



Covenant House Washington

Testimony before the Committee on Human Services – Bill 19-87, The “Homeless Services Reform Amendment Act of 2011”

Good morning Chairman Graham and Members of the Committee. My name is Dan Brannen and I serve as the Executive Director of Covenant House Washington. Covenant House Washington is part of Covenant House International and we are one of 21 sites throughout the Americas. I am here this morning representing Covenant House as well as the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates as one of its member agencies.

I am here today to support the passage of the “Homeless Services Reform Amendment Act of 2011.” Specifically, as a provider of comprehensive services to homeless, runaway and disconnected young people, ensuring that proper representation and focus be given to the youth and young adult population within the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH), is key. As someone who has spent nearly a quarter of a century serving homeless, runaway, abused and neglected teens and young adults, strategies and programming for this specific group of vulnerable American citizens can be quite different from that which is necessary to realize positive outcomes for older Americans who find themselves homeless or in dire life situations.

Over the past decade, much research has been done regarding human development, especially in the areas of the socio-psychological development of teens and young adults as well as the brain development of older teenagers and young adults. Understanding that teenagers and young adults are still transitioning into adulthood, possibly the most tumultuous stage of human development as an individual grows from pure dependence on caregivers to a life of interdependence with a positive network of caring individuals, is critical in devising strategies that will have the greatest opportunity of success. Thus, as findings have born out, supporting young people during their transition into adulthood is essential: not only to realize positive life outcomes for each individual, but to ensure a healthy and thriving society for us all.

Strategies to be employed should fall within the framework of “*positive youth development*”: family stability support, educational support, employment (hard and soft skill) support, a positive peer culture, physical and mental health support, and life skill development (from learning how to do laundry to managing your financial resources). These are all areas which teens and young adults don’t do so well without proper guidance. Moreover, these areas of focus are paramount to developing a young person into a successful adult; thus, avoiding the nightmarish prospect of becoming homeless.

The American Lung association has a saying regarding Asthma, “If you cannot breathe, then nothing else matters.” And for homeless young people, if they do not have a place to live, then nothing else matters...not their education, not their health, not having a job and supporting a livelihood, nothing. While this is true for older adults as well, it is especially true for young people who are trying to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. And for those who struggle mightily amongst us, our homeless and runaway youth, collective adult support is even more necessary in order to ensure their welfare for years to come.

Clearly, an early intervention strategy (that of focusing on struggling young people) will show more success in preventing an adult life of struggle, intermittent acute homelessness and, possibly, even chronic adult homelessness. If we focus more (and pay more) now, then our investment should see a several-fold increase, at least in economic terms, for our next generation of adults who had struggled as children.

To this end, by having representation from youth/young adult serving organizations as part of the ICH membership and by having a strategic focus in the area of positive youth development for these disconnected young people, I am confident that we will move further along in our quest to mitigate and end homelessness here in the District; not just for young people, but for older adults as well.

I would like to thank Chairman Graham and Committee members for this opportunity to testify today and for your continued vigilance and courage to ensure that we support those amongst us who have the greatest need for our assistance.

Thank you.