



Christina Brown, Chief Program Officer
Spectrum Youth & Family Services
April 28, 2026, Youth Homelessness Awareness Day

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and the time that you are all giving in recognition of the experiences of youth homelessness in our state.

My name is Christina Brown; I am the Chief Program Officer at Spectrum Youth and Family Services.

At Spectrum, we serve over 1300 youth each year, between the ages of 12 and 30 years old with services that focus on Prevention and Intervention, Life Skills, and Basic Needs. We provide crisis stabilization, employment coaching, outpatient mental health and substance use counseling, mentoring, affinity spaces, food and material resources, and supportive housing services including up to 30 beds for youth experiencing homelessness in Chittenden County and an additional 10 in Franklin County.

We provide services through the lens of positive youth development with an emphasis on trauma-informed care – recognizing the unique strengths, challenges, social-emotional and cognitive milestones of teens and young adults and catering our programming to match these needs. At Spectrum, we recognize the compounding impact of trauma on the developing minds of the youth we serve, and we pride ourselves in providing responsive supportive programming that meets the youth where they are at, keeping their dignity, autonomy, and voices at the center of our work.

On any given day in the Drop-In Center in St. Albans, we see 20-30 young people, many of them high school students without a safe alternative to spend their time after classes let out. On a single night in our Burlington emergency shelters, 18 youth are sleeping safely, relieved to be indoors. The average week of a case manager at Spectrum will have them driving from one end of the county to the other, meeting youth at the shelters, in their schools, in their homes, or even in the hospital – helping them find stability and work towards their goals.

When I think of what Youth Homelessness Awareness means in my daily work life, I think about the 22-year-old single father self-paying in a hotel to maintain partial custody of his child. I think about the 19-year-old who exited state custody and entered our shelter without so much as an ID. I think about the 18-year-old fleeing domestic violence, unable

to stay in the local family shelters with their mom and siblings because they are now, by all legal definitions, an adult.

I think about the many joyful moments, big and small: the young person who recently moved into an apartment after 2 years of living in Spectrum housing, the other who just celebrated a birthday with ice cream cake at the shelter.

We are there when they bring home an “A” on their math exam, and we are there when they lose the job they have been counting on. We are there in moments of deep grief and despair, and we are there when they experience the elation of finding a caring community. Youth Homelessness Awareness is seeing these young people for the full, rich, and complex lives they lead, often in the margins of our communities – overlooked and stigmatized for the intersections of their identities as adolescent and homeless.

Today, I urge you to move beyond awareness and towards action. As a community, we need to recognize the unique and vitally important developmental stage of adolescence in shaping an individual's future.

In the state of Vermont, we must prioritize solutions to end youth homelessness. Data from the National Network for Youth has shown us that half of all adults who are homeless, had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 25. The time to invest in solutions to end youth homelessness is now:

- We must center the lived experiences of young people. Listen to youth who have experienced homelessness, recognize their pivotal contributions and expertise, and honor their autonomy.
- We must invest resources in the services that are developmentally aligned with the needs of this specific population. Youth homelessness, and the solutions to address it, must be catered to their stage of development. We need to uplift the work of youth services providers and build on their impacts by continuing to support programming that is youth-centered, and explore new ways of offering services that do the same.
- We must develop policies and pass legislation that helps to prevent youth from entering homelessness early. This means: prioritizing permanence for youth in custody, focusing on kinship relationships, school-based resources for children who are unstably housed, supporting the rights of transition-aged youth to access needed care independently when necessary, safeguarding the financial benefits for youth in foster care, and especially protecting LGBTQ+ youth, who are over 120% more likely to experience homelessness.

An investment in ending youth homelessness is a long-term investment in a data driven solution to curb the rise of homelessness across all age demographics. Awareness is the first step. Many service providers are leaps and bounds ahead of mere awareness, we are in community with these young people every day and we need others to join us.

Thank you for taking the time to hear this testimony, and to bring greater visibility to a population that has too often gone unseen.