

Agencies Serving At-Risk Youth Seek Greater State Support to Battle Homelessness

March 4, 2021 - Nearly one-third of Michigan's counties – 23 counties of 83 - do not have safe shelters and crisis intervention for runaway and homeless youth. This puts already vulnerable teens in harm's way on the streets and susceptible to threats including human trafficking and preventing the reunification of families who are suffering from a moment of crisis that can be overcome.

That dearth in services in communities across the state, in rural and urban areas, was addressed by members of the [Michigan Network for Youth and Families](#) (MNYF) at its [Dome Day](#) advocacy event, bringing service providers and the youth and families who benefit from them before state lawmakers to share their stories and urge support. This year, MNYF is making a case for \$6 million in new state funding to ensure programs can expand to every underserved area. [Michigan's Children is recommending](#) that lawmakers approve the request in the state budget starting Oct. 1, 2021.

Michigan's service gap is not unlike what's reflected in national statistics. Across the country, nearly 500,000 young people experience homelessness, yet only 4,000 shelter beds are available nationwide, providers said. Eighteen MNYF-member agencies serve areas of the state (with one additional agency providing services) today, but at its peak there were 25, said MNYF officers.

Stagnant state funding over two decades caused more than a handful to close, leaving areas without any coverage and young people hours away from the nearest shelter. MNYF's funding 'ask' follows a modest \$500,000 increase three years ago that helped expand serve to four counties; another \$300,000 one-time increase was appropriated last year.

"We're asking to expand services to all of Michigan, so that no matter where someone comes from they are able to access these high-quality services," said MNYF President Ben Moe, who runs Do'chas 11, serving at-risk youth and their families in Jackson. "If you're a legislator or staff member, reach across the aisle and work with your colleagues to continue runaway homeless youth services in Michigan."

Youth who spoke to the online audience attested to feelings of relief after finding shelter and agency support. They talked about their successes - attending college classes, preparing to move into their first apartment – and the positive changes that happened in their lives after making a connection. Moe said students they serve as likely to stay in school and graduate on time.

MNYF programs connect youth with school staff funded by the federal McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act to work with them in school and connect them with school and community supports. Jacquie, who left home because her family objected to her sexual orientation, didn't know she qualified for help with post-secondary schooling until she was contacted by a liaison working in her high school. Today, she has been accepted to attend Western Michigan University. "I didn't know I had the intelligence or confidence to do this," she said.



Miraha, 19 and a mother of a 4 month old, pleaded with lawmakers to help other youths in unserved areas of Michigan find the same help she received to remain with her young child. She's been attending The Connection Youth Services in Howell off and on since she was 16 and on probation. In recovery from substance abuse issues, she said she benefited from Connection's life skill classes and drop-in center after school. The center provides youth with basic needs (food, hygiene products and clothes) at no cost to themselves, she added. "Thankfully, it was walking distance from downtown and my school," she said. "A lot of people deserve this and I know it helped me a lot."

Today, Miraha has a stable place to live and that's an important outcome in the work they do, Moe said. "Ninety-three percent exit our program to a stable placement. That's a huge success," he said.

Nationally, half of youth who run away or are homeless say they left because of conflicts at home that threaten their personal safety, said Amy West, a youth and family therapist for The Connection Youth Services in Livingston County. A quarter of young people from foster care become homeless two to four years after leaving the system. In some cases, the entire family is homeless. Homelessness affects African-American, Hispanic and youth who identify as LGBQ in significantly greater numbers than white peers. African-American youth have an 88 percent higher risk and Hispanic youth have a 33 percent higher risk for experiencing homelessness. The risk to youth who identify as LGBQ is a staggering 130 percent.

Youth who become homeless are usually running away from troubling and sometimes dangerous circumstances, in contrast to the "bad kid" stereotype that often and wrongly tagged to runaway and homeless youths, West said. Extreme family conflicts, parents battling substance misuse or mental health issues, a history of childhood abuse or neglect, trauma or failed adoptions are among reasons youths end up on the street, West said. "Most often, they are not running to something but from something," she said. "Youths who leave home or have no home are young people with hopes and big dreams; they are smart, caring, fun and resilient. They want to be successful and live fulfilling lives."

Growing up, Jasmine's family got help through The Connection and when she was 12, she attended classes there to manage her own anger. Her relationship with her mother was rocky, and when Jasmine was kicked out of the house, she reached out to The Connection for a place to stay from age 15 to 17. "They (the agency) helped me realize a lot was out of my control, that I wasn't just a troubled teen, but I had potential. They helped me with rides to school so that I could continue to go to school," Jasmine said. At 18, she went to live with a host family and her couch-surfing days were over. "I've become a better person with so much more understanding."

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services partners with private nonprofit providers for runaway and homeless youth and their families in Michigan. As a network, MNYF last year, reported that 93 percent of young people discharged from a shelter exited to safe housing; 82 percent found permanent housing destinations; and 88 percent of youth served by programs enrolled in an educational or vocational program.