



VERMONT COALITION OF RUNAWAY
& HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAMS

PO Box 627
38 Elm Street
Montpelier, VT 05602

Senate Health and Welfare testimony on H.201
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Bethany Pombar,
Executive Director, Bpombar@vcrhyp.org/ 802-229-9151
<http://www.vcrhyp.org>

I would like to thank the committee for taking time to hear from me in support of H. 201. 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 or are precariously housed. For youth under 18, our primary objective is family reunification and crisis stabilization.

VCRHYP strongly supports H.201, which will lengthen the time an unaccompanied minor is allowed to be sheltered by one of our member agencies. Currently, a youth can be sheltered for 7 days at a time, H. 201 proposes to extend that to 21 days. Lengthening the time we can shelter a minor will increase our ability to assess youth and family needs and put the resources in place to support and stabilize youth in crisis. Federal rules 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.

FINANCIAL IMPACT OF H201 ON VCRHYP PROGRAMS:

VCRHYP is funded through a mix of State and Federal funds. Emergency shelter services for unaccompanied minors is funded through a grant from the federal Agency for Children and Families, Family Youth Services Bureau, Basic Center Program grant. VCRHYP has received this funding continuously for over a decade.

State funding comes through a contract with the Department for Children and Families, which is capped at \$2,465,702 (\$195,000 is General Fund and specifically support Spectrum Youth and Family Services, \$2,270,702 is Medicaid). VCRHYP services are bundled into only monthly Medicaid fee of \$1700 for each youth. This monthly rate will not change regardless of the number of days the youth is in shelter.

Though VCRHYP members serve over 300 youth under 18 a year, emergency shelter is only accessed by fewer than 50 youth. VCRHYP uses emergency shelter as the last option for housing youth, looking instead for alternatives, like staying with another relative, which better support the youth to create permanent connections and broaden their support network. For more than 75% of these youth, the 7-day stay is enough time to address the crisis and stabilize a family enough for the youth to return home while the longer-term case management happens.

When we talk to our partners across the country, we hear that the average length of stay for a youth is about 15 days. For the 25% (n= 12) of youth that need longer than 7 days, we would expect to see them returning to home sometime between the 15 and 21 day mark.

The financial impact of this change, shared by our 14 member agencies, is very minor and absorbed by our Federal funds, which cover emergency shelter for minors.

VCRHYP SHELTER SERVICES FOR MINORS:

All VCRHYP agencies receive a Commissioner Designated Shelter License that is renewed annually from DCF. DCF regulates and monitors emergency shelter options for minors, ensuring the health and safety of youth in shelter. Additionally, our federal funding dictates that all shelter options have a emergency and disaster preparedness plan in place and that youth are informed of the plan upon entering shelter.

The majority of VCRHYP agencies use a “host home” model to shelter minors. Host homes are families or individuals within the community who are willing to share their home and provide emergency shelter youth for the allowable length of stay. After a background check and agency vetting, host families are trained, supervised and supported by caseworkers. Most agencies give a very small stipend between \$24-\$50/night to host homes who shelter youth to reimburse for food and transportation costs.

When a youth is referred to services, our first goal is to ensure the child is safely housed. Referrals come from a number of sources including community partners, law enforcement, schools, family and peers. Parental or guardian permission is acquired for all housing and services provided to minors and parents/guardians are notified within 24 hours that a youth is with the agency.

Once we have connected with a youth, youth care workers address immediate needs like food, safety, and shelter. If it is determined that a youth cannot stay with their family at that time, youth care workers first try to identify another safe option like a family member or a friend’s family. If another safe location cannot be identified, a youth is taken into emergency shelter as a last option.

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.

Once stabilized, youth, their family and staff work together to assess a youth's risk and protective factors and develop program goals. Agencies provide individual and family counseling, connect with educational supports, and develop youth's life skills and permanent connections to their community.

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. This can exacerbate the crisis and lead to more expensive interventions. A youth care worker tells this story:

*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.***

In conclusion, we reiterate our support for the passage of H201 and believe that it will have a positive impact on our ability to stabilize youth and continue to divert youth and families from more costly interventions. This is a critical step in improving our agencies' effectiveness and enhancing youth outcomes. Thank you for your time.