Their Stories, Our Responsibility:
Accounts from Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

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Their Stories, Our Responsibility

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless is working to prevent and end unaccompanied youth homelessness. We support increasing access to services and housing targeted to unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

Mission of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless

The mission of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless is to eradicate homelessness from the Commonwealth. We aim to meet this goal through avenues of advocating for people experiencing homelessness through public policy; fostering a strategic network of members and supporters who represent all regions of Massachusetts; providing assistance in coordinating support through our policy committees; and providing public education about the problem of homelessness and its solutions.

Supporting Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless has spent several years working with key stakeholders across the Commonwealth to elevate the issue of unaccompanied youth homelessness. These stakeholders include Massachusetts state legislators; advocates and direct service providers; representatives of multiple state agencies; many concerned citizens, and youth themselves.

The Coalition is a proud supporter and named member of the first-ever Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. This Special Commission was created to study and make recommendations on how to best improve the housing and services for youth through age 24 who are unaccompanied by their parents or responsible legal guardians. The work thus far of the Special Commission has included (but is not limited to) an analysis of the barriers to serving unaccompanied youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), as a disproportionate number of unaccompanied youth identify as LGBT; an analysis of the unique barriers to serving unaccompanied youth under age 18; an assessment of the impact
The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless has been the lead sponsor organization for the landmark Massachusetts legislative efforts related to unaccompanied youth homelessness. With the help of key legislators of both the Massachusetts House of Representatives and Senate, the bill has been filed as House Bill 3838 for the 2011-2012 legislative session and filed as House Bill 135 for the 2013-2014 legislative session, both entitled, “An Act Providing Housing and Supportive Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth.” The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless appreciates the continuous support for the youth campaign of many members of the Massachusetts State House of Representatives and Senate, most especially leading bill sponsors Representative Jim O’Day and Senator Katherine Clark and their fellow commission members, Representative Kay Khan and Senator Harriett Chandler. For more information about House Bill 135 and a complete list of all the co-sponsoring legislators, please refer to the Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act fact sheet located at the back of this report. In addition to the fact sheet and bill language for House Bill 135, there is information for a related budget campaign for unaccompanied youth homelessness. To address the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults through age 24 who are experiencing homelessness by funding housing and services and by conducting a count to better understand the scope of the need, the Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness FY’14 Budget Request proposes language in Line Item 4000-0300, to allocate $500,000 for the work of the Massachusetts Unaccompanied Youth Commission. Additional details on the breakdown of the $500,000 are provided at the back of this report.

Honored to Share and Learn from Youth Affected by Homelessness

In an effort to best represent the unique needs of youth, the Coalition began performing outreach to shelters and service programs serving the unaccompanied youth of the Commonwealth. While many meetings and informal discussions were held between the Legislative Advocacy staff at the Coalition and the various organizations serving youth and young adults, particularly strong relationships grew with two distinctly different organizations. These organizations are Journeys of Hope (JOH) in Salem and the Young Adult Resource Network (YARN), a program of Home for the Little Wanderers, in Dorchester. The goals of each
of these partnerships were to give the guests of JOH and YARN opportunities to share their stories and learn more about the process of policy advocacy.

Journeys of Hope – Salem, Massachusetts

Journeys of Hope (JOH) is a non-profit organization on the North Shore, serving youth between the ages of 18 and 23 who are experiencing homelessness. The mission of JOH is to assist young adults in the transition from the experience of homelessness into sustained shelter and a productive life. Staff and supporters of JOH strive to meet the basic needs of homeless young adults by providing assistance with shelter, food, clothing and referrals for medical services. Additionally, they offer referrals and connections to legal assistance and access to educational resources. JOH is proud to provide programs specifically designed to support young adults’ unique service needs. The organization officially opened their doors on April 12, 2010 and as of August 2012; JOH had assisted over 300 homeless young adults experiencing homelessness.

Legislative Advocacy staff of the Coalition met guests and staff of JOH three times between December 2012 and February 2013. At each of these meetings, there were between 5 and 11 program participants of different races, genders, and sexual orientations. There was at least one staff person at each of these meetings. The general focus of the meetings, in addition to increasing understanding, was around two very simple questions. The first question, “What was your experience before you became a participant of this program?” and the second is, “What kind of services or housing would you like to see at a youth and young adult shelter or drop in center?” These questions generated significant discussion, which has been summarized on the following pages.

Young Adults’ Experiences before Journeys of Hope’s Support

- Confused about what to do with self
Couch surfed, stayed in shelters, slept on streets, had (and lost) an apartment

People assume drug use happens, but many youth avoid drugs

Liked to use school as a sanctuary, at least to be warm all day

Felt judged, scared, alone

“I feel like I got screwed constantly, by everyone. I felt like no one actually cared. My time with Journeys of Hope is the first time I’ve felt cared for in a long time.” – B.

Many programs required ID cards, and young adults did not always have them, ID cards were expensive to replace once lost

Couch-surfed for years

Staying in adult shelters meant being in close proximity to all the bad things you try to avoid: drugs, fighting, drinking

The stereotypes of homelessness are hard to get away from, hard to get people to see beyond

When you stay in a shelter or get a job you get cut from other services, such as having SNAP (food stamps) benefits becoming reduced

Shelter life does not match student class schedule

Older people are catered to in the adult shelters; it is assumed the young people will perform more household chores. It disregards how tired a young adult might be from their day.

There are so many barriers to having goals

“I just want a sense of who I am” – A.

“Why set goals if they are impossible to consider achieving?” – M

“I just want a sense of who I am”
School breaks are scary, never sure how to stay on the right track when there are so many potential things to get in the way in between semesters, during holidays, and other breaks

Services or Support Young Adults Would Like to See at a Shelter or Drop-in Center for Youth

- Someone to teach young adults what they need, how to get what they need
- Would like someone to explain how to get an apartment, how to get a job that pays for an apartment
- Access to showers and hygiene products
- Would like getting back in touch with family members
- Would like to be protected from physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive parents
- Young adults don’t know that other people could care about them, like at Journeys of Hope

  “I need someone who is going to care enough to check-in. Felix [the case manager at Journeys of Hope] keeps me on my toes”
  -L.

- Judgment-free support

  “I’m trying to dedicate my time with Journeys of Hope to make myself a better person.” -L.

- Support in applying for jobs and finding clothing that is work-appropriate

- Would like help being connected to community opportunities (like gyms, schools, faith communities)
- More access to medical services and education about how to stay healthy

  - "It’s so hard needing to take bi-polar medication. I can’t always access my prescription filled and I don’t remember how sometimes." – B.

- Improved transportation support

- Support in goal setting and goal achievement

- Peer mentoring, people who know what being homeless was like

- Youth-only group meetings to support sobriety, motivation, and respect, as group meetings with adults can be scary and uncomfortable

- Diversity in staff (sexuality, gender, age, race)

- Need help with accountability, someone to check in and care

- Flexible Schedules, the ability to come and go

  - "Journeys of Hope helped me more than anyone else, because they let me come and go and still cared." – B.

- Housing should somehow be created

- Someone to help explain spirituality, how to explore different faiths and religions to know what they all mean, and what the young adults want to believe or learn about

- Need one place that is a connector to other places that have staff that has specialties in all the different “adult life” needs that are confusing such as:

  - Insurance
  - Housing
  - Food shopping
  - Medical and health information
  - Emotional support
Young Adults Resource Network (YARN) of the Home for the Little Wanderers, Dorchester, Massachusetts

The Young Adult Resource Network assists young adults ages 17-22 who are involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) in obtaining stable housing, employment, physical and psychological wellness, and educational and community involvement, while developing supportive relationships. Services are provided in the community where the youth reside as well as within a Community Advocacy Center located in Dorchester.

Legislative Advocacy staff of the Coalition met program participants and staff of YARN four times between November 2012 and February 2013. These meetings were in the place of the center’s weekly session called, “Hot Topics” where young adults are encouraged to freely share their opinions in a guided discussion facilitated by a YARN staff member. At each of these meetings, there were between 2 and 8 program participants of different race, genders, and sexual orientations. There was at least one staff person at each of these meetings. As with the outreach at Journeys of Hope, the general focus of the meetings, outside of growing in understanding, was two very simple questions. The first question, “What was your experience before you became a participant of this program?” and the second is, “What kind of services or housing would you like to see at a youth and young adult shelter or drop in center?” These questions generated significant discussion, which has been summarized below.

Young Adults’ Experiences before the Center

- Feeling lost
- Transition from foster care system to independence is difficult to do on one’s own

  - “It feels like being a toddler. Teaching myself to eat and where to find food. Teaching myself where it is safe to sleep.”-T.
Stereotyped as substance abusing, lazy, and drinkers

School was a sanctuary

School commitment was difficult when also experiencing homelessness

- “I love to write. I’m really good at it. But I needed somewhere to sleep.” - W.
- “Everyone just assumes that I’m a lazy dropout.” - T.

Some felt as if they were always running from people or situations that may hurt them

Some were molested

Experienced mental illness and depression

One young adult reported being in over 70 foster homes within two years

Some shared stories of their neglectful parents

Felt like there were always hard times

Some foster families were not supportive of youth’s identity as LGBTQ individuals

- “I felt like I didn’t deserve love, but I know I do.” - J
- “I was always proud of the person I knew I was.” - J
- “I always put on a front for my social worker; it is hard to always be disappointing someone. It’s hard being openly gay and homeless.” - J.

Some felt as though they had to take care of everyone, all the time

- “I have a baby, who I love more than anything. As a father, I am always worried about supporting the baby and the mother.” - N.

Many are taking care of or supporting siblings

- “Try finding a job to help pay multiple rents.” - J.
One young adult’s baby was taken from her from older kin-family members, but she feels responsible to the child’s upbringing.

Scared of adult shelters

Being healthy is really challenging. Eating is challenging.

- “It’s hard having a lot of allergies and having to depend on pantries and shelter kitchens.”-J

Some felt as though people did not believe young adults had a right to support or a place to be

Many found temporarily, unstable housing by staying in friend’s houses. Hospitality may always run out.

Stringent eligibility expectations in various housing or support programs resulted in some of the youth being turned down by different programs that are supposed to help kids.

- “How do I not qualify for help?”-B.

It was difficult to maintain healthy, happy relationships with family, friends, and community members when food, shelter, and safety became a priority to these young adults.

Some believe that they come from “broken homes”

Some stated that they felt all youth like them had trust issues

Parents were substance abusers

There always is death

The foster system failed to launch young adults prepared for adulthood.

“This Life of Mine” was written by a young adult who participated in the focus groups. The poem was submitted to be part of the Coalition’s “Our Stories, Our Art: At the Intersection of Homelessness and Creativity” art exhibit.
Services or Support Young Adults Would Like to See at a Shelter or Drop-in Center for Youth

- Young adults would like to see a shelter or drop in center specifically for youth who have experienced homelessness.

- YARN makes it less difficult to open up, there should be more programs that replicate YARN’s drop-in, join-what-you-like, service options.

- The center is like a family for many young adults regularly participating at YARN, this environment is ideal!

- There should be more safe, supportive spaces
  - “This is where I can focus and do school work” T.

- Showers and laundry are helpful and important to offer

- Consistent support

- All future service options should have staff who make the young adults feel welcome and valued

Additional Testimony: As Shared at the Coalition’s Legislative Action Day

The Coalition holds an annual Legislative Action Day each winter. This event brings together Coalition members, legislators, and advocates from all across the Commonwealth to discuss the Coalition’s current policy and budget priorities. This year, on February 27, 2013, the Coalition hosted a luncheon between members of Special Commission, youth program participants, and staff of programs for youth and young adults in the Commonwealth. At this luncheon, there were opportunities for both formal and informal discussion between the luncheon guests. Organizations that were represented at the luncheon by program participants and/or staff members include Journeys of Hope, The Haven Project, Homeless Not Hopeless, The Young Adults Resource Network, and Youth on Fire. Testimonies were shared and trends among the youth and young adults’ different stories are listed below.
Many were turned away from emergency shelter from offices of the Department of Housing and Community Development; they were told they were “not homeless enough” or the in the right homelessness circumstances.

Adult shelters prefer not to take young people at 18 years old into shelter, because it changes the shelter age dynamics drastically. Youthful behavior can be disruptive to elder adults experiencing homelessness.

Some dropped out of school. While school provided stability and opportunity, homelessness and standard education options are difficult combinations socially and academically.

Many would like to go to school for GED, associates, and bachelors degrees. They would like guidance on career opportunities.

Would like to be a part of programs with mentoring that help with motivation and goal setting

Fear and anxiety are constant: adult shelters are dangerous and expose young adults to harmful distractions.

Many grew up in unstable housing situations; parents were instable and neglectful because of financial struggles, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. The young adults spoke of being emotionally, physically, and sexually abused.

Fell through the cracks of the foster care system: Poor residential-homes living situations or dozens of foster care placements per individual story.

There is not enough affordable housing. Finding any job to pay rent and food is very challenging.

Taking care of personal mental health and physical health is difficult without access to services or financial ability to afford medication and treatment.
Being a young parent is very difficult. Constantly defending themselves for custody of their child is upsetting.

The constant struggle to be oneself and to be LBGT is challenging. Schools, biological families, and foster care homes are often unsupportive. Shelters and supportive services are currently not prepared to adequately support the needs of LGBT youth and young adults.

The group sharing testimony included former veterans, young adults with college degrees, and formerly full-time employed young adults.

Many young adults have engaged in explicit and risky behaviors in exchange for food and shelter.

Once there is a criminal record, young adults struggle to get a job that pays enough to support themselves.

Sobriety is very difficult, especially when there is unstable housing.

“Our Stories, Our Art: At the Intersection of Homelessness and Creativity”

In addition to the annual Legislative Action Day activities, this year the Coalition added another new opportunity for those affected by homelessness in Massachusetts to share their experiences. Art submissions came from all regions of the Commonwealth and were created by program participants, advocates, high school students, and concerned citizens affected by homelessness in varying ways. Many of the art submissions were from young adults experiencing homelessness. Some of their submissions are shown below.

The above art submissions were provided from program participants of Grace Center Inc, the Young Adults Resource Network, and TEMPO Young Adult Resource Center. To view more of the submitted art, please visit our website, www.mahomeless.org.
Conclusion

The work to create a comprehensive network of support through housing and services for the thousands of unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in Massachusetts is not complete for the Coalition, the Special Commission, legislators, advocates, and people like you. Rather, these parties and additional groups must be compelled to continue to take action. Some of the next steps include researching best practices, hosting focus groups with youth, developing legislative and administrative strategies to address youth homelessness, and providing quality assurance in any programs in which the Commonwealth invests.

The spirit of resilience that is found in so many of the youth’s stories as shared in this report is echoed by the present reality for thousands of youth and young adults in Massachusetts. These youth and young adults have hopes for futures that include health, education, careers, happiness, love, and stability. The Coalition will continue to participate in and support the efforts of the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, as well as continue to advocate for House Bill 135, “An Act to Provide Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth” and the corresponding budget campaign.

To learn more about how to advocate for House Bill 135 and the youth homelessness budget campaign, as well as other Coalition policy priorities to eradicate homelessness in Massachusetts, please visit our policy campaign page on the Coalition’s website at http://www.mahomeless.org/advocacy/present-policy-campaigns. You may also contact Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless via email at kelly@mahomeless.org or via phone at 781-0595-7570x17.
An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, a.k.a. Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act

House Bill 135

Lead Sponsors: Representative James O'Day and Senator Katherine Clark


Bill History: Referred to the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities on January 22, 2013.

The Need for Action:

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimates that nearly 6,000 high school students are experiencing homelessness and are out on their own. Thousands more unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are not reflected in these numbers because they have already dropped out of school or are older and have finished school. There is a desperate need for increased shelter and housing options for youth living without their parents.

Youth homelessness takes its toll on both the youth and our society at large. Youth who are homeless as adolescents often face bleak outcomes. While many youth are resilient and are able to overcome the ravages of homelessness, homelessness often leads to poor health outcomes including increased risk of death, exposure to violence, susceptibility to exploitation and high risk behaviors, and poor academic performance with increased risk of dropping out of school.

The Goals of This Act:

This bill seeks to reduce youth homelessness and its adverse effects by funding a continuum of housing and support services geared specifically for unaccompanied youth. The goal of these efforts is to improve housing and residential stability, reduce the risk of harm and improve educational, physical and mental health outcomes for this population.

This bill builds off of a budget amendment passed during the Fiscal Year 2013 budget debate that established the Massachusetts Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, tasked with identifying the needs of unaccompanied youth and identify real, tangible solutions to the problem of unaccompanied youth homelessness. The Commission's first report is due to the Legislature on March 31, 2013.
What this Bill Does:

Section 1: Requires the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to enter into performance-based contracts with organizations and agencies to provide services to unaccompanied homeless youth. These service needs will be identified in the Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission Report. Programs funded under this Act shall provide a continuum of housing options for this population provided on a voluntary basis in conjunction with wraparound support services, which shall include but not be limited to: emergency shelter, “kinship” home placements, short term housing and “Transition to Independent Living” programs. The funded programs shall provide unaccompanied homeless youth with a stable out-of-home placement and help to reunite the youth with the youth’s parent or legal guardian if family reunification is in the youth’s best interest, and help to create educational and residential stability. Additional support services funded through these contracts may include but are not limited to: individual, family and group counseling; access to medical, dental and mental health care; education and employment services; case management, advocacy and referral services; independent living skills training; and provision of basic needs.

Section 2: Will define “unaccompanied homeless youth” as a person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian and who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence. The more specific definition of unaccompanied homeless youth can be found in the bill’s language and is also expected to encompass the findings of the Homeless Youth Commission.

Section 3: Mandates the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to establish contracts to provide services to unaccompanied homeless youth in urban, suburban, and rural areas across Massachusetts.

Section 4: Requires the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to monitor contracted agencies providing said services to unaccompanied homeless youth to ensure quality and transparency. The Executive Office of Health and Human Services will be required to collect this data on service agencies it has entered into contracts with and report this data annually to the Clerks of the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities, the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means and the Office of the Child Advocate by December 31st of each year.

For more information, please contact Kelly Turley at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless: 781-595-7570 x17 or kelly@mahomeless.org.
Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness FY’14 Budget Request

Address the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults through age 24 who are experiencing homelessness by funding housing and services and by conducting a count to better understand the scope of the need (EOHHS – Line Item 4000-0300).

Overview:

Include $500,000 in the FY 14 budget through the Executive Office of Health and Human Services administrative line item for the ongoing work of the Massachusetts Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission so as to determine the scope of need among unaccompanied youth and young adults ages 24 and younger who are experiencing homelessness, and to identify and implement potential models for appropriate service delivery to unaccompanied homeless youth in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the Commonwealth. Such funding would support and further the work of the Commission, which was established through the FY 13 budget process, and brings together representatives from key executive branch offices/departments (such as the Departments of Children and Families, Transitional Assistance, and Housing and Community Development), members of the Legislature, youth affected by the issue, and representatives of statewide non-profit agencies and advocacy organizations.

Proposed Language in Line Item 4000-0300:

"$500,000 for the work of the Massachusetts Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission to determine the scope of need among unaccompanied youth and young adults ages 24 and younger who are experiencing homelessness, and to identify and implement potential models for appropriate service delivery to unaccompanied homeless youth in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the Commonwealth."

Proposed Allocations:

- $150,000 to pilot a survey of unaccompanied homeless youth in 3-5 areas within Massachusetts and conduct youth outreach
- $300,000 to fund 3-8 demonstration projects to identify service and housing models appropriate to support unaccompanied homeless youth in education and successful transition from childhood to adulthood
- $50,000 to fund a part time staff person or consultant to oversee implementation, to analyze data, and to report to the Special Commission

For more information, please contact Kelly Turley, Director of Legislative Advocacy, at 781-595-7570 x17 or kelly@mahomeless.org.

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