



VERMONT COALITION  
OF RUNAWAY & HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAMS

## Homelessness Awareness Day Legislative Testimony

My name is Bethany Pombar and I am the Director of the [Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs](#). We have 10 members and 2 partner sites across the state providing services for youth ages 12 to 25 including emergency shelter for unaccompanied minors, transitional housing for young people aged 16 through 24, tenant-based rental subsidies for young households, and supportive services like housing navigation, landlord mediation, independent life skills development, family mediation and individual counseling.

The first question I often get is “does youth homelessness happen here?” Unequivocally, yes. During the 2019 Point-in-Time count, 142 unaccompanied youth and young adults were experiencing literal homelessness, 6 of those were minors. 122 more young people were on their own and precariously housed that night- either couch-surfing, or staying somewhere impermanent. **That is 264 Vermont youth on their own and not safely housed on just one night.**

A recent national study by Chapin Hall on prevalence of youth homelessness in the U.S. shows that across all states, with little difference between urban and rural communities, 1 in 10 young adults and 1 in 30 minors will experience some form of homelessness within a year.

Last year, VCRHYP served a total of 350 youth and young adults in our housing stability programs, with too many left on waitlists because our beds were full. Vermont youth’s experiences of homelessness are fluid, many experience two or three different types of homelessness including couch-surfing, emergency shelters, and staying on the streets.

Youth who experience homelessness disproportionately experience trauma, serious health, behavioral, social and emotional problems, and substance use disorders because they lack sufficient resources. Youth housing intersects with other issues youth face:

- 25% of youth receiving housing supports in Vermont were parenting
- 23% served by VCRHYP identified as queer, and 7% were gender non-conforming or trans
- 13% were currently involved with DCF and 45% reported some form of past involvement
- 27% of youth and young adults served by all housing providers across the state identified as victims of domestic and sexual violence.

So, yes, youth homelessness happens here- and it is complex and requires systems solutions. VCRHYP is working with partners to build these solutions and we need your vision and support.

As part of the new Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program, over the past three years VCRHYP worked with the Department for Children and Families and the Vermont Coalition to End Homelessness to develop a [Coordinated Community Plan](#) to ending youth homelessness which laid out two vital strategies to ensure incidents are rare, brief and one-time.

The first strategy is to increase housing capacity, service availability and diversion supports; ensuring funded approaches are data driven, innovative, responsive to community need, and challenge a business-as-usual model.

We heard from youth that they needed access to flexible funds that would help stabilize them where they were, avoiding homelessness and preventing them from needing longer-term housing assistance; we are about to release those funds next month in a new pilot project.

We heard from youth that they need to be connected with supportive people to be able to sustain housing. We have ensured the availability of service support dollars attached to rental subsidies.

We heard that youth face stigma and lack understanding of their rights and responsibilities in housing, so we have created new landlord liaison and housing navigator positions to enhance access to affordable housing, avoid evictions, and divert youth from needing more costly housing interventions.

In this past quarter VCRHYP has increased our housing funding by 300%, with an additional 125% increase in community-based service funding. These are vital expansions, but they need to be supported with a system's response.

The second strategy laid out in the plan moves us towards a community solution, pivoting our state towards holistic, systems-centered responses instead of emphasizing individual providers.

Through this strategy we hope to build a comprehensive multi-system approach; creating linkages between runaway and homeless youth providers, education, workforce, child welfare systems, family supports, and other wrap around services. We are developing data driven strategies, and encouraging innovation within the field to be able to move faster and smarter with limited resources.

This is where we need your help- Vermont is known for collaboration, we know that it takes partners working together to build sustainable solutions, but this work needs leadership and coordination. VCRHYP's community-based providers are working on shoe-string budgets, exacerbated by funders' shifts to reimbursement or pay-for-service payments, increased data collection requirements, and increased costs of living in our communities impacting both those we serve, and our service workers. While administrative and operational costs have risen, base grants have not increased.

While we understand the need to ensure accountability and efficiency of funds, this has created a landscape of scarcity where community-based agencies and their networks lack capacity to work together to create the sustainable solutions we need. So, as you consider the vital need for increased funding for affordable housing and increased service and emergency supports, please also consider the resources that need to be in place to sustain the system and create integrated responses, we have to release the service funding pressure valve so agencies have capacity for collaboration. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

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