



**First Focus Campaign for Children
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Statement for the Record**

**Senate Committee On Appropriations Subcommittee On Transportation,
Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Subcommittee**

**Hearing to Review U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Efforts to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness**

April 29, 2015

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Reed, and Members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.

First Focus Campaign for Children is a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. Our organization is committed to ensuring that all of our nation's children have equal opportunity to reach their full potential and we know that homeless children and youth in particular face many barriers to achieving success.

In the 2012-2013 school year, the Department of Education (ED) identified 1,258,182 homeless children and youth enrolled in public schools. This is the highest number on record and an 8 percent increase over the previous school year. The number of homeless children in public schools has increased 85 percent since the beginning of the recession (the 2006-2007 school year).

In addition, for the first time, school districts were required to report whether homeless students were living with their parents, or on their own. School districts identified 75,940 unaccompanied homeless youth in the 2012-2013 school year.

Most homeless students do not live in shelters. Instead, they stay in hidden, precarious situations – such as in motels, or living with others temporarily because there is nowhere else to go. This is because often there is no family or youth shelter in their community, shelters are full, or shelter policies exclude them. Rural, suburban, and small city children, youth and families face additional hurdles, because more than half of HUD-funded emergency shelter beds are located in major cities.

Many families and unaccompanied youth stay wherever they can, moving from a shelter one night, to a couch in someone else's home, to a motel, to yet another person's couch or basement floor. Yet where they lay their head does not determine their housing or service needs, for these situations are often chaotic, unstable, overcrowded, and dangerous – resulting in negative emotional and health outcomes for children and youth, as well as putting them at risk of physical and sexual abuse and trafficking.

Too often these youth are forced to engage in survival sex, meaning they trade sex for a place to stay. The Urban Institute released a report in February that reveals the frequency of survival sex for homeless LGBTQ youth in New York.

Deborah Shore testified during the hearing to seeing firsthand the dangers of couch surfing for youth. She discussed that even in the best scenario, youth have no legal rights to where they are staying, and could be kicked out at any moment.

Most federal programs – such as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and others that address domestic violence, health, education, and early childhood acknowledge the vulnerability of children and youth in these situations and recognize them as homeless.

However, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s definition of homelessness often excludes children and youth who are living in motels or with others because they have nowhere else to go. As a result, these children and youth are often ineligible for federal homeless assistance services, such as emergency shelter, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing, which are critical to helping them achieve stability.

As discussed during the hearing, in order for homeless children in families or unaccompanied youth to be considered homeless by HUD and thereby eligible to

access these services, they have to be already living in an emergency shelter, living on the street or in a car, or prove that they are at imminent risk (within 14 days) of losing their temporary residence through documentation from the motel or person that is allowing them to stay.

This is problematic for several reasons. Children and youth staying with others are vulnerable to predators, including traffickers; these criminals are unlikely to make a written or verbal statement about how long a child or youth can stay. Families and unaccompanied youth staying with others out of necessity are often breaking lease agreements by exceeding occupancy and owners or renters of this housing are unlikely to provide a statement that anyone is living there.

Brittany Dixon referenced this issue in her testimony. She realizes that she was fortunate that the renter where she was staying was willing to provide her with documentation stating that she could not stay longer much longer, and this was the only way she could eventually access the services at New Beginnings. She testified that she would have been in trouble if she were not able to access this letter.

Mobility is proven to be harmful to children and youth's development, yet current law and regulations require families and youth to move – and document their moves – in order to be eligible for assistance.

These bureaucratic rules not only cause additional trauma for homeless children and unaccompanied youth, but they are also a waste of precious homeless service dollars. Time and again, service providers such as Sasha Bruce Youthwork are forced to put families and youth into emergency shelters just in order to qualify them for services.

In addition, by not defining these homeless children and unaccompanied youth as homeless, HUD is masking the nature and level of need in communities, making it much more difficult for these communities to raise awareness and attract non-federal sources of funding. In communities where the real need is known, non-federal funders are more likely to contribute.

For example, when advocates in suburban Minnesota, Sacramento CA, and rural Wyoming used the Department of Education's definition to raise awareness about youth homelessness, local government, community foundations and others contributed funding for youth drop-in centers, housing programs and emergency shelters. The broader definition revealed the true extent of the problem and helped them raise funds for more services.

We greatly appreciate Congress's efforts so far to address the needs of homeless

children and youth and remove the eligibility and access barriers that too often prevent them from accessing critical services.

The Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2015 (S. 256), sponsored by Senator Dianne Feinstein and Senator Rob Portman would amend the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of homelessness to include unaccompanied youth and homeless families who are certified by HUD Homeless Assistance Programs or public housing authorities as lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those temporarily sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, or staying in a hotel or motel.

It would also include unaccompanied youth and families who are certified as homeless by the program director or designee under the following federal statutes: Runaway and Homeless Youth Act; Violence Against Women Act; Health Care for the Homeless Program; Education for Homeless Children and Youth program (McKinney-Vento education subtitle); Higher Education Act; Head Start Act, and Child Nutrition Act.

Therefore, the Homeless Children and Youth Act eliminates complex documentation requirements for "proving" homelessness, such as evidence of multiple moves, or length of time spent without housing. A HUD homeless service provider could make a simple determination that a family or youth in a motel, or staying temporarily with others, is eligible, or accept a referral from another federal program.

In addition to removing barriers to existing services, we agree that homeless assistance services targeted to the needs of children and youth are needed. Therefore, this legislation would also prohibit HUD from forcing communities seeking homelessness funding to prioritize single adults, even if the need in their community is greater among families and unaccompanied youth.

Local service providers are the best equipped to evaluate which homeless populations have the greatest unmet needs, and where federal homelessness resources are best targeted.

We urge that these provisions be included in FY16 Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies bill or any appropriations language.

We also applaud efforts to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and encourage passage of the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention

Act (S. 262), which would improve these programs to offer assistance and protections for runaway and homeless youth who are victims of human trafficking as well as ensure that homeless children and youth will not be denied services based on race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

We greatly appreciate the leadership of Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Reed and look forward to working with you on this and other proposals to improve the well being of America's children.