



More than Money: Three Bills Congress Must Pass to Solve Youth and Family Homelessness

The ground-breaking Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) national study found that over 4 million youth and young adults experience homelessness on their own in the US each year—1 in 30 youth (ages 13-17), and 1 in 10 young adults (ages 18-25). The sheer scale of homelessness demonstrates the need for greater investments in programs that can meet the urgent needs of children and youth who are homeless today and can prevent them from experiencing homelessness as adults. Programs such as the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program and the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) program need sufficient resources to enable them to reach more children and youth – especially in light of the finding that youth without a high school diploma or GED are 3.5 times more likely to experience homelessness (the highest risk factor the study found).

In addition to examining the *amount* of resources directed to federal programs, Congress must assess the *effectiveness* of current policies in addressing the underlying causes, and preventing the worst consequences, of youth homelessness. Three bills before Congress offer responses that address the problems identified by this ground-breaking research.

1. The Homeless Children and Youth Act (HCYA, H.R. 1511/S. 611). VoYC found:

- Nearly two-thirds of youth who reported more visible homelessness (“explicit”) also reported less visible homelessness (“couch-surfing”) over the same time period. Less visible forms of homelessness were particularly prevalent in rural communities, which had the same rates of homelessness as urban and suburban communities. Despite this reality, HUD’s strict definition of homelessness prevents youth and young parent families who are staying in less visible situations from accessing existing programs.
- 28% of youth were reported as having substance use problems, and 66% were indicated as having mental health difficulties, while experiencing homelessness. These findings indicate that supports beyond housing are necessary to ensure sustainable exits from homelessness. Yet HUD has imposed short-term, housing-only models like Rapid Rehousing on communities, while defunding programs like Transitional Housing and Supportive Services, which are more appropriate for youth and young adults (including young families).
- The data show that child homelessness often leads to adult homelessness, as the majority of homeless unaccompanied young adults had experienced homelessness or housing instability in childhood or adolescence. Yet HUD continues to prioritize programs serving chronically homeless adults.

HCYA offers a response that corresponds with the evidence:

- Since young people move regularly between more and less visible homeless situations, HCYA aligns HUD’s definition of homelessness with other federal programs, such as public schools and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs, so that HUD’s definition will include *both*

forms of homelessness for children, youth, and families. This alignment will remove barriers to existing programs, streamline referrals, and improve collaboration.

- HCYA responds to the high levels of mental health needs and substance abuse among homeless youth that VoYC found by prohibiting HUD from imposing on communities adult-centered priorities and short-term, housing only approaches. It allows communities to use funds in ways that match the evidence and the needs.

2. The Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (soon to be introduced). VoYC found:

- A minimum of 700,000 youth ages 13-17 were homeless over the previous 12 months.
- Youth who are pregnant or parenting are more than three times as likely to experience homelessness, and more than 1 out of 3 homeless young women are pregnant or parenting.
- The prevalence rate of youth homelessness is the same in rural communities as in urban and suburban communities.

RHYTPA will respond to these challenges by:

- Increasing the maximum length of stay for youth in Basic Center programs from 21 to 30 days. This will allow these programs more time to stabilize homeless minors and provide appropriate connections and services.
- Supporting Maternity Group Homes, which provide longer-term housing with supportive services for pregnant or parenting homeless youth, and increasing the maximum eligible age for services to 24, at the option of each provider.
- Reauthorizing these vital programs, which provide funding for host homes and for programs to be flexibly implemented so that they are equally effective in suburban, urban and rural communities.

3. The Higher Education Access and Success Act for Homeless and Foster Youth Act (HEASHFY, S.1795/H.R. 3740). VoYC found:

- Youth and young adults with lower household incomes were 162% more likely to experience homelessness as young adults with higher incomes. However, when controlled for income, unemployment was *not* strongly correlated with youth homelessness. This suggests that employment will not by itself solve youth homelessness. Instead, the focus should be on lifting youth out of homelessness through helping them obtain better paying jobs and the education and training necessary to secure such jobs.
- Only 29% of young adults experiencing homelessness were enrolled in an educational program.

HEASHFY helps improve access to and success in higher education by:

- Streamlining and removing barriers to financial aid.
- Requiring colleges and universities to designate single points of contact to assist homeless and foster youth and connect them with resources.
- Requiring colleges and universities to develop a plan to assist homeless and foster youth to access housing resources during and between academic terms.