



## **SchoolHouse Connection Supports HB 2544 to Increase Housing Supports for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth**

March 1, 2021

Chair Williams, Vice-Chair Leif, Vice-Chair Ruiz, and Members of the Committee,

SchoolHouse Connection is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to overcoming homelessness through education. Currently, we are working on legislation to help youth experiencing homelessness in over a dozen state legislatures around the country. We are experts in the public policies necessary to help youth experiencing homelessness access safe and appropriate services and find stable housing to end their homelessness permanently.

**SchoolHouse Connection strongly supports HB 2544**, to provide funding for host home programs. I have worked with host home programs across the country for a decade, including Oregon's Second Home program. I have written two publications on host homes, chronicling their successful outcomes in providing stable housing and supporting education and employment, particularly to high school students. In my lengthy experience, host homes provide safe, stable housing and mentorship, helping students meet their educational, professional, and life goals.

Host homes provide housing and mentorship to unaccompanied homeless youth, who lack stable housing and are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. The federal McKinney-Vento Act has required schools to identify, enroll, and serve these youth for decades. Unaccompanied homeless youth have no parental support to meet their most basic needs, including food, shelter, and clothing. They are homeless on their own for various reasons primarily related to poverty and family dysfunction, striving to survive in unsafe or unstable housing. They live in a variety of temporary and inadequate situations, including shelters, the homes of others, cars, campgrounds, public parks, abandoned buildings, motels, and bus or train stations.<sup>i</sup>

"In their efforts to meet their basic needs for safety, food, and shelter, many youth become involved in high risk behaviors resulting in criminal charges and victimization through sex trafficking and violence."<sup>ii</sup> When unaccompanied homeless youth cannot access safe shelter and housing services, they are extremely vulnerable to victimization. Without these services:

- 70% of homeless youth report experiencing some form of violence, 32% of which includes sexual assault.<sup>iii</sup>
- 40% of homeless youth are victims of sex trafficking at least once in a single year.<sup>iv</sup>
- In a recent study, 50% of homeless youth reported prescription drug misuse.<sup>v</sup> Homeless youth often turn to substances as a coping mechanism when they cannot access appropriate support services.
- Homeless youth are 7.2 times more likely to attempt suicide than their housed peers.<sup>vi</sup>

Host homes provide safe, positive services to youth who otherwise would be easy prey to sex and labor traffickers. They are widely accepted as efficient, effective housing options that give youth agency and prepare them for independence. In my years of experience with host homes in Arizona, California, Florida, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington, I have never known a program to have to go through licensing with the state child welfare department. Typically, unaccompanied youth will not voluntarily participate in any program affiliated with the child welfare system, as they fear losing their autonomy and triggering consequences for their parents and their siblings.<sup>vii</sup>

Unaccompanied youth are best served by programs that can respond quickly and flexibly to their individual needs. One-size-fits-all approaches to housing and services have not proven successful. We know that youth have very different needs depending on a variety of factors such as age, family history, length of time in a homeless situation, mental health and substance abuse needs, connection with school, etc. Those very different needs require very different programs and services, with very different approaches. The host home model in particular is able to meet the individual needs of youth in partnership with them, respecting their autonomy while providing them with developmentally-appropriate supports.

For unaccompanied homeless youth in particular, an overly structured framework for services doesn't work. If a program starts to look and feel like a child welfare program or overly structured, many youth will shy away, driven into the hands of traffickers and the dangers of the streets. I am aware of two states, Maryland and Washington<sup>viii</sup>, that require host homes to register with the state. This is not a licensing process and does not impede upon the programs' operation or service model. Incidentally, Oregon's state law allowing youth to sign leases has been a model for other states, including Missouri, Wyoming, and Montana.<sup>ix</sup> In fact, Montana's law passed both chambers of the state legislature unanimously last month and currently awaits the governor's signature.

HB 2544 will create more safe and successful housing options for youth, preventing victimization, trauma, and even death. It will fund a proven model with outstanding outcomes to help youth graduate high school, continue to post-secondary education, find employment, and end their homelessness. When homeless youth cannot receive legitimate services, we lose the opportunity to keep them safe, help end their homelessness, and support their families. **For these reasons, SchoolHouse**

**Connection strongly supports HB 2544.** I am happy to respond to any questions or concerns.

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<sup>i</sup> The legal rights of unaccompanied youth are recognized by several laws, including the McKinney-Vento Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Higher Education Act, and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://attorneygeneral.utah.gov/advocating-for-homeless-youth/>

<sup>iii</sup> Kipke, et al. (1997). "Street youth, their peer group affiliation and differences according to residential status, subsistence patterns, and use of services." *Adolescence*, 32(127): 655-669.

<sup>iv</sup> University of Louisville (2016). *Youth Experiences Survey*.

<sup>v</sup> Harmony Rhoades (2014). *Prescription drug misuse among homeless youth*.

<sup>vi</sup> SchoolHouse Connection (2018). *Risk and Resilience: Differences in Risk Factors and Health Outcomes Between Homeless and Non-Homeless Students in 2017 YRBS Data*. Available at <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/risk-and-resilience-differences-in-risk-factors-and-health-outcomes-between-homeless-and-non-homeless-students-in-2017-yrbs-data/>.

<sup>vii</sup> I personally have conducted large-scale surveys of homeless youth and youth service providers in NJ, ME, NC, TN, CA, TX, ND, KY, LA, and WY. Fear of referral to foster care or child welfare, coupled with the inability to access services without parental consent, were the number one and two barriers to services cited by and for youth under 18 in every community.

The Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice found similar results from a survey of service providers in that state: Nearly 85% of the providers agreed that fear of being reported to the state prevents youth from coming forward to access needed services.

<sup>viii</sup> Maryland [SB 207](#) (2020) and Washington [RCW 24.03.550](#).

<sup>ix</sup> Missouri [Rev Stat §431.056](#) (2000), amended by [HB 1414](#) (2021); Wyoming [HB 159](#) (2017); Montana [SB 17](#) (2021). Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act regulations also allow youth to enter federally-funded shelter programs without parental notification or consent if the provider determines contacting a parent or guardian is not in the youth's best interest, the provider is unable to locate a parent or guardian, or the youth refuses to disclose a parent's or guardian's contact information.<sup>ix</sup>