

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/bipartisan-bill-is-critical-to-caring-for-youth-and-families-in-crisis>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In late January, the [Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act \(S.262\)](#) was reintroduced in the Senate to reauthorize the [Runaway and Homeless Youth Act \(RHYA\)](#), which expired in 2013. The first attempt to reauthorize RHYA failed last July. RHYA is the main federal safeguard for more than 1.7 million children nationwide by the [most recent estimate](#) who run away from home, are neglected and forced to leave their homes, are subjected to human trafficking, or exit the child welfare or juvenile justice system without a support system. Many of these children, however, are not considered eligible for critical services due to the limited definition of human trafficking under RHYA's current stipulation. The proposed bill would expand that eligibility to include youth facing labor exploitation, in addition to those facing sex trafficking who are already eligible. It would also reauthorize federal funding for three community-based programs that connect youth to vital services through [street outreach](#), provide [temporary housing](#) with crisis intervention and family counseling, and offer longer-term [transitional housing](#) with access to healthcare, education, and job training. Here are some important highlights from the proposed bill:

Both chambers of Congress have seen similar legislative action of late. On January 27, 2015, the same day as S.262 was reintroduced, the [Homeless Children and Youth Act](#) was reintroduced in the Senate. It aims to extend coverage of federal homeless assistance programs to children living with traffickers or in other vulnerable situations. Just a day earlier, the House of Representatives passed the [Enhancing Services for Runaway and Homeless Victims of Youth Trafficking Act of 2015](#), which calls for some of the updates proposed in S.262. Earlier this month, the president's proposed budget for the 2016 fiscal year included increased funding for RHYA for the first time in his six years in office. Despite this national attention on providing support and services to runaway youth, 39 states still consider running away a status offense and use punitive measures such as court referral and out-of-home placement as responses. Vera's [Status Offense Reform Center](#) provides practitioners and policymakers with a [toolkit](#) to help communities transform their response to status offenses from a juvenile justice orientation to one that is community based. Vera's [research brief](#) on running away explains why this issue is so important. Given the promising legislative environment in which it has been reintroduced, Vera believes that S.262's holistic approach of providing trauma-informed services for runaway, homeless, and trafficked children and their families is a critical step in the process of responsibly caring for youth and families in crisis across the nation.

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