

TOO BIG TO IGNORE

Youth Homelessness in California

A Policy Agenda Developed by
The John Burton Foundation
for Children Without Homes and
The California Coalition for Youth

The John Burton Foundation
for Children without Homes

 California
Coalition for Youth

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Dear Friends:

Homeless youth. Please take a moment to think about the absurdity of it. How does a young person, who has not even grown into full adulthood, end up without a safe, stable place to live? Where are the parents, the schools, the extended family, the social safety net? What could possibly have happened for such a massive failure to occur so early in a young person's life? How can we stop accepting homelessness among youth and begin responding as if they were our own children?

Sadly, these important questions are not being asked often enough by our elected officials, government administrators, and the general public. Despite the development of a ten-year action plan to address chronic homelessness in 2007 by an Interagency Council convened by Governor Schwarzenegger, we have come to accept this shameful situation as reality. The ambitious action plan has never been formalized, and California's homeless youth, ages 16 to 24, some of our most marginalized and vulnerable residents, are considered just another constituency.

Based on the belief that dramatically reducing youth homelessness is possible, this report proposes an agenda for change at the local, state, and federal levels. With the support of The California Wellness Foundation, we developed this agenda by conducting extensive interviews with local practitioners, elected officials, academics, public administrators, and policy experts. Please join us in turning our agenda into action.

For the estimated 200,000 California minors and the numerous 18 to 24 year olds experiencing homelessness each year¹, many have histories of family conflict, including abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and parental substance abuse. Some have parents who kicked them out or did not object to their leaving. Others were removed from their homes because their parent was unable to care for them, and they eventually ran away from foster care or juvenile probation system placements.²

Once homeless, youth on the streets fall prey to substance abuse, mental illness, and victimization. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population, in part because of parental rejection over their sexual orientation.³ Youth exiting the child welfare and juvenile probation systems also represent a significant proportion of homeless youth. Although their individual needs may differ, all homeless youth share common basic needs: a safe, stable place to live and a full range of services to assist them in making the transition to successful adulthood.

This report focuses on preventing youth from becoming homeless and reducing the number of young people who experience homelessness. The latter includes youth at various stages of homelessness, including: children who run away and are episodically homeless; those who have run away from or "aged out" of the child welfare or juvenile probation systems; youth who are transient; and those who have experienced homelessness for longer periods and often live on the street. Our recommendations are divided into two areas. First, we identify a series of short-term strategies to address youth homelessness that draw on existing resources. Second, we identify longer-term strategies, which will require new public investment. All strategies can be achieved within three years.

Fortunately, there are visible signs that ending youth homelessness in California is possible. First, California has a rich network of community-based organizations serving homeless youth. Second, California has shown it recognizes the specific needs of transition-age youth with the passage of the Mental Health Services Act and the development of the Transitional Housing Placement Program for former foster youth. And finally, the reauthorization of the federal McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance programs in May 2009 included significant policy changes that will allow housing providers to use federal funds to better meet the needs of homeless youth.

We are confident that together, we can significantly reduce youth homelessness in California. Please review our proposed recommendations, then help us turn our agenda into action.

Sincerely,



Senator John Burton (Retired)
Chair, John Burton Foundation
for Children Without Homes



Kenneth Tyner
Chair, California Coalition for Youth

Barriers to Addressing Youth Homelessness in California

Interviews for this report were conducted with 32 individuals over a six-week period in the summer of 2009. This group included 12 representatives of the nonprofit sector, four elected officials and their staff, and 16 youth policy experts. The interview team explored a series of questions focused on identifying policy options to reduce youth homelessness in California. Findings were combined with an environmental scan and research.

A series of barriers were identified that have prevented the development and execution of a successful strategy to end youth homelessness in California. These barriers revealed a lack of funding, the need for organizational development among homeless youth providers and the need for stronger partnerships between the child welfare system and homeless youth providers. Overarching these barriers is the lack of institutional ownership of the need to address youth homelessness in California. These barriers are summarized below.

The federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is effective but underfunded.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, at least 2 million youth ages 12 to 24 nationwide experience at least one episode of homelessness each year. The Alliance estimates that 50,000 housing units are needed annually to adequately serve homeless youth.⁴ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' primary strategy to address youth homelessness is through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) administered through the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB). The RHYA provides funding for four primary homelessness assistance and prevention programs, three of which are considered in this brief:

Basic Center, which provides youth with access to short-term shelter; Transitional Living, which provides transitional housing and services; and the Street Outreach program, which provides basic necessities and service referrals for homeless youth.

The RHYA programs have been determined to be cost-effective. In fiscal year 2008, the average federal cost of serving a youth in a Basic Center program was \$1,254, and the cost for a youth in a Transitional Living program was \$14,726, both of which are below the minimum cost of serving youth through California's Department of Juvenile Justice, which in 2007 estimated the annual cost of a ward to be \$175,616.⁵ Despite the cost-effectiveness of RHYA programs, their funding levels have remained relatively static and meet only a fraction of the total need. In fiscal year 2008, less than 3,600 youth received transitional housing through the Transitional Living program, and more than 5,100 youth were denied shelter and housing. Between 2003 and 2008, an average of 3,950 youth received transitional housing services each year. In 2008, only 6% (approximately 45,500) of Street Outreach interactions resulted in a successful referral to shelter or housing.⁶

California does not receive a proportional share of federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act funding.

Given that more than one in nine (12%) of the nation's population lives in California, a proportional share of federal Family and Youth Services Bureau RHYA funding would result in annual grant levels of approximately \$13.5 million for the Basic Center, Transitional Living, and Street Outreach programs in California. Data from the Administration of Children and Families demonstrates that although Basic Center and Transitional Living programs in Califor-

nia served more than 10% of the national FYSB caseload, their funding amounted to just \$3.4 million or 3.5% of federal FYSB funding in fiscal year 2008 (See Table 1.)⁷

California’s investment in reducing youth homelessness has not grown since 1988.

In 1984, a series of California state laws formed the foundation of services targeting homeless and runaway youth, including a comprehensive emergency referral network and pilot projects to develop a network of homeless youth service agencies. In 1988, the pilot projects were extended permanently with the expectation of continued state funding. The goal of these projects has always been to provide housing and supportive services to homeless youth to assist them in exiting street life and gaining self-sufficiency.

In 1989, the Office of Criminal Justice Planning, now known as the California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA), reorganized, placing nine program areas relating to children and youth in one branch. Although not all were targeted at homeless youth, the Child Exploitation Branch managed 72

tinue to receive a total of \$1 million in annual Cal EMA funding to serve approximately 5,000 youth. Services include outreach, shelter, counseling, long-term stabilization planning, and follow-up. Additional Cal EMA funding is not available to homeless youth providers serving thousands of other youth across the state.

California’s primary strategy to address homelessness is housing development, not tenant-based rental assistance.

The State of California has focused its resources primarily on housing development as a means of addressing homelessness. This funding is distributed through the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) via a range of programs, including the Local Housing Trust Fund and the CalHome Program. These programs provide a range of grants to cities, counties, and nonprofit housing developers to build, acquire, and rehabilitate properties serving low-income and homeless individuals and families. Unlike federal programs such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), these funding sources do not provide service dollars. However, many of the programs

Table 1

RHYA Program	Number of Youth Served Nationally ⁸	Number of Youth Served in California ⁹	Funding Level: National ¹⁰	Funding Level: California ¹¹
Transitional Living	3,536	388 (10.9% of national)	\$43.3 million	\$1.86 million (4.3% of national)
Basic Center	42,096	5,000 (11.8% of national)	\$52.9 million	\$1.55 million (2.9% of national)

projects and grants that totaled \$5.8 million, including approximately \$1 million for programs serving runaway and homeless youth. Many homeless youth providers considered this to be the beginning of a long-term financial commitment to youth homelessness services.

However, California has not increased its investment in combating youth homelessness since its initial investment in 1988. Four homeless youth providers con-

require the provision of supportive services to access funds for capital development.

Housing development, while an important strategy in fighting youth homelessness, is not utilized to its fullest extent. Many of California’s homeless youth providers specialize in providing shelter services as well as short-term, transitional housing options to youth, yet many have not pursued partnerships with

housing developers in the past. One example of this is the Housing and Emergency Shelter Trust Fund Act of 2006, known as Proposition 1C. This \$2.85 billion bond can be used for a number of housing options, including construction, rehabilitation, and



Homeless youth are a unique population with special and specific needs, which current licensing regulations do not adequately address.

preservation of rental and ownership housing and homeless facilities. Despite \$50 million set aside for homeless youth providers, more than 50% remains unspent.¹² This under-spending is certainly not due to a lack of need, as recognized by a 2009 state law (Assembly Bill 767, authored by Assemblymember Tom Ammiano), that will extend the date for funds to be expended until 2011.

Many homeless youth providers lack the organizational capacity to be successful applicants for HUD funding.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is the primary source of funding for affordable housing in the United States. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, HUD spends more than \$3.3 billion a year on homelessness assistance. Its programs fund operating subsidies and service provision, which are fundamental to serving homeless youth. Unfortunately, according to

a March 2009 survey by the California Coalition for Youth, many homeless youth providers in California do not access HUD for a variety of reasons.

The most common reason cited by providers was the perception that HUD funding is only intended to serve chronically homeless adults, rather than homeless youth. However, federal legislation passed in May 2009 expanded the definition of chronic homelessness to include unaccompanied youth who: have experienced a long-term period without living independently in permanent housing; have experienced persistent housing instability; and, can be expected to continue to experience such instability.

An additional reason homeless youth providers gave for not accessing HUD funding is that they lack the organizational capacity to do so, including the time to participate in their local Continuums of Care (the organizational body responsible for distributing HUD funding). This also includes the capacity to complete intricate applications for public funding, meet audit requirements, and comply with program reporting requirements.

Although there is a strong relationship between youth homelessness and the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, collaboration and cooperation are limited.

A number of research findings highlight the important relationship between the foster care, juvenile probation and homeless youth systems of care. According to a 2007 Congressional Report on youth homelessness, 28% of runaway youth who entered shelters cited abuse or neglect as a critical issue.¹³ Additionally, homeless youth become involved in the juvenile justice system more often than the general youth population.¹⁴ A third trend suggests the need to improve the quality of support for youth in the child welfare and juvenile probation systems. According to the Center for Social Services Research, the number of Califor-

nia foster youth on “runaway status” has more than doubled in the last decade, from 466 in 1999 to 1,116 in 2009.¹⁵

Some homeless youth providers explained how their organizations work with their county child welfare services agency. In some cases, transitional housing and shelter providers serve as placement options or provide services to homeless youth and their families in reunification efforts. In other cases, providers have developed relationships with juvenile probation departments, which often have fewer housing resources to offer youth exiting the probation system. However, more frequently, interviews revealed frustration among a number of providers who have been unable to utilize the child welfare system to serve homeless youth.

Transition services are not meeting the housing needs of youth leaving foster care and juvenile probation placements.

Extensive research demonstrates the need to improve transition planning for youth exiting the foster



Between 13% and 22% of youth experience homelessness after being discharged from the child welfare system.

care and juvenile probation systems to ensure they access safe, affordable housing. Repeated studies have found that youth who “age out” of the foster

care system are at an increased risk of homelessness, with 18% to 22% experiencing homelessness within three years of discharge from foster care.¹⁶ In addition, despite dropping child welfare caseloads, the number of youth “aging out” of foster care in California increased 55% from 1998 to 2008, from 3,380 to 5,255 youth.¹⁷

The establishment of the Transitional Housing Placement Program (THP-Plus) in 2001, which provides affordable housing and supportive services, was a significant milestone in the development of transition services for former foster youth. In fiscal year 2008-09, THP-Plus served more than 2,300 youth in 46 counties. This marked the greatest number of youth served in the program’s history. However, in 2009, THP-Plus also saw its budget reduced by \$5 million and, as a result, will need to reduce services.

The transition to adulthood is especially difficult for the estimated 15% of foster youth with severe physical or mental disabilities, and for the 67% of homeless adolescents experiencing a mental disability.¹⁸ Federal Social Security Income (SSI) benefits provide an important source of income to those with serious physical or mental disabilities. But most youth with a disability do not have this vital economic assistance in place when they leave care because of a lack of state or county protocols for screening youth and because of a lack of support in completing application materials.

Current licensing regulations create barriers to youth accessing shelters.

In its Basic Center Program Performance Standards, the Federal Youth Services Bureau states that each Basic Center in which temporary shelter is provided shall be in compliance with state and local licensing requirements. In California, the Department of Social Services’ Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) is responsible for licensing and monitoring all children’s residential group homes, but not explicitly children or youth emergency shelters.¹⁹

Current licensing regulations are designed to regulate group homes, which are long-term, non-voluntary, out-of-home placements for youth in protective custody, such as foster care. Emergency

“**Current Community Care Licensing regulations create barriers for runaway and homeless youth accessing care.**”

— Peter LaVallee, Youth Services Director, Redwood Community Action Agency

shelters, on the other hand, are designed to provide voluntary and temporary shelter to children and youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Current regulations do not adequately address emergency shelters. For example, these regulations require youth to obtain parental consent prior to entering and remaining in a shelter program – an obvious obstacle to youth who are oftentimes fleeing negative or dangerous parental situations.

Funding for homeless youth providers in California is fragmented, preventing the development of a cohesive policy agenda to reduce youth homelessness.

Homeless youth providers in California are funded through a variety of public and private sources. The largest single source is the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which awarded approximately 20 grants in California in Fiscal Year 2008 through its Basic Center, Transitional Living and Street Outreach programs. Other sources of funding for homeless youth programs include the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA),

city and county resources, and grants from private foundations.

This decentralized funding structure is distinct from other areas such as the child welfare or juvenile probation systems, where a single public agency is responsible for funding most of the sector's activities. The result is that the homeless youth provider sector in California is not well organized, and does not have a shared advocacy agenda.

Policy Recommendations

Interviewees identified a number of important policy recommendations to reduce youth homelessness in California, at the local, state, and federal levels. Recommendations are divided into short-term strategies that draw on existing resources, followed by longer-term strategies that require new public investment. **Of the many recommendations that were made, those included in this report were selected because of their ability to be achieved within three years.**

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES **Recommendations drawing on existing resources:**

Build the capacity of homeless youth providers to successfully apply for local, state, and federal funding (particularly HUD funding).

Providers can reduce youth homelessness by accessing existing funding, such as that offered by HUD. Each year, the federal government spends

“Participating in our local Continuum of Care is essential to accessing mainstream federal funding to support our homeless youth programs.”

— Sherilyn Adams, Executive Director, Larkin Street Youth Services

\$44 billion on affordable housing, including rental subsidies, public housing, and housing for special populations.²⁰ This funding comes from HUD, the

Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Labor. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, less than 1% of the funds for affordable housing and homelessness assistance are dedicated to homeless youth.²¹

The organizational capacity of homeless youth providers to access these funds would be strengthened by: educating providers about available funding; assisting them with the application process; and helping them adapt their administrative infrastructure to meet program requirements of the funding. Specific areas of potential funding include HUD and the McKinney-Vento Act at the federal level, the Mental Health Services Act at the state level, and Continuums of Care accessible at the local level.

Better accommodate homeless youth whose circumstances meet the legal definition of abuse or neglect in the foster care system.

A youth under the age of 18 living on the streets or in other unstable housing may be eligible for child welfare services if his or her situation meets the legal definition of abuse or neglect. Effective collaboration between the child welfare system and homeless youth providers in California has allowed eligible homeless minors to access the full range of support available through the child welfare system. However, this type of collaboration is not universal, and a number of homeless youth providers see their local child welfare agencies as largely unwilling to accept teenagers.

Potential benefits of including homeless youth in the child welfare system include: utilizing reunification services between youth and their guardians; ensuring a safe living situation in a foster care placement; and access to the entitlements of the foster care system, including, but not limited to, case management, access to educational services, and the protections

of the juvenile dependency court.

Better accommodating eligible homeless youth in the child welfare system may involve the formal prioritization of homeless youth by the California Department of Social Services as well as a series of trainings for child welfare workers.

Increase access to SSI benefits for homeless youth with disabilities.

It is essential that eligible homeless youth with disabilities are able to access SSI benefits, regardless of changes in age or involvement with a public system, such as foster care. An important step is to ensure that these benefits are provided when youth are leaving foster care. Changing Social Security Administration (SSA) rules to allow foster youth with disabilities to apply for SSI up to 12 months before emancipation would significantly increase the number of eligible youth that can access this important benefit. The SSA currently assists prisoners with disabilities in this manner by permitting prisoners to apply for SSI benefits before their release.

“Allowing foster youth to apply for SSI well in advance of leaving care will significantly increase access to this important federal benefit.”

— Representative Pete Stark
Congressman, California’s
13th District

Another approach would be to extend the period of time that benefits may be in suspense from 12 months to 36 months. This tactic is particularly important for youth exiting the foster care system because it recognizes that the date a youth is discharged from foster care can be highly variable. It is

critical that a minor’s benefits are not inadvertently discontinued because his or her dependency case was not discharged as initially scheduled. Extending the period of time benefits could be maintained in suspense status would guard against this and also prevent youth in foster care from being prematurely discharged in an effort to access SSI benefits.

Utilize the State Interagency Team for Children and Youth as the primary body responsible for addressing youth homelessness at the state level.

A major challenge facing the issue of youth homelessness in California is its lack of institutional ownership. No state agency is formally responsible for youth homelessness, making it difficult to identify and implement effective strategies.

The State Interagency Team for Children and Youth (SIT) represents an important opportunity to address this issue. Founded in 2003 to coordinate policy, services, and strategies for children, youth, and families in California, the SIT is comprised of deputy directors from 10 state agencies and departments, including: the departments of Social Services; Education; Health Services; Mental Health; Alcohol and Drug Programs; Developmental Services and Employment Development; the Attorney General’s Office; the California Children and Families Commission; and the California Workforce Investment Board.²² Regional Program and Fiscal Academies have already been developed by the SIT to provide information and training to local county representatives to educate them about available funding streams to serve children, youth, and families. In addition, the SIT has convened a “Barrier Busters Team,” focused on identifying and addressing regulatory and procedural barriers that impact children, youth, and families.

Creating a seat on the SIT for Cal EMA’s Law Enforcement and Victims Services division, which manages the state’s homeless youth funding, would create a bridge with the SIT to focus on homeless youth. It is recommended that Cal EMA be a leader

in prioritizing the issue of homeless youth among state departmental directors by asking each state agency to develop policy and resource recommendations aimed at reducing youth homelessness.



Current licensing requires that parental consent is obtained prior to a youth entering a shelter.

Develop alternative regulations for California's Basic Center programs to ensure sustained Runaway and Homeless Youth Act funding.

Homeless youth providers that receive Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) funding for their Basic Center shelter programs must receive a number of exemptions to become licensed by the California Department of Social Services' Community Care Licensing Division. In addition, there are a growing number of agencies which provide services to transition-age youth, extending care to the age of 21 or 24, which raises questions about the most appropriate regulatory body for these providers.

Several possible solutions exist that would satisfy the Federal Youth Services Bureau's licensing requirement and eliminate barriers for youth to receive services. It is recommended that the following options be explored in partnership with California's RHYA grantees:

- Consistent statewide implementation of shelter exemptions in local jurisdictions;
- The establishment of a statewide standard of care, that is developed by providers and adopted by the state; and/or
- The development of a new regulations category for youth shelters to be administered by the Community Care Licensing Division or an alternative statewide authority.

Include the needs of homeless transition-age youth in the creation of a permanent funding source for housing development.

Affordable housing advocates have long sought to identify a permanent source of funding for housing development in California. In recent years, this effort has made considerable progress with the introduction of California Senate Bill 500 by Senate President pro tem Darrell Steinberg. In addition, the California Department of Housing and Community Development has prioritized the development of a permanent source, which is estimated to raise up to \$2 billion annually. As Senate Bill 500 moves forward in January 2010, the homeless youth provider community can play an important role in ensuring that the legislation is amenable to the needs of homeless youth by including provisions for deep affordability and sufficient funding for supportive services.

In addition to advocating for a permanent funding source for affordable housing, the homeless youth provider community would benefit from additional capacity to be service partners with affordable housing developers. Although a number of providers have developed effective partnerships with affordable housing developers to offer services and rental subsidies within a permanent housing setting, many providers would benefit from individualized technical assistance to move the process of conceptualization to full partnership.

LONGER-TERM STRATEGIES

Recommendations requiring new public investment:

Expand California’s THP-Plus program to serve three out of five eligible homeless former foster youth.

In California, the Department of Social Services’ Transitional Housing Placement Program (THP-Plus) has proven to be an effective strategy for preventing homelessness among former foster youth and for promoting their achievement in the areas of education, health, and employment. A 2008 survey found a 19% increase in employment, a 13% increase in wages, and a 68% increase in community college enrollment among 458 THP-Plus participants since entering the program.²³

THP-Plus provides 24 months of affordable housing and supportive services to youth ages 18 to 24 who have “aged out” of foster care in California. The program is currently funded at \$35.7 million for fiscal year 2009-10, and served 2,300 youth in fiscal year 2008-09. Increasing the state budget to \$50 million would allow THP-Plus programs to serve 3,100 youth, a 40% increase. At this service level, approximately 60% of eligible former foster youth would be able to access the program.

Extend the upper age limit for foster care in California to age 21.

In October 2008, President George W. Bush signed into law the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. This law gives states the option to receive federal support to extend foster care eligibility to youth until age 21. California Assembly Speaker Karen Bass and Assemblymember Jim Beall introduced Assembly Bill 12 in December 2008 to access federal funding to improve the lives of our state’s most vulnerable youth.

In other states, youth that stayed in foster care past

age 18 were: 200% more likely to be working toward completion of a high school diploma; 300% more likely to be enrolled in college; 65% less likely to have been arrested; and 54% less likely to have been incarcerated than those who exited foster care at age 18.²⁴ In addition, this policy would result in significant cost savings. A March 2009 analysis by Professor Mark Courtney at the University of Washington concluded that this policy has a net benefit-to-cost ratio of at least \$2.41 for every \$1 spent.²⁵ With one in five of the nation’s foster children and youth living in the state, extending foster care to age 21 in California would positively impact a huge proportion of the nation’s foster care population.

Increase appropriations for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to \$165 million annually and advocate for California to receive funding in proportion to its population.

Despite the effectiveness of Runaway and Homeless Youth Act-funded programs, insufficient funding has prevented them from making a sizeable impact on youth homelessness, particularly in California. Given the magnitude of youth homelessness, the current funding level is far below what is necessary to make a meaningful reduction.

“Increasing Runaway and Homeless Youth Act funding is a necessity when thousands of homeless youth are being turned away from shelters and denied housing.”

— LaKesha Pope, Youth Program & Policy Analyst, National Alliance to End Homelessness

Reauthorization of the RHYA in October 2008 provided an increased level of funds for runaway and homeless youth programs as well as adjustments in allocation and program upgrades that will further strengthen RHYA programs. Increasing the appropriated level of funding from its current \$115 million to the annual authorization level of \$165 million would include \$140 million for the Basic Center shelter and Transitional Living programs, and \$25 million for the Street Outreach program.

Despite the fact that more than 5,000 youth were turned away from shelter and services in fiscal year 2008, a Congressional Resolution passed in the fall of 2009 will maintain the RHYA appropriation at its previous funding level of \$115 million. Although an additional \$2 million in funding is expected in 2009-10, this increase represents an insignificant proportion of the level authorized by Congress. Increasing funding to the recommended level would represent a large step forward in ensuring the basic living needs of our nation's homeless youth are met.

Expand California's investment and expertise in youth homelessness prevention.

The California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA) grants approximately \$1 million a year to address youth homelessness in California. While this level of funding does not meet the needs of the estimated 200,000 homeless youth in California, it is a first step toward a more comprehensive approach to serving homeless youth throughout the state.

Given that Cal EMA's responsibilities are as diverse as disaster preparedness, homeland security, and the needs of homeless youth, it is essential that the community of homeless youth providers and policy experts work closely with the agency to strengthen its expertise in and commitment to solving youth homelessness. Rather than creating an entirely separate state office, it is recommended that Cal EMA be considered as the primary state agency responsible for investing in addressing youth homelessness. This role would include facilitating inter-

agency collaboration and removing barriers through the State Interagency Team for Children and Youth and expanding the size and reach of state funding for homeless youth.

Expand the federal Family Unification Program (FUP) authorization to better meet the needs of homeless transition-aged youth.

Section 8 vouchers are given to eligible households to keep housing costs capped at 30% of their income. Housing subsidies are an effective mechanism to address homelessness; a 2007 study by the

“We must not forget about California's homeless youth. They must remain a priority, especially during times of economic struggle.”

— California State Senator Alan Lowenthal Chair, Transportation and Housing Committee

American Journal of Public Health found that families exiting shelters and going to subsidized housing were 21 times more likely to remain stably housed than families without a voucher.²⁶

The HUD Family Unification Program (FUP) was established as a partnership between local housing authorities and child welfare agencies to provide Section 8 housing vouchers to very low-income families at risk of losing their children to the child welfare system because of a lack of adequate housing. In 2000, the program was expanded to serve former foster youth ages 18 to 21. Today, it is used by

jurisdictions throughout the country to help former foster youth make a supported transition into affordable housing.

In September 2009, HUD announced \$20 million in new funding for FUP vouchers, a development that will enable Public Housing Authorities nationwide to access additional vouchers for families involved in the child welfare system and former foster youth. However, the program's effectiveness for former foster youth is still limited by the upper age limit of 21.

FUP is up for reauthorization in 2010 and presents an opportunity to modify the program to better meet the needs of homeless transition-age youth. Specifically, the policy should remove the 18-month time limit on FUP vouchers for youth "aging out" of the foster care system. This change would ensure that homeless former foster youth receive the same benefits as other individuals and families accessing Section 8 vouchers as a means to prevent homelessness.

Pursue a research agenda on homeless youth.

Additional research is needed to better inform strategies to reduce youth homelessness. Possible research topics include:

- **Family support programs:** According to data available from the FYSB's Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System, family conflict is the number one reason for leaving home cited by homeless youth. Identifying effective programs that can address family conflict, including families at risk of abuse and neglect, would inform future advocacy efforts to prevent homelessness among transition-age youth.
- **TANF Reauthorization:** In 2010, the federal government will reauthorize Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which supports families with time-limited subsidies and employment services. TANF is the nation's largest anti-poverty

program and its reauthorization poses an important opportunity for the homeless youth provider community to consider how TANF could play a constructive role in reducing youth homelessness.

Conclusion

Homeless youth represent some of our state's most invisible and vulnerable populations. In the midst of the worst economic recession in decades, they have been the hardest hit by unemployment and poverty, and are in great need of a full continuum of housing and supportive services to connect them to the economic mainstream.

Twenty years ago, the State of California took an important step in funding youth homelessness prevention. Since that time, however, significant action has not been taken. It has the opportunity to take the lead in helping these vulnerable young adults. The John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes and the California Coalition for Youth are committed to reducing homelessness among transition-age youth in California through the development of a coordinated statewide coalition. We recognize the significant contributions of the service providers that meet the needs of hundreds of homeless youth throughout the state, and of the policy makers and advocates that strive to identify funding and policy options for these young adults.

We invite you to join us in our effort to ensure that all youth have access to the safe, affordable housing and supportive services they need to become successful adults. To help, please join our coalition at www.cahomelessyouth.org.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The estimate of youth homelessness was developed based on applying California's proportion of the population (12%) to national estimates of youth homelessness, which range from 1.5 million to over 2 million youth.
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- ⁴ Framing New Policy for Youth Housing: Going to Scale to Meet National Demand. (2009). National Alliance to End Homelessness.
- ⁵ Ward Per Capita Cost Fiscal Year 2002/2003. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Available at http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Reports_Research/wardcost.html.
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- ¹⁰ What is the National Demand for Youth Housing? (2009). National Alliance to End Homelessness
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- ¹² California Department of Housing and Community Development.
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