



Report: Homelessness among U.S. gay youth an 'epidemic'

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By MARCUS FRANKLIN
Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK -- When Angelika Santiago was 18 and changing her identity from male to female, her mother issued an ultimatum: Cut her hair and dress as a boy or leave their apartment.

Santiago left their Manhattan home and ended up in a shelter for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or LGBT, youths.

"She wanted me to be a boy, deny who I was inside," Santiago recalled.

Santiago eventually gained her independence, landing a receptionist job and renting a room for \$165 a week. But after losing the job and the room a few weeks ago, she found herself staying at another shelter.

Santiago, now 20, is part of an "epidemic" of homelessness among LGBT youth, according to a new report released Thursday by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Up to 42 percent of the 575,000 to 1.6 million youths who are considered homeless or runaway are lesbian, gay or transgender, according to the report, "An Epidemic of Homelessness."

In New York, no one knows how many homeless youths there are let alone how many of them are LGBT, city officials acknowledged. But the estimate is that there are 30,000 homeless youths, of whom 8,400 are LGBT.

"Now that we have a report that sadly documents how big a problem the issue of homelessness among young LGBT people is," City Council Speaker Christine Quinn said, "it will make it much more difficult for government to ignore or walk away from that problem."

Solutions mentioned at the announcement included increasing the number of shelter beds for LGBT young people and expanding services designed for them to help them become self-sufficient.

Quinn and Councilmen Lewis Fidler and Alan Gerson noted that \$1.2 million of the \$2.6 million set aside in the budget passed this year for beds for at-risk, runaway and homeless youth is for LGBT homeless youth services.

The budget also calls for \$50,000 for an independent count and demographic breakdown of the city's homeless youth population. That count will be conducted in the spring, city officials said.

More than a quarter of the LGBT youth who came out to their parents or guardians were kicked out, and once on the street they're particularly vulnerable to mental health problems and diseases such as AIDS, said the report, which relies mostly on government statistics and existing studies on that population.

Nicholas Ray, an analyst who authored the report for the task force's Policy Institute, said Danny, a gay homeless youth he met in Colorado, denied he was engaged in prostitution.

"He said, 'I go to the library and get on (Internet gay sites) just to find a place to sleep for the night. Not for money. I'd sleep with them just so I had a place to stay,'" Ray recalled.

In New York, there are three or four shelters specifically for homeless LGBT youth with a total of about 65 beds, and each often has a waiting list, said officials from those shelters, who attended the announcement.

Also, openly gay homeless youth often recount stories of being mistreated, harassed or turned away from other shelters, particularly faith-based ones, city and shelter officials said.

Santiago, who is living in another shelter, is looking for a job. She wants her own place eventually.

"This needs to stop," Santiago said of homelessness among LGBT youth. "These kids cannot live like this, and they are kids. They can range from 12 and on, and it's not fair, and it's not right."