In 1974, Congress passed the Runaway Youth Act; in 1977, it was expanded to become the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA). RHYA provides foundational support to address youth and young adult homelessness across the country. These grants provide resources for local systems of care to be developed and shaped by the unique needs of each region, their available resources, and local policy priorities. Remarkably similar strategies have emerged in these local communities, including: emergency shelter, aftercare, outreach, education and employment, health care, behavioral health, transitional housing, and independent housing options, which help ensure a fully prepared youth achieve successful outcomes: safe exit from homelessness, family reunification, establishment of permanent connection(s), employment, and sustainable independent living.

Providing appropriate, relevant and readily accessible services is critical to addressing episodic or longer term homelessness among youth, and is an essential component of any housing intervention, including family reunification. Successfully addressing youth homelessness helps create self-sufficient young adults who can contribute positively to their communities. Significantly, it also reduces the numbers who become chronically homeless adults. RHYA is administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, the Act funds three key pillars to assist runaway, homeless and unaccompanied youth:

- **Street Outreach**: allows workers to go out into the community to provide youth with services such as referrals to shelter and counseling.
- **Basic Centers**: drop-in centers that provides temporary shelter (up to 21 days), basic life needs such as food and clothing, counseling services to reunify youth with their families, and aftercare services.
- **Transitional Living**: provides longer term housing for older youth (up to 18 months) coupled with supportive services such as employment, education, and mental health to help the youth achieve successful and sustainable self-sufficiency. This program also funds group maternal homes.

Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHYA) programs are not only the most cost-effective alternative to other systems homeless youth come in contact with, but they provide necessary supports which promote positive youth development. Youth who enter these programs are provided the basic supportive services they need, skill development in areas they lack and social support development which assist in reconnecting youth to their families whenever possible. A variety of organizations across the country – including the National Network for Youth’s members –

There are **1.68 million homeless youth in the U.S. each year.**

**RHYA Programs by the Numbers**

- In FY2011 Street Outreach programs made over **693,000 contacts with homeless youth.**
- Between 2009 and 2012, approximately **37,000 youth were turned away** from Basic Center and Transitional Living programs due to a lack of resources and space.
- **60%** of youth served by Basic Centers are able to reunite with family or a guardian.
- In 2010, Transitional Living programs exceeded the federal target for safe program exits.
- **78%** of Transitional Living participants are employed either part or full-time.
- **74%** of youth were discharged to stable housing after entrance into a Basic Center or Transitional Living program.
provide a continuum of developmentally appropriate services that include prevention, crisis housing, transitional living, and independent housing options.

**Many Factors Contribute to Youth Homelessness**
The vast majority of youth do not become homeless by choice. Different factors contribute to the overall number of homeless youth each year, but studies suggest that some of the primary reasons are family dysfunction, sexual abuse, “aging out” of the foster care system, exiting the juvenile justice system, and economic hardship.

**Family Dysfunction**
This can include family conflict, parental neglect due to poverty or mental illness, and/or lack of acceptance as an expectant mother or LGBTQ youth. Approximately 40 percent of homeless youth self-identify as LGBT. 1

**Sexual Abuse**
According to a study conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, 21-40% of homeless youth have been sexually abused prior to running away.2 These young people are fleeing from victimization, violence, and to escape the next traumatic violation against her or his body.

**“Aging Out” of Foster Care**
Approximately 12 to 36 percent3 of youth ages 18 or 21 exiting the foster care system become homeless, which in FY 2010 translated to approximately 28,0004 youth. Though some manage to find decent living situations after emancipation, 32% reported having transitioned more than five times within a two to four year span.5 Limited support coupled with low earning potential and a shortage of affordable housing result in youth “couch surfing” in order to remain stably housed.

**Juvenile Justice System Involvement**
Young people who end up on the streets are often victimized or commit minor status offenses in order to acquire food and shelter. Also, other youth who end up in the Juvenile Justice system often exit with no

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4 Housing for youth Aging out of Foster Care: A Review of the Literature and Program Typology
home to go to. RHY programs fill this gap in care for the young people that most need a safe place to live and developmentally appropriate services.

**Economic Hardship**
Families facing economic hardship due to poverty and the depressed economic climate are unable to support themselves and their children. Joblessness coupled with residential instability experienced by poverty stricken families due to a lack of sustainable and affordable housing, force many youth to find shelter outside of the traditional nuclear family dwelling.

“Where I stand today is a very important position because it shows how far I have come with the struggles that have occurred in my life. **Without the Transitional Living Program, I’d be homeless.** This program has given me the first pillow in almost two years to lay my head on and gives us young people a second opportunity in life.”
- **RHYA YOUTH BENEFICIARY**

**Continuum of Services and Housing Options:**
**Promoting Safety, Permanent Connections, Well-Being, and Self-Sufficiency**
For more than 35 years the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act has been the foundation for the development of interventions for homeless and disconnected youth. What has been created is a continuum of services and network of providers for homeless youth, with an emphasis on those unlikely to return home or find stable housing on their own. Increasingly, a fourth pillar is essential to bridge the gap for these youth: independent housing options with varying levels of services depending on need.

![Services Provided Across the Continuum](image)

**More than a half million youth need services to exit homelessness**
While the vast majority of runaway youth return home quickly, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) estimates that more than a half million youth up to age 24 are in need of intermittent or ongoing services to exit homelessness, achieve stability, and increase well-being. NAEH
has advanced a typology of homeless youth and young adults that helps articulate a framework for understanding the continuum of interventions relative to need.\(^6\)

Close to 450,000 youth and young adults are considered temporarily disconnected or transitionally homeless. These young people utilize prevention and crisis housing services to stabilize. Family reunification is an essential service for this group and many return to live with their families as a result.

Another 80,000 youth and young adults experience longer or multiple episodes of homelessness, and are unstably connected to family, school, and community, or are disconnected/chronically homeless. Particularly for these youth, services are an essential complement to a safe and stable place to sleep. Those at higher risk may have disabilities, mental illness or substance use issues, which complicate attempts to stabilize off the streets.

Increasing employment skills and re-engagement with education are crucial outcomes for all disconnected and persistently homeless youth. Where reconnecting with family is not possible, developing supportive networks through work, school, and leisure support success.

**Fiscal Consequences of Youth Homelessness**

Because the 1.68 million homeless youth are not easily identifiable and are not a specified target group for national surveys, there is not specific data reflecting the fiscal responsibility this population adds to taxpayers each year. However, there are many studies that provide insight to approximately how federal dollars are being spent on systems that have become a catch-all due to limited alternatives.

- States spend approximately $5.7 billion each year ($240 per day) to incarcerate a youth for a non-violent offense such as homelessness.\(^7\) In Maryland alone, per day cost for detention is quoted at $492.90.\(^8\) Contrasted to RHYA programs which have been able to permanently move a homeless youth off the street at approximately $5,800 annually.\(^9\)

- Due to a lack of stable housing, homeless and unaccompanied youth utilize emergency healthcare services more often; on average visiting five times per year. 80% of emergency room visits made by people struggling with homelessness is for an illness that could have been treated with preventative care.\(^10\)


\(^8\) Maryland Senate Bill 761 Fiscal Note (2012).


Without the skill building, employment, training and internships young people have access to within the RHYA framework, their lifetime earning potential is about $8,000 less than their stably housed counterparts.

Homeless youth are 50% less likely to have a GED or high school diploma. Homeless youth are not prepared to step into the positions that will come available as baby boomers are reaching retirement age.

**EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS**

A wide range of physical, mental, emotional and behavioral issues have been shown to develop as a result of youth homelessness while prior complications are at risk of becoming exaggerated. Homeless Youth suffer from:

- Higher incidence of a variety of mental health symptoms including anxiety, ADHD, developmental delays and depression resulting in elevated risk for suicide attempts.
- Homeless youth are often exploited and trafficked because they are unprotected. This results in young people becoming sex slaves and forced laborers.
- HIV and/or STD contraction due to increased likelihood of sexual exploitation, rape and sexual assault.
- Resorting to illegal activity such as stealing, forced entry, and gang activity in order to survive.
- Homeless young women are five times more likely to become pregnant and far more likely to experience multiple pregnancies.
- Fifty percent of homeless youth ages 16 and older drop out of school and face extraordinary obstacles in trying to finish.

**RHYA’s Return on Investment**

As compared to other financial commitments to youth in care, the federal investment for unaccompanied homeless youth represents a much smaller financial investment and one that needs to be enhanced to allow us to respond to the existing needs. Research suggest RHYA programs benefit the federal budget as well as individual taxpayers in the form of increased tax revenue and decreased welfare costs.

Currently, RHYA programs are funded at $115M. This is the same amount that has been appropriated for the past three fiscal years even though the costs to service providers has increased. Operational costs have increased in addition to the costs of providing the necessary services and support for these high need youth and their families. The allotted fiscal budget cannot continue to remain the same. The consequence

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to not showing a greater commitment to America’s vulnerable and exploited youth, will be a continued increase in the number of young people who find themselves homeless and will remain homeless without appropriate interventions. RHYA programs prevent exploitation and trafficking, criminal justice involvement, chronic homelessness, and lifetime dependency on government supports. These programs are more cost effective than any other alternative a homeless youth would come in contact with and provide the best care to youth and their families. By utilizing federal funds to leverage community’s resources, RHYA programs reunite families and promote positive and age-appropriate development of youth across this nation. The success rate of these programs is leaps and bounds ahead of the other systems set in place to address the issues facing this population.

**RHYA Programs Change Lives**

Jessica left home when she was 15 to escape a home environment in which her mother was abusive, both emotionally and physically. When her sole support person, her brother, left to join the Air Force, she left home too. "I couldn't deal with it any longer," she said.

After leaving home, she initially "couch surfed." "I couldn't get money for rent, I had to keep moving, every one or two weeks I'd have to go to a different friend's house and stay there. That ran out pretty quick."

Jessica talked about how hard it was to get off the streets. "The hardest thing is basically just getting around and trying to find a job ‘cause it's hard to get a job without an address. If you don't have somebody's address that you can use and say ‘I live here' quote, unquote, then they look at your application and they're like ‘no'"

A case manager from an Outreach program referred her to a youth transitional living program where she established goals: "to stay in stable housing and try to finish my GED. I'm doing that through the program’s school. It's free, which is good. I have some health goals too."

This homeless youth program provided Jessica with "more focus and more stability, which is a very important thing to have. If you get those, then you can do everything else that you want." Jessica says that if she hadn't found the program she would still be out on the streets. Her long-term plan is to go to college and study sociology. "I want to help people the way they've helped me."

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**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FY 2014**

*Appropriate at least $128 million to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act for FY 2014 so that these innovative and evidence-based models can provide vital safe places for homeless youth. **The President recommended flat-funding these programs at $115 million.*

- *Appropriate $5 million to increase the capacity and provide training for service providers to identify and serve exploited and trafficked youth.*

- *Appropriate $3 million for a study of the prevalence, needs and characteristics of homeless youth. **The President’s budget included this $3 million to fund a study that has been in the statute for 10 years, but has never been funded.*