



National Runaway Safeline
Youth Voices Panel: Lived Experience, Services, and Positive Outcomes
Summary & Key Recommendations

Title: Youth Voices Panel: Lived Experience, Services, and Positive Outcomes

Date and Time: Tuesday, July 20, 2021, 2:00 pm – 3:30 pm EST

Description: The Youth Voices Panel discussed issues affecting runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness nationwide, including youth homelessness prevention and services available to these youth.

Youth Panel Goals:

- Identify situations that lead youth to run away or to experience homelessness;
- Understand the impact of RHY services on and for youth; and
- Provide a platform for youth with lived experience to discuss their experiences with the services they received as well as their perspectives on gaps in services, areas of improvement, recommendations for expansion, and new opportunities to better support runaway and homeless youth.

The Youth Voices Panel included nine young people representing communities from across the U.S. Each had lived experience and had utilized services provided through Family and Youth Services Bureau-funded runaway and homeless youth programs.

Youth Panel Discussion and Recommendations:

Chené Weems, NRS Director of Training and Quality Assurance, moderated the panel discussion. The conversation focused on homeless and runaway experiences, services for youth experiencing homelessness, and panelist recommendations for RHY services. Below are the summarized responses and key takeaways from each of these conversation topics:

Homelessness and Runaway Experiences

The participants recalled their first experience with housing instability and homelessness, with individual experiences ranging from kindergarten to college. While many participants are not currently experiencing housing instability, all nine agreed that their past experiences are traumatic, extending well beyond the moment of crisis, persisting into the present day. Panelists expressed that, despite the challenges associated with leaving home, they

chose to do so when they perceived leaving as their safest option, citing threats of violence, fear for their safety, and concern for the mental health and stability of their caretakers as reasons for leaving. Their knowledge of support services available to them was limited or non-existent before leaving home or experiencing homelessness.

Services for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

During the initial period of their runaway or homelessness crisis, participants shared that Google was the main resource they used to find support services near them. They described feeling frustrated during this time because the trusted adults they reached out for help (i.e. teachers, coaches, librarians, etc.) sometimes lacked knowledge of existing services and the qualifying criteria for the programs. Participants expressed wanting to participate in programs, but not qualifying for services because of their age, citizenship status, duration of their homeless experience, or lack of a formal medical diagnosis required to receive care. This confusion, coupled with trauma from previous systems involvement, and intense feelings of shame, guilt, and fear delayed young people in their initial connection to services.

Once connected to services, the existing structures of programs and services were limited and often challenging. For example, job acquisition programs were widely utilized, but these programs connected participants to low-skill, low-wage labor with no pathway to professional or income growth. Financial literacy courses were limited, but when utilized the participants found them very helpful to develop their independence and self-sufficiency. Most participants enrolled in housing programs, but the limited period of support that the programs offered became a barrier to maintaining housing. While experiencing a crisis, young people found support in meaningful connection with their service providers or mentors.

Moving Forward: Improving Access and Services for RHY

Participants expressed that they viewed improved access to ongoing mental and physical health services for young people before, during, and after a crisis as a crucial step in prevention. Panelists offered several recommendations on effective ways to increase access to runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programs and services, including ensuring schools have better identification measures and more knowledge of resources available for their students. They also suggested utilizing social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter as tools to spread awareness of a program's mission and scope of

services. Once enrolled in a program, having providers with lived expertise working with youth in crisis and in leadership roles is important in developing connection and trust.

Youth also shared their perspectives on how organizations and schools could improve their existing programs and services. Panelists believe it is vital that service providers and school counselors receive comprehensive training on complex trauma and trauma-informed care (i.e., trauma and youth homelessness, pathway to homelessness, impact of trauma on vulnerable youth). When service providers and schools understand trauma, they can more effectively understand other systemic injustices experienced by their clients and better advocate for change (i.e. racism, discrimination, poverty, mass incarceration, systematic barriers, inequalities, etc.). Understanding trauma, systemic injustices, and equality gaps can help organizations reimagine their eligibility and participation requirements to be more inclusive and accessible to the populations they aim to serve. Allocating more funding to supporting communities of color, and the creation of community spaces within their institutions was expressed as a priority.

Youth also recommended that youth serving organizations, runaway and homeless youth programs, and schools elevate youth voices in their policies, activities, and programs, recognizing the need to include youth perspectives in shaping pathways to higher education, career counseling, and support for a young person's passions and interests.