



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chair Suzanne Bonamici (OR-1)
Subcommittee on Civil Rights & Human Services Hearing
Strengthening Federal Support to End Youth Homelessness
2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Tuesday, July 16, 2019 | 2:00pm

We are here today to discuss our responsibility to provide every child and youth with a safe and stable environment to learn and grow.

Today, millions of youth across the country do not have access to a stable home. For many of them, the effects of homelessness are not isolated to days or weeks or months. Youth homelessness has long-term consequences that undermine their education, their safety, and their future.

As our witnesses will establish, youth who do not have access to the support and resources that come with stable housing are far more likely to drop out of school, fall prey to exploitation and human trafficking, and remain homeless as adults.

In 1974, Congress recognized its responsibility to support youth who lack a safe and stable home by passing the *Runaway and Homeless Youth Act*. Over the last four decades, Congress has repeatedly recommitted—on a largely bipartisan basis—to fund the law’s programs to make sure that runaway and homeless youth receive the services they need to transition out of homelessness and thrive as self-sufficient individuals.

Unfortunately, it has been more than a decade since Congress updated the *Runaway and Homeless Youth Act*. Since then, new research shows that youth homelessness is a public health crisis that demands a significant and thorough response.

Researchers have found that, over a 12-month period, **more than one in 30 youth between the ages of 13 and 17** and **one in ten youth between 18 and 25** will experience homelessness. One of the counties I represent in NW Oregon, Washington County, has reported cases of youth homelessness in the thousands.

We also know that factors associated with significantly higher risk of youth homelessness reflect the systemic challenges facing underserved communities, including family conflict, child abuse, and experience with the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

It is no surprise, then, that some youth experience homelessness at disproportionately higher rates. LGBTQ youth, for example, are at a 120 percent greater risk of entering homelessness compared to heterosexual or cisgender peers. Racial discrimination also contributes to disproportionate homelessness among Black and Latino youth. Black youth have an 83 percent higher risk of experiencing homelessness than their white peers, and Latino youth have a 33 percent higher risk.

Homelessness can also put youth at high risk for devastating experiences that can have long-lasting consequences on their development. Homeless youth are vulnerable to exploitation and coercion. The data show that one in

five homeless youth are victims of human trafficking. One in six are sexually assaulted or raped. Homeless youth who experience these unspeakable acts need comprehensive supports to process their trauma and re-build their lives.

Our deeper understanding of the causes and factors surrounding youth homelessness demand an updated approach to addressing this public health issue. As this Committee considers a bipartisan reauthorization of the *Runaway and Homeless Youth Act*, we must make sure that federal programs:

- (1) Engage and unite family members—a proven approach to transitioning youth into safe and stable housing—when it is in the best interest of the child;
- (2) Adopt trauma-informed practices that support youth whose experiences have had long-lasting effects on their mental health and well-being; and
- (3) Importantly, that they do not discriminate against youth based on age, race, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Including these provisions in federal programs will help to prevent children from having to experience the uncertainty and trauma of homelessness. Today's hearing takes an important step toward achieving our shared goal of making sure that all children have access to safe and stable housing that empowers them to reach their full potential.