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LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

November 3, 2026

Governor Maura Healey
State House
Boston, MA 02133

Michael D. Hurley
Clerk of the Senate
State House
Room 335
Boston, MA 02133

Sen. Robyn K. Kennedy
Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
State House
Room 312-D
Boston, MA 02133

Office of the Child Advocate
One Ashburton Place
11th Floor
Boston, MA 02108

Timothy Carroll
Clerk of the House
State House
Room 145
Boston, MA 02133

Rep. Jay D. Livingstone
House Chair, Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities
State House
Room 146
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Clerk Hurley and Clerk Carroll:

I write to submit the 2025 Annual Report of The Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth.

Please contact Shane Blundell (shane.blundell@mass.gov) with any questions you may have.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Kiame Mahaniah, MD, MBA
Secretary

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Report Pursuant to Chapter 450 of the Acts of 2014 Regarding the MA Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth

Legislative Mandate

In accordance with Chapter 450 of the Acts of 2014, The Massachusetts Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth submits this annual report to the Governor, legislative clerks, the Joint Committee on Children, Families, and Persons with Disabilities, and the Office of the Child Advocate.

Chapter 450 of the Acts of 2014 specifies "The commission shall submit an annual report by December 31 to the governor, the clerks of the house of representatives and the senate, the joint committee on children, families and persons with disabilities and the office of the child advocate. The report shall include, but not be limited to, the commission's findings and any recommendations for regulatory or legislative action, with a timeline for implementation, cost estimates and finance mechanisms, and shall detail the extent of homelessness among unaccompanied homeless youth in the commonwealth and the progress made toward implementing the commission's recommendations and any other efforts to address the needs of this population.[1]"

The MA Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (a.k.a. Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Commission or UHYC) was established to provide targeted recommendations aimed at addressing the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless youth in Massachusetts. The focus of the UHYC's work includes, but is not limited to: "…(i) an analysis of the barriers to serving unaccompanied homeless youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; (ii) an analysis of the barriers to serving unaccompanied youth under 18 years of age; (iii) an assessment of the impact of mandated reporting requirements on unaccompanied homeless youths' access to services; (iv) the commonwealth's ability to identify and connect with

[1] Session Law - Acts of 2014 Chapter 450 (malegislature.gov)

unaccompanied homeless youth; and (v) recommendations to reduce identified barriers to serving this population. The UHYC, in formulating its recommendations, shall take into account the best practices and policies in other states and jurisdictions."[2] (See Appendix A: FY26 Commissioners of the MA Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth)

Homeless Youth Services: Funding and Structure

Pursuant to Chapter 450, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) funds Homeless Youth Services (HYS) through performance-based contracts with ten regional lead agencies. In FY26, line item 4000-0007 was funded at $10.451 million, level with FY25 but reduced from $11 million in FY24. A 1% maintenance reduction at the start of FY26 further reduced funding to providers.

In addition, EOHHS provides $563,000 to the Department of Higher Education to support shelter and services for college students experiencing homelessness.

The 10 funded Homeless Youth Services Lead Agencies in each region are:

Agency	Current FY26 Amount	Region
Bridge Over Troubled Waters Inc	$1,805,220	Metro Boston
Catholic Charities of Fall River	$ 494,581	Bristol County
City of Springfield	$ 924,292	Hampden County
Community Action Pioneer Valley, Inc.	$ 1,073,982	Berkshire, Franklin, and Hampshire Counties
Community Teamwork Inc	$ 1,036,642	North Middlesex
County of Barnstable	$813,091	Cape Cod and the Islands
Father Bill's & Mainspring, Inc.	$ 890,246	Plymouth & East Norfolk County
L U K Crisis Center Inc	$ 989,162	Worcester County
Lynn Housing Authority	$ 929,812	Essex County
South Middlesex Opportunity Council Inc.	$741,219	Metro West

[2] Session Law - Acts of 2014 Chapter 450 (malegislature.gov)

Prevalence & Characteristics of Youth Homelessness in Massachusetts - FY26

Snapshot of Youth and Young Adult (YYA)Homelessness

On any given night: Approximately **600 YYA** experience homelessness.

Over the course of the year: **Over 3,000 YYA** experience homelessness at some point.

Point-in-Time (PIT) counts and annual service data measure different aspects of youth homelessness. PIT counts capture crisis-level homelessness on a single night, while annual data reflect the much larger number of youth who cycle in and out of housing instability over time.

Point-in-Time Counts: Crisis-Level Snapshot
The HUD PIT and Massachusetts Youth Count differ in both definitions and methods:

- HUD PIT Count includes only youth who are *literally homeless* (in shelter, in cars, outside). Because shelters are mandated to report, the HUD PIT typically captures more young adults staying in adult shelters.
- Massachusetts Youth Count uses the broader MA definition of youth homelessness, which includes youth who are couch-surfing or doubled up. However, it is a voluntary survey, so it may miss youth staying in adult shelters if those providers do not distribute or promote the survey.

FY25 HUD PIT Count: 544 unaccompanied YYA
2024 MA Youth Count: 546 unaccompanied YYA

While the totals look similar, they represent different groups. Because both tools miss portions of the population, the number of youth experiencing homelessness on any given night is likely at least 600.

Annual Estimates: Longer-Term Experiences
Annual estimates capture all YYA who experience homelessness at any point during a year, revealing a much larger population than single-night counts. While PIT data suggest roughly 600 YYA are homeless on a given night, EOHHS-Homeless Youth Services (HYS) data show that more than 3,000 YYA experience homelessness over the course of a year.

This gap demonstrates a key point:
PIT counts show who is in crisis on one night; annual data reveal the much larger number of youth cycling in and out of homelessness throughout the year.

Service Impact and Outcomes (FY25)
In FY25, EOHHS-funded HYS providers supported:

- 3,043 youth and young adults experiencing homelessness
- 2,304 youth and young adults at risk of losing housing

Among YYA experiencing homelessness, 19% (565) secured stable housing through rehousing services. Prevention interventions were especially effective: **82% of the 978 youth receiving prevention-focused case management maintained stable housing.**

These outcomes underscore the importance of early identification and prevention strategies in reducing the duration and recurrence of youth homelessness.

Select Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Massachusetts:
FY25 Data from EOHHS-Homeless Youth Services Grantees
1. Gender

- Male: 40.4%
- Female: 54.0%
- Transgender: 2.5%
- Other gender identities: 3.1%

2. Race and Ethnicity[3]

- White: 20.5%
- African American: 36%
- Asian: 2.2%
- American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.58%
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.20%
- Other/Multiracial: 15.3%
- Hispanic: 24.7%

3. Other: LGBTQ+: 15.6%

Progress on FY25 Commission Recommendations

In its December 31, 2024 report, the UHYC identified four priority recommendations. The sections below summarize progress made in FY25 toward each recommendation.

1. Sustained Funding

Line item 4000-0007 was funded at $10.451 million in FY26, level with FY25 but below the FY24 levels. The 1% maintenance reduction at the start of FY26 resulted in cuts to all funded providers. While funding stability allowed services to continue statewide, reductions have constrained provider capacity.

[3] *Race percentages do not total 100%. Some youth declined to report race. Missing or undisclosed data account for the remaining percentage.*

2. Enhance Prevention and Access to Resources for Minors

In FY25, the UHYC advanced prevention and early access efforts through two primary strategies: the work of the Unaccompanied Minors Workgroup and the launch of a statewide awareness campaign.

The Unaccompanied Minors Workgroup developed a decision-making framework to guide adults—such as school staff, librarians, and community workers—when minors experiencing housing instability seek help. The framework emphasizes safety, trauma-informed practice, and clear next steps. It was reviewed and approved by DCF Legal and will be piloted and accompanied by trainings in FY26.

The statewide Awareness Campaign is described in detail below.

3. Enhance Support for BIPOC Youth

In FY25, the UHYC advanced this recommendation through targeted outreach, youth engagement, and guidance updates.

Our statewide awareness campaign prominently featured Black and Latinx youth, with Youth Action Boards supporting peer-led distribution of materials in locations frequented by young people and paid media placements concentrated near high schools in districts with the highest numbers of unaccompanied homeless youth. Additional details are provided in the Awareness Campaign section below.

Capacity to support youth participation and leadership was strengthened through expanded technical assistance to the Youth Advisory Council and Youth Action Boards, including dedicated staffing for statewide youth engagement roles. Both statewide youth engagement positions are held by BIPOC staff.

The UHYC also addressed the needs of youth exiting foster care, including youth of color, through guidance for working with housing-unstable minors that incorporates cultural considerations and emphasizes inclusive, identity-affirming language related to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and immigration status.

4. Strengthen Data Collection and Research

In FY25, the UHYC continued to invest in data initiatives critical to understanding youth homelessness and improving system design. The Massachusetts Youth Count will relaunch in April 2026 to track trends and identify gaps, particularly among youth who are couch-surfing or doubled up.

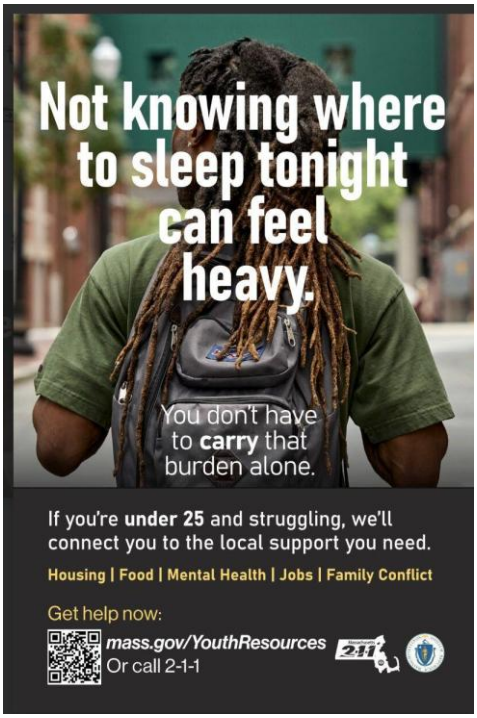
The 2024 Research to Action briefs (currently under review) focus on:

- Identification and access challenges for couch-surfing youth
- Housing access and regional disparities in youth-appropriate housing options

Beginning in FY26, all EOHHS-funded HYS providers are required to enter data into local Homeless management Information System (HMIS) and participate in the Rehousing Data Collective (RDC). This alignment will, for the first time, allow deduplication across HYS, Continuums of Care, and Emergency Assistance, improving cross-system visibility.

Awareness Campaign

During FY25–FY26, the UHYC and HYS received $150,000 through an interagency service agreement with the Office of the Child Advocate to develop and launch a statewide youth homelessness awareness campaign. Developed in partnership with youth and launched in October 2025, the campaign focuses on early help-seeking, access to age-appropriate services, and prevention of crisis.



The campaign directs youth to mass.gov/YouthResources, a redesigned resource hub connecting young people to shelter, food, safety, mental health, education, and LGBTQ+ resources.

The impact has been immediate and significant:

- Web traffic increased from 8 views per week to 2,878 views per week
- Nearly 2 million social media impressions
- Strong click-through rates from Instagram and Snapchat ads

This campaign directly delivers on UHYC's mandate to improve access and early intervention services for minors and young adults experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

UHYC Workgroups

The UHYC oversees three specialized workgroups that address the needs of particularly vulnerable youth populations: Unaccompanied Minors Workgroup, Young Adults Who Exchange Sex to Meet Their Basic Needs (ESN) Workgroup, and Parents Under 25 Workgroup. Each workgroup includes robust membership from state agencies, community providers, and young adults with lived experience of homelessness. All operate with clearly defined goals and concluded FY25 with meaningful deliverables.

These workgroups represent a key mechanism for making progress on the Commission's recommendations and advancing other efforts to address the needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness. By developing actionable frameworks, improving identification and screening, enhancing resource access, and analyzing data gaps, the workgroups are translating UHYC priorities into tangible improvements for youth across the Commonwealth.

Unaccompanied Minors Workgroup
Co-chaired by representatives of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and Bridge Over Troubled Waters

This workgroup focuses on improving services and outcomes for unaccompanied minors experiencing homelessness. In FY25, the group met monthly and produced a decision-making framework designed to guide adults—such as school counselors, librarians, coaches, and community workers—when a minor seeks help (See Appendix C). The framework offers a trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and practical approach to quickly connecting minors to safety, shelter, education, health, and emotional support. It centers youth dignity and ensures that every minor leaves with an actionable next step. The framework was reviewed and approved by DCF Legal, and the workgroup will pilot implementation and conduct trainings in FY26.

In addition, the workgroup helped shape the resources connected to the statewide awareness campaign, including informing the newly developed "Family Conflict: Where to Get Help" page. This page explains how minors can access support—such as Basic Center Programs, family-support services, and other therapeutic resources—and serves as a key connection point within the mass.gov/YouthResources hub.

Young Adults Who Exchange Sex to Meet Their Basic Needs (ESN) Workgroup
Co-chaired by a representative from the Bureau of Community Health and Prevention at the Department of Public Health and a national subject-matter expert

This workgroup advances recommendations from the UHYC's 2022 report Young Adults Who Experience Homelessness or Housing Instability and Exchange Sex To Meet Their Needs. In FY25, the group prioritized two areas from the report: 1) Meeting sexual health needs, and 2) Improving screening and identification.

The workgroup met monthly and produced a report on improving screening and identification within Homeless Youth Services programs. (See Appendix D) The Workgroup also implemented a key recommendation by partnering with DPH's Sexual and Reproductive Health Program to distribute sexual health and menstrual supplies, including condoms, lubricant, and menstrual products to all HYS providers statewide.

Parents Under 25 Workgroup

Co-chaired by representatives of the Department of Transitional Assistance and the Department of Public Health's Office of Sexual Health and Youth Development

This workgroup focuses on strengthening the housing and services continuum for parents under 18 and young parents ages 18–25 experiencing homelessness. In FY25, the group reviewed existing family shelter data from the Emergency Assistance (EA) system and HYS provider data and attempted to break it down by region to better understand the needs of young parents experiencing homelessness. The analysis made clear, however, that the Commonwealth does not currently have a reliable way to determine the number of homeless families with heads of household under age 25 due to the client counts that are duplicated across the multiple systems that serve them.

To address this gap, the workgroup plans to use HYS data within EOHLC's Rehousing Data Collective (RDC) beginning in FY26. The RDC will allow for deduplication across EA, CoC, and HYS programs, enabling a more accurate statewide count and a clearer picture of the needs and locations of young parents experiencing homelessness.[4]

Even with current data limitations, findings show that young families receive support across several EOHHS agencies, with Homeless Youth Services funding housing and services for hundreds of young families who are unable to access the EA family shelter system.

FY25 and FY26 Recommendations: Similarities and Differences

The FY26 recommendations build directly on the priorities established in FY25. Core focus areas—early identification, prevention, youth-centered design, and cross-system coordination—remain consistent.

Differences between FY25 and FY26 reflect implementation learning, system capacity constraints, and changes in the broader policy landscape. FY26 recommendations emphasize sustaining effective strategies, addressing remaining service gaps, and strengthening infrastructure to support long-term outcomes.

Recommendations for Legislative and Regulatory Action (FY26)

To achieve the goal of preventing and ending youth homelessness, the UHYC recommends the following for FY26:

[4] Beginning in FY26, all EOHHS-HYS grantees are required to partner with their local Continuum of Care (CoC) and enter their program data into the local Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). CoCs then upload these data to the RDC, where they are deduplicated across systems, including EA. This alignment effort began in FY26 and will, for the first time, enable cross-system visibility into young parents experiencing homelessness.

1. **Sustained Funding:** Maintain and strengthen funding for UHYC and HYS through line items 4000-0007 and 4000-0300.
2. **Enhance Prevention and Access:** Implement targeted communication strategies—such as the statewide awareness campaign launched in FY26—to ensure youth experiencing housing instability know how and where to access resources. Policies should continue to prioritize safe pathways for seeking help, particularly for minors, young parents, and youth with intersecting vulnerabilities. Resources like the mass.gov/YouthResources page should be maintained, expanded, and integrated into outreach strategies to maximize accessibility and impact.
3. **Strengthen Data Collection and Research:** Support the 2026 Massachusetts Youth Count and cross-system data alignment efforts. Efforts should also continue to align and deduplicate data across systems serving youth experiencing homelessness.

By maintaining and expanding funding for prevention-focused initiatives, improving awareness and access to resources, and strengthening data collection and analysis, Massachusetts can continue to make youth homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring, while addressing systemic inequities that contribute to housing instability.

Timeline, Cost Estimates, and Finance Mechanisms

The implementation timeline spans FY25–FY26. Funding is supported through line items 4000-0007 and 4000-0300. Additional budget adjustments may be required for staff cost-of-living adjustments due to level funding and maintenance reductions.

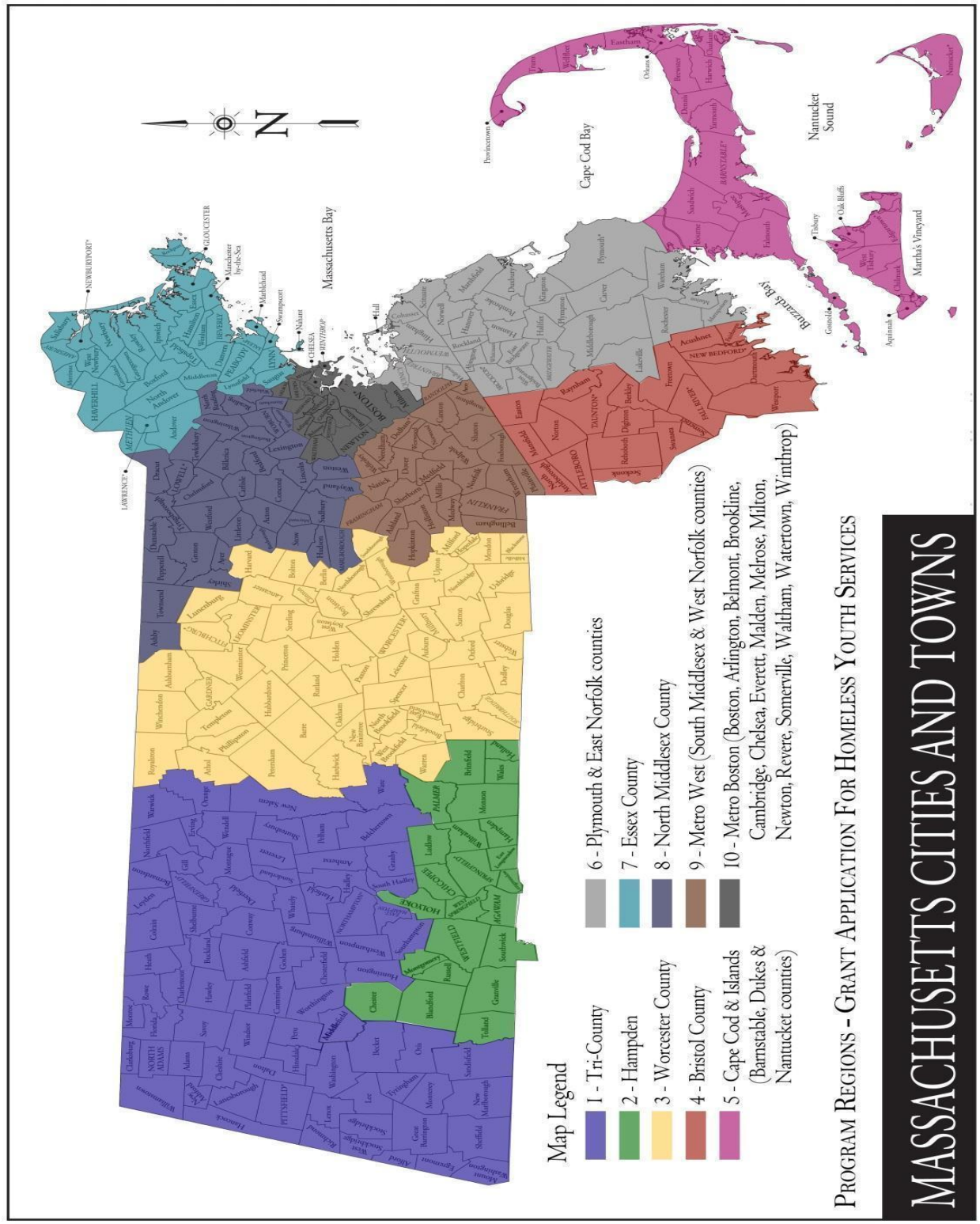
APPENDIX A

FY25 Commissioners of the MA Special Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (UHYC)	
Seats	**Current Appointment or Designee**
Secretary of Health and Human Services or Designee- CHAIR	Alice Colegrove, designee
Senate Chair of Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities	Sen. Robyn K. Kennedy
House Chair of Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities	Rep. Jay Livingstone
Member of the Senate	Sen. Lydia Edwards
Member of the House	Rep. James O'Day
One member Who Shall be Appointed by the Senate Minority Leader	Sen. Patrick O'Connor
One member Who Shall be Appointed by the House Minority Leader	Rep. Hannah Kane
The Commissioner of Children and Families (DCF) or a designee	Molly O'Neil, designee
The Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) or a designee	Shirley Fan-Chan, designee
The Commissioner of Department of Public Health (DPH) or a designee	Jennifer Halstrom and Stacy Lynch, DPH BSAS designees
The Commissioner of Mental Health (DMH) or a designee	Heidi Holland, designee
The Director of Medicaid or a designee	Madeline Wachman, designee
The Commissioner of Transitional Assistance (DTA) or a designee	Kamaria Moore-Hollis, designee
The Under Secretary for Housing and Community Development (Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities) or a designee	Gordon Calkins, designee

The Commissioner of Youth Services (DYS) or a designee	Rebecca Moore, designee
Direct Service Provider who works with Unaccompanied Homeless Youth- Appointed by the Governor	Elisabeth Jackson, Bridge Over Troubled Waters
Direct Service Provider who works with Unaccompanied Homeless Youth- Appointed by the Governor	Phil Ringwood, Dial/SELF
Direct Service Provider who works with Unaccompanied Homeless Youth- Appointed by the Governor	[open]
Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, Inc.	Kelly Turley
The Mass Taskforce on Youth Aging out of DCF Care	Rachel Gwaltney
Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice	Deb Silva
Mass Equality Org, The Campaign for Equality Inc.	Deborah Shields
Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance	Caitlin Golden
Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth	Aaron Gonzales
Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, Inc.	Tre'Andre Carmel Valentine
Youth who has experienced homelessness- Appointed by the Child Advocate	Thaliana Paulino
Youth who has experienced homelessness- Appointed by the Child Advocate	Brianna Howland
Youth who has experienced homelessness- Appointed by the Child Advocate	Deandre Avant

APPENDIX B

Map of EOHHS Homeless Youth Services Regions



Appendix C:

Referral Framework for Housing-Unstable or Homeless Minors Seeking Help

Purpose:

This framework is designed to guide adults-- such as school counselors, librarians, coaches, and community workers--when a minor experiencing housing instability or homelessness seeks help. It provides a trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and practical approach to quickly connect young people to immediate resources, while centering their safety and dignity. This is not an exhaustive manual; rather, it serves as a triage tool focused on the most urgent needs: safety, shelter, education, health, and emotional support. The goal is that every youth leaves with something useful and actionable--whether it's a contact, a plan, or a place to go.

Guiding Principles for All Encounters

- **Trauma-Informed**: Interactions must prioritize safety, trust, choice, collaboration.
- **Safety-Focused**: Check for safety concerns early and throughout.
- **Culturally Responsive**: Use inclusive, identity-affirming language for race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, etc.
- **Helpful & Youth-Centered**: Ask open-ended questions, avoid judgmental "why" questions, and ensure the youth leaves with at least one relevant, age-appropriate resource.
- **Accessible**: Always consider transportation- if they can't get there, it's not a solution.
- **Simple Language**: Keep it authentic and conversational, not clinical or bureaucratic.

Mandated Reporting Disclaimer (required up front)

Let the youth know: *"Just so you know, I'm a mandated reporter. If you tell me that an adult is hurting you or you're not safe, I have to report that to the Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF may follow up to make sure you're safe. We want to help you in a way that brings support, not more roadblocks."*

*Note: All reports of suspected child abuse or neglect must be phoned in to DCF. Please call immediately if you know of, or suspect, an incident of child abuse or neglect. During regular business hours (8:45 a.m.-5 p.m. M-F) call the Department of Children and Families (DCF) area office that serves the city or town where the child lives. Nights, weekends, and holidays dial the Child-at-Risk Hotline at (800) 792-5200.

STEP 1: Engage the Youth

Goal: Understand immediate needs and build trust.

Ask:

- "Is it ok if I ask you some questions to better understand your situation? These are questions we ask everyone and if your answers change you can always come back."
- "Is there anything you need help with right now, like food, clothes, or hygiene?"
- "Have you already reached out to anyone else for help?"

If they express needing help:

- Pause and offer snacks and food if available
- Refer to food programs, school liaisons, hygiene/clothing drives for basic needs assistance.

- A list of youth and young adult drop in centers can be found here: https://www.mass.gov/info-details/youth-young-adult-resource-drop-in-and-access-centers

- If unsafe situation is disclosed → you may need to **File a 51A report**

STEP 2: School Involvement

Goal: Help youth access educational rights and supports.

Ask:

- "Are you currently in school or another learning program?"
- "Is your housing situation making it hard for you to attend school?"
- "Has anyone at school helped or talked to you about your situation?"

If enrolled and struggling:

- If enrolled in school but not attending → Ask about barriers and offer referral to **school district's Homeless Liaison**.
  - Massachusetts Liaison Directory
    - The District Homeless Liaison can determine if the youth is eligible for "unaccompanied student" status which will activate McKinney Vento Homeless Education services and education rights such as transportation, meals, etc.

STEP 3: Living Situation & Safety (Not in DCF Placement)

Goal: Identify options for shelter or DCF involvement if necessary

Ask:

- "Where are you staying right now?"
- "Did you stay there last night?"
- "Do you plan to stay there tonight?"
- "Do you feel safe there?"

If staying with friends, relatives, or others:

- "How long have you been there, and how long can you stay?"
- "Do you feel safe where you're staying?"
- "Are there any rules or things you have to do to stay there?"
- "Has anyone asked you to do things like chores, work, or anything else in exchange for staying?"
- "Has anyone made you feel uncomfortable or pressured you to do something you didn't want to?"

If unsafe or experiencing unsheltered homelessness:

- Refer to **Basic Center Programs (BCPs)** for emergency shelter.
  - Detailed information on BCPs is at the end of this document or here:
    - www.mass.gov/info-details/family-conflict-where-to-get-help#basic-center-programs-in-massachusetts

- If abuse, neglect, or abandonment by a caretaker is disclosed → **File a 51A report** and **notify the youth of the reason**.

- If youth was forced out or feels their caretaker is unsafe → **File a 51A report** and **notify the youth of the reason**.
    - More information on Mandated Reporting may be found here: https://www.mass.gov/doc/dcf-mandated-reporter-guide/download

STEP 4: Youth in DCF Placement

Goal: Support placement stability and transition readiness.

Ask:

- "Are you in a foster home or a residential program?"
- "Do you feel safe where you are?"
- "Have you talked with your caseworker about what happens when you turn 18?"

If nearing age 18:

- Ask about **Transition Plan** (688 plan, education, employment, housing goals).
- If DCF is considering ending placement → ask what supports will continue.

Referral Options:

- If the placement is described as unsafe or problematic, call either agency below to help mediate and resolve concerns:
- The DCF Ombudsman office 617-748-2444
- Or the Office of the Child Advocate complaint line
    - Call 617-979-8360 and provide your name, telephone number, and a brief description of the reason for your call or submit a complaint online by sending an email to childadvocate@mass.gov

STEP 5: Medical & Behavioral Health

Goal: Ensure the youth has access to physical & mental health care and feels supported.

Ask:

- "Do you have any health issues or concerns that aren't being addressed right now?"
- "Do you have a doctor or clinic you go to?"
- "Are you on MassHealth?"
- "When was the last time you saw a doctor or nurse? Was that experience helpful?"

If the youth is pregnant:

- "Are you seeing someone for prenatal care, like a doctor or midwife?"
- "Do you know about supports for young parents like Healthy Families?"

Behavioral Health:

- "Have you ever talked to someone about your mental health?"
- "Are you currently seeing a therapist or counselor?"

Referral Options:

- **Behavioral Health Helpline (BHHL)**: Can 3-way call with youth.
    - Masshelpline.com or Call or Text 833-773-2445
- **Community-Based Health Centers (CBHCs)**.
    - https://www.mass.gov/community-behavioral-health-centers
- **Healthy Families:** For pregnancy and parenting support
- If relevant, refer to **Mass Ability** or **Statewide Head Injury Program**.
- For youth with significant medical, mental health, or developmental disabilities that affect daily functioning, Social Security benefits (SSI/SSDI) may be an option. To learn more or apply, visit www.ssa.gov/benefits/disability/

STEP 6: Social and Emotional Support

Goal: Address isolation, identity-based challenges, and build community connections.

Ask:

- "Do you feel like you have people to talk to?"
- "Would it be helpful to connect with a group or someone who's gone through similar stuff?"

If youth is an immigrant:

- Refer to **immigrant & refugee services** for legal, housing, and language support. https://www.mass.gov/office-for-refugees-and-immigrants-ori-programs-and-services

Closing Reminder

- Provide at least one tangible next step (a contact, an address, a resource).
- **Check in frequently if possible** or make a warm handoff to another trusted adult or service provider.
- Reassure the youth: *"You're not alone, and there are people who want to help."*

***Basic Center Programs* (shelter and services for minors) are currently located in Boston, Framingham, Worcester, Greenfield, and Springfield; transportation info included**

All Basic Center Programs (BCP) offer 24/7 emergency shelter and prevention services to youth 12-17 years old. The best practice is to connect the youth directly to the BCP closest to them. Most BCPs will work with the youth to provide transportation. *(more detailed info for each BCP is below)*

Dial Self **Greenfield, MA:** The Basic Center Program (BCP) offers 24/7 emergency shelter and homelessness prevention services to youth 12-17 years old. In some circumstances youth can be provided shelter for up to 21 days while working to secure more stable housing with the help of a counselor. This program typically serves Franklin and Hampshire counties but will work to try and support the young person in the area best suited to their needs. *For transportation, staff will respond in person to young people at multiple Safe Place locations within the service area and can provide transport from Safe Place sites to the shelter for additional services.*

Bridge Over Troubled Waters **Metro Boston, MA:** The Basic Center Program (BCP) offers emergency shelter and prevention service to youth 14-17 years old. In some circumstances youth can be provided shelter for up to 21 days while working to secure more stable housing with the help of a counselor. Typically serves Greater Boston but will work to try and place the young person in the area best suited to their needs. Bridge is the local respondent for the national runaway hotline (1-800-RUNAWAY), offering 24-hour access to a counselor and a safe bed off the streets for youth 14 to 17 years old who have run away from home and find themselves in crisis. *Bridge staff will contact Metro Cab to pick up youth 24 hours a day, seven days a week, within a 30-mile radius of Boston at no cost to the youth and safely transport them to our Transitional Living Program in Brighton for shelter and services. Runaway minors may stay at Bridge up to 72 hours without parental permission. Our Main Office 617-423-9575 is available 24 hours a day and monitored by an answering service after 5:00pm.*

CHD **Safety Zone, Springfield, MA:** The Safety Zone Basic Center Program (BCP) offers emergency shelter and homelessness prevention services to youth 12-17 years old 24/7. In

some circumstances youth can be provided shelter for up to 21 days while working to secure more stable housing with the help of a counselor. This program typically serves Hampden County but will work to try and support the young person in the area best suited to their needs. This program is open referral and places runaway youth in host homes.
For transportation, staff will pick up the youth and transport to the host home, and offer separate placements for boys, girls, and young parents.

LUK, Worcester County: The Basic Center Program (BCP) offers 24/7 emergency shelter and homelessness prevention services to youth 12-17 years old. In some circumstances youth can be provided shelter for up to 21 days while working to secure more stable housing with the help of a counselor. This program typically serves Worcester County but will work to try and support the young person in the area best suited to their needs.
We will work with the young person to problem solve their transportation plan. This plan may include, providing directions for public transportation or walking to the nearest office, meeting staff in a public area for pick up, using a cab service or other means as determined by the staff and the young person.

Wayside, Metro West/Framingham: Wayside's Basic Center Program (BCP) offers 24/7 emergency shelter and homelessness prevention services to youth 12-17 years old. In some circumstances youth can be provided shelter for up to 21 days while working to secure more stable housing with the help of a counselor. This program typically serves the Metro West region but will work to try and support the young person in the area best suited to their needs.
Wayside staff utilize an on-call system which is 508-782-4040 to pick up a youth 24 hours a day, seven days a week, within the MetroWest area at no cost to the youth and safely transport them to our Wayside's Campus in Framingham for shelter and services

Appendix D.

Improving screening of youth and young adults who are unhoused or unstably housed who exchange sex to meet needs: Report of ESN Workgroup to UHYC, June 2025

Background:

The 2022 Youth Count found that nearly one in five unhoused or unstably housed young adults (YA) were exchanging sex or sexual content to meet their needs (ESN), including those who would be considered commercially sexually exploited. In the 2024 Youth Count, 27% of YYA who reported exchanging sex or sexual content had someone else keeping the profits or holding the money. Additionally, a follow-up report found that, among other key recommendations, providers serving YA experiencing homelessness were not consistently identifying YA-ESN, and recommended that YA should not need to disclose ESN to receive appropriate support. The ESN Working Group within the UHYC was tasked with further investigating and making recommendations related to these findings**. This report focuses on recommendations to improve the identification of YA-ESN within the scope of homeless youth services and the UHYC's bi-annual youth Count, with the goal of improving the support offered to these young people.**

Process:

The ESN Working Group met six times over the past year. This Working Group included 40 members representing diverse professional backgrounds and lived experiences. Participants included service providers specializing in YA-ESN, homeless youth services, and state agencies that focus on YA, substance use, and mental health. Three YA participants who are members of the State Youth Advisory Council served as both members and facilitators of the Working Group meetings.

To ensure more specific feedback associated with screening and identification of YA ESN within the context of homeless youth services, two focus groups were developed and facilitated for YA-ESN who were connected to service providers across the state. Members of the YAC, along with three consultants with significant facilitation experience, facilitated these focus groups, and all participants were compensated. Additionally, YA who had signed up for the focus group but could not participate were given the opportunity to complete a survey collecting similar information to the focus group.

Focus groups were conducted anonymously, with participants' cameras off and pseudonyms used to protect their identities. Discussions centered on participants' experiences interacting with service providers while engaging in ESN, as well as their experiences with disclosure. Participants reviewed two distinct types of screening questions: 1) questions from the existing

MA Youth Count survey questions that relate to ESN, and 2) potential screening questions that could be asked by a provider during an intake process.

The recommendations from the focus groups were brought back to the Working Group to be interpreted and refined. The Working Group also reviewed potential HMIS questions related to ESN.

Limitations of Focus Groups:
Seven YA-ESN were involved in two virtual focus groups, and two additional YA-ESN filled out the survey. They came from Cape Cod, Worcester, Lowell, the North Shore, and Western Massachusetts. Of the nine, seven identified as cis-female, one cis-male, and one trans-male. In terms of race and ethnicity, five identified as white non-Hispanic, three as Hispanic, and one as Black. While these focus groups solicited extensive discussion and concrete feedback, the limitations should be noted. Only one participant identified as a cis-male participant, the racial and ethnic demographics were not representative of the YA-ESN population as a whole, and none of the participants had Limited English Proficiency or identified as recent arrivals in the U.S. These limitations were noted to the Working Group, and the broad representation of the Working Group was leaned on to improve the universality of the findings.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Improving YA-ESN Screening questions on HYS-funded Providers' screening/intake forms

The findings for improving screening for YA-ESN center around the following key areas:

1) Who is asking matters;
2) How they ask matters;
3) Why they ask matters;
4) What they ask matters; and
5) How they respond matters.

1) Who is asking matters.

Key Takeaways: Young Adults are more open when questions come from someone they feel is trustworthy, and are asked in an environment that feels safe and welcoming. Many factors contribute to a sense of staff "trustworthiness," including, but not limited to, empathetic and trauma-informed approaches, shared demographics, and lived experiences.

Recommendations: Programs should hire and train "credible messengers" (including people with lived experience) and create safe, culturally responsive environments that provide visible cues for safety (like posters, books, pamphlets, takeaways, safer sex supplies, etc.).

2) How they ask matters.

Key Takeaways*:* YA are always evaluating the safety of people and situations, and how questions are asked influences the likelihood of a direct response.

Recommendations: Staff must be trained in trauma-informed practices, questions should be framed as universal and optional, and supports must be offered to everyone.

3) Why they ask matters.

Key Takeaways: YA-ESN are more likely to respond accurately when they understand the purpose and potential impact of their answers. Disclosure is not the goal. The goal is to communicate that this topic is something the staff can discuss if the YA chooses, and that there are resources available if desired.

Recommendations: Staff must be clear about and clearly communicate why they are asking these questions and what may take place, including mandated reporting and any other limits of confidentiality, if ESN is disclosed.

4) What they ask matters.

Key Takeaways*:* YA prefer questions that are simple, clear, direct, and inclusive. Language should be universal and should avoid terms that are open for interpretation, such as "forced" and "choice". There was no consensus as to whether questions that inquire about the motivations for a young person exchanging sex should be included.

Recommendations: Youth Count questions should remain the same, and the following two direct questions should be included in the intake forms for homeless youth providers:

A) *Have you ever exchanged sex or sexual content (videos, photos, sexual calls) for money, food, shelter, drugs, or anything else you needed?*

   If yes: Is this happening currently?

B) *If you ever exchanged sex or sexual content for money, did someone else keep the profits or hold the money for you?*

If yes: Is this happening currently?

5) How they respond matters.

Key Takeaways: Staff should respond in ways that are supportive and respectful, and have resources ready to share. Negative or judgmental responses, or an experience of betrayal, were highly detrimental to YAs and impacted future support seeking.

Recommendations: Staff must receive training on asking these specific questions, including mandated reporting requirements when there are minors involved. Further, staff should be aware of relevant resources, and be trained in trauma-informed intake processes.

HMIS Questions and ESN integration

The ESN focus groups were conducted as separate but concurrent efforts alongside the Homeless Youth Services (HYS) Data Team's work to improve overall statewide data collection. At the time, the Data Team was focused on transitioning all HYS data into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and determining which HMIS data elements should be required for HYS providers.

During this review, the Data Team identified an existing HMIS data element called R15, which focuses on experiences of commercial sexual exploitation. Recognizing the relevance of this question to the themes that emerged in the ESN-UHYC focus groups, the Data Team proposed to the workgroup that R15 be included as a required question for all HYS providers as a part of standardized data collection.

The proposed integration would involve asking the question statewide, **using the wording exactly as defined in HMIS.** Question R15 includes an initial question about experiences of ESN, and depending on how that question is answered, additional sub-questions or prompts are triggered to gather more information about the individual's experience. To inform this decision, the ESN working group reviewed the language of question R15 and provided feedback based on their professional expertise, lived experience, and insights from the focus groups.

Question R-15 in HMIS includes:

1) Have you ever received anything in exchange for sex (eg money, food, drugs, shelter)?

if yes, 1a) Have you received anything in exchange for sex in the last three months?

1b) How many times have you received anything in exchange for sex?

1c) Were you ever made/persuaded/forced to have sex in exchange for something?

if yes, 1d) In the last three months?

The Working Group's feedback on these questions included the following recommendations:

1) The questions do not ask about sexual content, only "sex," which is usually interpreted as "sexual acts." Many young adults who are experiencing homelessness are engaging in sharing sexual content (phone calls, video chats, photographs, etc.), and this is a critical intervention point. **Staff should ask about both sexual content and sexual acts.**

2) The question asks about being "made/persuaded/forced" to have sex; however, this wording is interpreted very differently than the suggested "did someone else keep the profits or hold the money for you?". **Staff should ask about someone else keeping the profits/ holding money in addition to being persuaded/forced.**

3) **The question about "how many times have you received anything in exchange for sex" is too invasive and should not be asked.**

4) Given the concerns related to questions 1b and 1c, and the understanding that language must be kept exactly as defined in HMIS, **the Working Group proposed asking only question 1a in order to get some baseline data and ignoring the other questions.** Further, they considered having guidance around the questions to clarify that "sex" includes "sexual content" in order to get a fuller picture of the young adult's level of risk.

These recommendations were presented to the HYS Data team, and they incorporated them, to the best of their ability, in the required FY26 HMIS data collection.

Overall Conclusions:

Improving support for YA-ESN within homeless youth services will require a shift among service providers. While enhancing identification and consistent state-wide data collection are primary goals, the recommendations outlined in this report clarify that t**he true goal is to ensure that every YA-ESN is met by service providers offering a non-judgmental approach and connecting them to relevant services.** In sum, the following three tenets should guide the work moving forward:

> ***Disclosure is not the goal.*** Disclosures will come through relationships on the young person's own time. Disclosures that are not handled well can do great damage.
>
> ***Screening questions are an opportunity.*** Creating a welcoming environment that is sensitive to ESN communicates that a provider and an organization can handle and support young people experiencing this, and connect them to appropriate resources.
>
> ***Questions and supports should be universal.*** Screening questions AND supports should be universal regardless of disclosure.