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WHEREVER I CAN LAY MY HEAD: HOMELESS YOUTH ON HOMELESSNESS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research about the issue of homelessness largely has focused on understanding the characteristics and addressing the needs of homeless adults and families in our communities. Much less research has been conducted to document the characteristics and needs of homeless youth. In recent years, a number of studies have come out in Illinois that address the situation of homeless adults and families as well as youth. Yet there remains a lack of data documenting the perspective of homeless youth concerning their own needs. Providing services that youth report they need can serve as a gateway to other needed services.

In the summer of 2003, the Chicago Department of Health sponsored a symposium on the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth.¹ Discussions during this meeting made it clear that assessing the needs of homeless youth would require looking beyond those who were living in shelters, and that the needs of subgroups within the homeless youth population were likely to vary considerably. In response to this need for more information about homeless youths' needs, the City's Department of Children and Youth Services (CYS) partnered with the Night Ministry,² an agency with a history of addressing the needs of marginalized youth, to commission the Center for Impact Research (CIR) to conduct a study of the needs of homeless youth in the City of Chicago. The purpose of this study was to learn what the youth themselves identify as their needs, and to understand the differences in these needs among a variety of subgroups—those experiencing their first episode of homelessness, those cycling in and out of homelessness, and those experiencing chronic homelessness. Both the non-profit service providers and the City

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Questioning.

² The Night Ministry is a non-profit, non-denominational organization that responds to the needs of people on the nighttime streets of Chicago, serving homeless and runaway youth, working poor adults, uninsured and underinsured people seeking medical assistance. It provides direct services, outreach and shelter, as well as advocacy and public policy work and leadership/training on these issues (<http://www.thenightministry.org>).

hope that identifying and meeting these needs not only will act as a gateway to other needed services, but also will expedite resolution of problems that result in homelessness and lead to the establishment of permanent, stable, and safe living situations.

With guidance from the Homeless Youth Task Group of the Chicago Continuum of Care³ and an advisory group composed of government policy makers and program personnel and non-profit agency directors,⁴ CIR conducted a survey of homeless youth in Chicago between the ages of 14 and 21 during April and May 2004. Twelve youth, nine of whom were homeless, were recruited and trained to interview homeless youth for the project. They conducted 400 interviews with homeless youth throughout Chicago—at bus stops, fairs and festivals, on trains, streets, and basketball courts, in parks, shelters, schools, homes, drop-in centers, churches, and restaurants.

In addition to conducting the survey, CIR interviewed homeless youth service providers, advocates, and public policy personnel working at public and private agencies. These interviews provide further information about the needs of homeless youth and the resources currently available to them, as well as ways that the various systems serving homeless youth might be improved.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey and interviews with providers and policymakers yielded extensive data, much of which is presented in the full report. This executive summary presents the major recommendations identified by CIR and the Homeless Youth Task Group and Advisory Group.

- **Create an Interagency Task Force on Homeless Youth with members from the State, City, nonprofit service providers, and funders .**

We recommend that the City and State form an interagency task force to bring together representatives from the many agencies that come into contact with homeless youth in the public and private sectors, including private foundations that are committed to addressing this issue as part of their philanthropic support. Better coordination between and among public and private service providers and increased interagency referral will improve the State's ability to serve this population. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), because of their contact with many of these youth prior to homelessness,

³ Homeless Youth Task Group members are: Illinois Department of Children and Family Services; Unity Parenting/Harmony Village; Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - Administration for Children and Families; Thresholds; the Night Ministry; New Moms; and Click Services.

⁴ The project's Advisory Group members are: Chicago Department of Human Services; Chicago Continuum of Care; Special Assistant to the Mayor on Homelessness; New Phoenix Assistance Center; Teen Living Programs; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - Administration for Children and Families; Illinois Department of Children and Family Services; and the Night Ministry.

may be especially well placed to do preventive work with youth at risk for becoming homeless. Coordination with other city and state agencies to support DCFS and CPS in these efforts is crucial.

➤ **Improve continuity, coordination, and accessibility of services**

Homeless youth have a range of interrelated needs, yet service providers tend to specialize in addressing one or two specific service areas. It is difficult for youth to identify and obtain all the needed services from assorted providers in multiple locations. Furthermore, youth may find that their inability to meet one need, e.g., obtaining identification documents, or transportation, becomes an obstacle to accessing other needed services such as Head Start or job training.

We recommend that the Federal, State and City agencies, service providers, private foundations and homeless youth representatives work together to improve the continuity, coordination, and accessibility of services for homeless youth. Ideally, youth should be able to obtain a variety of related services in one location. However, given the current fiscal constraints and the potentially high costs of such comprehensive services by each service provider, youth would benefit from intensive case management designed to identify providers, coordinate services, and “fill in the gaps” by providing transportation vouchers, assistance with legal documents, and other services necessary to help youth overcome obstacles to accessing existing resources.

➤ **Recognize and address the differing needs of homeless youth subgroups.**

While many of the needs and experiences identified in this survey were expressed by homeless youth across the spectrum of the subgroups, other needs and experiences varied widely among subgroups such as youth who had been in the foster care or juvenile justice system, and youth of different genders and ages. In some cases, these differences simply require a heightened level of sensitivity in service provision, while in other cases, different services are required. Five of the groups that warrant particular attention are youth living on the street, young teens, pregnant and parenting youth, LGBTQ youth, and youth with criminal records.

Youth living on the street

This study exposed a divide between the needs of youth who live on the street and the needs of youth who have found shelter off the street. While both groups lack resources, youth who live on the street were significantly more likely to report having basic needs.

Given the sheer quantity of needs identified by youth living on the street, as well as the degree to which they lack the most basic resources of daily life, a specialized approach to this population is necessary. There needs to be an increase in outreach to youth living in less-accessible locations such as abandoned buildings, parks, trains, and cars in order to assist street youth in meeting their unique and complex needs.

Young teens

Youth ages fourteen to fifteen were significantly less knowledgeable than older youth about where they could seek assistance. This lack of knowledge increases the vulnerability of the youngest homeless youth to abuse and prevents them from accessing available services. These youth were also more likely than older youth to be experiencing crisis homelessness rather than chronic or episodic homelessness. It may well be that young teens in crisis today are tomorrow's chronically homeless youth.

We recommend that specialized outreach to young teenagers be implemented in an "adolescent and youth friendly" manner. This outreach should be designed to publicize the availability of youth services and encourage young teenagers to access them. Outreach methods with this group in particular should address the factors leading to their current homelessness to prevent future or continued lack of safe shelter.

Pregnant and parenting youth

Housing

This study uncovered an extremely high pregnancy/parenting rate among homeless females. Yet, only one shelter in Chicago accepts pregnant and parenting youth under the age of 18, and it can only accommodate five pregnant/parenting girls and five children. We recommend expanding emergency housing options for this population.

Childcare

Nearly one-half of the parenting youth, and over 90% of the youth who were both pregnant and parenting, cited childcare as a current need. Subsidized programs require identification, pay stubs, school records, or other documentation that can be hard for homeless youth to obtain. We recommend that youth applying for subsidized childcare or Head Start be offered assistance in obtaining the documents necessary for enrolling in these programs.

Lack of reliable transportation, as well as lack of access to information about childcare, may also prevent parenting youth from locating and using childcare. We recommend that childcare services be integrated into or coordinated with other homeless youth services.

WIC outreach

A large number of pregnant and parenting youth, virtually all of whom are likely to be eligible, cited WIC as a current need. We recommend implementing targeted outreach to pregnant and parenting youth to inform them of and enroll them in this program. Hospitals and community prenatal clinics that serve homeless youth may be ideal sites for reaching this population.

LGBTQ youth

Some lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth have needs that differ in severity and type from the homeless youth population at large. While their needs may appear to mirror those of non-LGBTQ youth, their sexual orientation and/or gender adds an additional layer of challenge to meeting these needs

Transgender youth in particular reported high levels of service needs; they were also more likely to have been arrested and to have been sexually abused.

We recommend an expansion of LGBTQ services for homeless youth, such as drop-in counseling, support groups, and health care sites. We also recommend that the existing hotlines for LGBTQ youth be further publicized in order to help these youth manage conflicts with their families regarding their sexual orientation and obtain the services that they need.

Youth with criminal records

Many youth reported convictions for misdemeanor and felony crimes. However, there appear to be only a small number of providers who assist homeless youth with expungement, and youth may not be aware of this service or know how to find these few providers. We recommend that information about and assistance with record expungement be integrated into existing youth service programs. School re-entry and job training and placement providers may be especially well placed to offer these services.

➤ Improve and expand preventive interventions targeting youth with difficult family relationships.

Nearly 80% of youth identified “bad relationship with family” or “disagreement with family” as a significant factor in their current homelessness. Although state programs to address family stress exist, this research did not obtain information as to the effectiveness of programs or the extent of their coverage. We recommend that the State and City work with schools, community centers, and other sites that interact with youth to raise awareness of the role of family problems in youth homelessness. Providers should be encouraged to offer or refer youth and adults for counseling, support groups, and other assistance in addressing difficulties in family relationships. We also recommend that the State and City work more closely with existing organizations to expand their outreach to youth and their families via schools, churches, and service providers.

➤ **Expand opportunities for education and job training and placement.**

In the survey the youth reported a high level of need for services far beyond those of housing. In particular, large numbers of youth requested educational and job assistance, both when queried about these needs directly and when asked more generally what they wanted to tell the City. The youth clearly demonstrate that they understand the importance of education and employment for escaping from homelessness, yet they report that few of them obtain this crucial assistance. We recommend that outreach be carried out to enroll homeless youth in school or GED programs and expand job training and placement programs tailored to youth.

➤ **Conduct further research about homeless youth.**

While this study was not designed to determine the total number or geographic distribution of homeless youth in Chicago, a census of homeless youth across the state would be instructive in determining the level and location of services needed to assist this population. Furthermore, because this study was restricted to homeless youth in Chicago, homeless youth elsewhere in Illinois may have different needs and perspectives and may face different issues that should be assessed. A complete census of all homeless youth in Illinois to determine the number, location, demographic profile, and service needs of this population would be highly useful.⁵

After completing a statewide census of homeless youth, a regional assessment of services available to meet the needs of these youth should be conducted. This research project found a significant disparity between the needs reported by homeless youth in Chicago and the services available for meeting them. The levels of need and services available may vary considerably between regions and should be determined in order to ensure adequate access to services.

In addition to the data documenting the extent of youth homelessness and the resources and limitations of the current service system, additional research assessing the reasons for youth homelessness and effective means of intervention and prevention is recommended.

➤ **Reassess funding and resources for homeless youth.**

The data from this study in conjunction with a statewide census and data on resources will help government and private funders reassess the level of resources required to address the extensive and complex needs of homeless youth. Funds shifted from other programs may not be able to meet this need; new funds may be necessary in order to de-fragment the existing services and create expanded and coordinated assistance for youth who lack safe and stable housing.

⁵ In the period between the completion of the report and its release, the Illinois Department of Human Services commissioned the University of Illinois at Chicago to conduct a census of homeless youth in the spring of 2005.

In response to the research and this report, the Homeless Youth Advisory Group has proposed the following next steps:

- Convene a youth summit to explore the issues raised in this report.
- Bring existing partners and agencies together to gain a fuller understanding of the youth perspective and to help them better advocate for youths' needs; and to coordinate services to serve homeless youth.
- Create a summary version of the report for youth and adults.
- Incorporate youth advisors into governmental groups on the city, state, and federal levels.
- Use this report to educate legislators about the needs of homeless youth.

CONCLUSION

The needs and resources of homeless youth as documented in this research do not come as a complete surprise to service providers or policymakers involved with this population. The finding of this study that merits particularly close attention is that there are particular groups of homeless youth who are at even greater risk than others because of their age, pregnant/parenting status, sexual orientation, or place of residence. Addressing the needs of these youth requires different outreach efforts and resources than those for other homeless youth.

Although there is scope for improving the continuity, accessibility, and quality of services, existing resources are insufficient to meet the needs of homeless youth. New and expanded resources are necessary to help homeless youth become stable and safely housed and to prepare them for self-sufficiency. The type and amount of resources must be determined through a statewide census of homeless youth. This census will document the number homeless youth who are living in each of the state's regions, their needs, and the resources available for meeting them. The information provided by this census will enable policymakers, service providers, and advocates to judiciously and effectively prioritize needs, develop services, and allocate resources.

THE NIGHT MINISTRY

The Night Ministry is a non-profit, non-denominational social service organization that creates hope throughout the communities we serve. We listen and respond to the needs of people we meet on Chicago's nighttime streets - regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or social status. Through our outreach and health programs and our youth housing and outreach programs, we connect youth and adults in need to basic resources and opportunities for support, housing, employment, education, and more.

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CENTER FOR IMPACT RESEARCH

Founded in 1975, the Center for Impact Research (CIR) focuses its work on issues of economic and social justice. CIR uses community-based research to advocate for and achieve changes in public policy and programs. The Center works collaboratively with diverse partners, who are all striving to eliminate the fundamental causes of poverty and injustice. CIR is focusing its current work in four project areas: Working Families; Children and Adolescents; Seniors; and Alternatives to Incarceration.

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