

Testimony of
Djimon Hounsou

April 29, 2008

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Actor and Advocate

Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary Hearing on "Living on the Street:
Finding Solutions to Protect "Runaway and Homeless Youth

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Leahy and members of the Committee, for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which serves our country's troubled and neglected adolescents that are so in need of our assistance. My name is Djimon Hounsou and I can address this issue personally, having experienced the very problem that we are discussing.

It is known to some that this cause is of personal importance to me and connects on a deeply intimate level. While I stand before you today, accomplished and successful in the eyes of society, I haven't always been so fortunate. After leaving home at an early age and moving to France I lived on the streets for some time - fighting for survival and searching for the daily necessities. I lived out my days in hunger and desperation. So this cause is not merely some distant charity that I contribute to from my home due to feelings of guilt or good will. My concern comes from an intimate understanding of the situation that these children face.

This issue is just as relevant today as it was in 1991 at the last hearing on the matter. We cannot ignore this crisis any longer. The mostly silent problem of homeless and disconnected youth in our country will not simply disappear.

The RHYA is important because kids need to dream. The hopes and dreams of homeless youth who live on the streets, however, are stifled and crushed, and there is no room left for a vision of the future. When you lack the basic necessities required for survival everything else fades away and you are left with nothing but the aching desire for food and shelter. I believe in the beauty and importance of our youth, and I believe that we have a responsibility to protect and nurture the generation beneath us to preserve our future and theirs.

Therefore, we need to champion causes such as the RHYA and the National Network's Place to Call Home Campaign, and find other ways to help safeguard and teach our youth. It is a sad state of affairs, when the richest country in the world has over two million children and adolescents living on the streets. This should not only be seen as a crisis, but a crime, and should not be taken lightly or overlooked. It is wonderful that we live in such a generous country that is able to help so many others in need around the world, but let us not forget the people closest to home. The question is not whether we can afford to fund such a cause. The question is how can we afford

not to? The homeless children of our country and the kids that have runaway who choose to live on the streets rather than deal with their family lives deserve not only a better, brighter future, but a better today.

In summary, I urge the Committee to quickly reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act so that community-based organizations can provide a much-needed safety net for youth in runaway and homeless situations. I also encourage you to support the National Network for Youth's Place to Call Home Campaign, a comprehensive public policy platform that seeks to prevent and end homelessness among our youth. If we have learned anything over the last 30 years, it is that young people's chances of becoming productive, contributing members of society are greatly increased when they are given the opportunity to realize and pursue their dreams.

We need to guard and preserve the innocence and purity of the youth of our country, and help cultivate and encourage their hopes and dreams. Without a home, food, and clothing children do not have even the opportunity needed to rise above their circumstances.

I thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for taking leadership on the important issue of runaway and homeless youth and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.