

**Testimony of Patty Avery, Co-Chair of Evansville-Vanderburgh County Homeless Youth Council
Oct. 22, 2007**

By way of introduction, I am Patty Avery, and I currently serve as co-chair of the Evansville-Vanderburgh County [Homeless Youth Council](#). I have been involved with homeless issues in Evansville since 2002, when I became a part of the task force that produced our community's ten-year plan to end homelessness and served as the project's lead editor.

Before moving to Evansville in 1999, I worked with street children in Brazil for over 8 years, helping found a project in Sao Paulo that included street outreach and long-term housing for teenage girls. Our family shared a home with these girls, helping them begin their education and learn the life-skills they needed to become self-sufficient.

I am employed full-time by Old National Bank, and serve in a volunteer capacity on our Youth Council, on the city-county [Commission on Homelessness](#) and on the board of Aurora, the organization that serves as resource coordinator for our ten-year plan to end homelessness.

Our Homeless Youth Council requested the formation of this study committee for several reasons. As we began to meet and consider youth homelessness in our community, we became frustrated with the lack of state-wide data. As we examined best practices from around the country, we also came to realize that our current structure in Indiana did not appear to permit the types of programs that are working elsewhere. And because effectively addressing youth homelessness requires a complex, multi-faceted and coordinated approach, we felt it would be of state-wide benefit for the legislature to hear about the current approach of the various stakeholders and ask how we can better prevent and address youth homelessness.

As you prepare to discuss potential legislation, I would like to share about the framework communities around the country have utilized in developing their plans to end homelessness along with some nationwide data that can provide some understanding into the issues that shape youth homelessness here in Indiana as well.

If you look at communities' ten-year plans to end homelessness, you will see several consistent areas of thought.

The first is to gather data that will inform strategies that will result in the outcome we want – in this case, a measurable impact on youth homelessness.

Several of you have understandably raised the question of needing reliable numbers of homeless youth in Indiana. While we can gather numbers from the school corporations that are fortunate enough to have McKinney-Vento grants and from the counties that have youth shelters in place, they are otherwise very difficult to obtain.

A recent report to Congress by the Department of Health and Human Services, entitled "Promising Strategies for Ending Youth Homelessness" reflected the same concern and sums up the problem of tracking kids this way: *Youth are not easily accessible to researchers, and they often move in and out of homelessness, avoiding contact with service systems and adults.* (p. 9)

Nevertheless, we must make an attempt, and the clearinghouse for information proposed by Sen. Becker could help track the information we do have. In addition, we can explore the possibility of adapting our HMIS information system or making use of the system that is in place for projects that receive federal funding through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

Communities developing plans to end homelessness have recognized that the challenge lies in not only developing solutions for those who are already homeless. They are working on preventing homelessness from occurring in the first place.

This same report to Congress cited three main factors that can result in homelessness among unaccompanied youth:

1. Family Conflict

- 89.7% of runaway youth entering shelters and 75.5% of homeless youth joining residential programs cite family dynamics as a critical issue leading to their homelessness (data from agencies funded by RHYA)
- Neglected and sexually abused youth were approximately three times more likely to run away than non-neglected youth. Studies show between 21 and 42% of homeless youth state that they were neglected or abused.
- Rejection regarding sexual orientation can lead to homelessness
- Family conflict resulting from teen pregnancy
 - When asked, nearly half of the members of Evansville's Teen Success reported that they had been homeless at one point since they became pregnant.

2. Foster Care placement

- An Illinois study showed that 52% of foster youth had run away at least once. Of that number, two-thirds reported running away more than once.
- A Washington state study of homeless youth found that a third reported previous foster home placement
- The report to congress states that *“youth who have emancipated or “age out” are at particularly high risk of becoming homeless.”*
- One study of youth who age out said 12% reported being homeless at least once and 22% reported living in four or more separate places.
- Another showed that 22% were homeless for one of more nights within a year of being discharged. Almost 20% were homeless for the first time ever for a week or more after leaving foster care.

3. Juvenile Detention

- Research is limited because this population can be difficult to track
- New York City shelter reported 30% of the youth who entered had a history of incarceration.

In order to prevent homelessness among Indiana youth, we must critically examine the structures we have in place in these three areas. The state’s renewed emphasis on preventing and fighting child abuse may, well, produce positive future outcomes in reducing youth homelessness, and we should continue to strengthen these efforts.

As was addressed at the last meeting, we do have some mechanisms in place for youth aging out of foster care. But in the speaker’s own words, “Unfortunately, a lot of our youth become homeless.” Strengthening these structures and seeking new ways to connect youth who leave foster care and later need services with them can help reduce homelessness among the kids we have taken as our own.

Recommendations in the federal report reflected these priorities:

- *“Given the large number of homeless adolescents with a history of foster care placement and juvenile justice involvement, targeted strategies are needed to support healthy transitions and prevent the onset of homelessness among these high risk populations.”*
- Training in health care, education and employment opportunities were associated with positive outcomes
- *“Youth who received an increasing number of skills training in the areas of money, consumer skills, credit, education and employment were more likely to maintain a job for at least a year and access health care if they needed it.”*
- *“Affordable housing is a critical need of youth aging out of foster care.”*
- Cross-agency or cross-systems coordination – a team approach works. *“Through this collaboration, youth gain access to education, employment/vocational training, mental health counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, housing, mentoring and other supportive services available in the community.”*

In terms of dealing with our present reality, we must then consider what can be done to serve unaccompanied youth, those who for whatever reason are now on their own. As you have heard in prior testimony, their needs are many and complex. And as the state’s Youth Services Association has shared, they face tremendous risks on many fronts.

Street Youth – the most at-risk

- At high risk of being a victim of crime – assault, robbery, rape.
- Studies of this population place the range of substance abuse in street youth from 70 – 85%.
- Midwest study showed almost half the males and a third of the females sold drugs.
- 27.5% of street youth and 9.5% of shelter youth report engaging in “survival sex” (exchanging sex for shelter, money, drugs, food or clothing)
 - Adolescent females more likely to engage in survival sex
- Gay, bisexual and transgender males report high rates of unprotected sex with persons known to be HIV-positive, sex while high, and sex with an injected drug user.

In addition to prevention, community plans to end homelessness go on to address building the infrastructure that will move individuals from homelessness to long-term housing that is safe and secure.

For many of these street youth, reconciliation with their family is impossible. Our task in Indiana is to understand the extent of this challenge and develop policies that will allow these vulnerable and at-risk youth to access housing and the services they need to become self-sufficient and build a future like the one the young man from Lake County has built. Our responsibility as a state to these young Hoosiers is to develop legislation that can be the framework of the bridges that can connect them to a healthy and viable adulthood.

The other young man that shared his story at the last meeting, Spencer, now that he has turned 18, is finally crossing that bridge. As you consider the potential legislation that is before you and additional measures that could be developed in the coming months, I hope you will remember his very compelling testimony and create new on-ramps for unaccompanied youth to have access to housing, care, counseling and support that is both life-saving and life-changing.