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City Spending for Runaway and Homeless Youth Grows Steadily

SUMMARY

DETERMINING THE NUMBER of runaway or homeless youth on the city's streets is particularly difficult. These youth generally avoid adult and family shelters and are reluctant to say they are homeless. While quantifying the level of need may be complex, the Mayor and City Council have seen enough evidence to steadily increase spending on the city's Runaway and Homeless Youth initiative since fiscal year 2005. IBO's review of the program's funding and spending found:

- Spending for runaway and homeless youth has more than doubled since 2005 and is budgeted at \$12.8 million for the current fiscal year.
- The city currently provides more than 80 percent of the funding for its programs for runaway and homeless youth, up from 71 percent in 2005. The state and federal shares have fallen to about 15 percent and 1 percent respectively.
- The number of overnight stays by runaway and homeless youth in crisis shelters has more than doubled, growing from 20,148 in 2005 to 41,245 in 2009. Spending on crisis shelters quadrupled over this period, rising from \$796,000 to \$3.3 million.

The report also notes that state and federal regulations have had the unintended effect of impeding efforts to provide services in New York City, especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth. State and federal regulations limit access to shelters based on age and gender and have different age cutoffs, 18 years and younger under federal law, and 21 years and younger under state law. The traditional method of segregating youth on the basis of gender adds a layer of difficulty in serving the needs of transgender youth.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, identifying homeless youth has been difficult because of differences in the behavioral patterns of homeless adults and youth. Homeless youth are inherently harder to count given their mobility, avoidance of traditional shelters for adults and families, and reluctance to be identified as homeless. Their relative invisibility makes it difficult to assess the magnitude of the homeless youth problem. Nevertheless, the best available evidence suggests that on any given night thousands of youth are homeless in New York City.

Determining that there is a growing need for services for homeless youth, the City Council and Bloomberg Administration have increased funding in recent years for programs in the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) that serve this population. Spending for DYCD's Runaway and Homeless Youth initiative doubled from fiscal year 2005 to 2009.¹ As a result there has been a significant increase in the capacity of the city's youth shelter system, as well as in the number of youth using these shelters on an average night.

This report will focus on the programs that are available as part of the city's Runaway and Homeless Youth initiative including recent trends in program capacity, expenditures, and funding.

MEASURING THE NEED FOR SERVICES

Homeless Youth Count. In the summer of 2007, the Empire State Coalition of Youth & Family Services conducted a survey of 1,000 youth who were either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Interviews were conducted at youth programs, at runaway shelters and transitional living programs, on the street, and in other places where it was expected that homeless youth would congregate. Based on the survey, the coalition estimated that on any given night over 3,800 youth were homeless in the city. Almost 30 percent of the youth interviewed who were homeless or at risk had been in foster care at some time in their lives, and over 40 percent had been in the juvenile justice system or in jail or prison. When asked about their sexual orientation, 28 percent of those surveyed identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Although considered superior to earlier attempts to measure the homeless youth population, the empire state coalition's count was hindered by limited funding and because some agencies were reluctant or unable to assist in locating young people who might have qualified for an interview. Some populations of homeless youth were under-represented in the sample. Large sections of the city were not visited and the vast majority of street interviews took place in Manhattan. Moreover, the coalition had difficulty

reaching out to the youngest homeless who are at special risk. The average age of those interviewed was 20; youth 16 and younger were harder to identify and survey and hence were under-represented in the study. Because the survey was done in July, it was not possible to reach out to younger adolescents still in school who might be at risk of becoming homeless. Therefore, it is likely that the actual number of homeless youth in the city is higher than that estimated in the coalition's count.

LEGISLATION GOVERNING HOMELESS YOUTH PROGRAMS

Runaway and Homeless Youth Acts. Congress has authorized funding for services to provide support for runaway and homeless youth outside of the juvenile justice, mental health, and child welfare systems since the 1970s. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, as currently amended, authorizes federal funding for three programs to assist runaway and homeless youth—the Basic Center Program, Transitional Living Program and Street Outreach Program.

Under the federal act, the term “homeless youth” refers to an individual under the age of 21 who cannot live in a safe environment with a relative and lacks safe alternate living arrangements. Similarly, the State Runaway and Homeless Youth Act of 1978 (also known as New York State RHYA regulations) defines a “homeless youth” as an individual under the age of 21 who is in need of services and without a place of shelter where supervision and care are available. In addition, the state law refers to a “runaway youth” as an individual under the age of 18 who is not residing at his or her legal residence and who is doing so without the consent of a parent or legal guardian.

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services oversees the state's network of county Youth Bureaus and is the agency responsible for certifying runaway and homeless youth residential programs. The Department of Youth and Community Development serves as the local Youth Bureau for New York City, and is responsible for managing contracts with service providers for the city.

THE CITY'S RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH INITIATIVE

New York City has been funding runaway and homeless youth services since at least the 1990s under the Department of Youth Services. In 1996, DYCD was created as a result of the merger between the Department of Youth Services and the Community Development Agency. Currently, DYCD funds programs that are designed to protect runaway and homeless youth and, whenever

possible, reunite them with their families. Program activities and experiences are designed to assist youth in becoming healthy, caring, and responsible adults (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/runaway/runaway.shtml>). Currently, there are seven crisis shelters and 11 transitional independent living facilities. All of the programs provide support for all youth, some with specialized programming. One crisis shelter provider and one transitional provider serve lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth (LGBTQ) as part of their program mission.

In fiscal year 2006, DYCD redesigned the runaway and homeless youth initiative to offer a more structured continuum of services and make it easier for youth to access needed services without having to travel to multiple sites. This model includes four program areas: street outreach and referral services, drop-in centers and transportation, crisis shelters, and transitional facilities.

Street Outreach and Referral. DYCD’s citywide, vehicle-based street outreach focuses efforts on those areas where youth are known to congregate at night, according to the agency’s Web site. The role of the street outreach worker is to distribute information about services for runaway and homeless youth, provide resources, make referrals, and transport youth from unsafe places to a safe environment—whether that be home to their families, or other safe homes, or crisis shelters. Runaway and Homeless Youth Street Outreach Services operate between the hours of 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. daily.

Drop-in Centers and Transportation. There is a drop-in center in every borough of New York City. These centers, according to DYCD’s Web site, provide young people and their families with services, counseling, and referrals from social workers. The hours of operation are from 12 p.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. All centers also now provide transportation for youth as part of the contracts that began July 1, 2009.

Crisis Shelters. As described on its Web site, DYCD’s crisis shelters offer emergency shelter and are the entry-point for the system of residential services for runaway and homeless youth. These voluntary, short-term residential programs provide emergency shelter and crisis intervention services aimed at reuniting youth with their families or, if family reunification is not possible, arranging appropriate transitional and long-term placements. Currently, there are seven crisis shelters; all are located in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Transitional Independent Living. The Department of Youth and Community Development’s transitional living program provide homeless youth between the ages of 16 and 20 with support and shelter as they work to establish an independent life according to the DYCD Web site. Transitional living programs provide services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. A young person in need of these longer-term residential services must first visit a crisis shelter and obtain a referral. Youth may stay at these programs for up to 18 months. Services offered at transitional living facilities include: educational programs, vocational training, job placement assistance, counseling, and basic life skills training. There are currently 11 transitional living programs run by eight providers, with a total of 137 beds.

Youth Connect. DYCD also manages Youth Connect, a toll-free information and referral phone service for youth, families, and communities. Youth Connect operates from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and is able to communicate with callers in 152 languages. Operators connect callers to an array of local services and resources. Funding for Youth Connect is not included in the Runaway and Homeless Youth initiative, but youth can call Youth Connect to find out about a variety of services including those in the initiative. In addition, the city’s 311 call center also handles calls about shelter for runaway and homeless youth. During the period July 2009 through October 2009, 311 received 1,776 such calls.

An Expanding Youth Shelter System. In recent years DYCD has moved to increase significantly its overnight shelter capacity for

Service Indicators for Runaway and Homeless Youth, 2005-2010						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Crisis Beds						
Number of Providers	1	1	3	4	4	4
Number of Beds	60	60	85	113	113	116
Number of Youth Served	1,707	1,470	2,421	1,824	1,713	1,860
Utilization Rates	92%	100%	100%	100%	100%	90%
Number of Nights of Service	20,148	21,900	31,025	41,245	41,245	38,106
Transitional Independent Living						
Number of Providers	5	5	6	7	7	8
Number of Beds	88	88	103	122	122	137
Number of Youth Served	306	299	218	244	275	250
Utilization Rates	N/A	N/A	83%	86%	82%	85%
Number of Nights of Service	N/A	N/A	31,204	38,296	36,515	42,504
SOURCES: IBO; Department of Youth and Community Development; Mayor’s Management Report						
NOTES: The 2010 number of youth served, utilization rates, and number of nights of service are all target numbers.						

runaway and homeless youth. Particularly in the crisis centers, this has allowed more youth to be served for longer periods of time.

Looking first at the crisis shelter system, youth are staying in the shelters for longer periods of time, with increases in the number of nights of service outpacing increases in the number of youth served. From 2005 to 2009 the number of youth crisis shelters increased from one to four, and the number of available beds nearly doubled from 60 to 113. The number of youth served over the course of the year increased from 1,707 in 2005 to 2,421 in 2007 before declining to an average of 1,769 in 2008 and 2009. This decrease was likely due to a redesign of the shelter program which encouraged longer stays and lower turnover rates. In order to measure whether youth are staying longer, it is necessary to look at the number of nights of service provided per year, which increased from nearly 20,150 in 2005 to over 41,245 in 2009. Over the same period, the average length of stay at crisis shelters increased from nearly 12 days to roughly 24 days.

Some of the same trends, notably rising capacity and increasing nights of service, can be seen in the transitional shelters. From 2005 to 2009 the number of transitional facilities increased from five to seven and the number of available beds increased from 88 to 122; an additional transitional shelter was added in 2010. Unlike the general increase in the number of youth served in the crisis shelters, the number of youth served in the transitional shelters has declined from roughly 300 a year in 2005 and 2006 to about 250 a year in 2008 and 2009. While the number of nights of service provided at transitional facilities is unavailable for the early years of this period, the data show an increase from about 31,200 in 2007 to 36,515 in 2009. As would be expected, there is far less turnover in the transitional shelters than the crisis shelters; in 2009 the average length of stay at the transitional shelters is about four and a half months, down slightly more than a week since 2007.

Spending. The increase in shelter services has necessitated a significant increase in spending. Expenditures for Runaway and Homeless Youth initiative programs (excluding administrative costs) in 2009 totaled \$10.4 million, 95 percent higher than in 2005. Over that time period spending for crisis shelters increased to \$3.3 million, more than 300 percent higher than 2005; spending on transitional shelters increased to \$5.1 million, 72 percent higher than 2005. Expenditures for street outreach have also increased to \$2.0 million or by 26 percent since 2005.

Spending on these programs has continued to grow through the city's downturn. For 2010, spending on these programs is expected to total \$11.9 million and the budget for the current fiscal year is \$12.1 million.

Funding. While the city has been able to draw down state and federal funds to pay for a portion of its Runaway and Homeless Youth initiative, the recent increases in spending have been funded with city dollars. In 2005 city funds accounted for 71 percent (\$4.8 million) of the initiative's budget, while state funds made up 27 percent and federal funds about 2 percent. By 2009 the city share had risen to 83 percent (\$9.3 million) while the state and federal shares had fallen to 15 percent and 1 percent respectively. The increased city funds came largely from additional City Council discretionary money added at the adoption of the budgets since 2006. These discretionary funds totaled \$4.6 million in 2009 and grew to \$5.9 million in 2010 and 2011. This raised the city's share of funding to 85 percent (\$10.3 million in 2010 and \$10.9 million in 2011), while the state and federal shares dipped slightly.

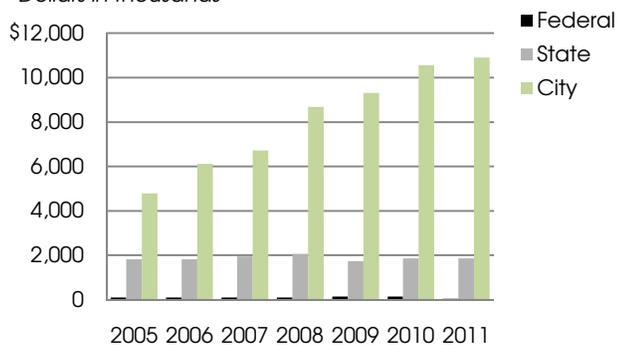
OBSTACLES TO IMPROVING SERVICES FOR YOUTH

There are requirements in the federal and state Runaway and Homeless Youth regulations that have had the unintended

Runaway and Homeless Youth Initiative Spending Grew								
<i>Dollars in thousands</i>								
	Actual 2005	Actual 2006	Actual 2007	Actual 2008	Actual 2009	2010 Current Modified	2011 Adopted Plan	Percent Change 2005-2009
Crisis Shelters	\$796	\$1,928	\$2,337	\$3,517	\$3,323	\$4,490	N/A	317.5
Street Outreach	1,574	1,490	1,911	2,100	1,981	2,227	N/A	25.9
Transitional Independent Living Program Subtotal	2,941	2,964	4,194	4,882	5,065	5,162	N/A	72.2
	\$5,311	\$6,382	\$8,443	\$10,500	\$10,370	\$11,879	\$12,124	95.3
Administration (Personal Service)	N/A	N/A	N/A	\$60	\$630	\$655	\$685	
TOTAL	\$5,311	\$6,382	\$8,443	\$10,559	\$11,000	\$12,534	\$12,809	107.1
SOURCES: IBO; Department of Youth and Community Development								
NOTES: The amounts for 2010 are subject to change through the year as money is moved between budget codes and other funding is received. The totals for 2010 and 2011 is as of the Adopted Budget, June 2010. Funding for Drop-in Centers is included with Street Outreach. Personal Service funding was not readily available prior to 2008. Funding for 2011 has not yet been allocated by program.								

City is Main Source of Funding for Runaway and Homeless Youth Program

Dollars in thousands



SOURCES: IBO; Department of Youth and Community Development

effect of limiting the availability of services to homeless youth in New York City. These requirements have to do with age, gender, physical living space and start-up funding. Although these requirements can be impediments for all providers of services for homeless youth, they are even harder on providers that serve LGBTQ youth exclusively.

Age. The age limit for residential services under state law is 21 while federal law limits service to youth age 18 and younger. Though the federal law identifies a “homeless youth” as someone who is not older than 21, federal funding is only provided for services for youth who are 18 years and younger.² As a result providers are forced to restrict access to beds based on age. According to providers, if their facility has a bed available that is funded with federal money, that bed cannot be used to serve a youth who is 19 years old or older.

Another problem that arises from the age requirements is that youth between the ages of 21 and 24 are excluded from receiving services using state and federal money. Most will be referred to an adult shelter, where they may not feel comfortable. Some youth service providers report that the ages of 21 to 24 are a key period of time when youth are planning for their future and, therefore, would prefer to see the age limit increased to 24, or an older youth program be created for those 21 to 24. Youth aging out of foster care at 21 are often not in a position to fend for

themselves due to the difficult circumstances under which they have lived.

Gender. LGBTQ advocates have pointed out that the traditional method of segregating youth based on gender makes it difficult to serve some of the young people from their communities. DYCD allows for mixed gender facilities but requires that bedrooms be occupied by the same gender youth in compliance with state regulations. Transgender youth are served according to the gender they identify with. It is important that all providers have policies and procedures that will train their staff to appropriately treat transgender youth. A commission for LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth was created in 2009 to address the needs of these youth. In June of this year the commission released a report outlining the issues that LGBTQ youth face and making recommendations for meeting their needs.³

Physical Living Space and the Need for Start-up Funding. Some youth service providers have had difficulty finding physical living space in New York City that complies with New York State Office of Children and Family Services requirements for certification. They have been advocating for the city to assist them in locating space for programs both by increasing the availability of city-owned properties and by offering incentives for landlords to make them more willing to rent to youth programs. Advocates have also urged the City Council to provide start-up funding for providers that need to bring new or existing spaces into compliance with state requirements. The current city procurement process does not permit any providers to be reimbursed for operating or capital expenses that they incur before the contract starts.

This report prepared by Nashla Salas

ENDNOTES

¹Data unavailable for 2004 and preceding years.

²Pursuant to the federal RHYA, crisis shelters are limited to serving youth under the age of 18. See 42 USCS § 5732a (3) (a) (1).

³Commission on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) Runaway and Homeless Youth “[All Our Children: Strategies to Prevent Homelessness, Strengthen Services and Build Support for LGBTQ Youth](#)” June, 2010.

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