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Testimony on H.201
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I would like to thank the committee for taking the time to hear from me and consider passing H.201, which will lengthen the time an unaccompanied minor is allowed to be sheltered by a runaway and homeless youth serving organization. Currently, a youth can be sheltered for 7 days at a time, H. 201 proposes to extend that to 21 days.

I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs. Our coalition is comprised of 14 member agencies covering all corners of the state. We provide services to youth up to age 24 who are experiencing homelessness, are precariously housed, or are at high risk of becoming homeless. For youth under 18, our primary objective is family reunification when safe.

VCRHYP strongly supports H.201. Lengthening the time we can shelter a youth to 21 days will increase our ability to assess youth and family needs and put the resources in place to support and stabilize youth in crisis. Federal rules¹ that guide runaway and homeless youth work also have a 21-day limit on use of federal funds for sheltering unaccompanied youth and supporting a longer stay is considered best practice in the field.

HOW VCRHYP AGENCIES SHELTER MINORS:

Youth are referred to VCRHYP services from a number of sources including community partners, law enforcement, schools, family and peers. A youth care worker determines eligibility and assesses risk and protective factors a youth. If it is determined that a youth cannot stay with their family at that time, youth care

¹ Family and Youth Service Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Department of Health and Human Services,; *Runaway and Homeless Youth Final Rule*, December, 2016, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/12/20/2016-30241/runaway-and-homeless-youth>

workers work to look for other safe options, like another family member or a friend. If another safe location cannot be identified, a youth is taken into shelter as a last option. Parental permission is acquired for all housing options with minors.

All VCRHYP agencies receive a Commissioner Designated Shelter License from DCF which regulates shelter options for minors. The majority of our agencies use a host home model- these are families within the community who are willing to shelter youth for the length of stay. After a background check and agency vetting, host families are trained, supervised and supported by case workers to house youth. Most agencies give a very small stipend between \$24-\$50/ night to host homes who shelter youth to reimburse for food and transportation costs.

While staying with a host, youth are integrated into the family activities and efforts are made to normalize their experience as much as possible, supporting youth in remaining connected to school, friends and family while also ensure safety.

Host homes are a precious commodity and families report how hard it is to see a youth have to leave when they know neither the youth or family is ready.

IMPACTS OF A 7-DAY LIMIT:

When VCRHYP shelters minors, it is usually an indicator that the issues the youth and family are dealing with are extremely complex. 7-days does not allow enough time:

- For case workers to build relationships needed to support the family;
- To assess all needs thoroughly and identify the correct resources;
- To work with DCF if to place youth in foster care if needed.

Youth who are forced to exit after 7-days are often forced into unsafe and unstable living situations. A youth care worker tells this story:

I was working with a youth who came to us because he and his mother were homeless. They had been staying with someone their mother knew, but the youth was kicked out. I worked with the youth the whole week trying to find another location for the youth to stay. At the end of the 7 days, we had not identified anyone. I was driving the youth to Barre, where

*he wanted to go and was from, I just kept driving around, not wanting to drop him off because that meant dropping him off on a street corner and who knows where he would stay. My heart was breaking. Finally, as a last ditch effort, we called one of his friends again and that time his friend said he could come and stay for the weekend. The youth was back with us the next week, and after another 7 days, we went through the same process again. **It was a real distraction from dealing with the other issues the youth was facing. If they aren't housed, nothing else matters.***

Another youth care worker shared this:

*We were working with a youth that was referred to us by law enforcement, who were consistently being called out to this family's house for domestic disturbance between the youth and mother. We sheltered the youth for 7 days and began family mediation and crisis intervention work, but things were so heated with the family, it was hard to make quick progress. At the end of the 7 days, we had to send the youth back with the family. **Another fight ensued and the cops were called out again and this time DCF was involved. It is a real drain on community resources if we don't have time to do our work.***

IMPACTS ON SHELTERING YOUTH FOR 21 DAYS:

One question you may be wondering is what the financial impact on agencies will be for increasing the length of stay. In a rough cost-benefit analysis, VCRHYP has determined that any potential impact would be minimal and easily covered by existing agency funds. VCRHYP not sheltering masses of minors, we are sheltering under 50 youth a year. Any associated costs that we might incur from increased reimbursement for host homes will be offset by a reduction in costs associated with time and transportation for the youth by the case worker and staff time for supporting a youth who isn't in shelter or a stable or safe living situation, which is much more complex and time consuming.

The greatest impact will be on stabilizing the youth and improving youth and family outcomes. Deeper connections will be built with the youth and we can begin to work with a youth and their family to address the root issues at play. When a youth is safe and stably housed, their focus and energy can be on obtaining other life goals, enriching not only their life, but all our communities. Thank you very much for your time.