

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
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Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Committee On The Judiciary
Hearing On "Living On The Street:
Finding Solutions To Protect Runaway And Homeless Youth"

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Today the Committee turns to the topic of youth homelessness. It is an issue about which we should share a common concern. The prevalence of youth homelessness in America is shockingly high. It is a problem that is not limited to large cities, but affects smaller communities and rural areas, as well.

We will hear from several witnesses who can speak first-hand about the significant challenges that young people face when they have nowhere to go. These witnesses also show the potential that is within young people who face the most harrowing obstacles, if they are given a chance: One has gone on to become an Oscar-nominated actor, and another now works with homeless youth in my home state of Vermont and is on his way to great things. I look forward to learning from all of our witnesses their perspectives concerning what we can do to help keep our nation's youth safe.

Homeless youth is a problem around the world. It affects those young people most directly, but affects and endangers the future of us all. That it remains a problem in the richest country in the world means we need to redouble our commitment and our efforts. We need to support those in small towns and communities across the country who work on this problem every day and see it firsthand.

The Justice Department estimated that 1.7 million young people either ran away from home or were thrown out of their homes in 1999. Another study suggested a number closer to 2.8 million in 2002. Whether the true number is 1 million or 5 million, young people become homeless for a variety of reasons, including abandonment, running away from an abusive home, or having no place to go after being released from state care. An estimated 40 to 60 percent of homeless kids are expected to experience physical abuse, and 17 to 35 percent experience sexual abuse while on the street, according to a report by the Department of Health and Human Services. Homeless youth are also at greater risk of mental health problems. While many receive vital services in their communities, others remain a hidden population, on the streets of our big cities and in rural areas like Vermont.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is the way in which the Federal Government helps communities across the country protect some of our most vulnerable children. It was first passed the year I was elected to the Senate. We have reauthorized it several times over the years and working with Senator Specter, Senator Hatch and Senators on both sides of the aisle, I hope that we will do so again this year. While some have tried to end these programs, a bipartisan coalition has worked to preserve them and all the good that they do. I remember when Senator Specter came to the Senate in the early 80's and his leadership in saving these programs as the chair of our Committee's subcommittee on juvenile justice. This law and the programs it funds provide a safety net that helps give young people a chance to build lives for themselves and helps reunite youngsters with their families. Given the increasingly difficult economic conditions being experienced by so many families around the country, now is the time to recommit ourselves to these principles and programs, not to let them expire.

Under the Act, every State receives a Basic Center grant to provide housing and crisis services for runaway and homeless youth and their families. Community-based groups around the country can also apply for funding through the Transitional Living Program and the Sexual Abuse Prevention/Street Outreach grant program. The transitional living program grants are used to provide longer-term housing to homeless youth between the ages of 16 and 21, and to help them become self-sufficient. The outreach grants are used to target youth at risk of engaging in high-risk behaviors while living on the street.

In Vermont, the Vermont Coalition for Runaway and Homeless Youth, the New England Network for Child, Youth, and Family Services, and Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington all receive grants under these programs and have provided excellent services. In one recent year, the street outreach programs in Vermont served nearly 10,000 young people. Reauthorizing this law will allow them to continue their enormously important work.

These topics are difficult but deserve our attention. We have a distinguished panel of witnesses today, and they bring with them unique and personal perspectives about this important issue. From the people working directly with the youth on the streets today in rural places like Vermont, to stars lending their names and voices to a worthy cause, finding solutions to this growing problem is an effort we can all support. I thank our witnesses for being here today and look forward to their testimony.

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