Testimony of Deborah Shore, Executive Director and Founder of Sasha Bruce Youthwork and Chair of the Board for the National Network for Youth

Senate Appropriations Hearing on Youth Homelessness
Before the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies

Overview of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Efforts to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Reed and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding HUD's efforts to meet the Administration's goal of ending youth homelessness by 2020.

I appreciate the chance to bring my 40 plus years experience as a service provider to runaway and homeless youth in the District of Columbia. I am Founder and Executive Director of Sasha Bruce Youthwork, an agency which provides Street Outreach, Emergency Shelter, Transitional and Long Term Housing to about 60 youth and young families ages 12 – 24 at one time and over 300 youth per year. We offer the only minor shelter for homeless youth in Washington, DC. Our programs are successful for the youth we are able to serve: 75% of the youth who leave our emergency shelter return home with strengthened family relationships, and 88% of youth who leave our transition and permanent supportive housing programs become established either in school or employment. I am also the Board Chair of the National Network for Youth. The National Network provides public education on federal policy effecting runaway and homeless youth and the programs that serve them.

I am a perpetual optimist but as I reflect on the distance between our current capacity and the important deadline for ending youth homelessness over the next five years, I think we need to be VERY concerned that our progress has been so slow.

The three main topics that I will address are:

1. The gaps between the needs of homeless youth and the programs to serve them which belie a lack of directed resources;
2. The eligibility barriers to HUD homeless assistance that prevent youth from accessing currently funded programs; and
3. The need for a youth-oriented Continuum of Care that recognizes that youth are different than adults, in both their pathways to homelessness and what they need to exit homelessness and transition to adulthood.

An important place to begin is what we know about the disparity between youth in need and services available. We know that youth are hard to count and that they often will go to lengths to avoid detection because of their fear of public system involvement and/or that their embarrassment of the circumstances they are in. Also, youth who are homeless have overwhelmingly experienced significant trauma and are not trusting of the adult world. So we

know we have underestimates but the numbers we do have create a stark picture and should be a call to action!

The HUD AHAR report (Annual Homeless Assessment Report) in 2013 and 2014 on the unaccompanied homeless youth population shines light on the distance we need to go. In both years, less than 1% of beds counted in the Housing Inventory Count were for child-headed households. In 2014, there were over 22,000 unaccompanied homeless youth in unsheltered locations. Data from the HUD point-in-time count, the U.S. Department of Education, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows that homeless youth are unsheltered at higher rates than other sub-populations, that the number of unaccompanied homeless youth is rising, and that youth are turned away from programs at high rates due to the lack of an available bed.

Clearly, we need more capacity. Please know how much I support the Incidence Study that we have been asking for which will deepen our knowledge and provide a better estimate of the scope of need, but I submit that we know enough to know that we are seriously underinvested in housing and services for homeless youth. It is critical that we increase access for youth to come into safe spaces because to NOT do so contributes directly to chronic homelessness, victimization such as trading sex for a place to stay, added use of jails and hospitals and/or early death. Real consequences which research and our experience tells us happens every day in America when young people remain homeless and unsupported.

Over the past five years there have been many productive conversations with HUD and other federal partners about how to build a youth development, trauma informed continuum for homeless youth, which is different than the continuum for adults. While there is agreement that youth need more support services and life skills supports, and though I believe there is a real interest in seeing this come to pass, the reality on the ground for our young people is that there is not enough housing when they need it or they do not feel safe in the adult housing that is available.

While more resources are clearly needed, homeless youth face barriers in accessing current HUD resources. There are consistent reports of barriers that exist for homeless youth and young adults due to the HUD priorities and who is eligible for HUD homelessness assistance. This is because there is a mismatch between the priorities at HUD and their ways of defining homelessness and the realities for our youth. The reality for homeless youth is that most couch surf as a way to manage their instability. As such, they have trouble meeting the requirements for the documentation of their homelessness. Let me share a few examples that were sent from youth providers who are part of the National Network for Youth.

Young people like:

- Elaine, from Richmond, whose mother was addicted to drugs and whose father abandoned her. Elaine was forced to stay with cousins who did not want her, who did not feed her, and who verbally abused her. When her cousin told her to get out, Elaine sought help from the Department of Social Services, but was told she either needed to be on the streets, or obtain a letter from her abusive cousins saying she could not stay there. She was just 17 years old.

- Consider Lonnie, from Tulsa, who has significant mental health challenges, including mental retardation. Lonnie is living with two older men who consistently abuse him. Lonnie does not meet HUD's definition of homelessness because he can stay at his current residence for more than 14 days. Lonnie does not feel safe at home, or in an adult shelter.
- Another example is K.B., age 22, from Seattle, who is pregnant, AND has a one-year-old son, AND has been homeless for two years, couch-surfing from place to place. When she called for help, she was told they could not provide assist because she was not staying in a tent, car, or shelter.

The stories are legion and nationwide – young people who are neither safe, nor stable but are not eligible for the HUD homeless assistance without documentation which is often too high a bar. Youth rarely know how long they can stay at any given location when couch surfing; even if they cannot stay for 14 days, they often cannot obtain a statement, either because they are afraid to ask for fear this will trigger them to be asked to leave immediately, and/or because a person or family member does not want to become involved with any official system. Public housing residents will not sign a letter because they believe they will lose their place if they acknowledge allowing someone to stay there who is not on their lease. In other cases, the family member or friend simply doesn't want what might be considered responsibility. As a couch-surfer, with no name on a lease or any formal documentation, youth have no legal rights. While they may not have a letter saying it, they could be kicked out at any time, their belongings stolen, and be endangered including by being sexually exploited.

These realities and the urgent need to make strides in ending youth homelessness lead to the need for a youth oriented Continuum of Care which has an array of services adapted to be youth development and trauma informed. The Departments of HUD and HHS should collaborate together to create a continuum with crisis residential housing and transitional housing available widely to our young people in crisis. Transitional housing is the most appropriate response for our youth who become homeless and have not had much opportunity to attain life skills or to live independently but has been de-prioritized. A Youth Continuum would encourage the possible movement of a youth from one group model of transitional living into a scattered site transitional living model with more autonomy, a practice that now means a poor outcome within HMIS. Importantly, it would not place the priority of youth against the priority of chronically homeless adults and eliminate all barriers to serving homeless and unstably housed youth and young adults.

In conclusion, I am here before you today in the hopes that:

1) The urgent needs of homeless youth can be prioritized with increased resources to respond appropriately;
2) That eligibility barriers be removed to allow homeless youth access what they need when they need it; and
3) Together, we work to create a continuum for youth that is flexible and appropriate so that young people are not only housed, but able to gain the life skills needed to eventually exit public systems of care and enter employment or higher education.

It is my hope that the thrust of this hearing can be to create the momentum towards a much larger

investment into the life-giving work of appropriately serving homeless youth. We need to see these young people move from their dire circumstances towards becoming contributors in our world. I know this is possible as I have seen it time and again.

I dedicate my testimony to Raynice, a young mother who became homeless at age 19 when her mother and grandmother passed away within two weeks of one another. With the help of one of our programs she is now finishing college and her daughter is thriving. And to the millions of youth like her who need our help today in order to not to become tomorrow's chronically homeless adults.

Thank you.

Below are real examples and statements from homeless youth providers and youth from across the country who struggle with HUD's eligibility requirements and administrative decisions which do not allow youth experiencing homelessness to access what they need:

YOUTH SERVICES OF TULSA (YST) IN TULSA, OK

Main Issues with YST Youth accessing HUD housing:

- YST Youth do not meet HUD Chronic Definition (homeless for one year; or 4 homelessness accounts in less than 3 years)
    - Kicked out at age 18, a youth would have to be street homeless until they turn 19 in order to meet the chronic definition.
    - Many youth are very afraid of adult shelters, and will stay with friends (leaving them ineligible to meet the definition of "homeless".
    - Youth are requested to stay at adult shelters in order to meet necessary requirements. This is a dangerous and re-traumatizing request to simply legally access HUD housing.

- Youth who are pregnant are not eligible for "single occupancy" supportive housing
- Youth are not considered homeless even if they are living in the following circumstances:
    - Abandoned homes that have either water or electric.
    - Apartments or houses (not on the lease) with large groups of people squatting.
    - Couch Surfing or staying in day-to-day motels.
    - Coming out of transitional living program housing.

Examples Where Youth People Were Denied Housing Due to HUD Requirements –

1. Jeremiah S.: Jeremiah was living with his mother before becoming homeless at 18. Jeremiah and staff were proactive in that they tried to connect him with supportive housing (Jeremiah has Asperger's and other mental health diagnoses) before his 18th birthday; knowing that his mother planned to kick him out of her home the day he turned 18. Jeremiah was denied this opportunity because he was not yet homeless. Jeremiah was forced to go to an adult homeless shelter, which intensified his mental health challenges.

It was only then that Jeremiah was able to access safe, supportive housing. With that, Jeremiah did not meet HUD Chronic homelessness; so he is unable to access specific supportive housing services in that regard.

2. Lonnie L.: Lonnie is currently living in a home with older "friends". Lonnie has significant mental health challenges; as well as some Mental Retardation. Lonnie is a very vulnerable young man. He was not qualified for independent/supportive housing due to not meeting the "homeless" definition. Lonnie is in a home with 2 older men who physically and mentally abuse him. The men are forceful and demanding when it comes to finances, etc. Lonnie does not feel safe in his home; nor does he feel safe in an adult shelter. The only option for Lonnie to meet qualifications for HUD housing is to start sleeping outside. With that, Lonnie does not meet HUD Chronic homelessness; so he is unable to access specific supportive housing services in that regard.

3. Spencer M.: Spencer became homeless when he was dropped off in Tulsa, OK after hitch hiking from Missouri. Spencer has serious mental health challenges, and for a time was extremely suicidal. Spencer slept at the adult shelters for a few nights, but eventually began sleeping on Youth Services property (outside) because that's the only place he felt safe. Because he had not been homeless for over a year; Spencer did not meet HUD Chronic homelessness. This put his opportunity for safe, supportive housing at a high risk. Spencer would be the safest in a more supportive housing environment; but again, he does not meet Chronic standards, so he can not access specific supportive housing in that regard.

4. Zach B.: Zach became homeless in August 2013 after turning 18 years old and his mother kicking him out. Zach spent time at various adult shelters before meeting someone that allowed him to sleep on the floor of his apartment from time to time. Because Zach was not on the street or at a shelter consistently for one year, he would not qualify for HUD Supportive housing. Zach receives SSI and has been unsuccessful in finding safe, stable, supportive housing.

5. Kerie S.: Kerie had a 1 year old baby, and another one on the way when she found herself back on the street. After several attempts to access HUD Supportive housing; Kerie was turned away due to having a child, and being pregnant. Kerie was told the HUD funds are for single occupancy ONLY. Because she had a child, and was pregnant, she was not eligible for housing. Kerie spent weeks at an Emergency Shelter with her child while on a Section 8 voucher waitlist.

6. Victor M.: Victor was in and out of group homes, and foster homes, until turning 18 and becoming street homeless in Tulsa, OK. Victor was unable to access HUD supportive housing because he had not been homeless for over a year; in turn, not meeting the HUD Chronic homelessness definition. When he was finally able to access housing; he communicated that he needed a roommate to be more successful. HUD requirements did

not allow Victor to have a roommate; and he since failed several different housing opportunities. Victor is now in jail.

7. Crystal N.: Crystal was sleeping in her car for months before accessing HUD long-term supportive housing. Crystal has severe mental health issues, as well as several suicide attempts. Crystal got into a relationship and became pregnant. At that time, she could no longer access her supportive housing; because it would no longer be single occupancy housing.

8. Kyle K.: Kyle has been on and off the streets since the age of 14. Kyle was attempting to access supportive housing through HUD. Kyle stated that at one time he stayed in an abandoned motorhome that had running water for about 2 months. HUD guidelines stated that because there was water running to the RV, it was considered a habitual living space. Kyle was no longer eligible for housing under HUD Chronic definition.

9. Gabe A.: Gabe was stably housed before losing his employment and income. At that time, he began couch surfing with friends that would allow him to stay. Because of his couch surfing, and not spending time on the street or the adult shelters; he did not meet HUD homeless guidelines and was unable to access supportive housing.

10. JoAnna M.: JoAnna was in and out of housing for several years. At the time, JoAnna was couch surfing with a "street family", 6 adults in a 1 bedroom apartment. JoAnna then became pregnant. JoAnna was unable to access supportive housing because she did not meet the HUD homeless guidelines (because of couch surfing), and because she was pregnant she was not considered a single occupancy resident.

YOUTHCARE, SEATTLE, WA

Youth Housing Connect – King County Coordinated Entry System for Homeless Young Adults

Nearly every young adult (ages 18-24) coming into YouthCare's housing programs through Youth Housing Connection (King County's Coordinated Entry system) are couch surfing or living with a family member that cannot support them. When they have to ask them for a letter affirming that they cannot stay beyond two weeks, this can create real trauma within the family unit. No young person who is trying to build a relationship with their family wants to then have to ask for a letter saying that family member won't let them stay beyond two weeks. Additionally, after signing an official letter, family members or friends may be afraid they will get in trouble for housing the youth longer than 2 weeks and kick them out pre-emptively.

In other cases, the family member or friend simply won't sign the letter, even though the young person could be kicked out at any moment. As a couch-surfer, with no name on a lease or any formal document, youth have no legal rights. While they may not have a letter saying it, they could be kicked out at any time, their belongings could be stolen, and they could be staying in an incredibly unsafe location. Additionally, they do not know how they are "supposed" to act in the YHC assessment – they see it as an interview for

housing where they should be putting their best foot forward and showing how proactive they are being. What they don't know is that once they say they "couch-surfing" they are effectively preventing themselves from being placed into housing.

- *A young woman lost her housing after her mother received an eviction notice and disappeared. She began sleeping in her truck, and arrived at YouthCare's James W. Ray Orion Center to enroll in case management. As part of that process, her case manager had her complete a YHC assessment. While waiting, her case manager helped her make a plan so that she would not have to sleep outside, which was unsafe, and she began couch-surfing. After two months in the waiting pool, she was accepted into one of YouthCare's job training programs and her case manager encouraged her to update her YHC information with this great news. During the update, she let the YHC assessor know she was staying on a couch and could stay there while she looked for other options. She was removed from the YHC waiting pool and told that she would need to complete an assessment again when she was sleeping outside or in a shelter again, or could provide third party documentation that she would be homeless within the next two weeks.*

- *A case manager was working with a young woman who was couch-surfing in an extremely unsafe location, where she did not know the person she was staying with well. She went to a Youth Housing Connect assessment, and did not know that she needed to say "I will be kicked out in 14 days." She was told she didn't qualify for YHC, and returned to the unsafe location, and was sexually assaulted later that week.*

- *A case manager was working with a young woman whom he had encouraged to set up a YHC assessment – he wasn't able to meet with her before her assessment to talk about what to expect, and she went into the assessment. She emerged crying because the assessor told her she didn't qualify for housing since she was couch-surfing. She then dropped out of case management and he has not seen her again.*

- *The mother of a 19-year-old woman called looking for help. Her daughter was "in the life" (i.e. being sexually exploited) in an area known for prostitution. The daughter was arrested, and once released, she went to her mother's house. She has never technically slept outside or in a shelter (because while she was being sexually exploited she stayed in motels and/or with "boyfriends"). She has been staying with her mother for 1 week; her mother cannot provide long-term housing as she is in section 8 housing and is not permitted to have another resident. The young woman will be having a YHC assessment this week, and case managers are*

concerned that since she has never slept outside or in a shelter she will be turned down.

Family Housing Connect – King County Coordinated Entry System for Homeless Families

As YouthCare, our clients interact with the family system in two ways. Either they are homeless because their family is, and they are seeking housing together with their family, or they are pregnant/parenting and seeking family housing for themselves and their children. Family shelters are nearly impossible to get into, and almost universally do not accept men or boys over age 15, meaning families must sometimes split up to access these coveted spots. To receive an assessment through FHC, you must be sleeping outside, in a car, or in a shelter. This forces the most vulnerable youth – young women who are pregnant or parenting – to sleep outside to qualify for housing.

- *Open Doors [a step-down rental subsidy program at YouthCare] recently had a client who is still in the age range of youth programs, but gave birth to her first child this fall; therefore, she is now in the Family System. She is in her own apartment, but not in a safe space for her and her child. She also received an eviction notice. Upon calling 2-1-1 for referrals [this is the local coordinated entry point for Family Housing Connect], she was told that she must sleep in a shelter or a space not meant for habitation in order to qualify for any referrals or services. This young woman has a 4-month-old and was told that she must sleep in her car or outside in order to find better housing.*

- *In our under-18 transitional housing program, we have a minor client (17 years old) who is pregnant. Her family is also homeless, and living in a formal homeless encampment in Seattle. The client is on the waiting list for family housing through King County's Coordinated Entry system – Family Housing Connect. She must qualify as homeless in order to get placed into housing for her and her baby upon her 18 birthday. Because this young woman is in our TLP, she is not considered homeless. She has asked that she be on pass from our program so that she can spend a week living with her family in a tent in a homeless encampment (again, she is pregnant!) and be able to answer the FHC assessor honestly, during the interview, when asked where she has slept for the last week.*

- *Our WIA Supervisor has worked with a client for many years. She had exited case management and was stably housed with her husband on a farm where they were able to live in exchange for his work, and it was a wonderful set up. He was fired after a long stretch and they returned to homelessness, couch-surfing between friends and other locations. They have a one-year-old son and she is currently pregnant; when she called Family Housing Connection, they told her "that they only help people that are living in a tent, car, or shelter." She doesn't want to go into a shelter because her husband will not be allowed to stay with them. They are*

currently couchsurfing with various friends, but are not able to stay long-term. She has been extremely proactive about seeking employment and looking for educational opportunities that will boost her employability, but stable housing remains a barrier to all of these goals.

- *A case manager worked with a 17-year-old girl who has a three-month-old baby. She is living with her mother, who is unstable and a domestic violence aggressor. After an incident, a judge issued a 6-month no contact order against the mother, but the daughter and her child don't have anywhere else to live. Family Housing Connect will not conduct an assessment because she lives with her mother, even though she has a no-contact order, and her mother could be arrested simply for living in the same house.*

- *A case manager is working with a 19-year-old young woman with an infant. She moved in with her boyfriend's mother to escape violence from her boyfriend. The home was not safe for her as the boyfriend would come and go regularly and the mom did not honor the young woman's wishes that contact with the infant be supervised. When she called 2-1-1 for a family housing connection assessment, they told her she must be "literally on the streets" to get an assessment.*

- *Another case manager worked with a family that lives in a tent in a wooded area in South Seattle. They have 7 children between 3 family units, including two YouthCare clients ages 15 and 17. Previously, they were staying in a partially finished house, which CPS deemed unfit for human habitation and opened investigations against the parents. Family Housing Connection deemed it a livable structure and would not provide a housing assessment for them.*

- *A 21-year-old youth in our rental assistance program became pregnant and had a child. She lost her job and then lost her apartment. She was told she needed to spend a night at a shelter in order to receive an FHC assessment.*

Other

At our drop-in center, staff report frequently getting phone calls or meeting formerly homeless youth who have lost their job or had their paid internship end, and they want help getting another job. They do not yet have an eviction notice, and they do not want to inform their landlord that they no longer are employed because that will potentially cause them to be preemptively evicted. They do not qualify for case management or paid employment training programs with us because they are not homeless under the HUD definition.

COVENANT HOUSE NEW YORK, NEW YORK, NY

The very system designed to be a "Continuum of Care" toward permanency and stability, in actuality cannibalizes itself. Agencies such as Covenant House that work exclusively with homeless youth and absolutely need every aspect of the continuum: Emergency Shelter, Transitional and Permanent cannot seamlessly access the HUD system to attain the goal of permanent housing. As a McKinney Vento Transitional living program provider and a Continuum of Care Leasing Program provider, Covenant House residents coming from our HUD funded transitional living program are ineligible for the leasing program. This is because in order to qualify for the Continuum of Care permanent housing Leasing program you must be documented as Chronically Homeless. In order to qualify as Chronically homeless you have to be demonstrate that you have been homeless for an entire year or demonstrate four bouts of homelessness within three years. **HUD does not view residents living in a Transitional Living Shelter funded by HUD to be homeless** therefore residents coming from our Rights of Passage Transitional Living program are ineligible for our very own Leasing program funded by the HUD Continuum of Care.

What makes this even more exacerbating is that residents coming directly from our Emergency Shelter or demonstrate the four bouts in three years are not adequately prepared to live in their own apartment even with the subsidy that the CoC Leasing Program provides.

HUD needs to seriously re-examine their Chronically Homeless criteria with respect to youth and understand that most youth or young adult oriented transitional living programs are designed to assist residents in preparing for independence; however, 95% of residents do not have the financial means to live independently in a City like New York. They need some sort of subsidy program or else they become vulnerable to renter the homeless system, many times now as adults. So in the meantime, residents in transitional living program are essentially homeless as they are limited in their housing options.

Thanks for the opportunity to offer our perspective on the subject, please reach out to me if you need further questions of clarity.

ALTERNATIVE HOUSE, DUNN LORRING, VA

Alternative House is a nonprofit organization that serves at-risk, runaway and homeless youth in Northern Virginia. Last year we worked with more than 2,000 young people. We provided safe shelter to 200 runaway or homeless youth between the ages of 13 and 24. Homeless youth are not like homeless adults. They often are homeless because they believe the street is a safer option than their family home. They “couch surf” going from friend to friend trying to find a safe place to stay. Too often they end up trading sex for food and shelter. The current U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD’s) definition of homelessness excludes these young people.

One of Alternative House’s programs, the Homeless Youth Initiative, provides rental assistance, case management and educational and occupational supports to homeless

unaccompanied high school students. Many of these students do not fit HUD's rigid definition but clearly fit the true meaning of being homeless. "John's" parents lost their jobs during the recession and their marriage fell apart. With their home in foreclosure they left the area leaving John behind trying to finish high school. He bounced from friend to friend with his grades plummeting until a school social worker referred him to our Homeless Youth Initiative. We were able to help John maintain stable housing and find part-time work, which allowed him to remain in school and graduate on time. He has since gone on to community college and full-time employment. John did not "technically" meet the HUD definition of homelessness but he met ours.

CENTER FOR YOUTH SERVICES, ROCHESTER, NY

HUD's eligibility requirements excludes homeless youth and families:

It is a vicious circle - because HUD does not count youth who are hopping from unreliable relative to potentially unsafe acquaintance each night (instead of risking sleeping out on the streets), they aren't counted as homeless so shelter beds are not allocated. And since there are not enough shelter beds for youth and young adults they continue to have to rely on hopping around in order to survive.

This also means the current definition for HUD of homeless youth impacts the number of transitional housing beds available. A core component of the continuum of services required to address youth homelessness is youth-centered transitional living/housing programs. Due to the limited and shrinking number of these types of units, young people seeking safety and stability who are even able to get into a shelter that provides youth-appropriate services, often cannot stay long enough to wait for a space in a youth-appropriate longer-term transitional independent living program to become available. It can take months for a space to open up. This leaves young people seeking housing relying on unsafe and uncaring adults while waiting to access services.

HUD has not been adequately or proportionately serving youth:

- Outcomes: HUD's outcome measurements are not reflective of the measurements of success when working with homeless youth and young adults - especially parenting teens. Academic achievement, attainment of safe, permanent connections and independent living skills gained are more applicable and useful outcomes to be measured.
- Definition of Permanent Housing at Discharge: HUD's options for determining Permanent Housing as an outcome at discharge are not realistic or appropriate for youth and young adults. Discharge to military, college campus and even another longer-term adult- focused transitional housing program should be included as permanent, stable housing outcomes for youth and young adults.
- Rapid Rehousing: The definitions of permanent housing impacts services such as Rapid Rehousing for Transition Age Youth (TAY) as RR programs are seen as successful based on adult-oriented permanent housing. This results in RR programs not serving TAY as they are seen as "unsuccessful" and too "high need" for RR services and supports.
- Permanent Housing: The average age of young people who become independent

in the best of circumstances in the US is 26. Hundreds of thousands of young adults move dorms/apartments/shared housing each year as they progress through college and early careers. To expect young people 16 - 24 with the kinds of traumatic experiences many homeless bring to be able to maintain a lease and remain stable is unrealistic and sets these youth up for failure and evictions on their records. Also, many TAY can't even legally sign a lease, while others have little or negative rental histories making them undesirable to landlords. The definition of Permanent Housing for TAY needs to be expanded to include more transitional, risk-tolerant options.

- Coordinated Access: Assessing and diversion services look very different for minors and other TAY. CoCs are majority adult-services and are crafting Coordinated Access to fit their models. Because homeless TAY have not been counted many CoCs do not have many youth and young adult providers at the table (if they have any at all in their community) to participate in the creation of a specific, unique Coordinated Access for homeless TAY.

AVENUES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Avenues for Homeless Youth operates a 21 bed shelter and transitional housing program in Minneapolis, Minnesota and three community-based host home programs. We are about to open a 12 bed shelter and transitional housing program in the northwest suburbs of the Twin Cities, which is being developed in partnership with the City of Brooklyn Park in response to the rise in youth homelessness and sex trafficking in the suburbs.

There are many problems with HUD's current definition of homelessness, especially for youth and young adults. For example:

1. HUD's definition of homelessness excludes many youth from HUD-funded housing programs and from homelessness counts. For example, it does not include youth who are unstably couch-hopping from house-to-house. This is the majority of homeless youth. While they may have a place to sleep at night, they are not stable and they are not necessarily safe. And they are not getting the supportive services they need to become stable, stay in school and plan for their futures.

2. There is a terrible shortage of youth-specific shelter beds, both in Minnesota and across the country. This means youth need to spend time in adult shelters to qualify for HUD-supported housing. Adult shelters are inappropriate and often unsafe for young people. Youth will choose many other options over crowded, frightening adult shelters, including options that are not safe for them.

Our goal, as agencies supporting homeless youth, is to connect with youth as quickly as we can early in their homelessness. Early and comprehensive supportive services help them avoid long-term and chronic homelessness, becoming victims of sex trafficking, being forced to engage in sex work or illegal activities just to make ends meet, having to drop out of high school and college, and other negative outcomes.

These young people face extraordinary challenges, but supporting them is an opportunity for the larger community. We all benefit as they move from surviving the streets to thriving young adults.

YOUTH CONTINUUM, GREATER NEW HAVEN, CT

Youth Continuum has served homeless youth in the Greater New Haven, CT area since 1997. On average, our Street Outreach Program identifies between 200 and 250 new homeless youth each year. Through our DHHS funded Basic Center Shelter, Transitional Living Program, and HUD housing programs we provide housing for approximately 40-50 youth annually.

For most homeless youth, the options for finding housing are extremely limited due to current local systems and federal guidelines.

- There are no youth shelters for non-system youth and most young people do not feel safe in adult shelters where the population is primarily chronic older adults and those with serious mental health and substance abuse issues. Adult shelter providers are not trained to understand the unique needs of youth and are generally unaware of normal adolescent brain development and the implications for treatment, nor do they employ a Positive Youth Development framework, as skilled youth providers would.
- Few homeless youth meet the requirements for Permanent Supportive Housing; they are generally low on the priority list for rapid rehousing dollars, which they are often ineligible for, given a lack of prior employment or rent history.
- Existing HUD guidelines prioritize chronically homeless adults and veterans, making youth needs low on the priority list. As youth do not qualify as 'chronically homeless' they fail to rise to the levels to compete for housing with adults who have medical and psychiatric conditions to go along with their history of chronic homelessness.

As providers of youth services, including services to those in the State's child welfare and juvenile justice systems, we regularly see how the failures of those systems lead to youth homelessness, as well as how homelessness makes these youth more likely to end up in the justice system. As this country moves forward on the efforts to end homelessness for all, we desperately need to go 'up-stream' to stop youth from becoming the next generation of chronically homeless. In order to do this, we need federal guidelines which recognize the true nature of youth homeless and allow access to services to prevent and end this situation.

Unlike adults who can often be diverted from care, youth require urgent access to care and support. These youth are survivors, but not without a great deal of damage to them along the way. The statistic regarding homeless youth to increased risks of sexual assault, drug use, HIV/Aids, prostitution, pregnancy, and incarceration, as well as lower graduation and employment rates, clearly indicate that these young people are not being

given the opportunity for a bright, productive future that we hold out to young people in America.

STACEY VIOLANTE COTE, ESQ., MSW, DIRECTOR, TEEN LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT, CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY, HARTFORD, CT

The Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA), located in Hartford, CT was founded in 1997. CCA's mission is to improve the child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, health and education systems' responses to the needs of poor children by 1) providing holistic legal services to poor children in their communities and 2) improving legal representation of poor children. CCA locates its attorneys within each system, in offices at health care programs in Hartford and New Britain and schools in Hartford and Bridgeport, where they are available to children whose needs for services and appropriate treatment by government agencies are not being met. CCA attorneys also conduct outreach at youth shelters, schools and community programs in Greater Hartford, Fairfield County and New Haven, to educate children about their legal rights and provide legal representation.

The current HUD definition of homelessness excludes many of the homeless youth CCA comes into contact with. Most of the youth we work with are staying in temporary, unsafe locations on couches, in acquaintances' homes, and even trading sex for a safe place to sleep. This was documented in a recent study conducted by Yale's Consultation Center in Connecticut entitled, "Invisible No More: Creating Opportunities for Youth who are Homeless." In the Study, several youth reported that they had traded sex for money (N = 7; 7.1%), a place to stay (N = 8; 8.2%); and drugs or alcohol (N = 4; 4.1%). Because the definition excludes many of our clients, these youth are forced to stay in unsafe living situations because they cannot access supports.

BILL WILSON CENTER, SANTA CRUZ, CA

We wonder why there is so much confusion surrounding homelessness when the truest definition seems obvious. It rests with the people experiencing it. A family knows when they are homeless. Instead of looking forward to the holiday season, they are simply hoping to survive. They might be living in a homeless encampment or in their car -- or at a motel renting by the week, or doubled up on the sofas or in the garages of friends. These survival strategies are not long-term, nor do they mean the family is adequately housed. Parents often go to every length they can to keep a roof over their children's heads, but just because they are temporarily successful with motels or couch-surfing does not mean they are not homeless. Too often, homeless children are invisible to the systems meant to protect them.

At Bill Wilson Center, we know firsthand that young people experiencing homelessness are survivors, and for many, their survival strategies push them out of HUD's definition of "homeless," even when their lives and well-being are at risk. These troubling discrepancies in the counts of homeless families and youth can cause a misdirection or

reduction of resources available for combating homelessness. When lives are at stake, a clear, consistent definition across all agencies that are supposed to help is critical.

LARKIN STREET YOUTH SERVICES, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Larkin Street Youth Services is the main provider of services for runaway and homeless youth in San Francisco, last year reaching over 3,400 youth ages 12-24. Our programs provide youth with crisis intervention, housing, intensive case management, medical care, education, job training, and other vital support services.

Prior to entering our services, many youth bounce around, staying temporarily with friends or family for periods of time. Their futures are uncertain and these youth often do not know when they will wear out their welcome and be forced out onto the streets. Approximately 1/3 of youth who access our services said that the last stable place they had to live was with a family member.

The failure of HUD to allow some homeless youth to access homeless services has serious and far-reaching effects, including exclusion of these populations from critical services, continued invisibility in community planning on homelessness, and weak or non-existent coordination with key systems of care for children and youth.

In Their Own Words – Statements from Homeless Youth

"My experiences with my biological family have been anything but positive and supportive... The situation at my father's house continued to escalate and a second order of protection was granted for me. I am currently a displaced teen. I am temporarily sleeping in the living room of my older half-brother's biological father's apartment. I am responsible to provide for my own needs such as food and clothing. I am responsible to get myself up and ready for school each day. When I can go to sleep at night, I do not want to worry about everyday situations as much as I have already in my short life. I want to live happy and productive."

- K.F., Staten Island

"Initially, the arrangements felt like sanctuary. After all, anything was better than living with either one of my parents, who were incapable of taking proper care of themselves, let alone children. There were two bedrooms, five people, and an old cat that acted more like a sixth person than a pet. My great uncle, who had suffered a major heart attack in 2002, had one of the bedrooms because the heart attack had left him with a plethora of mental and physical illnesses. My little brother, who was nine at the time, moved into the other bedroom. The adults in the situation had all agreed that the most important thing was for the youngest child to have a somewhat stable environment and his own personal space so he could sleep well at night and still go to school. My elderly grandmother, with her own abundance of physical and mental illnesses, along with my older brother of eighteen, slept in recliner chairs in what we considered to be the living room. As for me, the only option left was to just throw a blanket down on the kitchen floor. It was literally the only spot in the whole apartment not occupied."

- K.S., Maine

"Stability is a word I never really understood until last year. There was not one thing in my life growing up that ever held constant. Whether it was where I lived, the state my father was in, or the times when my mother decided to be a parent, I was never allowed to experience the concept of certainty. I never thought that 16-year-olds would have to worry about where they were living the next day. Whether it was a motel room with one bathroom, two beds, and six other people enclosed by four bare white walls, or an upgrade to a rundown trailer with barely and food or privacy, my living arrangements were never really home."

- M.D., Wisconsin

"When I was twelve years old, I entered the foster care system. After living with my foster mom for close to six years, she adopted me and my younger sister. Then, not even a year later, and three days after my eighteenth birthday, my adopted mom kicked me out of the house. She was physically, emotionally, and verbally abusive to me for years. However, her throwing me out on the street was still a bit of a shock. I knew I did not have time to cry over it. I packed my things, called one of my best friends, and went to live with her and her mother in their small, two-bedroom apartment.

I am truly grateful to my friend and her mother, because without them, I do not know what I would have done. Unfortunately, their home was not exactly a stable environment, nor was it a permanent one. I slept on a pull-out mattress in the living room with all my belongings shoved in suitcases under my friend's bed, or thrown haphazardly into her mother's spare closet. I knew I could not stay there indefinitely because the landlord forbids anyone but the tenants to live there. If the landlord found out that I was living there, my friend and her mother would have been evicted, and they would have become homeless as well. "

- R.S., Louisiana

"After my father's death, my mother crumbled, as the 21 years of comfort provided to her was gone, and was quickly replaced with crack/cocaine. Several encounters with law enforcement due to her worsening addiction caused her to go to prison for three years. Those continuous series of events left me helpless. I was shuffled from family member to family member, who all treated me as if I were a burden. Blood then trickled to water, and family meant nothing to me. I was legitimately ALONE. Hiding this secret was a challenge. I did not know that my secrets placed me in a growing category of unaccompanied youth.

Reaching out to my guidance counselor for support, she paved a pathway for me to follow. I looked at school as a getaway and excelled in academics, despite the constant stress of not knowing if I was even welcome in my own "home." I strove to stay active and busy to escape the reality of loneliness. I played basketball for my high school, which took three more hours away from the home life that I desperately wanted to escape. I also volunteered over 200 hours at the middle school where I tutored students and kept busy until later in the day, just to keep away

from "home." My "family" made it clear that I was unwanted; this lasted until my sophomore year, when a small argument led to my physically being put out of the house. I hit rock bottom."

- T.G., Florida

"One time I wanted to go to DHR, but one person encouraged me not to go. It was one of my friends. She told me that I could come and stay with her. I lived with my friend for a year, until her mother told me to leave because she didn't want to take care of me anymore. I needed a place to stay, so I used what little money I had saved up and stayed in a motel by myself for a while.

On another occasion, I had stayed with another friend. Things were going great until we had an argument one night, and they kicked me out of their house. I was homeless again. I packed my things and left with no transportation. I walked through the night by myself. I didn't know where my mother was. Finally, I stopped at a neighbor's house and called my cousin to come and get me. My cousin took me back to get my valuables, but they were nowhere to be found. My "friends" had stolen all of my clothes and other belongings. When I asked for my things back, they tried to run over me with their car.

There was also a time when I lived with people who almost killed my mother. Her arm was broken, and the bones on the right side of her face were broken. Still today, she suffers from the effects of the beatings, such as the lack of feeling in her face."

- T.B., Alabama

"At 13 years old is when I started living with other people. My friends all had their back doors open for me specifically or a window. I climbed in the window sometimes. But when I was 15 years old is when I packed my bags and said I wasn't coming back. And that meant that I already knew at least one family that I could stay with, but I knew that it meant that I was gonna be staying with multiple people. And so, from the time I was 15, officially, until the time I was 18, I moved every two or three weeks, and I lived out of garbage bags and backpacks. I lived at two or three different houses at once basically, so that I never had to ask one person if I could live with them. Because people shouldn't be having sleepovers on a school night. And especially, you know, if you smell bad, or have a backpack full of clothes with you."

- B.S., Washington state

"I was staying with a lot of other people. Whenever somebody's parents would let me stay at their house for the night, I would stay there. A lot of times it was during school, so I couldn't stay the night because you know, no sleepovers on school night. I stayed in the dorms on base – I had a friend who was an airman. He risked getting in trouble, because he could get in a lot of trouble for having anybody in your dorm past 9:00, I believe. So I put him in a situation where he could really get in trouble."

- E.S., Florida

"My parents would lock the door on me, and so I'd either be wandering all night, or find somewhere to go. But being in high school, a lot of people don't want you staying the night at

their house because it's a school night. So I moved around countless times. Overstaying your welcome is a big part of being homeless. You can't stay somewhere for too long, because you can't provide for them being so young. So you just kind of stay for a couple of weeks, a month, and you end up somewhere else eventually. That's what I was doing throughout high school. And being a girl it's different, because when you stay at other people's places, a lot of guys kind of take advantage of that and want to get something more out of you, I guess."

- C. W. - Michigan