

HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH ACT (H.R. 32)



The Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2011 (H.R. 32) would align the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definition of “homeless” children with the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education. Enactment of this legislation would make all of America’s 1.6 million homeless children eligible for shelter and supportive services like meals and health care, as well as over 65,000 unaccompanied homeless youth. H.R. 32 amends HUD’s definition of homelessness by including children and youth who have been verified as homeless by personnel in any of the following federal programs: school district liaisons, Head Start programs, Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs, and early intervention programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C.

A SOBERING REALITY

Job losses and foreclosures have made it harder for many parents to meet their children’s basic needs. The recession has left more than a million American children homeless. Some live on the street, but more than 700,000 live a transient life – hotel rooms when their parents can afford it, or on a friend’s couch for a night or two, then somewhere else the next night. They may have a roof over their heads tonight, but it’s not their roof, and they never know if they’ll lose it tomorrow. In every way that matters, these kids are homeless.

BUREAUCRACY DENIES KIDS THE HELP THEY NEED

While the U.S. Department of Education recognizes that children living in these situations are homeless and need assistance, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) disagrees. HUD does not define these children as “homeless,” and its complex regulations make it impossible for most of them to qualify for HUD Homeless Assistance programs, including access to emergency or transitional shelters. Kids should not be denied a safe place to sleep, a meal, and other basic needs because government agencies cannot agree on definitions.

LOCAL LEADERS KNOW BEST HOW TO MEET THEIR NEIGHBORS’ NEEDS

HUD’s definition ties the hands of local homeless-serving agencies. The Homeless Children and Youth Act would fix this problem by aligning the definitions of “homeless” for children, making all homeless kids eligible for the help they need. The bill wouldn’t require local officials to help kids before adults – it would simply take the handcuffs off local leaders and allow them to make the best decisions they can with the resources available to them. If a homeless adult needs help first, local officials could still help that person. But if a homeless child needs help, local leaders would no longer be forced to deny it. Local agencies should be trusted to make the right decision and not have to worry about bureaucratic red tape.

PUBLIC POLICY SHOULD ALIGN WITH REALITY, NOT FANTASY

The Homeless Children and Youth Act will also make government more effective and recognize the reality of child homelessness. Government will never be able to obtain the resources needed to combat homelessness by pretending the problem is smaller than it is. Just as important, government should be in the business of solving real problems. Solving problems begins with understanding them, and that means that public policy should be based on reality, not fantasy.

The First Focus Campaign for Children is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization affiliated with First Focus, a bipartisan children’s advocacy organization. The Campaign for Children advocates directly for legislative change in Congress to ensure children and families are a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. For more information, visit www.ffcampaignforchildren.org.



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