



Free to  
Be Youth  
Project

**Free to Be Youth Project**

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New York City Council  
Committee on Youth Services  
Preliminary Budget Hearing  
March 22, 2023

To The Members of the City Council Committee on Youth Services:

Good morning. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today. On behalf of the Free to Be Youth Project (formerly the Peter Cicchino Youth Project) of the Urban Justice Center, I'd like to thank the New York City Council's Committee on Youth Services for convening this important hearing. My name is Amy Leipziger and I am the new director of the Free to Be Youth Project.

Free to Be Youth Project

The Free to Be Youth Project is dedicated to serving homeless and at-risk lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) youth. We provide free legal services for individual LGBTQ+ young people up to the age of 24 and systemic advocacy for the LGBTQ+ youth community. The Project is housed at the Urban Justice Center, a non-profit law collective serving New York City's most disenfranchised poverty populations. Since 1994, we have been providing legal services to LGBTQ+ youth and young adults who are poor, living on the streets, in homeless shelters, in the juvenile justice system or in foster care. We regularly travel to drop-in centers where homeless youth congregate to offer our services. We have helped hundreds of LGBTQ+ youth with legal problems like applying for legal immigration status, fighting wrongful denials of disability benefits, changing their names, fighting terminations of their public assistance benefits, overcoming barriers to obtaining safe and stable housing, and being wrongly turned away from our City's homeless shelters.

Homeless Youth

I am here today to speak about the barriers that homeless youth in this city are experiencing in both accessing a safe place to sleep in a shelter bed, and the hurdles they face in transitioning to

stable housing. I'd also like to briefly address how these challenges are exacerbating the trauma experienced by homeless youth, and the need for more robust mental health supports.

It's no secret by now that New York City is in the midst of a homelessness crisis that is not limited to those in the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter system. Young people

become homeless for many complex reasons including family conflict, shortage- of affordable housing, and family poverty. Youth run away for many reasons including violence, abuse or neglect in the home; mental illness or substance abuse among family members; challenges at school. Others are rejected by their families or experience family conflict as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity, an unplanned pregnancy, use of drugs or alcohol, or inability to comply with parent/caretaker rules. Lacking the financial resources and basic life skills needed to live independently, they can experience criminal victimization, including commercial sexual exploitation and labor trafficking, resulting in traumas that jeopardize their well-being and development into thriving adults.

Notably, LGBTQ+ youth become homeless at a significantly higher rate than the adolescent population as a whole and are vastly overrepresented in the Runaway Homeless youth (RHY) population. One out of four LGBTQ teens in the United States at some point either runs away or is thrown out of his or her home, and upwards of 40% of teenagers living on the streets today self-identify as LGBTQ+. We also know that the pandemic exacerbated both housing and mental health concerns for homeless youth. Shelter resources that were stretched thin were pushed even further, and many young people having even fewer means of accessing services and support.

There are currently 813 total allocated beds in the youth shelter system; however, only 60 of them are allocated for young people ages, 21 to 24. In a city where roughly 3,800 youth are homeless every night, this does not come close to meeting the need of young adults in need. The rest must sleep on subway trains, on park benches, and many are forced to engage in dangerous activity to ensure they have a bed or a couch for the night. In order to ensure that older youth can benefit from the safety and security of youth specific shelter supports, we ask that funding be made available for an additional 40 young adult beds in the DYCD RHY system.

Every year there are thousands of youth and young adults who find shelter and support in the DYCD RHY System, and around 40% reported having been in the child welfare system at one point in their lives. Unfortunately, lack of access to permanent housing resources has led to almost 50% of youth being discharged from DYCD RHY shelters back into another homeless situation. To prevent young people from entering the DHS system, and increasing their likelihood of experiencing prolonged homelessness, they must be given a way out. Youth

experiencing homelessness in the DYCD-funded Runaway Homeless Youth (RHY) programs as well as youth transitioning out of the Administration for Children Services (ACS) care must be made **categorically eligible** for CityFHEPS vouchers without having first to enter Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter. This is a critical investment that will support the Administration's initiatives to eradicate homelessness, to prevent people from entering DHS shelters unnecessarily and to make access to vouchers easier.

Even before a young person is considered runaway or homeless, they have likely experienced trauma. This trauma is only exacerbated each day they experience homelessness. The challenges in ensuring safe shelter, or stable housing, exact a punishing toll of the mental health of homeless youth. It is not surprising, then, that homeless LGBTQ+ youth are two to four times more likely to report depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. Notably, homeless LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to experience bullying, sexual assault, violence, trauma, HIV infection, and substance abuse than either heterosexual or stably housed LGBTQ+ peers. Moreover, homeless LGBTQ+ youth, in particular youth of color, are at high risk of involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system due to their homelessness.

The repeated stressors brought on by homeless, often exacerbating pre-existing trauma, create an overwhelming lack of stability for these young people that can also impact their ability to continue with school, or find and maintain employment. For these reasons, access to meaningful healthcare, including access to quality mental healthcare, and related services is particularly crucial for RHY.

Young people often share that they wish they had better access to meaningful mental health supports. Providers continue to express that they often do not have the staff capacity or appropriate structure to support RHY who have significant mental health needs. The City should fund two new pilot programs to serve RHY with mental and behavioral health needs that would include on-site clinical services, and intensive case management to provide these youth with the services they need.

Thank you to the members of this Committee and to the community of youth advocates who have been working hard to address the needs of this community. The Free to Be Youth Project stands ready to assist the Youth Services Committee in any way that we can.

Sincerely,

/s/ AL

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