

Little Help for Connecticut's Many Homeless Youths, Advocates Say

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
Wednesday, December 18, 2013

It's been a rough four years for Chancharay Tyson who, at 18, "aged out" of state custody after years of living in numerous group homes as a foster child.

A year later, with nowhere to live after leaving her abusive boyfriend, the Norwich 19-year-old again asked for help from the Department of Children and Families.

"They told me I needed to find a homeless shelter but didn't help me find one whatsoever," Tyson said during an interview. "I had nowhere to go. It was scary."

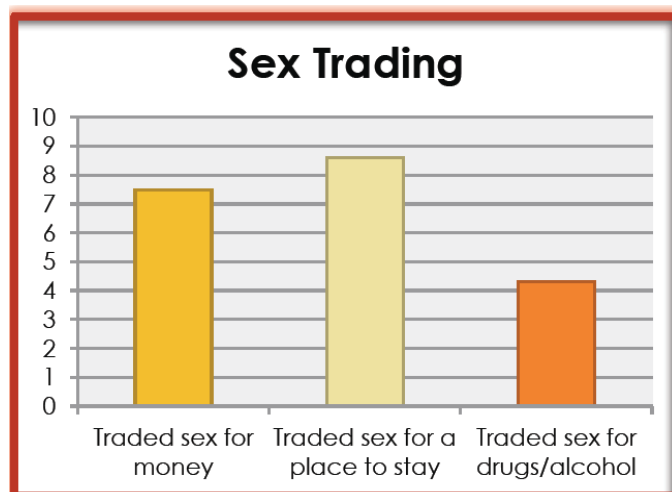
Tyson's hardly alone.

Each year about 320 foster teens will reach age 18 while in state care. And a new report by a Yale researcher says that nearly 40 percent of the homeless children and young adults in the state he was able to locate had been removed as children from their homes by DCF because of abuse or neglect.

Other reasons for homelessness among those under 25 in Connecticut include: being released from jail with no place to go; being thrown out of their homes because of their sexual preferences; running away from DCF care; or coming to the United States from another country with nowhere to go.



Chancharay Tyson, 'I had nowhere to go.'



**Source, *Invisible No More*,
Yale University School of Medicine**

and another 172 young adults, ages 18 to 24, at those facilities. By Gordon's estimate, 11,700 children and young adults will be homeless at some point during the year.

Service providers and advocates say that both the state and local communities are struggling to provide those who are young and homeless with the housing, health and educational services required to improve their situation.

Derrick M. Gordon, a psychiatrist with Yale University's School of Medicine, reported that the consequences of homelessness for these young people are often dire.

Of the 98 children and young adults he interviewed and surveyed, Gordon reported that eight had traded sex for a place to stay; 14 had made plans in the last year for how they would commit suicide; seven had tried to stay in jail because they had nowhere else to go; 32 had been raped at some point in their lives; and 35 had been attacked with a weapon.

"We are not paying attention to this problem that is right under our noses," Gordon told a roomful of legislators, state agency leaders, service providers and child advocates during a forum last week at the state Capitol complex.

The state's last statewide homeless count, on Jan. 29, 2013, found 746 children under age 18 living in homeless shelters

Referring to temporary housing, shelters and transitional housing, Gordon summed up his interviews with 16 providers and advocates: The supply, he said, is “woefully insufficient to meet the demands and needs.”

“The crises that we face in Connecticut are the lack of services we have,” said Stacey Violante Cote, an attorney with the Center for Children’s Advocacy, which represents many of these vulnerable young people.

Finding help

“There really were not many resources out there for me,” said Jessica Ferreira. She said that when she became pregnant at 18, DCF told her she could no longer live in the agency’s transitional housing.



‘There really were not many resources out there for me,’ says Jessica Ferreira

The turmoil continued in the years that followed. Ferreira’s child was taken from her by DCF, she lived in various homeless shelters in Norwalk and other towns, she “couch surfed” at her friends’ homes, and she came close to committing suicide.

“I would still be homeless if not for my parents,” said Ferreira, now 24, who eventually reconciled with her family.

Of the 98 homeless children and young adults in Gordon’s survey, nearly one-third were receiving no help from the state for things like food stamps, housing or welfare money.

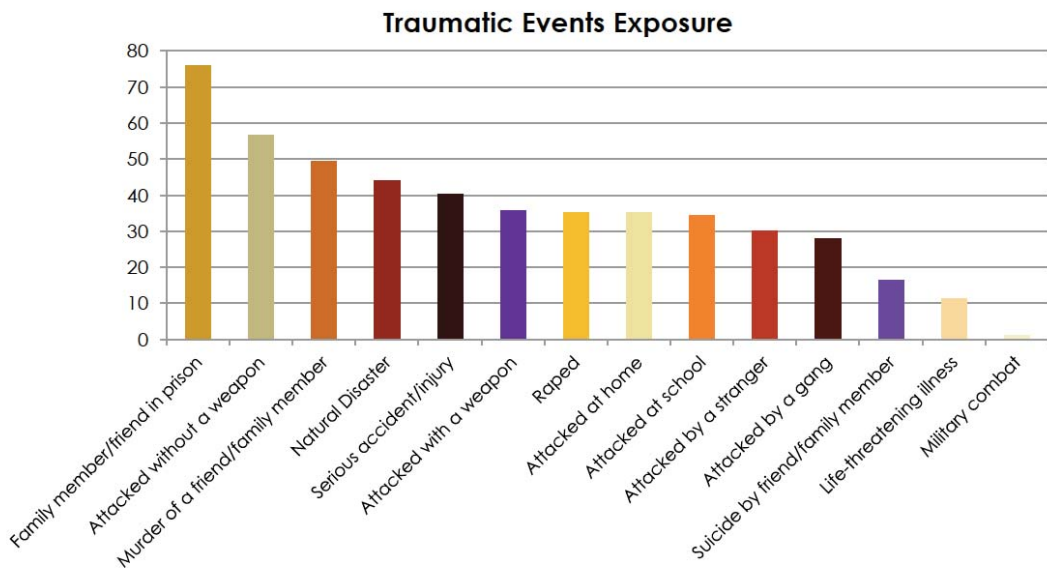
One problem, said agency officials, is that these young adults are reluctant of getting help from DCF or the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS).

“We routinely hear of people falling through the cracks,” said Cheryl Jacques, director of young adult services for DMHAS. Her agency, among other things, is treating 1,100 young adults, ages 18 to 25, who are dealing with mental health or addiction issues; most of them were receiving care from DCF as children.

“We are voluntary. So they walk away from us or they say they are going to do it on their own,” Jacques said, adding that not everyone transitions appropriately from DCF to her agency for care. “We are missing a lot of kids. Our system needs to be more flexible in welcoming them back.”

DCF is also working to be flexible by allowing more young people, 18 and older, the option of re-entering care so they can go back to school and receive other support, including housing.

Brett Rayford, director of DCF’s division of adolescent and juvenile justice services, said 30 young adults have returned to DCF custody in the last few years so they could get their GED or college degree. For those who chose not to come back, “Those are the kids



Source, Invisible No More, Yale University School of Medicine



'We are not paying attention to this problem that is right under our noses,' Derrick Gordon, of Yale University School of Medicine

said they were told by officials at their school that they could no longer continue attending the school. "That's alarming and unacceptable," he said, noting that those schools are violating the law by turning away homeless children.

Too few beds

In addition, there are not nearly enough beds in the state's homeless shelters for teenagers and young adults.

Ferreira said she has had to call 20 shelters before she could find a bed, which was often on the other side of the state. Advocates say that statewide, there are 15 emergency beds dedicated to those under 18 who are not accompanied by an adult.

The number of teens and young adults living in transitional housing is also declining; 294 youths lived in such facilities in 2013, compared with 464 youths five years earlier, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness has reported. This comes as the number of homeless families continues to rise in the state, according to the state's annual count.

Torrington school Superintendent Cheryl Kloczko is well aware of the problem.

She was driving home on a cold evening recently when she saw a student who she knew had housing problems walking alone. After leaving his grandmother's condo because he couldn't stay in her elderly community overnight, he had nowhere to go. The shelter where his family was staying doesn't let boys over a certain age stay at the facility for safety reasons. After appealing to the shelter in Winsted because of the frigid temperatures, Kloczko convinced staff members there to make an exception for the night.

"You really just have no idea how many people are out there living camping out, you know living somewhere other than a safe and secure place," she said.

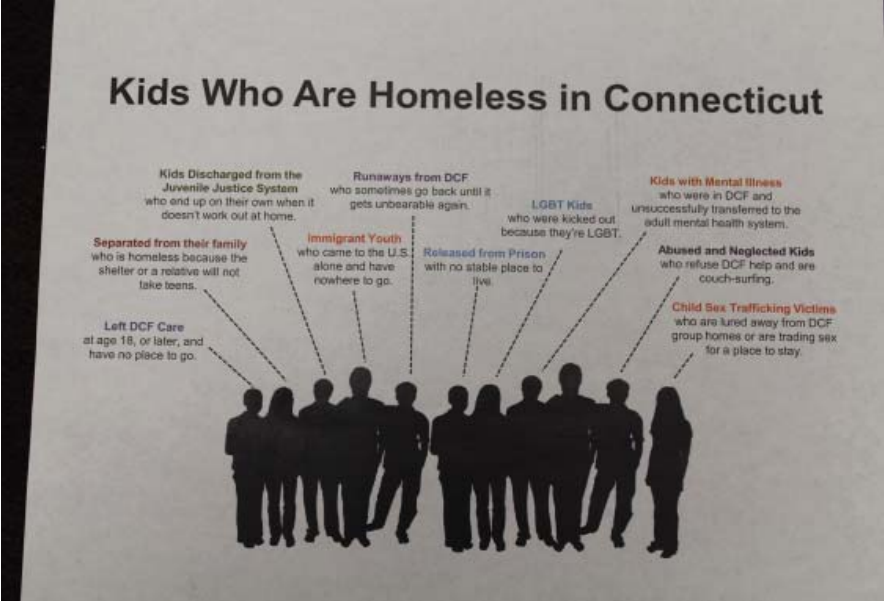
Every year DCF officials tell the legislature that hundreds of foster children would be able to return to their families if not for the fact that their families are homeless. "Essentially, they are still not with their families for no reason other than poverty," DCF Commissioner Joette Katz told the legislature's budget-writing committee earlier this year.

saying, "We don't want anything to do with you," Rayford said.

That wasn't Tyson or Ferreira's experience. Both young women say they were never given the opportunity to come back. In fact, Tyson said, she was trying to go to college when DCF asked her to leave because she was unable to maintain a full-time course load and work at the same time.

Of the homeless youth surveyed in the Yale study, nearly one-third had dropped out of high school. The State Department of Education reports that there were 2,804 homeless children enrolled in the state's public schools during the 2011-12 school year, almost 1,000 more students than were identified five years earlier.

The most troubling finding for Joe Vaverchak, the liaison for homeless youth in the New Britain school system, is the report's finding that one of every 10 homeless youth



Source, Invisible No More

Reality and priorities

Several efforts have been made to increase the availability of affordable housing in the state, including a recent \$18.3 million infusion from the state to renovate existing housing units and offer more subsidized apartments to low-income residents.

"Increasing the availability of affordable housing is a top priority," Gov. Dannel P. Malloy said last month when announcing the most recent round of grants for renovations.



'We routinely hear of people falling through the cracks,' said Cheryl Jacques of the CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

for homeless teenagers and young adults that helps them get a job, education and eventually become independent. Her program currently serves 36 kids throughout the state, but she said there are dozens of children on any given day waiting for help.

Several legislators, expressing frustration, said last week they wish they could help resolve the problem. "Year after year, it's the annual 'How are we going to make sure we have the dollars to do the programs we need to do?' It's really the million dollar question, and I really wish I knew the answer for you," said Sen. Gayle Slossberg, D-Milford, the Senate chairwoman of the legislature's Human Services Committee.

Sen. Beth Bye, the incoming co-chairwoman of the powerful budget-writing committee, agrees. "If you do this upfront, you won't pay later," the West Hartford Democrat said. "All these costs incur when we don't take care of youth right at the point when they need us."

Tyson said she was one of those lost kids who wasn't sure where to get help. But then she heard from a friend about The Connection, and eventually she was able to land a spot in the program.

"The shelter that I attended before that was not a very safe shelter," she said, referring to the violence and substance abuse problems she witnessed among the residents. Now she credits getting a certificate to be a medical assistant, having a full-time job and nearly living on her own without any subsidies to the help she received.

"I was able to get on my feet," Tyson said.

Resources:

[Invisible No More: Report on Homeless Youth in Connecticut, 2013](#)

[Census of Homeless shelters in Connecticut, 2013](#)

While advocates applaud the long-term strategy, many say more needs to be done to better coordinate other services that homeless children and young adults need.

They point to a 2010 state law that provided a coordinated approach for the state to help homeless youths. That law provided funding for DCF to help these young people reunite with their families, and it provided for transitional housing if reconciliation didn't happen. It also funded DCF so it could provide these adolescents with food, clothing, and help them get insurance to cover their mental health and medical needs.

In 2011, lawmakers cut funding for the program; only a pilot program remains in place today.

"With resources we can change instability," said Kathleen Savino, with The Connection, based in Middletown, which is the only state-funded housing program

Reported Homeless Students Statewide Totals

School Year	Total
2007-08	1878
2008-09	2132
2009-10	2370
2010-11	2440
2011-12	2804

Source:
State Department of Education