

Testimony of
Jerome Kilbane

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Jerome Kilbane
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Before the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on the "Living on the Street: Finding Solutions to Protect "Runaway and Homeless Youth

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Chairman Leahy and the members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to the crucial role the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act plays in serving the many suffering children who have too often been discarded by family and main-stream society.

My name is Jerome Kilbane and I am the Executive Director of Covenant House Pennsylvania, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Covenant House Pennsylvania is an affiliate of Covenant House International and a member of the National Network for Youth.

Covenant House International has been serving runaway and homeless youth under the age of 21 since its creation in 1972 in New York City's Lower East Side. Covenant House's creation precedes the enactment of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and responded to the same issues that Congress eventually did recognize through RHYA's enactment. However it is as true today as in 1972, that the need for services for homeless and runaway youth far outstrips the supply. We miss a great opportunity to prevent youth from becoming totally disconnected from mainstream society and from becoming chronically homeless by underfunding this statute and not amending it to respond to changing needs of America's at-risk youth. We are in a time of budget cuts and economic tightening. Now more than ever, we should recognize the value of preventative services which help young adults become productive and healthy adults. What Covenant House, and what the RHYA does, is try to intervene in a young persons life when they are in crisis and help them stabilize and reach their potential. Our investment in these youth will bring us positive returns. If we do not meet the needs of these at-risk youth, they are likely to enter the more costly child welfare and juvenile justice systems or linger on the street without the skills or resources to make it on their own.

Since its inception, Covenant House International has served over one million young people in need throughout all of its sites. Last year alone, Covenant House International worked with 65,000 youth on the street who had nowhere else to turn but here in their most desperate moment. 65% of the total youth CH serves are between 18-21 years of age, a rather invisible

population that are too old for the Child Welfare System and too young for the adult system. Covenant House is the bridge for this gap, serving an extremely unique population.

Of those 65,000 served last year, Covenant House Pennsylvania provided services for 3,525 young people. Covenant House Pennsylvania has been providing services to runaway, homeless and at-risk youth under the age of 21 in the Philadelphia area since 1999. Covenant House Pennsylvania is now the largest provider of shelter and services to homeless and runaway youth in the Commonwealth.

Covenant House has built a continuum of services that meets the complex needs of homeless and runaway youth. Similar to the continuum of services funded by the RHYA, our continuum consists of Street Outreach, a Crisis Center, and a Transitional Living Program. I would like to report that in 2007, our Outreach and Community Service Center had contact with over 3000 youth. Our Crisis Center served 500 youth and our transitional living program served 24 youth.

Covenant House's continuum is designed to help youth move from the street to independence, which begins with our Street Outreach Program and Community Outreach Center. In Fiscal Year 2007, these programs made contact with over 3,000 different young people throughout the Philadelphia area. The next step in our continuum is our Crisis Center, a 51-bed emergency shelter in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. This program operates from a policy of Open Intake, which means any young person under 21 who comes through our doors for the first time is admitted, no questions asked. In Fiscal Year 2007, 500 unduplicated young people, with an average daily census of 38 youth in the shelter. The third step in our continuum is our transitional living program, "Rights of Passage", currently an 8-bed facility near Temple University. Last year 90% of the youth served in the Crisis Center were 18 years or older. Most could not return home and because of factors such as unemployment, limited education and a lack of independent living skills had little chance of making it on their own. This is where our Rights of Passage Program has been crucial.

5 years ago, an 18-year old girl came to our doors, scared and hungry. Her family had moved to out of state and left her behind. She had been raped, and found herself with nowhere to turn. A friend had suggested Covenant House and although she was hesitant to enter a shelter, she came in. This shy young woman stayed with us for a few months, before applying for a scholarship program through and partnership with Saint Joseph's University. She was selected, and received a full scholarship. Last May, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, acquired a job at a local mortgage firm, and has been volunteering her time with Covenant House Pennsylvania's Young Professionals.

While youth have varying paths to homelessness, it is important for this Committee to understand that a large number of youth who we served are foster care alumni.

Over 40% of the young people we serve annually have been involved in the Child Welfare System, and 21% have "aged-out" of foster care. It should shock Congress and the general public that so many youth who were removed from their families for their own protection and care are being raised by a system that then releases them to homelessness when they turn 18. We understand the stress that most child welfare systems are under and that it is the infants and young children who receive much of the public's attention, but we should be very concerned that

our child welfare systems are producing so many homeless youth. I do not suggest these stressed agencies be punished, but rather that they are held accountable for the fate of the youth they raise AND that increased funding is provided through the RHYA to respond to the needs of these vulnerable youth. In 2005, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had 5,611 children in foster care over the age of 16, with 942 "aging-out" of care. In 2006, the City of Philadelphia alone had 1205 children in foster care over the age of 17, with over 300 "aging-out" of care. This is a significant number of youth who are highly vulnerable to becoming homeless and for whom we have the opportunity to intervene and limit their cost to society and maximize their ability to become productive and contributing members of society.

At last count, there were under 40 transitional living program beds in the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania specifically serving runaway and homeless youth. With 500 young people in shelter at Covenant House in Philadelphia alone, there is an obvious disconnect between the number of young people in need and the number of transitional beds available. We also are aware that there are many large rural areas that have no shelters or transitional living programs for homeless youth, and that this disconnect between need and supply can lead to devastating consequences. Covenant House Pennsylvania has begun a campaign to construct a brand new 30-bed "Rights of Passage" facility in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia to help address this problem. While this project will increase the number of transitional living beds in the Commonwealth by about 75% it still does not meet the need of the homeless youth in Philadelphia or the rest of the state.

It is imperative that the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized before it expires later this year. We are in a unique position where we actually know what services and supports work and help young adults get off the street and into work and stable housing. The outreach, basic center, and transitional living continuum of services is a good one that is effective, but we must provide greater access to youth in need, and this would require increased funding. In closing, I would make the following suggestion to strengthen this legislation:

? The Federal Government should provide more help to youth aging out of the foster care system. Meaningfully addressing the needs of this population has the potential to greatly reduce the number of homeless young adults. This could be done through increasing the funding for Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and require that states dedicate some of those funds to meet the housing needs of aging out youth. Similarly, these goals could be met through passage of the Place To Call Home Act [H.R. 3409].