

Testimony of  
**Michael Hutchins**

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U. S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Hearing  
Tuesday, April 29, 2008  
The Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act  
Oral Testimony  
Michael Hutchins  
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Hello. My name is Michael Hutchins; I live in Burlington, Vermont, and I am 25 years old. I currently work as a Residential Manager at the Spectrum Youth Co-op, a group home in which Spectrum Youth and Family Services houses up to six male youth, ages 15-19. While I myself have never been through the foster care system, as these young men have, I do know what it is like to be homeless and I know how difficult it is to be struggling with addictions and mental disorders, as these young men are.

I first came to Spectrum in May of 2002, as a client in the shelter. Just one week prior to my arrival, I had barely survived a drug overdose at the nightclub I worked at down in Orlando, Florida. After a three-month binge on narcotics popular to the circuit culture--such as ecstasy, cocaine, crystal meth, Special K, and GHB--my body finally fell out from beneath me. I went into seizures on the ground outside of the club; my heart had stopped beating on the way to the emergency room and the EMT's had to resuscitate me in the ambulance. I awoke in a hospital bed several hours later, alone, homeless, broke, and terrified. The only thing I possessed in that moment was the realization that I wouldn't be alive much longer if I didn't get help.

With family members--and friends of family members--that work in the field of Human Services, a referral to Spectrum came swiftly to my list of options; other choices included joining the military, moving to Philadelphia near my brother, or staying in Orlando and risking death yet again. I chose Spectrum, because I wanted to be closer to home and people I knew. Once I arrived at Spectrum and made the decision to stay dedicated to getting my life on track and clear of narcotics, it only took me two months to earn my way out of the shelter and into Spectrum's transitional living facility: the Single-Room-Occupancy program. During my 18 month stay at the SRO, I went through intensive inpatient treatment at Conifer Park's drug rehabilitation center, intensive outpatient treatment in the form of group therapy which met three times each week at a Burlington facility called "Day One," and attended Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings nearly twice a day. Everyone on my Spectrum treatment team--my case manager, my counselor, my doctor, my workers from the JOBS Program and the Education Department--as well as all the residential managers who worked in the shelter and the SRO, all helped me achieve my ultimate goal: to live independently as a self-sufficient young adult out in the community. Once I successfully completed the three phases of the SRO program, I moved

into an apartment with a friend I had made while working as a seasonal worker at a video game store.

While living with my friend and successfully paying rent, bills, and previous debts, I first attained employment as a Shift Supervisor at the local mall's McDonald's restaurant, and not too long after that I returned to the video game store as an Assistant Store Manager. It did not take long for me to realize that as proud as I was to be in a managerial position, I definitely did not want to be in retail for the rest of my life. It was around this time that I recalled a conversation I had with Elise Brokaw, our Residential Director, in which I asked if she thought I would be a good staff member some day. Her reply was, "let's give it a year out there on your own, and then come see me. We'd be glad to have you." I applied for part-time respite work at the Co-op and gave my two week notice to my store manager the second I was hired at Spectrum. Despite having never worked in the Human Services field, I had incredible confidence that having been through the program myself would be an incredible asset and an efficient tool I could use while working with youth whose shoes I had been so recently standing in.

Now that I have worked here at the Co-op for almost three years, it has been amazing to watch these young individuals work on treatment goals similar to those I had once set for myself; it is highly rewarding to be able to assist and support them through their difficult struggles. Now, instead of helping people make important decisions on which video game to purchase, I am helping people make important decisions about their lives. When a youth tells me that I don't understand what they're going through, I can tell them that I know exactly how they are feeling. I believe my experience as a Spectrum client gives hope to the youth I work with; they can see proof that succession through this program is indeed possible, and I've even had a few of them ask me if I thought they would make good staff members themselves some day.

I can only hope that the youth that I work with, as well as the thousands and thousands of homeless and runaway youth in this nation today, will be able to share their own success stories and encourage others to improve the quality of their lives as well. Without the funding that the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act provides to organizations like Spectrum nationwide, those success stories might never occur; if Spectrum Youth and Family Services had not existed on that 19th day of May, in 2002, it is more than probable that I would not be standing before you this very minute.

I profess to you today that I believe in this system whole-heartedly, and I implore you to not only reauthorize this act, but to focus in the years to come on how we, as a nation, can improve the quality of the lives of those youth who believe there will be no brighter tomorrow.

Thank you very much for your time.