

Testimony of  
**Victoria A. Wagner**

April 29, 2008

Statement for the Record of  
Victoria A. Wagner, MA  
Chief Executive Officer  
National Network for Youth

Before the  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate

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

April 29, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, as CEO of the National Network for Youth, I welcome the opportunity to appear before you to discuss solutions for protecting runaway and homeless youth. The National Network for Youth is a non-profit membership-based organization that champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services. Founded in 1974 to advocate for the passage of the first Runaway Youth Act, the National Network for Youth is the nation's leading organization on youth homelessness, providing training, professional development, information on best practices, and public policy development on the federal, state, and local levels.

National Network for Youth's membership includes community-based, faith-based, and public organizations that provide an array of services to youth and families in the U.S. states and territories as well as international locations. In addition to service providers, youth, youth workers, and regional and state networks of youth-serving organizations are among our membership base. Members provide a full continuum of core prevention and intervention services to youth and families in high-risk situations, including street-based crisis intervention, family reunification services, emergency shelter, and transitional and independent living arrangements. Our members also provide supportive services including life skills, health and wellness education, physical and behavioral health treatment and care, education, workforce development, arts, and recreation services to ensure that young people are connected to school, work, caring adults, and their communities. Collectively, National Network for Youth member organizations serve over 2.5 million young people annually.

Last year, the National Network for Youth launched its Place to Call Home Campaign, which seeks to build the conditions, structures, and supports to ensure lifelong connections for runaway, homeless, unaccompanied and disconnected youth. The four cornerstones of the campaign

include: 1) Public Policy Advancement and System Change; 2) Best Practices; 3) Public Awareness; and 4) Research and Knowledge Development. The reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is one component of our Place to Call Home Campaign.

I have had the opportunity to work with young people in runaway and homeless situations for almost 30 years, serving in a variety of roles, including street outreach worker, case manager, and eventually, as the Executive Director of Youth Care, a multi-million dollar community-based organization based in Seattle, Washington. I witnessed firsthand how the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act's Street Outreach, Basic Center, and Transitional Living Programs meet the immediate needs of youth in crisis and assist them in exiting the streets and transitioning to self-sufficiency.

## ISSUES CONFRONTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

While it is difficult to estimate the number of youth who experience homelessness, evidence suggests that the size of the homeless youth population is substantial and widespread. The U.S. Department of Justice estimated that in 1999, nearly 1.7 million youth under the age of 18 experienced a runaway/throwaway episode.

Youth consistently report family conflict as the primary reason for becoming homeless. Many are compelled to leave their home environments prematurely due to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by others in the home. Across studies of homeless youth, rates of sexual abuse range from 17 to 53 percent, and physical abuse ranges from 40 to 60 percent. Others are forced out of the home due to parental disapproval of the pregnancy, parenting status, school problems, drug or alcohol use, sexual orientation or other circumstances of their children.

Young people who live on the streets have difficulty meeting their most basic needs. In a study of Hollywood street youth between the ages of 13 and 17, 57 percent reported having spent at least one day in the past month with nothing to eat. Homeless youth have difficulty obtaining medical care, continuing their education, finding clothing and maintaining healthy personal hygiene.

Studies have shown that homeless youth are extremely vulnerable to victimization while living on the streets. In a sample of street youth in Hollywood, 42 percent had been physically assaulted and 13 percent had been sexually assaulted. Street youth are also at an increased risk of sexual exploitation. Some homeless youth find that exchanging sex for basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter or protection, is their only chance for survival.

The federal government plays a critical role in ensuring that young people experiencing episodes of homelessness are connected to safe and stable living situations and make a successful transition to adulthood. The majority of states and local jurisdictions lack a dedicated funding stream to provide services and supports runaway and homeless youth, creating gaps in services to our nation's most disconnected youth.

## NATIONAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH'S PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES

The National Network for Youth has submitted written testimony outlining our full set of public policy recommendations. Today, I will focus my oral testimony on our priority recommendations related to research, funding, performance standards, and the development of an appeals process.

Priority Recommendation #1: Require HHS to develop every fifth year, directly or via contract, a national estimate of the prevalence of runaway and homelessness episodes among youth and young adults.

Runaway and homeless youth are among the nation's most disconnected populations and urgently require the attention of policy makers. Current research on homeless youth has major limitations, including a lack of large representative samples, an absence of reliable and valid measures, and a lack of comparison groups. Because runaway and homeless youth are among the most understudied and undercounted populations, the paucity of empirical evidence creates barriers to informing sound public policy decisions and the development of effective prevention and intervention services.

In 2002, the Senate Appropriations Committee expressed concern about the lack of research on this high risk population, instructing HHS to develop a plan for estimating the incidence of runaway and homelessness episodes among youth and to monitor trends. In response, HHS released a report in 2003 entitled "Incidence and Prevalence of Homeless and Runaway Youth," which outlined various research methodologies and options for conducting prevalence studies. The report recommended administering studies at regular 5-10 year intervals.

This reauthorization period offers Congress an opportunity to provide leadership and implement the recommendations of the 2003 report by requiring HHS to conduct prevalence studies at five-year intervals. The most recent federally funded study on runaway youth, The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Youth (NISMAART-2), estimates that 1.7 million youth under age 18 left home or were asked to leave home in 1999. While the sample size for NISMAART-2 was three times the size of its first administration and therefore provided more accurate information on this youth population, there are still limitations. The most obvious limitation is that NISMAART-2 failed to include older homeless youth, given that the sample population was under the age of 18. Further, NISMAART-2 did not include youth who did not return home and remained homeless -- the most at-risk subpopulation of youth. A more accurate prevalence study must include youth who utilize homeless services, but also youth who remain on the street, couch-surfers who have no stable housing, and other youth who do not utilize services. A five-year interval prevalence study will provide policy makers and the field with important information to better serve this vulnerable population of youth.

Priority Recommendation #2: Reauthorize and increase authorization levels for Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs. The runaway and homeless youth consolidated account, which funds emergency shelter and transitional living programs should be authorized at the \$200 million level, and the runaway prevention account should be authorized at the \$30 million level in FY2009 and "such sums as may be necessary" in each of FY 2010 through 2013.

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) Programs are critical to reconnecting youth to education, work, and caring adults, and in assisting youth in making a successful transition to self-sufficiency. The last federally funded evaluation of RHYA programs demonstrated that the programs reduced drop-out rates; doubled school attendance; increased college attendance; increased employment rates; reduced parental physical abuse; and improved family relationships for unaccompanied youth.

In FY2007, RHYA programs served over 740,000 youth, but only 7% were provided with emergency shelter or transitional housing. The other 93% received critical services to meet basic needs through the Street Outreach Program. According to the federally-administered Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS), 6,800 youth were turned away from the Basic Center and Transitional Living Programs during FY2007. The most basic needs of homeless children and youth --namely safe and stable housing--are unmet, with hundreds of thousands of homeless youth forced to remain on the streets and in unstable and often unsafe housing situations. An increase in authorized levels for the Street Outreach (runaway prevention) account and the consolidated account, which funds residential-based services would help communities meet the most basic needs of this vulnerable population of youth.

Priority Recommendation #3: Require HHS to develop performance standards for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act grantees.

As I mentioned previously, one of the cornerstones of the National Network for Youth's Place to Call Home Campaign is Best Practices and Professional Development. Since its inception, the National Network has been committed to identifying and replicating high quality services, providing annual training opportunities for youth workers to develop core competencies in working with young people.

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has developed performance standards for the Basic Center Program. The standards assist funded grantees in meeting minimum benchmarks related to service delivery and administrative functions. To ensure higher quality services for youth, the National Network for Youth recommends that HHS develop performance standards for all three RHYA programs, in consultation with the field and experts. The standards must be fully integrated into the competitive bid process, monitoring, evaluation, and technical assistance. We anticipate that the new performance standards will ensure consistency among providers, serve as a developmental tool for program managers, and improve positive outcomes for youth accessing services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

Priority Recommendation #4: Require HHS to develop a process for considering appeals for reconsideration form unsuccessful RHYA applicants.

As competition for the limited pool of Runaway and Homeless Youth Act funding increases, so does the demand for a transparent, fair, and formalized appeals process for applicants who are denied funding. Every grant season, the National Network for Youth and Members of Congress receive calls from high quality, long-time runaway and homeless youth programs that were denied funding. Our members have reported that communication from HHS indicates that some applications were scored down on the basis of missing responses, even though the application was complete and addressed each question. Currently, the only option for unsuccessful grantees in seeking reconsideration is to exercise rights under the Freedom of Information Act.

Unfortunately, this process does not sufficiently address these issues, as it imposes serious lag times and does not authorize the Administration to reconsider decisions. In response to this issue,

the National Network recommends that FYSB develop a formal appeals process to ensure fairness and transparency within the administration of grants.

The intent of this recommendation is not to shift FYSB's focus from its current priorities to unnecessary and burdensome administrative tasks. On the contrary, we envision that the appeals process would only be open to a limited group of applicants who score within 5 points of the fundable range and who can demonstrate that the original application included responses to questions that the review panel did not identify. Our members have opportunities to appeal funding decisions on the state and local level and seek a similar avenue on the federal level. Our recommendation allows flexibility for FYSB to develop the appeals process that would work within their current staffing structure and budget.

## SOLUTIONS TO PROTECTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

Reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act must be considered just one part of a larger effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. Congress must take bold steps, such as those offered in the National Network's Place to Call Home Campaign. The Place to Call Home Campaign includes a comprehensive public policy agenda to prevent, respond to, and end runaway and homeless situations among youth. Proposed legislation addresses reform issues around juvenile justice, child welfare, education, workforce development, teen parenting, homeless assistance, and housing.

We encourage Members of this Committee to support the Place to Call Home Campaign by swiftly reauthorizing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; supporting the First Step Forward Act, Senator Schumer's youth reentry legislation; and supporting the National Network's recommended provisions on the deinstitutionalization of status offenders within the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which also sunsets this year. These steps will bring us closer to making sure that every runaway and homeless youth is connected to a safe and stable home, caring adults, workforce, and education.

Mr. Chairman, we are deeply grateful for your leadership and support on the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and I look forward to working with you and the Committee to ensure a timely passage.