

June 6, 2018

The Honorable Jeb Hensarling
Chair, House Financial Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Maxine Waters
Ranking Member, House Financial
Services Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
4340 O'Neill House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sean P. Duffy
Chair, Housing and Insurance Subcommittee
House Financial Services Committee
2129 Rayburn House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Emmanuel Cleaver
Ranking Member, Housing and Insurance
Subcommittee
House Financial Services Committee
2335 Rayburn House Office Building
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Hensarling, Ranking Member Waters, Subcommittee Chairman Duffy and Ranking Member Cleaver:

I am writing from First Focus Campaign for Children, a national bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions, to express our support for the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R. 1511).

As an organization dedicated to improving the well-being of our nation's children and youth, we applaud efforts to retool the federal homeless assistance system to allow local communities to more effectively meet the unique developmental needs of homeless children, youth and families.

Millions of children and families experience homelessness in the U.S. each year, and numbers continue to increase. Homelessness, even for a brief time, is extremely detrimental to a child's healthy development. The younger and longer a child experiences homelessness, the greater the cumulative toll of negative health outcomes,ⁱ and homelessness is associated with an 87% increased likelihood of dropping out of school.ⁱⁱ

Families and youth often become homeless due to traumatic experiences such as job loss, substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence. Therefore, homelessness is both a symptom and a cause of trauma for children, youth and families. Homelessness causes instability in a child's life, resulting in multiple moves and overcrowded living situations, and too often, homelessness puts children directly at-risk of physical harm and abuse.

The Department of Education identified 1.2 million homeless children and youth in public schools in the 2014-2015 school year. This is a 34 percent increase since the end of the recession in 2009. In addition, a recent study from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that 1 in 30 youth (ages 13-17) and 1 in 10 young adults (ages 18-25) experience homelessness on their own each year.ⁱⁱⁱ

Homelessness can take many different forms and often results in very fluid and unstable situations. This is because homeless families with children and youth who are on their own stay wherever they can. These situations often include run-down motels, or with others temporarily in overcrowded spaces because there is no family or youth shelter in the community, shelters are full, or shelter policies exclude them.

Chapin Hall also reports that two-thirds of the youth reported couch-surfing or other less visible forms of homelessness at some point. This is particularly true in rural communities, where the rate of youth homelessness was just as high as in urban and suburban communities. These less visible forms of homelessness mean that youth are often invisible to public systems, putting them at high risk of harm, abuse and neglect, including trafficking. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, runaway/homeless and unstable housing statuses are among the top five risk factors for human trafficking.

Public schools, including early childhood programs, recognize all the forms of homelessness that children and youth experience, but the homeless assistance system administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) does not. Its eligibility criteria exclude some of the most vulnerable homeless children and youth from accessing the programs and services that they need. This keeps many children, families and youth invisible to public systems, and excluded from policy decision-making.

In addition, communities are often barred from serving homeless children, youth and families in a way that is responsive to their unique developmental needs. This includes interventions that couple services for children and parents with housing assistance. Early care and learning, adult education, employment assistance, and mental health services must go hand-in-hand with housing if families are to stay housed, and children are to recover from the trauma and disruption of homelessness.

The bipartisan Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2017, led by Congressman Steve Stivers, would remove barriers that communities face in addressing family, child and youth homelessness and give them the flexibility to tailor homeless assistance interventions based on the unique needs of their homeless population.^{iv} Communities would have the discretion to target services based on local assessment of need, and serve the most vulnerable homeless children, youth and families, despite what form of homelessness they are experiencing.

This would increase visibility and awareness of child, youth, young adult and family homelessness through increased data transparency, more accurate counts, and collaboration with early childhood programs, institutions of higher education, and local educational agencies, thus helping communities to leverage and attract more public and private resources to address homelessness.

In order to truly reduce family homelessness in the U.S., we must acknowledge that family and youth homelessness is a complex problem that takes many forms. Without a holistic solution, families will find themselves unable to maintain stable housing and find themselves homeless once again, thereby generating future cycles of family homelessness and poverty for the foreseeable future.

We appreciate your leadership in considering this important legislation and look forward to continuing to work together to improve the well-being of America's families and children.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley
President

XC: Members of the House Financial Services Committee

ⁱ Sandel, Megan, Sheward, Richard and Sturtevant, Lisa, *Compounding Stress: The Timing and Duration Effects of Homelessness on Children's Health*, INSIGHTS from Housing Policy Research, Center for Housing Policy and Children's HealthWatch, June 2015, available at: <https://www.issueclab.org/resources/21731/21731.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Ingram, Erin S., Bridgeland, John M., Reed, Bruce and Atwell, Matthew, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools*, Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates, June 13, 2016, available at: <http://www.americaspromise.org/report/hidden-plain-sight>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, available at: <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>.

^{iv} First Focus Campaign for Children, "Take Action on the Homeless Children and Youth Act 2017," <https://campaignforchildren.org/take-action/>.