

Reports Spotlight Homeless Youth

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by Amy Wooten

A recent report shows that although 87 percent of youth in existing homeless youth provider programs in 2007 were able to move into stable housing, homeless youth are still underserved in Illinois due to a severe shortfall of resources.

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) recently released a report that analyzed how well needs have been met for homeless youth over the past year. Despite the success stories that many providers are able to share, the fact of the matter is that this holiday season, many of Chicago's homeless youth remain left out in the cold.

CCH worked with 24 homeless youth providers across Illinois such as The Night Ministry, Teen Living Programs, Hull House and others to see how many youth were served in 2007. What they found was that more youths were turned away than served this past year, due to a shortage of state-funded beds, staff and employment assistance programs.

The good news is that the survey found that 36 percent of youth in existing programs were able to obtain employment, and 42 percent completed or enrolled in a high school or GED program.

Although such services aided nearly 2,900 youth in obtaining housing, employment and education, even more youth had to be turned away due to capacity issues and a lack of resources. According to the survey, over 3,000 youths had to be turned away in 2007. Homeless youth providers housed a little over 37 percent of youth served. The survey found pregnant and parenting youth to be the group most likely to be underserved.

According to CCH, on average, each homeless youth program housed 45 youths a year, but had to turn away 134. It estimates that roughly 1 in 5 homeless youth can be served in Illinois on any given day due to current bed counts and resources.

These unmet needs are particularly important to the LGBT community. Last year, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) revealed its startling report that showed rates of homelessness of an epidemic proportion among LGBT youth throughout the U.S., including Chicago.

Throughout the course of one year, about 25,000 youth experience homelessness in Illinois, CCH and the state estimates. According to NGLTF, between 5,000 and 10,000 of these youth identify as LGBT. In its groundbreaking national study released in 2006, LGBT Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness, NGLTF found that between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth in the U.S. are LGBT.

Many of these homeless teens have experienced physical abuse and sexual assault. Some have had to turn to prostitution to survive.

Chicago isn't alone when it comes to the problem of homelessness among LGBT youth. A recent New York City study found that almost one-third of its homeless youth identify as LGBT.

There are programs meant to target Chicago's homeless LGBT population. For example, of the providers surveyed by CCH for the study, 64 percent of programs offered serve transgender youth. Still, a lack of resources means many LGBT youth are not getting the help that they need.

The survey estimates that close to \$5.5 million would be needed to meet the current unmet needs of Illinois' youth. CCH is calling for an additional \$7 million dollars annually to double the number of state-funded beds, create new programs and more.

Homeless youth programs are funded through the Illinois Department of Human Services. Current programs are funding at \$4.7 million annually through 2008.

CCH recommends that in order to serve the unmet needs of homeless youth in Illinois, more funding is needed, state-funded beds need to be doubled, employment services need to be increased and new programs need to be created in areas of the state that currently lack service.

And several youths are slowly but surely beating the odds. For example, The Chicago Tribune reported that Hector Castro, 20 (who was kicked out of his home seven years ago because of his sexual orientation) , recently enrolled in a housing program at Chicago House.