

MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC CONFERENCE  
WEST END PLACE

150 Staniford Street, Boston, MA 02114-2511  
Phone (617) 367-6060  
FAX (617) 367-2767

**LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY**

To: Members of the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities  
From: Kathryn M. Davis, M.Ed., Public Policy Coordinator  
Re: Support of *House 1862, "An Act Providing Housing & Support Services for Unaccompanied Youth"*  
Date: July 19, 2011

The Massachusetts Catholic Conference ("Conference") respectfully submits this testimony in support of *House 1862, "An Act Providing Housing & Support Services for Unaccompanied Youth"*.

**Section 1 – Definition of Need**

*House 1862* requires the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to study and take action to meet the unique needs of a highly vulnerable, growing population in Massachusetts known as "unaccompanied homeless youth". As the legislation stated, "[t]he Department of Elementary and Secondary Education estimates that nearly 6,000 high school students are homeless and on their own. Thousands more homeless youth are not reflected in these numbers because they have already dropped out of school."

*Need for Services*

Youth aged twenty-two and under experience numerous developmental emotional, social and biological changes that can lead to increased vulnerability. When separated from their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) the risk increases dramatically. "[U]naccompanied, homeless youth are disproportionately at risk of being involved in and harmed by the commercial sex industry."<sup>1</sup> "Homeless youth experience disproportionately high rates of trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."<sup>2</sup> They are "more likely to engage in substance use and delinquent behavior, drop out of school, and suffer from sexually transmitted diseases and mental illness at greater rates than the norm."<sup>3</sup> Homeless youth have higher rates of suicide initiations, depression and other mental health disorders.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, chronic physical health problems such as diabetes, hypertension, hepatitis, tuberculosis, asthma and other respiratory problems are common.<sup>5</sup> The need for services, along with safe, affordable, stable housing is acute.

---

<sup>1</sup> Able-Peterson, T., & M. Meuleners, "Homeless Youth and Sexual Exploitation: Research finding and Practice Implications". National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bender, K, K. Ferguson & S. Thompson, "Factors Associated with Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Homeless Youth in Three U.S. Cities: The Importance of Transience". *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 23(1); 161-168: February 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Walsh, S. & R. Donaldson, "Invited Commentary: National Safe Place: Meeting the Immediate Needs of Runaway and Homeless Youth". *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 39(5); 437-445: 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Whitbeck, L & D. Hoyt, "Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and Their Families". New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> "Homeless Youth in Minnesota 2003: Statewide Survey of People without Permanent Shelter." Wilder Research, February, 2005.

## **Section 2 – Housing and Support Services**

*House 1862* seeks to provide a “continuum of housing options” including, but not limited to: “emergency shelter, kinship home placements, short term housing and Transition to Independent Living programs” alongside wraparound services to address the need for “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.”

## **Section 3 – Unaccompanied Homeless Youth in School**

Not less than twenty percent of the funds appropriated through *House 1862* will be dedicated “to unaccompanied homeless youth enrolled in and attending high school or alternative educational programs to assist them in completing their education.” Formerly homeless youth have reported that “leaving school was a turning point in their lives and that their situations worsened afterward.”<sup>6</sup> The struggle to meet their basic needs, while faced with the extreme physical and emotional challenges of homelessness is reported by homeless youth to be a large barrier to educational achievement.<sup>7</sup> When asked what services would support their educational goals, unaccompanied youth referenced the need for basic necessities such as housing, personal hygiene, employment, financial stability, family support, emotional well-being and mental health.<sup>8</sup> Dedicating state resources to study and serve this population would support resilient, youth who are motivated, in the face of great odds, to improve their lives (and in some cases the lives of their children) by completing high school.

## **Section 4 – Establishment of a “Special Commission(s)”**

*House 1862* seeks to establish a “a special commission for the purpose of studying and making recommendations concerning services for unaccompanied homeless youth under eighteen years of age with the goal of ensuring a comprehensive and effective response to the unique needs of this population.” The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth published a report in 2008, titled “Using What We Know: Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth”. In this report the authors noted the importance of developing a “[b]road, multi-agency coordination on the local level...to ensure that unaccompanied youth can enroll in, attend, and succeed in school.”<sup>9</sup> Faith-based organizations are one of the twenty partners suggested in the report. The “Conference” invites the Committee to include professionals who represent faith-based organizations on the commission(s) established by *House 1862*.

---

<sup>6</sup> More information about the Alameda County School-Based Health Centers is available at <http://www.alamedafs.org/index.php?id=7> and <http://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information about Youth On Their Own, visit <http://www.yoto.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> Tex. Ed. Code §25.001(f), available at <http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/laws/texascode.php>.

<sup>9</sup> Julianelle, P., “Using What We Know: Supporting the Education of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth NAEHCY.” National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. February 2008.

The “Conference” also supports the establishment of a second commission (as recommended by Outside Section 145L of Senate 1920) to study the unique needs of unaccompanied homeless youth between the ages of 18 and 22.

### *Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*

“[O]ne quarter of former foster youth experience homelessness within four years of exiting foster care.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, studies have found that anywhere from twenty to forty percent of young women who age out of foster care are pregnant or already parents.<sup>11</sup> Youth aging out of foster care often have “limited options for housing, income, and family or other social support. Many have witnessed domestic violence, been physically or sexually abused, and have serious emotional and psychological problems.”<sup>12</sup> Targeted research and corresponding interventions to assist this vulnerable population in Massachusetts are needed for the good of the individual young people, as well as the society-at-large.

### **Reflection**

As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *God is Love* (2005), “The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation”.

On February 9, 2011, the four Roman Catholic Ordinaries in Massachusetts issued a statement titled, “Standing in Solidarity with All”, in which they pledged to “do all [they] can as Bishops to enable our institutions – parishes, Catholic Charities, health care facilities and schools – to continue to do their best in extending help to our neighbors in need.” Currently, administrators of Catholic Charities, members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and other regional leaders and parish members are serving numerous vulnerable residents in Massachusetts, including homeless youth. The passage of *House 1862*, drafted to address the unique needs of this extremely vulnerable population of homeless youth, would strengthen and expand the invaluable work already being done by professional and volunteer organizations throughout the Commonwealth. As a result, the quality of life for all residents of Massachusetts could improve considerably.

### **Recommendation**

For these reasons, the “Conference” urges the Committee to report favorably a bill based upon the provisions of *House 1862* that addresses the aforementioned needs.

The Massachusetts Catholic Conference is the public policy office of the Roman Catholic Bishops in the Commonwealth, representing the Archdiocese of Boston and the Dioceses of Fall River, Springfield, and Worcester.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cook, R., “A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth, Phase 2.” Rockville, MC: Westat, Inc. 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Shinn, M., D. Rog, & D. Culhane, “Family Homelessness: Background Research Findings and Policy Options.” Washington, DC: U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, May 2005.

<sup>12</sup> “Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness: 2010.” United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.