

Homelessness Awareness Day Testimony  
January 20th, 2022

Good morning, my name is Hannah Heinchon, I am the director of Transitional Living Programs at Washington County Youth Service Bureau. I work with youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of becoming homeless without immediate intervention. I want to start by thanking you for this opportunity, it is the first time I have had the chance to speak to legislators about the population I serve and what they are facing. I am here because I want to make sure that among everything you hear today, you also hear about the homeless experience of our youth as they face different challenges than other homeless populations. Whether you realize it or not, we have youth in every county of our state who are sleeping outside in tents, living in their cars, or crashing on different couches every night because they have nowhere else to go.

I first want to describe some of the reasons why youth become homeless in the first place. Some youth are kicked out because their caregivers do not agree with their life choices, whether in regards to sexual orientation, gender identity, or simply their decisions around employment or education. Others are left homeless as they age out of the foster care system with no clear plan and no family to turn to. Some run away from their homes because of abuse, neglect, or substance use that is happening in the home. For families who struggle during normal times, this pandemic has added even more strain to already tenuous relationships and situations reached their breaking point where youth were simply told to leave. I have seen other youth forced out of their homes because of financial hardship, their parents simply cannot afford to care for them anymore and if they are 18, or close enough to it, their parents just show them the door. Financial hardship has become more of a problem as parents have been laid off due to the pandemic and struggled to access unemployment, or as they have been forced to miss work because they have covid-like symptoms or were a close contact with someone who tested positive. Regardless of why they ended up homeless, these youth have found themselves with nowhere to call home and that is only the beginning of their problems.

Nearly every youth I have worked with has had a rough start to life. They have not had loving families who taught them basic life skills. They have not had supportive adults who guided, encouraged, and believed in them. They have never had the chance to succeed. They lack the most basic skills, like how to clean an apartment, grocery shop, do laundry, or cook a meal. Not only do they lack basic life skills, but most of these youth have experienced significant trauma. I have worked with youth who witnessed frequent violence in their homes, suffered constant verbal attacks as well as physical and sexual abuse, and severe neglect since early childhood. Adding to that trauma is the constant uncertainty and fear that this pandemic brings. As a result these youth carry a trauma response around with them like a backpack. They become easily irritable, are suspicious of others, have difficulty following through with tasks, feel tired all of the time, and have difficulty focusing. These things become a barrier to every goal a youth sets for themselves. The exhaustion, depression, and anxiety they experience gets in the way of their learning and can make it nearly impossible for them to be successful in school, or to show up regularly for school or work. The irritability they struggle with can give them a short fuse when

frustrated, so they end up dropping out of school, quit jobs frequently, and end meaningful relationships. These youth are often alone, having burned every bridge ever offered to them, and they are lost. They didn't drop out of school or quit their last job because they are lazy. They are doing the best they know how to do. Yet we expect them to finish high school, hold down a job, maybe two, find their own apartment and then live independently all on their own, ignoring every barrier they must overcome.

Unlike some who experience homelessness, handing a youth a housing voucher isn't the solution. Even if they had the skills to succeed in independent living, which they don't, they are frequently unable to secure an apartment. We all know there are not enough affordable housing options in our state, and in Washington county in particular it is nearly impossible to find an apartment for a reasonable rate right now since we overwhelmed the market with CARES vouchers. When an apartment does become available, landlords are flooded with applications within days of posting the unit. Out of all of the applications they receive, landlords are not going to choose the youth who has never had a lease in their name so has no housing references, has no credit history, and has minimal work history if any. Adding to the unlikelihood that they'll be offered an apartment is the stigma around how youth might act while in an apartment: not following the rules outlined in the lease, having a lot of guests and throwing parties, using substances, playing music loudly and disturbing other tenants, the list goes on and on. So youth are skipped over for apartment after apartment, even when they have a voucher that would pay the entirety of their rent because they are not currently employed. I have had youth give up their vouchers because no matter how many hours they spent looking for apartments, how many applications they filled out, or how many units they went and looked at, they were never offered an apartment and they felt it just wasn't worth it to keep trying. So instead they continue to couch surf, begging friends and family to let them spend just one more night on their couch, constantly having to look for the next available bed, and when they cannot find one, they sleep in their cars or outside. They end up only being able to focus on finding a place to sleep that night and getting food to eat, they are in full survival mode and do not have the bandwidth to focus on anything except surviving. Education becomes a luxury they cannot afford. These youth become an easy target for adults who take advantage of them in exchange for a place to stay.

I have heard over and over again that the youth I work with should 'just get a job', and I understand that not everyone gets the privilege of having these youth be vulnerable and open with them, youth have shared their heartbreaking struggles with me in a way that humbles me and it allows me a perspective on why they have a hard time finishing high school and securing or maintaining employment that most will never have. I feel honored every single time a youth trusts me enough to share their experience. I also often feel frustrated with the lack of resources available to meet their needs, and even the limited capacity I have to serve the large homeless youth population in this county. Right now, I have more than 30 youth on my waitlist. That is at least 30 youth who are homeless or who will be soon whom I cannot serve because I simply do not have the capacity. They don't just need housing vouchers, they need intensive case management. They need someone to show up for them, to guide them, to give them the consistent support they have never had. If they do not learn the basic life skills they lack, get

connected with and receive mental health treatment for the traumas they have experienced, and have someone to advocate on their behalf when they face discrimination in the housing market, what chance do they possibly have of getting out of homelessness?

When support is available, it makes a difference. I work with one youth who, when I met her, was being housed in a motel through economic services. Her daughter had been removed from the home by DCF, she had dropped out of school and was unemployed. I helped secure her a rapid rehousing voucher through the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program and she has been stably housed for over a year. She has graduated from high school and secured part time employment. She has also regained full custody of her daughter and they are both doing well.

I am not here because I have all the answers on how to address youth homelessness but because I can shine a light on the unique challenges these youth are facing and help to dispel some of the misconceptions around why youth become homeless and why they struggle to get out of it. My hope is that as you move forward and make decisions you will keep in mind that there are youth in every county of this state who are struggling, they are doing the best they know how to do and still they are homeless, they are lost. Unsure where to go or what to do. They need guidance, but more than anything, they need compassion. We cannot ignore the discrimination they face, their fundamental lack of basic life skills, and the backpack of trauma they carry around with them. We have a responsibility to make sure they are not forgotten just because they are young and able bodied.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak.