

Summit Raised Voices of Youth Experiencing Homelessness and Built New Powerful Allies

Sharing a “Zoom room” with two dozen of her peers – teens and youth all with personal stories of homelessness and life in a shelter – Isabel’s trembling but confident voice carried a sentiment common to all. “It’s so important to be heard, to be connected,” she said. “That is a great feeling to have.”

The Livingston County teen had just made a pitch for more funding to ensure that other runaway and homeless youth in Michigan have a place to stay, and a program to help them be safe while transitioning to the next step in their lives, like she did at The Connection, a youth services program of the Livingston County Family Services. It was significant that her audience included two Michigan lawmakers who would vow to continue the conversation, pledging to personally take a deeper dive into the plight of Michigan youth like Isabel.

Her comments and others were raised during an intensive Virtual Youth Summit sponsored by the [Michigan Network for Youth and Families](#) with support from Michigan’s Children over three weeks in August. Youth participants were briefed on how public policies are made, and coached on how to effectively tell their story to spur change. Besides young people from The Connection were participants from [Traverse Place for Youth](#) in Genesee County. Among their guides were state Representatives Ann Bollin, a Republican and long-time municipal leader from Brighton, and Sheryl Kennedy, a Democrat and former school principal from Genesee County.

Both lawmakers said the youths’ stories were moving and powerful.

“I was inspired by their courage and perseverance. It certainly gave me an awareness of the importance of homeless shelters ... not just as a place to shower and get a meal but to serve as a place of transition,” Bollin said.

As a member of the House’s powerful appropriations committee, she promised to pore through the state budget to study the level of resources targeted for shelters and transitional programs, and schedule an in-person visit to the Livingston County shelter in the near future. “I want the youth to know that they can count on other people and that they can have an impact,” Bollin added.

“The plight of homeless youth is near and dear to my heart as a former foster mom and school administrator,” Kennedy said after the event. “The big take-away for me is the exponential need for real mental health and social work support in schools as well as opportunities for youth and young adults to live outside of a home that is unsafe for them, without being labeled as a criminal, runaway or troublemaker.”

The number of youth experiencing homelessness in Michigan is significant. Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which defines homelessness as all children lacking a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence, the number of school-age children experiencing homelessness in Michigan grew to 34,000 – representing 14 percent of students in K-12 schools - in the 2017-2018 school year. The MNYF counted [3,265 homeless and at-risk clients](#) during 2016 among its 21 organizations that year.

During the summit, the youth raised a variety of issues and concerns that can negatively or positively impact how young people emerge from homelessness, including the lack of shelter and housing along with access to community services.

When home is not a safe place, young people need somewhere to turn where they can get the academic help, mental health, and their social-emotional needs met, said Alec from Genesee County. Those who have experienced homelessness, or are at risk of it, need emotional support to build up their self-esteem, find strategies to move out of unhealthy relationships, and achieve their goals, others said. Shelters and transitional housing with trained staff can provide that assistance. But places like The Connection and Traverse Place are few and far between and are chronically under-resourced. Angela Parth, executive director of the Livingston Family Center, said they could assist more young people if they had additional resources, citing last month a reduction in transitional beds from eight down to merely three. Their center offers transitional housing in host homes and apartments for youth 16-21 years old, and temporary housing for runaway and homeless youth who are 11-17 years old.

Another critical resource for young people at risk or experiencing homelessness is school, they said. Schools where students spend a large part of their day and where adults are already primed to connect with youth are likely connectors for kids in trouble so long as their worries can be shared from teachers to administrators who are empowered and engaged in finding solutions, too. Students suggested that schools are a lifeline for kids; school administrators should make a concerted effort at school assemblies and through other communication channels to communicate how youths can access community resources that can help them.

Mariah, a youth who found help at Traverse Place, added that community supports either don't exist or youths aren't aware of them. For that reason, she started a support group herself and is looking to grow it by adding teachers and other young people. "How can we have groups like this so that I am not responsible?" she asked.

Kennedy told the youth she was committed to increasing the number of school counselors and navigators in the state to help students today and as they plan their futures beyond graduation. She has also championed efforts to strengthen the role of schools in providing students with integrated community-based "wraparound services." From her own personal, family experience, she said she knows young people need continued guidance into their early-to-mid-20s before they can become fully independent. She encouraged them to continue sharing their story with decision-makers. "Get someone to see the world through your eyes and help them change the way they see the problem. The best asset is your story because it is compelling and real."

Bollin said afterward she was keen on looking at successful models like The Connection to ensure resources are dedicated to them, and learning where resources are available but not accessed. On another issue, she promised the youth she wanted to explore the cost of adoptions after hearing from one teen who said he lost the chance to be adopted because of it. She suggested the possibility of making tax deductions a stronger incentive for adoption. "I'm inspired," she told the young people.

"All in all, it was an amazing experience," Kennedy said. "All legislators need to walk in these kids' shoes for a day to see the challenges they face."

The Michigan Network for Youth and Families is a 501.c3 nonprofit membership organization providing training, technical assistance and advocacy for and on behalf of 19-member organizations service Homeless and Runaway Youth in Michigan.