

Role of RHY Programs

Prior to 1974, runaway & homeless youth (RHY) were handled through the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In 1974, Congress passed the ***Runaway & Homeless Youth Act (RHYA)*** to assist runaway & homeless youth outside of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. This was important because many youth slipped through or intentionally avoided those systems of care. The RHYA has since been expanded through reauthorization enacted approximately every five years, and is currently up for reauthorization (being co-sponsored by Senator Leahy and Senator Collins from Maine). RHY programs operate under the federal Agency of Human Services - Family & Youth Service Bureau.

The key is that RHY programs are community-based programs that operate outside the juvenile justice and child welfare systems to provide runaway prevention, outreach, shelter, mediation, and transition services to runaway, homeless, and street youth or youth at risk of running away or becoming homeless.

the Vermont model of RHY programs

The Vermont Coalition of Runaway & Homeless Youth Programs was established to create a *statewide* safety net for runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth. The Coalition has 14 member agencies serving every region of Vermont (refer to map in attached annual report for agency names & locations). Together, these agencies ensure a statewide safety net for disconnected youth through resource sharing, collaboration, training, shared leadership, a community of practice that supports one another, and an interdependent network of service providers working together to deliver a coordinated statewide approach that still allows each provider to respond to the unique needs of their community.

- Funding is a blend of federal (RHYA), state (GC & fed Medicaid) & foundation funds. Detailed funding information is contained in the attached annual report.
- There are two core programs funded through VCRHYP:
 - **Basic Center Program** - provides short-term emergency shelter and family reunification services to runaway and homeless youth, and youth at risk of running away.
 - **Transitional Living Program** - provides services for up to 18 months including housing supports, case management, life skills training, education, and employment supports to help youth transition to independence.
- Key Characteristics of both VCRHYP programs:
 - **Non-system** - operating independent from the Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice systems
 - Services are **voluntary**
 - **Low-barrier access** - programs take nearly any youth & intentionally designed to allow youth in, not screen them out
 - **Strengths-based approach** - even youth with the most difficult of backgrounds and in the most difficult of circumstances have internal & external strengths
 - Balance of autonomy for **local** service providers to meet unique characteristics of their community **and** maintain **statewide** practice standards, data collection, and service coordination

Who are RHY in VT?

VCRHYP programs serve approximately 900 youth per year. Each youth is unique and has their own individual set of circumstances, however there are some common characteristics and higher incidence sub populations among youth that seek help at Coalition agencies:

- Vermont RHY look different from pop culture images of street youth in urban areas. In VT, most RHY remain intentionally invisible - commonly couch surfing, sleeping in abandoned buildings, and camping out.
- These youth are disconnected from family & community - they have few meaningful and long-lasting relationships with adults and generally do not feel like they are “part of” the community.
- Most have experienced and survived some type of trauma (exposure to violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, etc.)
- Most come from families that live in poverty - often intergenerational poverty.
- About half indicate that conflict between them and their parent or guardian was the reason they left home, and more than half report that their parents told them to leave, or knew they were leaving and didn't care.
- These youth often slip through or arounds other systems of care. RHY generally avoid anything they perceive as “a system” and often manage to intentionally avoid child welfare interventions. Others live in very unhealthy environments that just have not quite met the threshold for child welfare intervention.
- Some are youth who have had system involvement and may have run or “aged out” from the child welfare or juvenile justice.
- Pregnant/parenting youth have a higher incidence of homelessness.
- LGBTQ youth are over-represented among homeless youth - national research suggests that between 20% to 40% of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT).

Trends & Realities

Over the past 5 years, VCRHYP sites have seen an increase in older youth (18-22) seeking services. For example in fy 2009, 68% of youth accessing services were under the age of 18 and most of those were reunified with their families at program exit. In fy 2013, 56% of youth were between the ages of 18-22, and for most of these youth returning home is not an option. These youth are transitioning to independence on their own, without the benefit of family supports & resources.

Although the total number of youth seeking help at VCRHYP sites has remained stable or even decreased slightly over the past 5 years, the need for emergency shelter *and* long term housing supports has increased. In fy 2009, VCRHYP sites provided 998 youth with 11,651 of shelter or housing supports and in fy 2013 provided 784 youth with 27,468 nights of shelter or housing supports.

About $\frac{1}{3}$ of youth enter services with some degree of protective factors (supportive relationships with caring adults, engaged in school, employed, etc). Youth that enter services possessing such protective factors generally only need brief interventions and supports, and are likely to be reunified with family or successfully move on to independence when they exit services. Roughly $\frac{2}{3}$ possess few of these protective factors, and present with multiple and complex simultaneous needs & problems (eg: no housing, disconnected from school, history of violence, survivors of trauma, unemployed, poverty, mental health, substance use, etc). In addition, they have nothing and no one else to help them. Youth with complex problems are going to need long-term and sustained supports, and sustainable housing is usually the most vexing challenge. These youth place an enormous strain on program resources & youth care workers.

About half (48%) of youth leave VCRHYP transitional living programs with employment of 90 days or more, and even for those that are able to find & sustain employment, the types of jobs youth are able to secure don't pay enough to afford their own place in Vermont (one of the most expensive housing markets in the country). Youth double, triple, or quadruple up but even then are just one unplanned financial crisis away from not making rent.

Lessons Learned & Implications

Each youth is unique and has their own individual set of experiences and conditions. To help them, we must understand their unique experiences, and identify their individual goals and needs; ***one size doesn't fit all***. This reality makes creating a uniform intervention nearly impossible because youth care workers are doing everything they can to respond to multiple problems simultaneously. As one youth care worker said, “*there is no freakin' manual*”.

Developing strong helping relationships with youth care workers (aka: case managers) in a non-clinical environment creates opportunities for ***transformational relationships***. These individuals help youth learn to navigate resources, facilitate the youths skill acquisition, help youth identify their strengths, provide non-judgemental support (for many youth their first experience with healthy adult relationships), and create opportunities for rich learning experiences.

A ***harm-reduction approach*** is most effective for disconnected youth, including youth that use substances. Placing unrealistic expectations on youth in order for them to access or remain in services (eg: any substance use gets you kicked out) only filters youth out and puts them right back on the streets.

Engagement of extended families and/or other supportive adults is extremely important, not just to help with the current crisis but to provide those permanent connections that youth need to caring adults. This stresses the value of linkages to community members, resources, and supports that can serve as important ***permanent connections for youth***. Also, self-identified family (including peers) have a tremendous influence on RHY and while they may not be healthy role models, are viewed by the youth as significant individuals and supports.

The longer youth remain homeless, their likelihood of becoming involved in criminal behavior, and their risks of victimization experiencing physical assault, rape, human trafficking, and mental health disabilities are greatly amplified. Building more protective factors and reducing risks decreases the likelihood of long-term homelessness, incarceration, pregnancy, health issues, and lifelong poverty. Vermont gives a lot of attention to early childhood services and prevention efforts. A similar statewide ***vision and investment for adolescents and the emerging adult population*** is needed.

No one housing model offers a silver bullet remedy. Offering a variety of housing supports has proven most effective for youth in Vermont (shelter for crisis housing, SRO, efficiency apartments, and temporary subsidies for private rental agreements). With housing, youth are like adults - they want their own space. Group living models have to find a way to balance the need for personal space with the economies of scale achieved in congregate living. It's also important to create a space for living, where youth are connected to community, can access transport to and from education & work, and access services & recreational opportunities.