

**Written Testimony of Cyndi Lauper, Co-Founder, True Colors Fund
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee On
Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies
Wednesday, April 29, 2015**

Good morning, Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Reed, and Distinguished Members of the Committee. I'm Cyndi Lauper, Co-Founder of the True Colors Fund, which works nationally to end homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to Chairman Collins for holding today's hearing and for your unwavering leadership on behalf of homeless youth in your great state of Maine and across the country. It has been an honor to work with you in your role as a lead sponsor of the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act, which would reauthorize and make important improvements to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. While last Wednesday, the legislation failed to pass the Senate, I look forward to working with you to continue to build support for its eventual passage.

It is an honor to be here and to be a voice for homeless youth who too often go voiceless. And since I have a big voice, I thought I could use it for these kids. I, myself, was homeless too young as a teen. I could have lost my future, but I was lucky. I found a youth hostel that helped me and put me on the road to getting a GED and back into society. I found a doorway back in.

I don't know what my life would have been like without art and music. It certainly would have been different without "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" or "True Colors." And everywhere I go, I hear from those who have been disenfranchised from life and find solace in those songs. I don't know what my own life would be like if I didn't hear from people who were affected by these songs. It changed me. And it made me want to get involved.

There are 1.6 million youth who have been disenfranchised from *their* lives. 1.6 million youth who did not choose to be homeless, but had the choice made for them by life's circumstances. 1.6 million youth who are on the street in search of a doorway back in.

Up to **40 percent** of all homeless youth in America are LGBT, yet **only 7 percent** of the overall youth population is LGBT. So you can see, there is a bigger problem at play. These kids come out and get thrown out – or they feel unsafe and run away. It's unacceptable. No young person should be left without a home because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They didn't choose their identity and they are trying so hard to be brave – to survive. Remember, we are just talking about kids from 12 to 24 years old. They need adults to help them by protecting them.

We can end youth homelessness in America, but we have to get to the root of the problem. Our country must invest in preventing kids from becoming homeless in the first place, and this is an area of focus that has largely been ignored. That means helping families. It means fixing our broken child welfare system, our flawed juvenile justice system, and our schools. Each one of those places can be a doorway to homelessness *or* to a better future.

In an effort to start to determine the best prevention strategies to invest in and replicate across the country, the True Colors Fund is partnering with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), as well as the Departments of Education, Health and Human

Services, and Justice, and the U.S. Interagency Council of Homelessness on the LGBTQ Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative. The Initiative is taking place in two communities – Houston/Harris County, TX and Cincinnati/Hamilton County, OH. Both communities built cross-sector coalitions that developed local, community-wide prevention plans, which they started implementing in the fall of 2014. What we will learn from both communities over the next year and a half can – and must – inform our national strategies as we begin to invest in and put greater value on prevention.

Homeless youth spend their days on the streets and draw straws for beds at night. But they need more than beds. When I needed more than a bed, I got it – and I got my future back. We must give these kids stable housing, but also education and job training. We need to protect their social and emotional well-being, and give them permanent connections and some stability. The True Colors Fund is dedicated to making that happen and figuring out what works.

Through a broad continuum of public education and engagement, advocacy and public policy, youth collaboration, research, and community building programs, the True Colors Fund is working in partnership with our friends across multiple sectors to build a comprehensive national system that values prevention, early intervention, crisis response, and permanency equally.

It is important that we build a network of programs across the country that moves us from just crisis response to long-term solutions. But communities and service providers need funding to put them in place, and they need someone to speak up for them – so here I am. In particular, funding needs to be appropriated so HUD can test programs and systems in targeted communities to figure out what should then be replicated across the country. The more we learn about what works, the more we can do for these kids.

These are *kids* – we can't ignore them. They could be our next doctors, lawyers, or senators. If we ignore them, their options are chronic homelessness, suicide, or being trafficked. Those are not options. Government, advocacy groups, researchers, private funders, and service providers need to work together to find solutions that give these kids their options back. We need to study and invest in long-term solutions for prevention **and** for moving homeless youth to independence.

And we need a comprehensive national system that is inclusive of **all** young people. LGBT youth are in the homeless youth population in numbers much greater than other kids, and we have to meet their unique needs. The Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act, which failed to pass the Senate last week, would be an important first step. Included in the bill is a nondiscrimination clause that would ensure all youth, including LGBT youth, are treated with dignity and respect when accessing programs receiving funding through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

I want to appeal to the 43 senators who voted “no” to change their minds. It is wrong to reject these kids. It is wrong for the kids and for society. We want everyone to grow up to be a productive adult. That's been the whole goal of this bill.

Imagine you are a parent of one of these kids.

And to those parents, as a parent myself, I say, please – love and accept your child for who they are. If you reject them, you may never be able to repair the damage. If it is an issue of faith – I implore you not to pray to God to change *your child*, but pray to God to change *your heart*.

We must do better. I never thought I'd be anyone. But I did become someone. And these kids can too, if we do our jobs. If we speak up for them and talk to each other... If we learn from the models that are already working and invest in getting answers to the questions we still have... **And**, if we provide the funding to turn the solutions that will work into reality, we will be better as a country – a country in which each of us fulfills our dreams.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. I look forward to answering your questions.