelessness**

YouthCare's founding Basic Center Program, the Adolescent Shelter, helps minors experiencing homelessness access shelter and reunite with family whenever safe. In 1999, YouthCare bolstered its services for minors by opening a RHYA-funded transitional living program for under-18 adolescents called Pathways.

RHYA Basic Center Programs, like the Adolescent Shelter, and RHYA Transitional Living Programs for minors, like Pathways, fill a unique need—not just in King County, but also in the state and the nation. Across the U.S., states are grappling with a pervasive system gap: how to support teens who may not meet the threshold for state dependency—or may meet the threshold but cannot access foster care due to lack of capacity or will—but cannot go home for myriad reasons (e.g., safety, rejection, poverty, family homelessness, chemical dependency or mental health issues in the home, caregiver death, or incarceration).

YouthCare's Adolescent Shelter immediately helps young people who may be experiencing trauma, sexual exploitation, abuse, or neglect. The 24/7 Shelter increases young people's personal safety and socio-emotional well-being while working to ease underlying family conflict. Yet family reconciliation, particularly in the face of trauma, is hardly a linear process, and cannot always be achieved within a short period of time. For this reason, YouthCare supports extending the length of stay at Basic Center Programs from 21 days to 30 days, and longer if permitted by state licensing.

For some youth, however, family reconciliation may simply be unfeasible or unsafe. These youth, who account for a quarter of youth staying in YouthCare's under-18 shelters, often find themselves "shelter hopping"—bouncing from shelter to shelter every month, staying the maximum amount of time allowed, until, if they are lucky, securing a solution that is more permanent. In King County, that alternative is YouthCare's Pathways Transitional Living Program. Unfortunately, there are just nine longer-term beds for all minors experiencing homelessness in the County. There is a dire need for increased RHYA investments in longer-term transitional living programs for minors in both the County and the nation.

- **Focus on LGBTQ youth**

LGBTQ youth are disproportionately at risk of homelessness. Approximately one third of unaccompanied young people in King County identify as LGBTQ; across the nation, estimates of LGBTQ homeless youth reach as high as 40%.ⁱ Research conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago revealed that LGBTQ homeless youth face higher levels of adversity: 38% reported being forced to have sex (compared to 15% for non-LGBTQ youth), and 64% reported being exposed to stigma or discrimination within their family (compared to 37%).ⁱⁱ These risks underscore the need to include gender-affirming and non-discrimination language in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

In 1998, YouthCare opened Ravenna House, a groundbreaking program for LGBTQ-identified young adults. Ravenna House was, and remains, the only RHYA-supported transitional living program specifically developed for LGBTQ young adults in Washington State. The program focuses on gender-responsive services that acknowledge, affirm, and celebrate young people's gender identity and sexual orientation. Both the RHYA Street Outreach Program grant and the RHYA Transitional Living Program grant support YouthCare's Street Outreach Program and Ravenna House to this day.

- **Focus on trafficked youth**

Young people living on the streets are at extreme risk of exploitation and trafficking. About one fifth of homeless youth report being trafficked and over one third report experiencing violence or sexual assault while homeless.^{iii iv}

In 1988, YouthCare was one of the five organizations in the nation to secure a demonstration grant through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) focused on helping street youth who were being trafficked or victimized through sexual exploitation. The grant enabled YouthCare to launch its Threshold Program, which served commercial sexually exploited children (CSEC) through a continuum of care including shelter, housing, case management, education and employment training. YouthCare operates similar services today through the Bridge Continuum.

Under the Bridge Continuum, every YouthCare employee attends a two-day training on identifying and serving the unique needs of CSEC. YouthCare holds dedicated beds for CSEC and has specialized case managers that work with CSEC to heal and move forward. Additionally, YouthCare manages the Bridge Collaborative, a multi-agency partnership across King County that provides case management, support, and resources to youth and young adults experiencing sexual exploitation and human trafficking, including sex and labor trafficking. YouthCare is very supportive of the recommendations to add provisions to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act around

identification, data collection, and service provision for young people experiencing trafficking in persons and sexual exploitation.

- **Focus on at-risk and overrepresented populations**

All YouthCare staff are trained in the evidence-based frameworks of harm reduction and trauma-informed care, as well as strengths-based practices. In addition to LGBTQ and trafficked young people, YouthCare tailors its services to populations that are disproportionately at risk of homelessness, including youth of color, youth exiting systems of care in the justice system, child welfare, or behavioral health facilities, youth with undiagnosed and untreated mental health and/or chemical dependency issues, youth who are pregnant and parenting, and immigrant and refugee youth.

Why is the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act so critical?

Just as young people's risks while couch-surfing or living on the streets are unique, so too, are their needs. Neuroscience has shown that young people's brains are still rapidly developing and do not reach maturation until 25.^v Moreover, young people are at the onset of adulthood: not only do they lack credit, rental, and employment histories, but many also lack the basic life-skills to successfully thrive on their own. For these reasons, the strategies, interventions, and outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness must vary from those for adults experiencing homelessness.

- **Definitions of homelessness**

Young people are the most vulnerable during their first night on the street—and, in many cases, their first hour. If we can prevent youth from experiencing homelessness, or get them off the streets as soon as possible, we curb the risk of traumatization and long-term homelessness. Early intervention and prevention must be a core strategy to ending youth and young adult homelessness.

Unfortunately, the definitions of homelessness used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) make prevention services challenging and do not reflect young people's unique needs. HUD directs communities to prioritize homelessness services for those who fall within Category 1 of homelessness, or "literal homelessness." Both the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED), however, use a more inclusive definition of homelessness that recognizes temporarily staying with others and other forms of homelessness as homeless episodes that are eligible for services. This inclusivity is critical: homelessness is a fluid experience for youth and families, and the definition of homelessness determines which services and systems communities can—or cannot—access or design.

HHS and ED’s definition of homelessness more accurately represents both the need and nature of homelessness—and affords broader access to a continuum of shelter and housing services. For example, under RHYA a young person exiting a YouthCare shelter can move into a YouthCare RHYA-funded transitional living program. Under HUD’s definition of homelessness, that same young person would need to exit the shelter into homelessness to meet the definition of “literal homelessness” and become eligible for housing. In other words, the HHS definition of homelessness prevents homelessness; HUD’s definition promotes the creation of homelessness and penalizes young people’s access to emergency services.

- **Performance outcomes**

The performance outcomes used by HUD are similarly problematic for young people. HUD measures success through the narrow lens of permanent housing. RHYA, however, uses “safe and stable housing,” which is more reflective of developmental trends. Indeed, the majority of young adults 18-24 in the U.S. do not live in housing considered permanent. Nearly a quarter of the population has the ability to live with their parents long-term; many others are living in transitional or stable housing (e.g. college dormitories).^{vi} Moreover, according to the U.S. Census, young adults move more than any other generation (accounting for over 43% of movers), and migration patterns increase with economic instability.^{vii} Stable housing is thus a more appropriate outcome measure for this population.

Moreover, “success” is multi-faceted and looks different based on age, cognitive levels, and socio-emotional needs. RHYA’s program outcomes and three-pillar approach of outreach, shelter, and transition living programs are customized to young people’s developmental needs. RHYA broadens its scope of success, measuring progress through the four categories of safe and stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, and social and emotional well-being.

For all these reasons, I ask Congress to bolster and elevate the value of an investment in these vital Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs, as the HHS approach to serving youth is what our young people need.

Funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

National research authorized by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found a staggeringly high prevalence of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in America: at least 700,000 minors and 3.5 million 18 to 25 year-olds experienced some form of homelessness in America per year. That amounts to 1 in 10 young adults ages 18-25 and 1 in 30 youth ages 13-17.^{viii}

RHYA is the only federal funding source geared toward the housing, socio-emotional, and educational needs of this population; however, RHYA's vital community-based services are woefully underfunded. The most recent appropriation for RHYA was \$127 million, which equals a mere \$30 per young person investment in the life of a young person experiencing homelessness. This level of funding is far from the investment truly needed to transform young people's lives—and stem the cycle of chronic homelessness, intergenerational poverty, and toxic trauma.

Conclusion

I've done this work now for more than 35 years. What keeps me going is knowing that, every day, we change lives. Allow me to end with the words of one of our young people, Triston Spears:

Before I came to YouthCare, I was homeless. I was relying on anything to survive. Anything you could imagine in order to find a meal to eat—a snack—or a few bucks to get to where I needed to go.

It was ugly. I was depressed. Sad. Desperate. I felt abandoned and lacked support. I was eager to make something better of myself, but I didn't know how to do it.

Fortunately, I had a friend that was a part of YouthCare, and she referred me to a woman working at YouthCare.

If I needed food, clothing—anything—I always knew I could reach out to YouthCare. If I needed help, most of the time, my case manager, Joe, had it or he could put me in the direction of where to find it.

If it weren't for YouthCare, I'd probably be another statistic. The people I grew up with are dealing drugs. They're killing themselves to support their addictions. They're the people that you see outside.

Where would I be without YouthCare? Probably with them.

The first time I was put in detention I was in fourth grade. I was raised in the criminal justice system. Then I was in the foster care system. The people I know that were part of the criminal justice system and the foster care system are dead.

I have a credit score.

I have three daughters that are my everything.

I have an apartment downtown.

I have a good paying job.

That's what three years of consistent support can do.

Every young person has potential; everyone grows up with curiosity and dreams for their future. We must leverage this opportunity. Almost 50% of homeless adults in King County experienced homelessness for the first time before the age of 25.^{ix} Helping young people move ahead is our most effective—and humane—strategy to preventing and ending adult homelessness. Federal investments in homeless services should reflect that strategy.

RHYA needs a full and comprehensive reauthorization, which last occurred more than a decade ago. This includes critical non-discrimination and gender-affirming language and increased supports for human trafficking services and prevention. Additionally, YouthCare supports changing the Basic Center Program stay from 21 to 30 days to give youth more time to reconcile with family and changing all RHYA grant cycles from 3 to 5 years to ensure for increased program sustainability.

Congress has the power to invest in these programs so they can be scaled to meet the need and, one day, end youth homelessness in this nation. This starts with passing a full reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I appreciate your time and attention and I look forward to addressing any questions you may have.

ⁱ Morton, M. H., Samuels, G. M., Dworsky, A., & Patel, S. (2018). Missed opportunities: LGBTQ youth homelessness in America. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Greeson, J. K.P, Schilling, D. S., Treglia, D., Wasch, S., &. (2018). *Human trafficking prevalence and child welfare risk factors among homeless youth*. Philadelphia, PA: The Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research at the University of Pennsylvania

^{iv} Crawford, D., Huatala, D., Lazowitz, M.W., & Whitbeck, L. (2016). *Administration for children and family youth services bureau street outreach program*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska-Lincoln

^v Arain, M., Haque, M., Johal, L. Mather, P., Nel, W., Rais, A., Sandhu, R., & Sharma, S. (2013). Maturation of the adolescent brain. *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*; 9: 449–461.

^{vi} Nova, A. 2018. "A growing share of millennials are living with mom." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: CNBC. N.J. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/10/nearly-25-percent-of-millennials-live-with-their-mom-.html>

^{vii} Benetsky, M., J., Burd, C.A., & Rapino, M. A. 2015. "Young adult migration: 2007–2009 to 2010–2012." Suitland, MD: United States Census Bureau

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/acs/acs-31.pdf>

^{viii} Morton, M. H., Samuels, G. M., Dworsky, A., & Patel, S. (2018). Missed opportunities: LGBTQ youth homelessness in America. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

^{ix} All Home King County (2019). *Seattle/King County Point-in-time count of persons experiencing homelessness*. Seattle, WA: All Home King County.