

State works to change future for homeless youth

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Homeless youth are at increased risk for sexual abuse, being lured into prostitution, physical abuse, criminal justice involvement, illness and suicide, dropping out of school, mental health problems and substance abuse.

Those facts set the framework for a group of state agencies that will gather Thursday in Hartford to discuss the unknown numbers of homeless youth. The goal is to explore policy and make recommendations to create opportunities for these youth, like Miranda, a student from lower Fairfield County.

Here is an excerpt from the statement that will be read during the session about her situation:

"She was committed to the Department of Children and Families until her commitment was revoked and she went back to live with her mother. But then her mother was arrested and incarcerated and Miranda was left to live with her older sister, who has a history of domestic violence. Miranda's sister kicked her out. Since June, Miranda has lived in five different places. Sometimes she stays with extended family and sometimes with friends. She was in one of the few community-run emergency shelter beds for a while. Miranda hopes she can stay out of DCF, even though she's only 16. She's afraid DCF would move her to a group home in a different community and she would be away from everyone she knows. She's trying to get to school every day. It's hard because there are many days she has to move her stuff from one house to another so she has a place to sleep that night. There is concern that she is trading sex for a place to sleep."

Stacey Violante Cote, of the Center for Children's Advocacy and chair of the Reaching Home Youth Workgroup, and Alicia Woodsby, deputy executive director of Partnership for Strong Communities, will host the event.

The Reaching Home Campaign will release Connecticut's first study and comprehensive report on youth and homelessness. The report is by Derrick M. Gordon, Ph.D., and Bronwyn A. Hunter, Ph.D., of The Consultation Center at the Yale University School of Medicine. For the report, 98 young people in lower Fairfield County, Hartford, New Haven and New London were interviewed. The students discussed their experiences on topics such as education, housing, finances, family, peers, criminal justice, mental health, physical health, substance use and trauma.

Woodsby said the goal of the study was to learn about the lives of the young people in order to set out a methodology for counting them and providing help. While the adult homeless in the state, which number about 14,000, are counted each January, young people are not included because they are not part of adult homeless support efforts.

"Our most immediate need is for a crisis response," Woodsby said, which means to have more than the four safe houses for young people to go. There are only 15 crisis beds across the state for the youth who are homeless, she said.

The state started several years ago, with the Reaching Home campaign, to build political and civic will to prevent and end homelessness in Connecticut.

Now the state has a program called "Opening Doors," which is based on a comprehensive plan from the federal government. Their goals are to end chronic homelessness by 2017; prevent and end homelessness among veterans by 2017; and prevent and end homelessness among families, youth and children by 2022.

"There are some states that have done some very positive things for homeless youth. In some ways, we are more advanced, but in some ways we are not," Woodsby said. "The state has done good work in linking mental health supports and helping those who are in the foster system. We need more crisis providers and also some longer term transition housing. We have some kids right now who are sleeping in hallways of buildings or trading sex for a place to stay. We can't wait to address the issue."

The forum should help formalize work the state must do, ranging from increasing support across social service systems to improving policies that might now limit access to services the young people need.

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