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Oregon's Runaway and Homeless Youth:

An Overview and Strategic Framework

**Oregon Department of Human Services
Homeless Youth Advisory Committee**

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Call to Action

A letter from Oregon's Homeless Youth Advisory Committee

Each year, thousands of youth across Oregon are homeless and unaccompanied, struggling to survive without a safe, stable place to live. Youth homelessness is a significant problem in urban, suburban, and rural parts of the state, but the issue remains largely below the radar of public concern or legislative action.

This report provides a stark picture of Oregon's homeless youth population and the gaps in information, resources, capacity, and political will that have contributed to this growing crisis. As members of Oregon's Homeless Youth Advisory Committee, we urge our state leaders to view this report as a call to action.

We believe that all young people should have safe and stable places to stay, the services and supports they need to thrive, and opportunities to reach their full potential. To achieve this vision, Oregon needs a statewide response to youth homelessness that is guided by the following principles:

- Every Oregon community should have access to services and supports that ensure the well-being of every youth and family.
- We can help to prevent youth homelessness by working to stabilize, strengthen, and support families.
- When any youth becomes homeless, we should intervene quickly to promote family reunification when it is safe and appropriate.
- We should get homeless youth off the streets and move them towards stability by providing housing, supportive services, and fostering relationship building and community connections.
- Services and interventions should be designed to end youths' homelessness, not simply manage their homelessness.
- Services should be family and youth-centered, culturally-responsive, flexible, and tailored to meet the strengths and developmental needs of youth and their families.
- The systems that come into contact with homeless and at-risk youth should collaborate, coordinate, and align their services with the goal of most effectively meeting the needs of youth and their families.
- Public schools should have the capacity and tools to identify, engage, and support at-risk and homeless youth and their families.

Recommendations

To achieve this vision, we are calling for significant changes to the state's runaway and homeless youth systems, policies, and resources. Our recommendations are outlined below, organized by topic area.

State System

- Prioritize ending youth homelessness in Oregon as a state responsibility.
- Create a state Office of Runaway and Homeless Youth that is responsible and accountable for meeting the needs of runaway and homeless youth, ages 12-24 throughout Oregon, and that has the resources and authority to provide leadership on this issue.
- Ensure that every Oregon county has a designated local agency or collaborative that is responsible and accountable for the well-being of runaway and homeless youth in that county.
- Create a multi-agency coordinating council with accountability for strengthening coordination and alignment among all state agencies that come into contact with homeless youth, including Oregon Department of Education (ODE), Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), Oregon Youth Authority (OYA), Youth Development Council (YDC), and Oregon Health Authority (OHA).

- Develop a statewide framework of shared goals and best practices aligned with the federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness.
- Provide resources to support the development and implementation of local plans that are tailored to reflect each community's unique needs, capacities, and circumstances within a coordinated statewide framework of core services and strategies.

Resources

- Significantly increase the state's resource allocation to runaway and homeless youth services, starting with the 2017-19 biennium.
- Allocate additional state funding to support a baseline of services in every part of the state in a way that is stable and predictable.
- Work with local and state partners to align and leverage additional public, private, and philanthropic resources to support the development of an effective statewide continuum of services.
- Structure state funding so that it supports communities' ability to define their own priorities and collaborative approaches within a coordinated statewide framework of core services and strategies. Minimize the administrative burdens of applying for and administering the funding.
- Create a funding mechanism that enables runaway and homeless youth to be served in the settings and systems that will best meet their needs. Reimburse runaway and homeless youth shelters and transitional housing for caring for youth who are better served in those settings than in foster care, juvenile justice, or other systems.

Policy and System Changes

- Expand the state definition of homeless youth to include youth through age 24.
- Mandate effective discharge and transition planning from child welfare, juvenile justice, hospitals, and other institutions to ensure that youth aren't discharged into homelessness. Monitor and evaluate the outcomes of youth transitions from institutional care to ensure accountability.
- Work with ODE to increase the resources and capacity of schools to provide early intervention and connect homeless youth to services. This includes increased counselor, staff, and teacher training, increased district liaison FTE, and better connections and partnerships with community organizations.
- Make it easier to create host homes and to allow people willing to take in a homeless youth on a temporary basis to do so while ensuring youth safety. Provide host training, support, and safety standards.
- Provide greater voice and rights to youth by making the systems that interface with them (e.g. child welfare, juvenile justice, etc.) more youth-centered.
- Use an equity lens to frame the state's runaway and homeless youth investments and strategies. This includes working to ensure that services are culturally responsive and culturally appropriate, and that communities of color, including Tribes, play an active role in leadership, planning, and service provision for homeless youth.
- Incorporate runaway and homeless youth transitional housing and congregate care as options for DHS youth who would be better served by these options than by foster care.
- Address legal barriers to make it easier for youth to access identification, driver's licenses, healthcare, Oregon Health Plan, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, and other essential supports.
- Create more flexible custody options for unaccompanied homeless youth, such as a mechanism for youth to transfer temporary guardianship to a service provider or other trusted adult, an easier process for youth emancipation, and a formal process for parents to temporarily transfer custody rights to third parties.
- Create an income source to help unaccompanied youth with no other resources to pay for their basic needs.

Data and Information

- Work with schools, 211, Continuums of Care, and other partners to create effective systems to connect youth in crisis with information about available services. This includes improved marketing and dissemination of existing sources of information such as 211's mobile app.
- Use shared data systems to support information sharing, collaboration, and data tracking across all agencies and systems that interface with runaway and homeless youth. Work collaboratively to address logistical and legal barriers to data sharing.
- Strengthen statewide data collection on the numbers, demographics, characteristics, and needs of runaway and homeless youth as well as the trajectories that lead to youth homelessness, and the critical junctures where interventions are needed. Use the data to inform service planning and resource allocation.
- Create coordinated outcome measures and data collection protocols to track success in addressing youth homelessness.
- Create and maintain a comprehensive statewide inventory of the federal, state, and local public and private resources going to runaway and homeless youth services to identify and track opportunities and gaps.

We look forward to working with state leaders and community partners to advance these recommendations. We are confident that implementing these changes will have a significant impact on the prevention and reduction of youth homelessness in Oregon.

Sincerely,

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Introduction

The 2015 Legislature directed the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) to appoint a cross-system advisory group to coordinate statewide policy and planning for addressing the needs of runaway and homeless youth. The Oregon Homeless Youth Advisory Committee (HYAC) represents leaders from state and local government agencies and nonprofit organizations in communities across the state. With staff support from DHS's Office of Child Welfare Programs, the HYAC is spearheading the development of a strategic framework and action plan for ending youth homelessness in Oregon.

As background and context for this work, this report provides a synthesis of existing data and research on homeless youth in Oregon and nationally. It highlights the causes and characteristics of youth homelessness and best practices for services and interventions. It also summarizes input gathered through a series of focus groups and interviews conducted with youth and service providers across the state about the gaps in Oregon's homeless youth strategies and potential solutions.

Definitions of Homeless Youth

Thousands of youth across Oregon are homeless and living without the support of a parent or guardian. One of the challenges in understanding the scope of this issue is the wide variation in definitions used to frame this population. For example:

- The federal **Runaway and Homeless Youth Act** defines homeless youth as "individuals under age 18 who are unable to live in a safe environment with a relative and lack safe alternative living arrangements, as well as individuals ages 18 to 21 without shelter".
- The federal **Department of Housing and Urban Development** defines homeless youth as persons under age 25 who are not accompanied by a parent or guardian and are sleeping in emergency shelter or transitional housing for the homeless or in a place not intended for human habitation.
- The federal **McKinney-Vento Act – Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program** defines youth as homeless if they "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," including sharing housing (often referred to as doubling up), couch surfing, or living in trailer parks, campgrounds, or substandard housing due to lack of alternative accommodations. McKinney-Vento defines unaccompanied youth as youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, while accompanied youth are those experiencing homelessness with a parent or guardian.
- **Oregon's Revised Statute 417.799** defines runaway and homeless youth as children who are 0 through 17 years of age and youth who are 18 through 20 years of age.

The lack of consistent definitions makes it difficult to get a comprehensive understanding of the scope of youth homelessness in Oregon, develop coordinated policies, or track outcomes and trends.

For the purposes of this paper, we use the term "homeless youth" to refer to youth ages 12 to 24 who are living on their own without a parent or guardian, and who lack safe, stable housing. This includes:

- Youth who are living on the streets or other places not intended for human habitation, shelters or transitional housing for the homeless, or are doubled up or couch surfing.
- Runaway youth who have left their homes or alternative care placements and have little or no connection with their families or caretakers.
- Youth who have been pushed out of their homes or abandoned by their parents or caretakers.

Oregon's Homeless Youth

Comprehensive data on Oregon's homeless youth are not available, making it impossible to provide an in-depth, detailed analysis of the state's homeless youth population. This section draws upon the available state-level data as well as national research to draw an overall picture of Oregon's homeless youth population.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

Although the characteristics and experiences of Oregon's homeless youth are diverse, there are a number of common pathways that lead to youth homelessness:

- Runaway youth typically leave home in response to physical and/or sexual abuse, violence, neglect, addiction of a family member, family conflict, and/or poverty.
- Abandoned youth may be thrown out by families who reject their sexual orientation, gender identity, substance use, mental illness, behavior, and/or pregnancy, or abandoned by parents who are deported, incarcerated, or struggling with their own addictions or mental illness.
- Youth with a history of systems involvement may become homeless upon release from residential treatment, the juvenile justice system, or the mental health system.
- Youth with a history of foster care are disproportionately likely to become homeless, either after running away from a foster care placement or upon aging out of the child welfare system.
- Youth in homeless families can become separated from their parents due to shelter restrictions, parents' efforts to protect youth from the streets, or older youth's efforts to reduce the family's economic burdens.
- Older youth who are living independently can become homeless due to inadequate income or a lack of affordable housing options.
- Pregnant youth may be kicked out by their parents, and for parenting youth already living independently, the economic and logistical challenges of taking care of a child can lead to homelessness.

Characteristics and Needs

Homeless youth have unique characteristics and needs that distinguish them from homeless adults and families and require tailored services and strategies:

- Youth are still developing and need to have developmentally appropriate services and supports.
- Youth often enter into homelessness before completing their education, and with little or no work experience.
- Youth typically lack independent living skills such as money management and housekeeping, and they lack experience interfacing with landlords, government agencies, and other institutions.
- Youth on the streets are at risk of victimization from adults, sexual predators, and human traffickers.
- Youth under age 18 are often afraid to seek out assistance because they fear being reported to the authorities, sent to foster care, or forced to return home.
- Youth under age 18 may have the opportunity to resolve their homelessness through family reunification, but this process can be complex and may require ongoing support.
- Youth under age 18 can have difficulty accessing critical services such as health care, as well as essential documents such as identification and driver's licenses, without parental consent.
- A disproportionately high percentage of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.¹

Numbers of Homeless Youth in Oregon

Estimating the size of Oregon's homeless youth population is difficult because there is no coordinated or consistent data collection or reporting system. The data that do exist focus on a limited portion of the population, and many of the data sources are undercounts. We also don't know how much overlap there is between the youth counted by the different sources.

Available data

- **Oregon Department of Education:** School districts in Oregon counted 3,232 unaccompanied homeless students during the 2014-15 school year. This is an unduplicated count.
Limitations: These data only include youth who are enrolled in school at some point during the school year. Many homeless youth do not attend school, but we have no data to indicate what portion of homeless youth this represents. Homeless youth who do attend school often hide their situation from school staff. Schools have limited staff capacity to identify and track homeless students, so data collection can be inconsistent or incomplete.
- **Oregon Housing and Community Services:** During the January 2015 Point-in-Time count, communities across Oregon counted 1,280 unaccompanied youth plus 135 parenting youth (with 157 children), for a total of 1,572 homeless youth. Two-thirds (69%) of the youth were ages 18-24, with 31% younger than 18.
Limitations: The Point-in-Time count only captures data on a single night; far more youth are homeless over the course of a year. The count doesn't include youth who are doubled up or couch surfing. Many youth try to avoid being counted and will hide from enumerators or lie about their age or homeless status out of fear of being reported to authorities or forced to return home.
- **Oregon Department of Human Services – Runaway and Homeless Youth Contracted Programs:** During the 2013-15 biennium, 14 agencies receiving state funding through DHS for contracted programs provided services to approximately 2,700 youth.
Limitations: These figures are not unduplicated counts of individual youth; they are counts of numbers of youth served by contracted programs. Many more agencies provide homeless youth services across the state than receive state funding, and many homeless youth are not being served by any homeless youth programs.
- **Juvenile Justice Information System (JJIS):** 1,706 unduplicated youth under age 18 in Oregon were referred to county juvenile justice agencies for being runaways in 2015.
Limitations: Juvenile justice system referrals are categorized in JJIS by the most serious charge, so runaways referred for more serious offenses would not be included in this figure. In addition, not all counties enter data into JJIS on dependency status offenses.
- **Oregon Alliance of Children's Programs (OACP):** The OACP's membership includes ten organizations with programs for unaccompanied runaway and homeless youth. In 2014-15, runaway and homeless youth were served 12,529 times by these programs. The majority of these youth were under age 18.
Limitations: These figures are not unduplicated counts of individual youth; youth served by more than one program may be counted more than once. These ten organizations only represent a portion of the homeless youth programs across the state, and many homeless youth are not being served by any homeless youth programs.

Order-of-magnitude estimates

We can apply findings from national research studies to the available Oregon data to create order-of-magnitude estimates of the overall size of the state's homeless youth population. However, it is important to remember that these are only rough, ballpark estimates intended to give a sense of the potential magnitude of the problem.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) uses the available research to estimate that there are approximately 550,000 unaccompanied youth up to age 24 in the United States each year who experience a homelessness episode of longer than one week.² A comparison of the NAEH estimate to the national January 2015 Point-in-Time count figure for unaccompanied youth of 46,808³ indicates that only about 9% of youth who are homeless over the course of a year are captured by the Point-in-Time count data. If we apply this estimate to Oregon's Point-in-Time count data, we get a ballpark annual estimate of 17,466 homeless youth in Oregon.

Similarly, NAEH reports that only 50,000 youth per year are served by homeless youth programs.⁴ This ratio suggests that only 9% of homeless youth access available services. If we apply this ratio to the available data on the number of youth accessing state-funded homeless youth programs in Oregon, we can generate a ballpark estimate that up to 30,000 youth may be homeless over the course of a two-year period in Oregon. However, not all homeless youth programs in the state receive state funding, and the figure for the number of youth served by state programs is not an unduplicated number, so this estimate should be regarded as extremely rough.

Geography of Youth Homelessness in Oregon

The lack of comprehensive data makes it impossible to know the exact geography of youth homelessness in Oregon, but the limited information we do have makes it clear that there are homeless youth across the state. To illustrate, the below table shows the Oregon counties with more than 50 unaccompanied homeless students during the 2014-15 school year.

2014-15 Oregon Department of Education Data	
County	Unaccompanied Homeless Students
Clackamas	237
Deschutes	273
Jackson	297
Josephine	96
Klamath	67
Lane	543
Lincoln	69
Linn	140
Marion	240
Multnomah	525
Washington	419
Yamhill	64

These figures only capture youth who are attending school, so they are a significant undercount of the homeless youth populations in each community, but they provide an indication of the geographic distribution

of the homeless youth population. School districts with homeless youth are located in urban, suburban, and rural communities in all corners of the state. While the counties with the highest numbers of homeless students are predominately located in the western half of the state, several Eastern Oregon counties also had relatively high homeless student counts. For example, Malheur County had 32 homeless students, Baker County had 26, and Wallowa County had 21.

Homeless youth programs receiving state DHS funding are located in Deschutes, Douglas, Jackson, Josephine, Lane, Linn, Malheur, Marion, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties.

The below table shows the Oregon counties with more than 50 unaccompanied homeless youth counted on a single night during the January 2015 Point-in-Time Count:

January 2015 Point-in-Time Count Data	
County	Unaccompanied Homeless Youth
Clatsop	62
Coos	239
Deschutes	53
Jackson	59
Josephine	96
Lane	144
Multnomah	244
Washington	57
Yamhill	50

As noted earlier, these data sources only capture a portion of all homeless youth, so we know this is a significant undercount. But it gives an indication of the geographic spread of the homeless youth population across the state.

Impacts of Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness has significant short- and long-term consequences for youth themselves as well as the broader community. This section provides a brief overview of some of the impacts of youth homelessness and highlights examples of what youth homelessness costs society as a whole.

Risks to Youth

Short Term

In the short term, homeless youth are at high risk for a wide range of negative outcomes. These include:

- Interruption of education, and a disproportionately high risk of dropping out of school;
- Physical and sexual assault, victimization, and involvement in human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation;
- Illness, chronic health problems, malnutrition, and injury;
- Mental health and addictions problems, chronic stress, and post-traumatic stress;
- Involvement with the criminal justice system due to survival-related activities such as loitering, camping, trespassing, and stealing;
- Engagement in survival sex and unsafe sex practices, with a disproportionately high risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Long Term

Experience with homelessness as a youth can also have negative life-long consequences. For example:

- Former runaways are 50% more likely than non-runaways to not have a high school degree or GED as adults.⁵ High school graduates earn an average of \$7,171 more per year than those without a high school degree, while college graduates earn \$24,242 more.⁶
- More than 30% of formerly homeless youth report alcohol problems, more than 40% report drug problems, and more than 50% report mental health problems over their lifetimes.⁷ Mental illness and substance abuse are risk factors that increase the likelihood of becoming chronically homeless adults.⁸
- The chronic mental and physical stress associated with homelessness can have long-term impacts on brain development, and on physical and mental health.⁹
- Runaways have over three times higher odds as non-runaways of attempting suicide as adults.¹⁰
- Homeless youth are seven times as likely to die from AIDS and 16 times as likely to be diagnosed with HIV compared with the general youth population.¹¹
- Runaways are 2.5 times more likely to be arrested as adults and have a 99% increase in the odds of being engaged in the drug trade as adults.¹²
- Homeless youth are three times as likely as other youth to be pregnant or parenting.¹³ Single parents face difficult challenges related to employment and childcare, resulting in poverty rates four to five times higher than for two parent families.¹⁴
- The odds of having someone in the household who is a recipient of public assistance are 76% higher for adults who are former runaways than for non-runaways.¹⁵

Costs to Society

Youth homelessness also has significant costs to society as a whole. For example:

- Studies indicate that youth who drop out of high school and are unable to find work impose a future lifetime taxpayer burden of \$170,740 and a social burden of \$525,030.¹⁶
- The average cost of placing a homeless youth in the criminal justice system for one year (\$53,665) is almost ten times the cost (\$5,887) of permanently moving a homeless youth off the streets.¹⁷
- Studies have found that people experiencing chronic homelessness cost the public between \$30,000 and \$50,000 per person per year through their repeated use of emergency rooms, hospitals, jails, psychiatric centers, detox, and other crisis services.¹⁸
- More than two-thirds of single parents who have their children out of wedlock end up on welfare, as do 84% of young, teen, unmarried mothers – at a significant cost to taxpayers.¹⁹
- The lifetime cost to society of treatment for a heavy drug user is \$17,500.²⁰
- The lifetime cost to society of a career criminal is estimated to range between \$3.2 and \$5.7 million.²¹

Best Practices for Services and Systems to Address Youth Homelessness

Homeless youth need access to a range of services and programs that will give them the support they need to stabilize their lives and successfully transition to adulthood. While the needs of each homeless youth and the specific service models that will work best in a given location vary, national best practice research and local experience provide clear guidance on the types of services that should be available. This section summarizes the components of a comprehensive continuum of services, the guiding practices for service delivery, and the elements of an effective state-level system.

Continuum of Services

An effective system of care for homeless youth includes a continuum of services that can transition youth from the streets to safety, stability, and – eventually – independence. The components of this continuum include:

- **Prevention:** Identify at-risk youth and provide crisis counseling and support to youth and their families to increase family stability.
- **Reunification:** Intervene quickly once youth are on the streets to assess if family reunification is appropriate; when it is, provide support to facilitate successful reunification and family stabilization.
- **Street outreach:** Build relationships and trust to begin the process of connecting youth to services; provide youth with information, basic supplies, and referrals.
- **Assessments:** Assess youth's strengths and needs to connect them with appropriate services; provide coordinated entry to available programs.
- **Safety services:** Provide youth with drop-in and day centers where they can access safety off the streets, food, showers, hygiene supplies, and meet other basic needs.
- **Shelter:** Provide temporary housing in a safe, supportive environment through congregate shelters, host homes, or other models.
- **Case management:** Create individualized action plans tailored to the needs of each youth, including reconnecting with family members and strengthening family relationships when appropriate; build supportive relationships between youth and case managers to provide ongoing assistance with plan implementation.
- **Supportive services:** Provide youth with mental health care, addictions treatment, medical care, and other services necessary for achieving stability.
- **Community connections:** Provide support to youth to build positive social networks with peers and adults, build and strengthen family connections, increase knowledge of available resources, and create a sense of belonging in the community.
- **Transitional living:** Provide housing resources and skill building to support youth's transition to independent living.
- **Education and employment:** Connect youth with opportunities to further their education, learn job skills, and obtain employment.
- **Self-sufficiency:** Connect youth with stable living situations and support them in transitioning to living independently.

Guiding Practices

Best practice research indicates that effective services for homeless youth typically include a combination of the following approaches:

- **Positive Youth Development:** services focus on meeting youth where they are developmentally and supporting their positive growth.
- **Trauma-Informed Care:** services emphasize healing and are appropriate for youth who have experienced abuse and/or trauma.
- **Harm Reduction:** services accept youth as they are while aiming to reduce the adverse consequences of high-risk behaviors.
- **Cultural Competence:** services are tailored to engage youth of different cultural backgrounds, races, ethnicities, gender identities, and sexual orientations.
- **Youth-Centered:** services are rooted in an understanding of each youth's unique situation and goals; strategies are customized for each youth.
- **Permanent Connections:** services emphasize the value of building permanent connections with family and/or other positive adults.
- **Strengths-Based:** services identify and build upon each youth's core strengths and skills.
- **Resiliency-Focused:** services aim to build youth's self-efficacy skills along with community supports that youth can draw upon.

Characteristics of an Effective State-Level Approach

Effective state-level strategies for ending youth homelessness include the following components:

- A commitment of resources that is sufficient to meet the need.
- A state agency responsible for guiding homeless youth policy and planning and overseeing homeless youth investments.
- Collaboration and coordination among all the entities that interact with at-risk and homeless youth at the local and state level.
- Strategic alignment of systems and funding streams.
- Sufficient capacity in every community to provide an appropriate continuum of services.
- Services and interventions that are locally-focused, support the ability of youth to remain in their communities, and are tailored to fit the unique context of different communities within a coordinated statewide framework of core services and strategies.
- Systems for identifying and implementing regulatory, statutory, and policy changes to better meet the needs of homeless youth.
- A coordinated system for collecting and reporting on comprehensive data for understanding the needs and tracking outcomes.

Gaps in Oregon's Homeless Youth Services and Systems

Oregon lacks a comprehensive state-level homeless youth service system, and many communities rely on a patchwork of inadequately funded services and programs to meet youths' needs. This section summarizes the common themes from a series of focus groups and interviews held with runaway and homeless youth and service providers across the state in June and July 2016 (see Appendix C for a list of participants). It highlights the gaps in services and programs as well as the policy and systems-level barriers that undermine Oregon's ability to effectively address this issue.

Services and Programs

No community in Oregon has a complete and adequate continuum of services to meet the needs of its runaway and homeless youth. That said, the types of services available in each community vary widely, as do the specific service priorities and needs. This section summarizes the types of community-level service gaps that were identified most frequently by focus group and interview participants. It is important to note that while there are similarities across the state, each community's gaps are slightly different.

- At the most basic level, homeless youth need a **safe place to go** where they can find support, get their basic needs met, and get connected to services. This can take the form of a youth shelter, drop-in or day center. In many Oregon communities, youth in crisis don't have a physical location where they can go for support, leaving them isolated and alone, and making it difficult for them to access services.
- Youth in crisis often don't know how to find help. Many of the youth focus group participants said they struggled on their own, often for months, before learning about available supports. Youth need easy access to **information about available services** so they will know where to turn. Communities need to have systems for inventorying and tracking available services, and there need to be ways to get the information about services to youth who need them through schools, community billboards, social media, and other routes.
- **Family services** such as counseling, parenting support, family stabilization, respite care, and mediation are essential to prevent homelessness and to support reunification. While many communities have some form of family services, most respondents said the available services are inadequate to meet the need. Respondents emphasized the importance of providing these "upstream" services to at-risk youth and their families to prevent and mitigate youth homelessness.
- Many respondents identified **youth shelter** as a primary gap in their communities. There are large swaths of Oregon with no youth shelters, respite homes or host homes. Youth are forced to either travel long distances to access available shelters, or remain under the radar, couch surfing or camping. The need for shelter includes comprehensive shelters with a wide range of services on site as well as low-barrier shelters for short-term and emergency use.
- Many Oregon communities also need **transitional housing** options for youth who aren't ready or able to access community-based housing. This includes younger youth and youth coming out of juvenile justice or other systems of care. It also includes youth ages 18-24 who need access to transitional housing that can support them until they are developmentally ready for independence or to enter the adult service system.
- In addition to shelter and housing, homeless youth need help meeting their **basic needs**, such as food, clothing, laundry, personal hygiene, showers, transportation, and school supplies. Many communities try to address these needs through donations, churches, and school-based programs, but the needs typically outstrip the available resources. Access to flexible funding or income sources to help youth pay for basic needs would help to fill this critical gap.

- Homeless youth also need a range of **supportive services** including health and medical care, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health services, and counseling. Few communities have access to adequate services to meet the needs. Respondents particularly noted the need for services such as residential treatment for alcohol and drugs, mental health services connected with housing, on-site services at homeless youth agencies for youth with mental health needs who have experienced trauma, and treatment for co-occurring issues. These services need to be available to youth of all ages, with or without health insurance.
- Youth need support in learning how to recognize and build **healthy relationships**, a skill that is critical for creating supportive family relationships as well as developing permanent community connections. Schools should offer social skill building of this kind. Homeless youth agencies can also provide one-on-one relationships with caring adults while fostering the development of broader community support networks.
- **Educational and employment supports** are essential for preparing homeless youth for adulthood, and some respondents identified this as a critical gap in their communities. This includes supports to reconnect youth under age 18 with school, as well as access to GED programs and community college for older youth. It also includes life skills training, supported employment, and on-the-job training that provides access to job skills and experience. Many youth also need access to supports such as childcare and subsidized transportation in order to be able to attend school or hold onto a job.

Policies and Systems

In addition to the gaps in available services for homeless youth, focus group and interview respondents identified a range of barriers at a policy and systems level that make it difficult to effectively meet the needs of Oregon's homeless youth.

- **Lack of state leadership:** Stakeholders are frustrated with what appears to be a lack of state-level commitment to solving the issue of youth homelessness, as demonstrated by historically inadequate state funding and by the limited focus on the issue within state government. Many stakeholders emphasized the need for the state to take greater ownership over the issue and to demonstrate a greater sense of urgency to address it.
- **Lack of a responsible agency:** There is no entity at the state level whose primary mandate is to be responsible for runaway and homeless youth. Oregon's Runaway and Homeless Youth Program is housed within the Office of Child Welfare Programs in the Department of Human Services, which has a wide scope of work, with homeless youth as a small part of its focus. Respondents argued that without an agency with a primary focus on homeless youth, there is no accountability at the state level for meeting their needs.
- **Lack of a system of care:** In many communities, the only available services for homeless youth are through systems that aren't designed for homeless youth, in formats that are often inappropriate. For example, providers in rural areas are often forced to place youth on probation or enter them into Oregon Youth Authority custody in order to access services for them, because the only services are available through the juvenile justice system.
- **Lack of coordination:** Homeless youth across the state interface with a range of systems, including the child welfare, educational, juvenile justice, and health and mental health systems. There are examples of effective coordination between these systems at the local level, but there is little formal state-level collaboration or alignment, and no structure for ensuring the systems are accountable for effectively serving homeless youth. Stakeholders emphasized the need for all of the systems that come into contact with homeless youth to work together in a more coordinated fashion, with state-level mandates and accountability for meeting homeless youths' needs.
- **Lack of resources:** The resources for homeless youth services in Oregon pale in comparison to the need. Federal funding is difficult to obtain, involves significant administrative burdens, and tends to be accessed

by a small number of existing agencies with limited options for expanded funding in new communities. The state's funding allocations have historically been inadequate to meet the statewide need. Few local jurisdictions offer public funding for homeless youth, and philanthropic dollars are sparse. Existing programs need reliable funding to be able to sustain current service levels, and new resources are needed to expand service capacity and fill service gaps throughout the state.

- **Lack of funding mechanisms:** In addition to the overall lack of resources, there are few revenue streams or funding mechanisms that can be used to serve homeless youth. Whereas foster parents receive funding in exchange for caring for children in foster care, there is no similar mechanism for reimbursing service providers for caring for homeless youth. Similarly, while homeless families can access Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, that option is not available for unaccompanied homeless youth. Many stakeholders emphasized the need for a state-funded revenue stream to support the needs of homeless youth.
- **Lack of data:** Oregon lacks comprehensive data on the state's runaway and homeless youth population and the available services and resources in communities across the state. This makes it difficult to effectively plan for meeting their needs or to strategically prioritize available resources. The lack of data is compounded by inconsistent definitions, barriers to information sharing, and the absence of a statewide system to coordinate the information.

Addressing Youth Homelessness in Oregon

Focus group and interview participants offered a range of suggestions for how the state can most effectively address the gaps in Oregon's homeless youth services and systems. This section summarizes the common themes that emerged from stakeholders' recommendations.

- **Take leadership:** Stakeholders emphasized the need for a greater sense of leadership, urgency, and accountability at the state for addressing youth homelessness. This includes having leaders with the capacity, resources, and authority to give this issue the attention it deserves. Some stakeholders suggested this would best be accomplished by having a state agency with an exclusive mandate and focus on the needs of runaway and homeless youth.
- **Increase resources:** We cannot fill the service gaps for runaway and homeless youth without increased resources, and it is very unlikely that these resources will come from the federal government. Stakeholders urged the state to significantly expand the resources allocated to runaway and homeless youth. Stakeholders also encouraged the state to reach out to philanthropy and the private sector to align funding priorities, create funding partnerships, and leverage additional resources. Some stakeholders also suggested redirecting existing funds from other systems to support strategies that will better meet youths' needs. For example: (a) foster care payments could be redirected towards shelters or transitional housing for youth who would be better served in those settings; (b) funding could be redirected from the adult homeless system to meet the needs of youth 18-24 who are better served through the youth system; and (c) funding for facilities and housing-related costs could be redirected from Oregon Housing and Community Services.
- **Align state systems:** Stakeholders emphasized the importance of strengthening coordination and alignment between all of the state agencies that interface with homeless youth, including the Oregon Department of Education, Department of Human Services, Oregon Youth Authority, Youth Development Council, Oregon Health Authority, and local juvenile justice departments. Aligning resources and building coordinated practices among all of the systems and providers who serve homeless youth will help to build the foundation for a more effective system of care. In addition, by working together to better understand the trajectory of youth through the different systems, we can identify the critical junctures when improved interventions could prevent future homelessness. This includes effective discharge and transition planning to ensure that youth don't transition from child welfare, juvenile justice, and other systems of care into homelessness.
- **Serve all youth:** Many stakeholders urged the state to expand its definition of homeless youth and to create more flexible eligibility guidelines so that youth can be served more effectively. This includes raising the age limit to include youth through age 24, and making it easier for programs to serve youth until they are developmentally ready to transition to independence or the adult service system. Stakeholders also advocated for eliminating narrow eligibility requirements that make it difficult for service providers to meet youth where they're at and that let too many youth fall through the cracks. For example, eligibility criteria that require youth to be unsheltered in order to receive services don't reflect the diverse circumstance and living situations of youth across the state, and should be replaced by broader criteria that include youth who are doubled up and couch surfing.
- **Create a statewide framework with local plans:** Many stakeholders said that Oregon needs a state-level framework for addressing youth homelessness that includes shared goals and outcomes and identifies guidelines and best practices for services. The specific strategies for achieving these shared goals and outcomes will need to vary by community. Stakeholders said the state should encourage counties or regions to develop local action plans that leverage local resources and capacities and are tailored to address locally-specific needs within a coordinated statewide framework of core services and strategies.

- **Structure grant funding more strategically:** Stakeholders encouraged DHS to be more strategic in how it structures and allocates state grant funds for homeless and runaway youth services. Grants should be framed within a coordinated statewide framework of core services and strategies, and funding should be used to support services that align with nationally-recognized best practices such as Positive Youth Development and Trauma-Informed Care. At the same time, local communities should be given the flexibility to identify the specific service gaps that they want to prioritize for grant funding. The administrative burdens of applying for and administering grant funds should be minimized so that communities across the state can effectively compete for funding. And the grants should be structured in ways that promote coordinated strategies that leverage partnerships and collaboration among multiple systems and organizations.
- **Develop a resource allocation formula:** Given that state resources will almost certainly not be sufficient to meet the statewide needs, the state will need to establish criteria for prioritizing its resources. Stakeholders offered a wide variety of opinions about what criteria should be used. Some suggested resources should be distributed equally to each geographic region of the state, while others said the funding should go to the geographic areas with the fewest existing resources. Some said the state should prioritize funding to stabilize and fully fund existing services, while others said state resources should be used to add services in places they don't currently exist. Some said resources should be prioritized to youth under age 18, while others said resources should be prioritized for youth through age 24. Some said state resources should be used to fund foundational services in every community, while others said they should be used to fund locally-defined priorities.
- **Take a regional approach:** Stakeholders emphasized that runaway and homeless youth should be able to receive services in their own communities, rather than traveling to other parts of the state to access shelter and other supports. However, in a state as large and geographically dispersed as Oregon, creating a full continuum of services in every community isn't realistic. Rural stakeholders suggested using a regional approach to expand access to basic services across the state. For example, each multi-county region could have a central shelter, with the agency in charge of the shelter also responsible for sponsoring host homes in local communities throughout the region. Existing programs could be incentivized to do outreach to surrounding communities, and to assist neighboring communities to build their own programming as resources permit. Rural stakeholders also suggested that there should be a designated agency responsible for runaway and homeless youth in every county. This role, which could be served by regional agencies responsible for multiple counties in their service regions, would help to increase accountability and provide a more coordinated structure for meeting the needs of homeless youth. Existing entities such as Continuums of Care, Community Action Agencies, Coordinated Care Organizations, and Tribes could potentially be leveraged to play this role.
- **Strengthen school capacity:** Schools are a central touchpoint for connecting with at-risk and homeless youth and their families. Every community has a school, and every school district is required to have a homeless liaison, but most districts have very limited resources and capacity to carry out this work. Stakeholders stressed the importance of strengthening the schools' capacity to serve this essential role. This includes: (a) increasing awareness among school staff about how to identify youth in crisis and connect them to resources; (b) providing training for teachers, counselors and staff so they can more effectively engage youth and respond to their needs; (c) expanding district homeless liaisons' FTE so that they have the capacity to effectively identify, track, and support youth in schools across the district; (d) requiring school districts to develop plans to work with the unique needs of homeless students, such as providing trauma-informed environments in their schools; and (e) strengthening connections and partnerships between schools and community-based organizations that serve at-risk youth and families. Some stakeholders suggested that Oregon Department of Education should be responsible for funding this work.

- **Improve data and information:** Stakeholders emphasized the importance of improving statewide data and information on runaway and homeless youth. This includes gathering and tracking comprehensive data on homeless youth numbers, characteristics, and needs disaggregated by race/ ethnicity, age, and gender. It also means facilitating information sharing across agencies and systems to make it easier to track youth across the service continuum, and to support broader research on homeless youth trajectories and feeder systems. Stakeholders encouraged the state to conduct a comprehensive inventory of runaway and homeless youth services, which could be used to identify gaps and to better connect youth with available resources. They also stressed the need for better systems for helping youth to access information about services through schools, crisis lines (such as 211), social media, and other locally-specific strategies such as billboards.
- **Use an equity lens:** Youth of color tend to be disproportionately represented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and have a greater likelihood of experiencing housing instability and homelessness. Some stakeholders urged the state to use an equity lens to frame its runaway and homeless youth strategies. This includes using disaggregated data to identify racial and ethnic disparities affecting homeless youth. It also includes working to ensure that services are culturally responsive and culturally appropriate, and that communities of color, including Tribes, play an active role in state and local leadership, planning, resource allocation, and service provision for homeless youth.
- **Remove regulatory barriers:** Regulatory and licensing barriers make it more difficult for local communities to address homeless youths' needs. Stakeholders offered a variety of suggestions for removing these barriers: (a) make it easier for nonprofits and other local entities to create host homes to meet the need for short-term shelter in rural communities; (b) create an easier path for community members who are willing to take in a homeless youth on a temporary basis to be able to do so; (c) reduce the administrative and reporting burdens on providers to make it feasible for smaller, community-based organizations to fill local needs; and (d) reduce the time and costs involved with applying for and maintaining state youth facilities licensing.
- **Reduce legal barriers:** Legal barriers can make it difficult for unaccompanied youth to access essential tools and supports such as identification, healthcare, housing, and driver's licenses. Stakeholders urged the state to make policy changes to reduce these legal barriers. Potential strategies include: (a) reducing the age of consent required to access basic services such as housing; (b) creating a guardianship option for social workers, grandparents, and other responsible adults so they are able to get temporary guardianship rights when parents are abusive or neglectful; (c) providing parents with a way to temporarily transfer custody rights to third parties when they are unable to care for their youth; and (d) facilitating the emancipation process for unaccompanied youth.
- **Facilitate access to income and benefits:** Unaccompanied youth who are too young to work (or are unable to work for other reasons) have no options for accessing temporary income supports to meet their basic needs. Stakeholders suggested creating an income source for these youth, either through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or a General Assistance program. Stakeholders also urged the state to facilitate unaccompanied youths' access to essential benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Oregon Health Plan.
- **Reform the child welfare system:** Many stakeholders and youth said the child welfare system needs to become more youth-centric, with its primary focus being the needs of children and youth. This includes taking youth claims of abuse more seriously, and listening to youth when they ask the state for help. It means intervening earlier to provide families with appropriate supports before the situation reaches a crisis level. It also includes offering a wider range of options to youth in the child welfare system. Stakeholders noted that for many youth over the age of 12, group homes, transitional housing or other forms of congregate care would be more appropriate and effective than foster care.

Appendix A: Oregon's Homeless Youth Policy

Oregon's Runaway and Homeless Youth Program ("RHY Program") began operation under the Oregon Commission on Children and Families (OCCF) in 2005. In 2007, the Oregon State Legislature appropriated \$1 million to OCCF's 2007-09 budget to enhance, expand, or develop services and supports for previously unserved runaway and/or homeless youth under age 18. The funding was used to roll out pilot projects in eight counties across the state.

In 2011, with legislative elimination of the OCCF, the RHY Program was assigned to the Department of Human Services (DHS). In 2012, responsibility for the RHY Program was integrated into the Office of Child Welfare Programs and assigned to the Child Well Being Unit. Oregon's child welfare services are embedded in the greater mission of the Department of Human Services: to improve family capacity to provide safe and permanent living environments.

The 2013 Legislature allocated additional funding (\$750,000) to DHS to assist in the expansion of the RHY Program and also passed legislation extending the service age limit from 18 to 21 years of age. In June 2014, DHS discontinued the existing pilot project contracts. The newly allocated resources, along with the funding from the pilot projects, were distributed through a competitive contracting process to a range of programs and services across the state.

In 2015, the Oregon State Legislature enacted HB 2232, which narrowed the age limit for RHY services to 20 and further defined the scope and priorities for state RHY funding. The bill also directed DHS to appoint an advisory committee to provide guidance on policies and procedures to coordinate statewide planning for delivery of services to runaway and homeless youth.

DHS is working with the Oregon Homeless Youth Advisory Committee (HYAC) and other stakeholders to develop a framework and plan to address youth homelessness in Oregon. As a first step, DHS commissioned a review of national best practices research and a synthesis of existing statewide data and reports. It also convened a series of focus groups and interviews with runaway and homeless youth and service providers from across the state. The HYAC will build on this work to develop a statewide framework and action plan.

Appendix B: Research and Data Sources

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Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Participants

Molly Rogers, Wasco County Youth Services, Wasco County
Beatriz Morales, Wasco County Youth Services, Wasco County
Two youth, Wasco County Youth Services, Wasco County
Gary Casady, Youth Empowerment Shelter, Wasco County
Jensie Bryan, Youth Empowerment Shelter, Wasco County
Dwight Evans, Youth Empowerment Shelter, Waco County
Wilma (Teddy) Evans, Youth Empowerment Shelter, Wasco County
Three youth, Youth Empowerment Shelter, Wasco County
Tyler Beane Kelly, Zion Lutheran Church, Wasco County
Debby Jones, Wasco County YouthThink Coalition Coordinator, Wasco County
Jim Patterson, Hood River Juvenile Department, Hood River County
Deirdre Kasberger, J Bar J Youth Services, Deschutes County
Sherlyn Roberts, Union County CARE, Union County
Bridget Thamert, Union County CARE, Union County
Amber DeGrange, Sherman County Juvenile Director, Sherman County
Twelve youth, Casa de Belen, Douglas County
Penny MCue, Casa de Belen, Douglas County
Mary Ferrell, Maslow Project, Jackson County
Ray Dinkins, Maslow Project, Jackson County
Fallon Stewart, Maslow Project, Jackson County
Heather Hartmann, CareOregon Jackson Care Connect, Jackson County
Kevin Lamson, Hearts With a Mission, Jackson and Josephine counties
Caitlin Campbell, Homeless Youth Continuum, Multnomah County
Kanoë Egleston, Native American Youth and Family Center, Multnomah County
Sean Suib, New Avenues for Youth, Multnomah County
Heather Brown, Outside In, Multnomah and Clackamas counties
Dennis Morrow, Janus Youth Programs, Multnomah and Clark counties
Drew Williamson, Boys and Girls Aid - Safe Place, Washington County
One homeless youth, Boys and Girls Aid - Safe Place, Washington County
Lisa Montesana, Beaverton School District, Washington County
One homeless youth, Beaverton School District and Second Home, Washington County
Jenny Pratt, Second Home, Washington, Multnomah and Lincoln counties
Tricia Ratliff, Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, Marion County
Kirstin London, Looking Glass Community Services, Lane County
Dona Bolt, Oregon Department of Education, statewide
Vicki Massey, Oregon Housing and Community Services, statewide
Jamie McKay, Oregon Youth Authority, statewide
Any Sekino, Oregon Youth Development Council, statewide
Cord Bueker, Oregon Youth Development Council, statewide

Appendix D: Endnotes

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