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Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Progress Report

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Executive Office of Health and Human Services



Background

The Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (the Commission) was reconstituted through Chapter 450 of the Acts of 2014. Following its previous directive, the Commission was established in statute for the purpose of studying and making recommendations relative to services for unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults¹, with the goal of providing a comprehensive and effective response to the unique needs of this population. The focus of the commission's work specifically includes an analysis of the barriers to serving unaccompanied homeless youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, an analysis of the barriers to serving unaccompanied youth under 18 years of age, an assessment of the impact of mandated reporting requirements on unaccompanied homeless youths' access to services, the Commonwealth's ability to identify and connect with unaccompanied homeless youth and recommendations to reduce identified barriers to serving this population.

In addition and subject to appropriation, Chapter 450 directs the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to enter into performance-based contracts with organizations and agencies to provide housing and support services to address the needs of unaccompanied homeless youths in urban, suburban and rural areas. These contracts are required by statute to include housing services for unaccompanied homeless youth which may include, but shall not be limited to: emergency shelter; kinship home placements; short-term housing; and transition to independent living programs. Programs shall provide any such unaccompanied homeless youth with stable out-of-home placement, help to reunite any such youth with the youth's parent or legal guardian if family reunification is in the youth's best interest and help to create educational and residential stability. Additional support services may include, but shall not be limited to: individual, family and group counseling; access to medical, dental and mental health care; education and employment services; case management, advocacy and referral services; independent living skills training; and provision of basic needs.

Through the FY16 and FY17 budgets, the Legislature appropriated a total of \$3 million to EOHHS to conduct such activities.

Regional Consortiums and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Funding

In April 2016, EOHHS entered into contracts with 8 Lead Agencies across the Commonwealth to address the issue of families and individuals in housing crises by assembling and supporting regional Consortiums composed of housing and service agencies and providing flexible support for people facing recent or chronic homelessness. Each of the 8 Consortiums is developing and/or providing a coordinated entry system of triage, assessment, prevention and diversion services to ensure these vulnerable homeless populations have timely and appropriate access to needed interventions in their communities. In addition, each Consortium has a Youth Subcommittee to develop strategic plans to adequately and appropriately address the needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults who are experiencing homelessness in their region. All 8 Lead Agencies have entered into subcontracts with local youth providers to implement the goals of their strategic plans.

In July 2016, with \$1 million of youth funding in the final budget, EOHHS entered into contract amendments with the 8 consortiums to continue the work of the local youth provider agencies. Once the supplemental budget was approved in November of 2016 for an additional \$1 million for youth funding and \$1 million for consortium funding, additional contract amendments were executed for these important initiatives.

¹ The Commission defines "Unaccompanied Homeless Youth" as a person 24 years of age or younger who is not in the physical custody or care of a parent or legal guardian and who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Over the course of FY17, the Commission will include 3 Working Groups to carry out the requirements of Chapter 450 as well as propose strategies, best practices and policies to more appropriately and adequately respond to the needs of our youth and young adults who are or who have experienced homelessness in the Commonwealth.

As part of the mission of the youth commission, three young adults who have experienced homelessness have been appointed as commissioners to the full commission. The commissioners not only participate in the commission meetings but are also taking on specific tasks for the commission including refining the Massachusetts Youth Count survey, reaching out to Continuums of Care (CoCs) to gain feedback on the count and survey process, convening focus groups of young adults to understand their needs and challenges and leading the work of the committee that will develop the state plan for youth housing and services.

In the next month, the Commission will convene a committee to develop a State Plan to End Youth Homelessness in the Commonwealth by working with the Commission members, stakeholders, providers and, most importantly, youth and young adults who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness.

The Commission's Identification and Connection Working Group is charged with assessing the Commonwealth's ability to identify and connect with unaccompanied homeless youth and capture an accurate count of unaccompanied young people who are experiencing homelessness in the Commonwealth. This working group has refined the annual Massachusetts Youth Count survey with input from stakeholders and youth commissioners. A convening of the statewide CoCs will take place in March in preparation for the youth count and survey in early May. In addition, the youth commission has reached out to the Executive Office of Education, which convened a meeting with staff from community colleges and public universities to discuss the survey that was recently taken in these colleges regarding food insecurity and housing instability among their students. There was overwhelming interest on the part of the public colleges to more fully understand the challenges and engage with students who are facing housing instability. The Commission will be working with the Department of Higher Education and its partners to review the Massachusetts Youth Count survey and discuss strategies to better implement the survey, as well as to engage and support students with these challenges by utilizing youth-focused resources and local youth provider services.

The Demonstration Working Group is charged with convening the youth providers funded through the Regional Consortiums to create and facilitate a statewide network where the providers can regularly connect with each other, share best practices and consider opportunities for technical assistance and/or training that could support their work. The Working Group convened its first meeting on January 20th and will be developing and recommending to EOHHS specific metrics that should be measured by the youth providers to determine if the programs are successfully serving youth.

Following the 2014 first-in-the-nation statewide census of youth experiencing homelessness, the Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission conducted the second annual Massachusetts Youth Count (Count), between January and March 2015. The third Massachusetts count was conducted in May 2016 following recommendations from CoCs and young adults that a May count and survey would be more effective in reaching youth who are facing housing instability. Historically, the number of unaccompanied youth continues to be difficult to determine for a variety of reasons including limited resources to identify and count the population and fear among the youth related to being returned to a home they have left and still deem unsafe. Consequently, the federal government and communities across the country have been working over the past several years to develop methodologies for conducting a

more comprehensive count in order to understand the scope of homelessness among unaccompanied youth and connect them to appropriate housing and services.

In 2016, a total number of 1,984 surveys were collected from the 15 regional counts led by the 15 Continuums of Care. (In 2015, 1,896 youth and young adults under the age of 25 participated in the survey.) Those responses are now being analyzed to determine the number that could be categorized as (1) currently meeting the definition of an unaccompanied homeless youth that was adopted by the Commission, as of the night of the count (516 youth in 2015); (2) currently meeting HUD's definition of homelessness, as of the night of the count (395 youth in 2015); or (3) had experienced homelessness (as defined by the commission) at some point in the previous year (610 youth in 2015).

The Youth Count survey asked several questions to understand demographic characteristics of the respondents. For 2015, overwhelmingly, the survey respondents meeting the state's definition of unaccompanied homeless youth were between the ages of 18 and 24, with just over 10% of responses from those meeting the state's definition under the age of 18.

The survey also contained questions to identify the race and ethnicity of respondents. Respondents were able to select multiple options for race. In 2015, the majority of responses were from white youth (46%), with African-American youth also comprising a significant proportion at 33% and Hispanic/Latino/Latina youth comprising of 37% of respondents.

Of the 516 respondents meeting the state's definition of homelessness in 2015, 287 or 55.8% identified as female. For the second consecutive year, this was higher than was anticipated, given national estimates that show homelessness among unaccompanied youth is higher among males. The Working Group attributes this high percentage of female respondents to the fact that several CoCs conducted outreach to pregnant and parenting youth who are being served by the state's Emergency Assistance family shelter program. Participants in that program are overwhelmingly female, possibly skewing the results. A total of 206 responses were from youth identifying as male, representing 39.7%. All responses for lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, and "other" totaled 22% of the total respondents meeting the state definition. National estimates for LGBTQ unaccompanied homeless youth range from 20-40% of that population, suggesting our results of 22% at the very bottom of those estimates may be an underestimate of the true extent of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in the Commonwealth.

To further help the state understand the demographics, needs and history of youth homelessness, the survey also asks respondents to provide information about their education, sources of income, ability to access housing and supportive services, reasons for no longer residing with their parent or guardian and past experiences with state systems.

For more information, please contact the Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth. The 2016 Massachusetts Youth Count Report will be forthcoming.

Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

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MA Appleseed Center for Law and Justice	Deb Silva
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MA Housing and Shelter Alliance	Caitlin Golden
MA Transgender Political Coalition	Mason Dunn
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