

U.S. Senate Judiciary Field Hearing
Effective Community Efforts to Counter Drug-Related Crime in Rural America
March 22, 2010, Barre City Auditorium, Barre, Vermont

Testimony of Barbara A. Floersch
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Senator Leahy, Senator Whitehouse, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The Washington County Youth Service Bureau/Boys & Girls Club was established in 1974. I joined the Bureau in 1977 and for the past 33 years have developed services to meet the needs of young people in this county, and throughout the state. The Youth Service Bureau assists around 2,500 youth in Washington County each year, and through its statewide efforts, reaches up to 10,000 others. Locally, the Bureau provides services to runaway youth and their families, temporary emergency shelter for youth, transitional living support to homeless youth, adolescent substance abuse prevention and treatment, assistance to teen parents and their children, a teen center, an after-school program, a peer outreach program, a program to connect at-risk youth with training to obtain *green* jobs, a residential, transitional living program for young men returning to Barre City from jail (called Return House), and a 24/7 crisis response service.

On a statewide basis, the Youth Service Bureau started and now administers the Vermont Coalition of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs (that includes 13 member organizations), the Vermont Coalition of Teen Centers (that serves around 30 teen centers), and AmeriCorps and Vista Programs that, combined, place around 50 volunteers in youth serving agencies each year.

To do my work, I have continually tracked research on why young people succeed, or don't. My testimony is based on my experience at the Youth Service Bureau, and is supported by the research of J.D. Hawkins and R.F. Catalano who defined risk and resiliency factors that affect young people, the research of Larry Brendtro who has written extensively on reclaiming youth who are at-risk of failure, and the research of Stephen Benson who identified 40 *assets* that increase the likelihood of a young person's success. Benson's research shows that the more *assets* a young person has, the more likely it is that he or she will avoid risky behaviors; and, conversely, the fewer *assets*, the more likely that the young person will get into trouble. These *assets* are basic: young people do best when they are valued by the community, treated with respect, have meaningful relationships with good role models, are engaged in creative activities, do well in school, and so forth. I have submitted a bibliography of this research with my written testimony.

Basically, preventing drug abuse, crime, and other social ills can only be accomplished through actions that promote physical, mental, and spiritual health and wholeness. When young people are belittled or abused, do not perceive their own promise, are emotionally maimed, are estranged from the community – that creates crime. It creates wounded children who self-medicate with drugs, who have little experience of caring and responsibility, and who have nothing to lose. The well-being of children and well-being of the community cannot be separated.

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In Washington County we're fighting for our children which means we're fighting for our communities:

- *New Directions* coalitions operating in Barre, Cabot, and Montpelier are promoting a culture of community wellness that's free of substance abuse.
- The Bureau's *Cityscape After-school Program* operates at Barre City Middle School. Cityscape is a Boys & Girls Club site and a 21st Century Community Learning Center. *Community Connections* provides high quality after-school programming in Montpelier and the 5 communities of the Washington Central Supervisory Union. The state's evaluation of Vermont's 21st Century Community Learning Center programs shows that quality afterschool activities help young people succeed academically, build skills, and establish positive, lasting relationships within the community.
- The *Basement Teen Center* and *Northfield Teen Center*, both Boys & Girls Club sites, give teens a safe, supervised, substance-free place to hang-out, learn leadership skills, and participate in activities.
- The *Washington County Parent Child Center* supports parents and young children.
- *Central Vermont Community Action Council* educates teen parents, is providing funds to the Youth Service Bureau to prepare at-risk youth for *green* jobs, operates the area's *Head Start Program*, and fervently works to address both the causes and effects of poverty.
- *Community Justice Centers* are bringing restorative justice practices into both Barre and Montpelier, and offering exciting, research-based approaches for addressing conflicts and redressing wrongs.
- The Youth Service Bureau's *Return House* is a residential transitional living program for young male offenders (age 18-22) who are returning to Barre City from jail. Return House is staffed 24/7 and in addition to supervision, provides life skills training, support in finding and retaining a job, substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, positive leisure activities, and community service opportunities. Return House is the only program of its kind in the state, and in the almost 4 years since it opened not one of its participants has committed a new crime.

Along with my written testimony, I have submitted documentation on the effectiveness of these programs and services. There are many other efforts underway, but since testimony time is short I will direct my comments to an area where we need to do much better.

In spite of our successes some young people are still falling through the cracks and living in a harsh and dangerous reality. At this time, the most porous spot in Vermont's safety net and the most perilous point in the long crossing into adulthood is for transition-age youth, those between the ages of 17 and 25.

At every point in a child's life, the opportunity for health and success is precariously balanced with challenges that could snowball to produce alienation, hopelessness, substance abuse, and crime. There's a strong, committed service system for young children and school-age children. It needs more resources, but it does exist. But, by the time kids are in their late teens or have become young

adults, there aren't many people left to help them if they fall down. It's true that older teens and young adults who are troubled can be hard to help. They're pretty good at burning bridges. But as a community, we can't give up on them.

A 2003 study found that of all 18 to 21 year olds incarcerated in Vermont, 36% had been in foster care. Although there is no more up-to-date data that's specific to Vermont, a national report in 2008 showed that young adults who had been in foster care experience high rates of homelessness, often struggle with depression, are usually without health insurance, and are likely to live below the poverty level.

The Youth Service Bureau works daily with young people between the ages of 17 and 25 who are in crisis and who have no support system. Each year, our Transitional Living Program for homeless youth helps about 150 young people, but that program is dreadfully under-funded and the heartbreaking reality is that there are many pressing needs we can't meet. The words "homeless teen" are sobering, but if you take a moment to picture a pregnant 17 year old sleeping in the hallway of an apartment building, an 18 year old man sleeping in an abandoned car, a 19 year old woman trading sex for shelter – then the real impact on the young people and impact on our community comes into sharper focus.

The largest population under the supervision of the Vermont Department of Corrections are 18 – 25 year old men. The majority of young men in jail did not graduate from high school and many have learning disorders. About 95% of them have substance abuse problems that have not been treated, and that aren't treated in jail. Most have backgrounds of abuse or neglect – many were placed in foster care because their homes were chaotic or worse. The number of women supervised by Corrections, while much lower has been growing. Almost 90% have been abused, 95% have substance abuse problems, and 60% have diagnosed mental health problems. These are the young people who fell through the cracks in our support system, and helping them make a successful transition back into the community from jail is our best chance to help them move their lives onto a different track, our best chance to help them become contributors to the community, our best chance to stop the in-jail/out-of-jail revolving door that can so easily become a life.

Again, thank you for the honor of speaking at this hearing.



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