

Meeting the Needs of Homeless Youth in the Merrimack Valley

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Executive Summary

This paper summarizes a year long research effort aimed at understanding the problem of youth homelessness in the Merrimack Valley. Data collected from organizations and agencies serving homeless youth, as well as from youth focus groups, are used to identify 1) the key features of the service environment, and 2) the needs, attitudes, and behaviors of the homeless youth these agencies are working to assist. Our analysis shows that the two areas in which agency efforts seem to fit best with the needs of homeless youth are in the provision of basic needs and outreach. In addition, the biggest need that is not being met systematically in the current service environment is the need for psychological support. Based on our analysis, we develop a set of ten recommendations on how to get youth into programs, how to make individual programs work better, and how to make the system as whole function more effectively.

A Tale of Two Problems: Why Youth Homelessness Matters in Workforce Development

In working to provide a foundation for sustained economic growth and prosperity, the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board (MVWIB) devotes significant attention, energy, and resources to youth workforce development. Through its Youth Council, the MVWIB addresses so called "pipeline issues", i.e. helping the youth of the region access the education and training, develop the skills, and acquire the experiences needed to both enjoy good careers and become productive citizens. Developing and enhancing the abilities of the region's youth is a key to creating a robust future workforce and providing for the economic future of the valley.

In terms of the current state of youth workforce development in the nation, the state, and the region, two things are true. First, teen work experience, along with formal education and training/apprenticeship, is positively correlated with both the likelihood of employment and annual income. Sum (2009) reports that individuals who worked as teens earn, on average, 16% more than those with no teen work experience. The effects of participation in apprentice training (+7%), formal company training (+9%), and other training (+10%) on income are similarly impressive. The effects of education on income are by far the greatest, with Bachelor's Degree recipients earning twice as much as high school graduates and three times as much as high school dropouts.¹

Second, the region and state are quickly falling behind other states in the nation, and other nations of the world, in terms the preparation of youth to enter the workforce and contribute to society. Between 2000 and 2008 youth ages 16-19 and young adults ages 20-24 showed the largest decline in employment of any age group nationally. This decline was larger among men than women, among Hispanic men in particular, and largest among the less educated and those with lower family income. In the last two decades, Massachusetts has fallen from 11th to 23rd among states in teen employment.

In addition, these same groups that are having difficulty acquiring critical early workforce experience are most vulnerable to dropping out of school, placing them at a distinct disadvantage in securing employment and establishing careers. Statewide women graduate at higher rate than men (84% vs. 78%), and Whites (86%) and Asians (84%) graduate at higher rates than Blacks (65%) and Hispanics (58%). Graduation rates in urban and low income suburban

¹ Sum, Andrew. 2009. "Youth Development Indicators for Educational and Workforce Development Programs in Massachusetts at the State, Regional, and Local WIB Service Delivery Areas." Presentation for the Northeast Youth-Focused Summit, March 19, 2009.

districts in the region are significantly lower than statewide averages (Sum 2009).

One factor identified by the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board Youth Council as a significant contributor to these observed deficiencies in the preparation of the region's youth for gainful employment is the problem of youth homelessness. In many ways, stability in one's living/housing situation is a pre-requisite for being able to take advantage of the educational, training, and experiential opportunities in which the youth of our region need to participate in order to make them workforce ready.

The significance and prevalence of the issue of youth homelessness was brought into particularly sharp focus in 2007, when the MVWIB partnered with the Greater Lowell Workforce Investment Board to upgrade and expand the capacity of their MVHUB website. This website, designed to connect valley residents with community information and resources, provides a searchable community services directory that list over 230 agencies, organizations, and programs, and provides a calendar of community events. As part of the 2007 upgrade, the site administrator at Community Software Lab (CSL) was able to generate information on site usage and queries. In particular, CSL was able to report on those key terms on which site users were most frequently searching. The first of these reports was run in 2008. In this report, and in every report since then, homelessness has been among the top several search terms used at the MVHUB site.

The prominence of the issue of youth homelessness in the local context parallels national and statewide trends. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the US Department of Justice there are an estimated 1.7 million homeless and runaway youth in America. The US conference of Mayors estimates that youth account for 1% of the urban homeless population, while according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness five to seven percent of American youth become homeless in any given year. Here in Massachusetts, the Center on Social Policy at UMass Boston reports that of the 28,000 unaccompanied individuals who stay in shelters each year, 9% are youth (18-24). In addition, estimates from the Massachusetts Department of Education indicate that in 2005 there were as many as 48,000 homeless youth enrolled in the state's public schools. While published data at the regional level is not generally available, the City of Boston's most recent homelessness census reported a 22% rise in the number of homeless families in the last year and a 24% increase in the number of children without a home in that same time period.

Falling levels of preparation for workplace success and rising levels of homelessness among the region's youth may in fact be connected. These problems are certainly both exacerbated by the current economic climate, which

constrains opportunities and services available for youth, while at the same time placing greater economic stress on them. Given this connection and context, the issue of youth homelessness can be seen as an issue of infrastructure and support that is critical to the MVWIB Youth Council's comprehensive efforts to develop and promote regional youth programs aimed at workforce development.

Project Goals

Based on the realization that youth homelessness is a problem that is negatively affecting the preparation of the region's youth for workforce participation, the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board Youth Council partnered with Merrimack College's Center for Public Opinion Research on a P-21 (Pathways to Success by 21) Grant aimed at documenting the problem of youth homeless in the Merrimack Valley. This year long project, designed to provide a clearer understanding of the region's youth homeless problem, has had four key goals:

- 1) Develop a picture of the service environment, including:
 - the types of services provided
 - the ways in which these services are delivered
 - the challenges and constraints facing service providers
- 2) Develop a picture of the youth homelessness problem, including:
 - the causes of youth homelessness
 - the ways in which homeless youth are currently surviving
 - the needs of homeless and at-risk youth
 - the assets and barriers to homeless and at-risk youth getting help
- 3) Identify the areas where services are meeting needs – the overlaps – and where services are not meeting needs – the gaps
- 4) Develop a set of recommendations that draw on the strengths of the existing services environment and address the areas where the current system is failing to meet needs

While these four goals have been the substantive focus of the project, the research process – from design, to data collection, to dissemination of findings – has been guided by the principle of collaboration. The input and guidance of the region's youth, and of those who work with the homeless youth population everyday, has been critical in developing an understanding of the problem of youth homelessness. In particular, how the research team proceeded in attempting to understand the components of the youth homeless problem was

shaped to a large degree by the feedback and observations of our agency and youth partners.²

Project Design

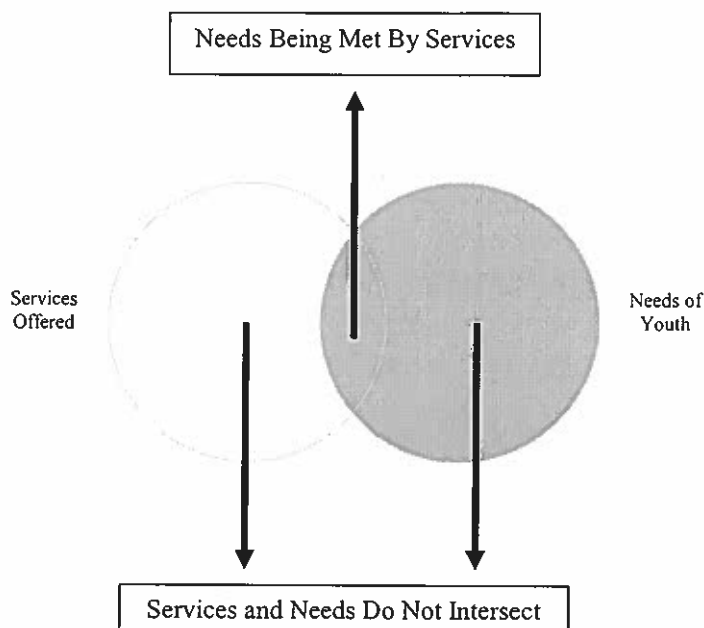
While some of the larger municipalities in the state (e.g., Boston) and region (e.g., Lawrence) have undertaken censuses of their homelessness populations this research strategy was rejected as inappropriate for the purposes of this project for several reasons. First, the resources needed to identify and survey this relatively difficult to reach population were simply not available as part of the funding for this project. Second, when organizations engage in what is typically referred to as a homelessness census, in fact they are attempting a count of the number of homeless in a given geographic area. Given the in-depth information required to address the research questions identified in this project, a simple census/count would not be inadequate for our purposes. Furthermore, the fluidity of this population makes the logistics of such an endeavor extremely challenging. Third, given that this project focuses on homeless youth, the population from which to draw a reasonable sized sample, on which generalized conclusions could be made, is even smaller than the general homeless population. The challenges of identifying such a sample, again given resource constraints, seemed too large to warrant such approach.

Thus, in collecting data aimed at identifying the ways in which services are being provided to homeless youth and the needs, attitudes, and behaviors of homeless youth, we opted for a non-probability sampling strategy designed to be broadly illustrative rather than statistically representative of both the agency environment and the needs of youth. The results of our research should be interpreted as showing what services are available across a range of agencies and organizations, and what needs are out there. However, they do not indicate the prevalence or frequency of these services and needs.

Given these constraints, our basic approach was first, to document as fully as possible the agency environment and the needs of homeless youth, and second to identify the gaps and overlaps between services and needs. Figure 1 depicts this data collection and analytic design.

² A great deal of the invaluable guidance that we received on this project occurred at our initial planning conference in April 2008, which brought together a wide range of regional constituencies involved in the issue of youth homelessness.

Figure 1 – Data Collection and Analysis Design



The area in which the two circles overlap represents those places where the services provided are in fact meeting the needs of homeless youth. The area of largest concern is the where there are needs of youth that are not being met by service providers, the non-overlapping portions of the blue circle. The non-overlapping portion of the green circle shows where services might be redirected to better serve the needs of youth.³

In order to develop a picture of the services offered to homeless youth our student research team conducted twenty-one interviews with representatives from agencies, organizations, and groups working with homeless or at-risk youth across the region. Our definitions of homeless and at-risk youth are taken from the McKinney-Vento criteria (see Appendix) and include young people ages 14 to 22. While, this age range for youth does not perfectly coincide with the census reporting categories of youth (16-19) and young adult (20-24), it extends our analysis from youth who fall below the legal dropout age to those who are above the age at which they can legally secure housing independently, two legal demarcations that are important for understanding how young people meet their need for housing.

The sample of agencies was designed to include representatives from each of seven types of organizations (education, community or faith based

³ Of course agencies and organizations might be providing (and might want to continue providing) these service for a variety of reasons. It is only where such services have been specifically directed to assist homeless youth, and where they are not meeting a need of this population, that the resources devoted to these services be redirected.

organizations, state agencies, local government or public safety, public libraries, housing authorities, shelter or food pantries) from each of three geographic areas in the Merrimack Valley (Greater Lawrence, Greater Haverhill, and Greater Newburyport). Table 1 provides a sampling grid that identifies the geographic and agency boundaries of our sample.

Table 1 – Sampling Grid

	<u>Greater Lawrence:</u> Andover, Lawrence, Methuen, N. Andover	<u>Greater Haverhill:</u> Georgetown, Groveland, Haverhill, Merrimac	<u>Greater Newburyport:</u> Amesbury, Boxford, Newbury, Newburyport, Rowley, Salisbury, W. Newbury
Educational Institutions			
Community or Faith Based Orgs.			
State Agencies			
Local Gov. or Public Safety			
Public Library			
Housing Authorities			
Shelters or Food Pantries			

One agency of each type from each region was contacted for participation in the project, and while scheduling conflicts of other constraints prevented approximately 25% of the agencies initially identified from participating, appropriate substitutions within region and agency type were made to fill out the sample. The interviews, took approximately one hour and focused on several different types of information: background on the respondent, organizational mission, services and referrals, population served, relationships with other agencies, outreach and advertising, reporting and data collection practices, infrastructure impediments, the philosophy of program design, and staffing issues⁴.

Data on youth homelessness were collected in six focus groups composed of 5-10 youth each in the target age range, conducted at schools, libraries, community centers, and agencies providing services to youth. Representative from these organizations assisted with the recruitment of these youth focus group participants and as an incentive, each participant received a \$25.00 mall gift card. Each group was mixed in terms gender and participants were fairly

⁴ A copy of the interview schedule is available from CPOR upon request.

close in age to each other. These focus groups were all facilitated by pairs of student researchers working on the project.

Of the youth who participated in the focus groups some may have themselves been at-risk or homeless, however being at-risk or homeless was not a pre-requisite for focus group participation. Instead, this phase of the data collection was designed to elicit insights from subjects closest to the problem of youth homeless, those with either direct or indirect knowledge of this issue. To protect the privacy of youth focus group participants, and to encourage participants to share information regarding homelessness they had learned from their peers, none of the focus group participants were asked to self-identify or provide information about their own experiences. Instead, as part of the introduction to the focus group process, participants were told that,

For the questions we are going to ask you we don't need anyone to identify themselves as homeless, or having been homeless, or even as being worried about becoming homeless. Our questions will be phrased very generally, in terms of what you know or think about this issue based on your experiences, the experiences of others, conversations with others, or just what you have seen around.

This approach was adopted in an effort to elicit comments that were as honest as possible regarding a fairly sensitive topic. Interestingly, this approach, as well as the facilitation of the student researchers, created such a comfortable environment that several of the focus group participants spontaneously identified themselves as having been homeless at some point in their lives. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour each, were fully transcribed, and focused on: the prevalence of the problem, how it is perceived in the community, the causes of youth homelessness, the lifestyle of homeless youth, the availability of services, and what can be done about this problem.

Findings on the Service Environment

Based on the twenty one agencies interviews several patterns emerged in how the youth homeless population of the Merrimack Valley is being served. These findings cover the services provided, the ways in which these services are delivered, and organizational constraints and challenges.

Agencies Provide A Wide Range Of Services, But Basic Needs Are Addressed Across The System By Almost All Organizations

While organizations offer a range of services, from education, to training, to shelter, almost all organizations have some focus on basic needs. It is not

just those organizations that have the provision of basic needs as their core mission, such as shelters or food pantries that focus significant attention on the provision of these services. Schools help meet the nutritional and health needs of the homeless youth population; law enforcement agencies connect young people in need with shelter and clothing. Obviously, resource constraints limit the degree to which organizations are able to provide these basic services to youth in need. However, even those organizations that focus on services designed to assist homeless youth in the long run (e.g., educational institutions, training programs) have an acute awareness of and devote significant attention to helping meet these basic needs. In a sense, there is no real division between short term and long term service providers. If there is an area of deficiency in the focus of organizations, it would be in the provision of services that are preventative in nature, ones that are designed to help youth avoid becoming homeless in the first place.

Most Organization Utilize A Single Service, One-On-One Model With Cross Agency Collaborations And Extensive Outreach And Advertising

When asked about the whether a focused approach (in which they provide mostly one type of service) was a very important, a somewhat important, or not a very important element of their program design or delivery, most service providers responded very important. In contrast, the modal response regarding the degree of importance of a comprehensive approach – in which they provide lots of different kinds of services – was somewhat important. This assessment is consistent with the data on service provision, which shows that most organizations focus on providing a single service (or relatively narrow range of services), but supplement this work with other services in order to meet client needs. It is also consistent with the mission statements which we collected from these organizations, which by and large are clear, concise, and focused on a single goal.

As for the one-on-one model of service delivery, nearly all organizations rated some combination of peer to peer service provision, developing supportive relationships, and mentoring as very important in their service delivery and design. Discussion groups were seen as important by some, with fewer viewing mediation or developing supportive social networks as very important in how their programs were run. In addition, most organizations embraced a graduated approach to the provision of services.

Whether it is because of financial, institutional, or legal constraints, most organizations cannot provide all of the services needed by homeless youth. Usually based on geography, youth serving organizations have found local partner organizations to supplement the services that they themselves provide. In response to our query, almost all organization described their working

relationship with these partners as "standing, established, and regular," rather than, "recent, tentative, and sporadic". These partnerships are truly collaborative, with all agencies reporting a mix of situations in which, "we lead" and "they lead" in reference to how they work with their partner agencies. Only two of the organizations we interviewed said that they outsourced or referred all of their supplementary services, aside from the main one their organization was focused on providing. In addition, when asked about other organizations that were active in providing services to homeless youth, agency representatives listed, on average, four other organizations they were familiar with, further evidence that there does exist a true community of service providers working with this population.

When asked about the advertising and outreach they engage in, organizations listed: newsletters, e-newsletters, television commercials, fundraising events, network outreach, newspaper advertising, flyers, talks at organizations and community meetings, websites, open houses, street outreach, courts, mailings, radio advertising, school visits, press releases, Myspace pages, churches, and community centers as some of the ways in which they try get the word out. These techniques range from the sophisticated to the basic, from the highly mediated to the highly personal. Most organization representatives rated these individuals advertising and outreach efforts as both highly resource intensive and highly effective.

The Most Significant Organizational Constraints And Challenges Are Funding, Information Sharing, And Program Qualifications

Not surprisingly, insufficient funding was seen as the biggest constraint on the ability of organizations to deliver better and more services to the populations they work with.

While organizations struggle with deficiencies in physical and technology infrastructure as well, when we asks specifically about whether resources in these areas were adequate or inadequate, most representatives – with this choice forced upon them – responded adequate. Thus, organizations seem to be getting by in these areas, though certainly more resources devoted to infrastructure and technology could make the services they offered more effective.

Constraints on the ability to share information with other organizations were also seen as significant barriers to service provision. These legal restrictions make coordination of efforts more difficult and in some cases not worthwhile. While most programs have extensive reporting requirements, the legal limitations on how that information can be used and shared inhibit coordination and tracking according to a majority of respondents.

Finally, program qualification restrictions do cause agencies to have to deny services to certain individuals who do not qualify. Because age is a qualification for many of the services that homeless youth are seeking to access, these restrictions present a particular burden for this group.

In general, many of these constraints were viewed by agency representatives as necessary components of their programs, but significant burdens none the less.

Finding on Youth Needs

The six youth focus groups examined the conditions in which homeless youth exist in the Merrimack Valley from a variety of perspectives. The major findings of these focus groups have been excerpted and organized into the following five areas: the causes of youth homelessness; how homeless youth are currently surviving; the needs of homeless and at risk youth; and the assets and barriers to homeless and at-risk youth getting help.

Economic And Family Causes Of Homelessness Are Primary, But It May Be "A Choice" For Some

When asked to elaborate on the causes of youth homelessness, many of the answers focused on economic causes

It started with the loss of a job. Foreclosure is a big problem.

In addition, the current economic situation was seen as directly relevant to the rise in youth homeless. When asked how big a problem they thought youth homelessness was, participants replied:

Youth homeless is starting grow more . . . especially at this time during the recession. I think now it's increasing because of the market. People are losing their jobs and don't have the same amount as before.

However, almost an equal number of responses focused on the breakdown of families and personal problems, combined with faults in the social services system,

We have a high population of children in DSS 'til they're 18, but many don't want to live there. They don't have the necessary life skills to live on their own and end up on the streets

All family members passed away – moved on. No way to get a job, don't have any money, have nobody to rely on anymore. A lot of kids in DSS. The kids don't have to stay until 18. A rebellious teen can end up in jail, run away, do things you shouldn't because until you get caught you can do what you want.

This last comment also conveys the sense that in some cases, some members of our focus groups viewed homelessness as a conscious lifestyle choice, albeit a misguided and negative one. This sentiment was echoed in other places in the focus groups where participants discussed how some homeless youth hustle and take advantage of the system. To some degree our participants distinguished between youth who were driven into homelessness by economic or family circumstances, and those who either chose homelessness or chose to stay homeless.

Homeless Youth Are Currently Surviving By Hanging Out In Public Places, Sleeping In A Variety Of Places Not Designed For Human Habitation, Relying On Services And Various Forms Of "Hustling"

When asked, participants listed a wide range of places where homeless youth hang out:

Abandoned places, shelter, liquor stores, at friends house, under bridges, the park, in front of the high school waiting for other kids to come out, the mall the YMCA, walking in the stores

Similarly when asked where homeless youth actually sleep, participants offered a range of responses:

Under bridges, anyplace that has a roof, dumpster, abandoned buildings, friends house, anyplace that might have some sort of covering, anywhere you can find a store open 24 hours, stairs, basement

In terms of the others around them, most participants felt that young people were no more or less likely to be homeless on their own than with their family. Some felt that there was a difference between male and female homeless youth in terms of who they tend to socialize with, with females tending to hang out with older males and male youth remaining with same age, same gender groups.

When asked how homeless youth meet their basic needs, aside from shelter, responses fell into two categories. Some meet these needs by,

Hustling, begging for change, they sing and perform, sometimes they resort to stealing and illegal activities

Others rely on services,

A lot of shelters help you out, they are a really big help, even if it's just to clean up

Homeless Youth Need Basics, Plus Psychological Support And Long Term Goals

No surprisingly much of the discussion of the needs of homeless youth focused on the basics necessities of life. In response to a series of question on the biggest challenge faced by homeless youth, the one thing they need to get them through their days, and their biggest fears and concerns, participants offered,

Food, Water, Clothes, Shower/Bath, Hygiene Finding shelter, Health Care, Protection from the weather/cold

One participant observed, quite concisely

You can't think straight without food

In addition, several of the groups focused on the means by which to obtain these things, namely, "money" or "a job", as the things that homeless youth most needed.

Somewhat more surprising was the degree of importance that all of the groups put on the psychological stresses that homeless youth face and their need for support

[They need] Love and care, Finding someone to talk about it with, Love, Help, Support, Someone to talk to

That's another reason why people are homeless because they feel abandoned

I remember when I was younger, my mom being stressed about money – clothes, food, and bed

The groups also observed mental health and addiction issues were among the more serious manifestations of homeless youth not getting needed psychological support and services.

In some of the responses to these questions, as well as in response to our prompt about what homeless youth need in the long term to help them improve their lives, several groups alluded to the importance of having goals towards which to strive,

Belief, hope, faith, comfort, and someone to motivate you

were all seen as important in helping homeless youth get back on track. The groups also conveyed strongly the idea the general economic conditions in the communities in which homeless youth found themselves, Lawrence in particular, contributed to a sense of hopelessness that homeless youth were struggling against.

Homeless Youth Have Social Assets, But Face Economic, Educational, Emotional and Self-Definitional Barriers To Getting Help

In several different places in the focus group discussions, the idea that homeless youth actually do have supportive networks on which they rely came through indirectly,

Youth who are staying at friend's house

In front of the high school waiting for other kids to come out

When asked who a homeless youth would tell their status, respondents mentioned,

A school counselor and their closest friends, best friends, people closest to them, their families, friends who you confide in

While there was also some discussion of homeless youth who, "mope around" and, "are alone" the picture painted of the bulk of homeless youth is that they maintain connections to peers who may not themselves be economically well off, but who may have more stability in their housing situation.

In terms of barriers to homeless youth success, education was seen as important, especially as it connects to employment prospects,

From education you get a good job, you get money, and you get back on your feet

Participants also mentioned language as a barrier to getting help and advancing for homeless youth, as well as a lack of necessary skills, for example knowing

how to open a bank account and being intimidated by the language involved in this.

By far and away, pride was seen as the biggest psychological and emotional barriers holding back homeless youth.

Keep a job, swallow pride and let people know you need help, pride will not feed you or make you a better person

[They don't use services available because they are] embarrassed, too much pride

Despite being an important issue that they see their peers facing, the subject of homelessness remains taboo among young people. This stigmatization of homelessness may in fact represent the biggest barrier to youth getting the help they need.

In all the groups the dominant response to the question of how widely this topic was discussed among people your age was none or not at all. One participant offered up the explanation that,

People don't want to talk about uncomfortable things

When presented with the McKinney-Vento definitions of homeless and at-risk, most focus group participants agreed that these were reasonably good definitions. However, they observed that in self identifying, youth would not use these definitions. One participant observed that,

If they have a house to go back to, it's not homeless.

It seems that pride may be the biggest barrier to these youth both identifying as homeless and getting the services they need to get back on track.

Overlaps: Focus on Basic Needs and Advertising/Outreach

Basic needs were identified by the focus groups as one of the most important areas in which homeless youth require assistance. Agencies seem to be focusing significant attention on this need as well. While organizations are constrained in their capacity to meet these material needs, the ability of organizations to see this need and attempt to meet it as creatively and resourcefully as possible, even while their organizational focus may be elsewhere represents a true success. Furthermore, it lays a necessary foundation on which other, longer term successes can be built.

In addition, the advertising and outreach efforts of these organizations seem to be effective. Our focus group participants confirmed quite emphatically the positive self-assessment of the agency providers regarding their advertising efforts. The youth who participated in our groups mentioned numerous specific organizations they were aware of and confirmed that they had been informed about the services and programs available to homeless youth through many of the outreach and advertising efforts identified in the agency interviews. Furthermore, our focus group participants provided a sense that word of mouth and the visibility of these service providers in the community were effective in letting them and others know about the availability of these services.

Gaps: Psychological Support and Utilizing Social Networks

Assessments of the gaps in the service environment – those areas in which needs are not being met by existing service providers – must by their very nature remain more speculative. This is because even though certain of the needs identified in the focus groups were not listed by organizations during our agency interviews as being among the services they provide, our research process was not an iterative one. In essence, we did not go back to the agencies once we had identified these needs in our focus groups to confirm whether or not these organizations do in fact address these concerns in the services they provide. For this reason our identification of the gaps between services and needs remains fairly general, and concerns itself with broad patterns in service environment, rather than specific programmatic deficiencies.

Nonetheless, psychological support seems to be an area in which needs are not being met. Clearly, the psychological needs of some members of the target population are quite substantial and not all agencies are, nor should they be, equipped to handle such demands. However, psychological needs, from support and counseling to more extensive services, were identified as being at least as large a concern as basic needs in most of our groups. Our agency interviews failed to reveal nearly as large or prevalent an emphasis on this type of service compared to, for instance, the nearly uniform emphasis that agencies have on the provision of basic needs.

In addition, in terms of how services are delivered, the client based model pursued by most agencies seems to be failing to utilize existing social networks. While this is not a gap in the classic sense, i.e., there is a need for some service out there which agencies and organizations are not providing, this failure to utilize existing social networks can be seen as a way in which providers are failing to deliver their services as efficaciously as possible. We were quite surprised by the degree to which our focus groups indicated that homeless youth are plugged into social networks. A few, but not most, service providers

recognize the importance of social support, and incorporate attempts to build new, supportive relationships for homeless youth into their programs. However, even in doing so they may be overlooking the value in existing social networks. At a minimum, the supportive value of these relationships needs to be re-examined by providers looking to help homeless youth make long term progress towards their goals.

Recommendations and Challenges

Our recommendations are based in large part on the places where we can identify gaps between elements of the service environment (based on our agency interview data) and the needs of the homeless youth (based on our focus group data). They also draw on some of the areas of overlap or strength that we have identified that provide models for replication. In addition, these recommendations are informed by feedback gathered at our initial project planning conference and the bibliography of resources on youth homeless that we have compiled in conjunction with our work on this project. In addition to our recommendations, we offer several challenge questions that we believe require careful consideration as organizations working with homeless youth in the Merrimack Valley move forward with implementing the recommendations and improving the programs they support.

We divide our recommendations into three sequential categories which focus on the issues of getting youth into programs, making programs work, and making the system work.

Getting Youth Into Programs

Recommendation 1: Continue to Work to De-stigmatize Youth Homelessness

Youth can't get services if they have don't have a problem and youth failing to self-identify as homeless is a major barrier to their receiving the services they need according to agency representative and youth alike. Various strategies have been employed in this effort, such as shifting the terminology to "unaccompanied youth", and strategies such as this need to continue to be incorporated into outreach and advertising.

Recommendation 2: Understand Better the Communication Styles of Youth

While advertising and outreach efforts are generally succeeding according to both youth and agencies, the communications styles of youth in the fast paced, technologically changing world in which we live are constantly evolving. We recommend the development of a standard training seminar that can be brought to youth serving agencies and constantly updated to help providers more effectively reach this population.

Recommendation 3: Use Existing Social Networks in Outreach

One of the important findings of the youth focus groups was the importance of support from peers. We need to think about the ways that we can utilize existing peer relationships to get at-risk and homeless youth connected to programs and services. Furthermore, these relationships should be incorporated into service delivery where possible.

Challenge Question: To what degree do our strategies for getting homeless and at-risk youth into programs need to be targeted separately to in-school, out of school, and post high school youth, and to what degree will broader, common outreach and advertising strategies be effective?

Making Programs Work

Recommendation 4: Enhance Existing Partnership Networks

The existing partnerships in the area of service delivery to homeless youth have evolved organically. We need to know more about what makes these partnerships work so that we can extend and replicate their success. We also need to understand what the limits or boundaries are, and to what degree the network can be expanded without losing effectiveness.

Recommendation 5: Improve the Transitions Between Service Providers

Two elements that would facilitate a more seamless referral process are support for transportation, literally moving clients between services, and tracking. Support for these capacities should help providers connect, and allow existing partnership and referral arrangements to provide a more comprehensive set of services to clients.

Recommendation 6: Partner More with the Private Sector

Deficiencies in housing can be addressed directly, by working with landlords, or indirectly, by working with employers who provide a means by which one's housing situation can achieve stability. This is a classic paradox, i.e., stable housing is needed to obtain and retain employment, and employment is a monetary prerequisite for stable housing. This dilemma must be addressed from both ends with the help of the private sector.

Recommendation 7: Establish a Network of Service Providers

This project has brought together a diverse group of service providers and has begun to provide the basis for establishing for a network of organizations and agencies working with homeless and at-risk youth. This network should focus on coordination and communication, evaluating and establishing areas in which centralization of services is desirable (e.g., MVHUB as a centralized information resource, a "homelessness hotline"), and provide support for the

common challenges faced across organizations (e.g., assistance in meeting reporting requirements).

Challenge Question: How do we increase coordination of services, and enhance partnerships and networks without adding another layer of bureaucracy?

Challenge Question: How feasible and desirable is a "one-stop-shopping" model of service provision to homeless youth?

Challenge Question: Is a universal referral form a desirable option?

Recommendation 8: Adopt a Graduated Approach to Move Youth Both Into and Out of Services

Homeless youth have a wide range of needs for services both in terms of the breadth and depth. It is important not only to establish where on the continuum of needs a given homeless youth falls, but to consider how services can be increased, as new needs occur, and eventually decreased, toward the ultimately goal of self-sufficiency. Model programs should be able to identify where a youth is situated, and establish a plan and structure for how to incrementally move him or her toward a goal, in order to give a sense of progress, momentum, and achievement to client, provider, and external constituencies.

Challenge Question: Are there tradeoffs between the client based model and a focus on providing walk in services? What are the advantages of horizontal v. vertical organization models? Should client-based models be the goal towards which we are working, or could resources be more effectively deployed in other ways?

Recommendation 9: Programs Should Have an Explicit Focus on Psychological Support, Long Term Goals, and Positive Self-Image

Our focus groups identified dealing with the psychological stresses of their situation as almost as important a challenge for homeless youth as meeting basic needs. In addition, focusing on a long term goal was seen as important. Helping homeless youth deal with these elements of their situation should be an important component of even the most minimal services. To the degree possible, programs should target existing and potential positive social relationships as a means of psychological support. Additional training in understanding and assisting youth with their mental health needs should be provided to frontline agencies. Models that explicitly address this need should be established and promulgated.

Making the System Work

Recommendation 10: A Focus on Advocacy Should Be Established to Address the Systemic Constraints on Service Providers

This recommendation might in part be accomplished in conjunction with establishing a network of service providers. Because the major constraints on service providers fall in the areas of resources and information sharing, advocacy seems to be an important avenue for challenging and/or reshaping these constraints. For example, advocacy might not simply involve seeking more resources, but working to give service providers more flexibility in how to use existing resources. It might not be concerned with eliminating onerous reporting requirements, but might work toward increasing support for meeting these requirements and making the information collected more useful to organizations working with homeless youth. This creative advocacy should even extend to the area of prevention of youth homelessness, which not only has direct benefits, i.e., fewer homeless youth, but also indirect benefits, i.e., reducing the sense of hopelessness brought on by challenging environmental conditions that make breaking out of this condition more difficult.

Conclusion

Housing and jobs, along with education, are the cornerstones on which we build up ourselves and our society. To ignore one of these key elements in our efforts to support another would be misguided; to ignore the obvious connection among the three would be foolish; and to ignore the way in which all three are needed to provide stability and the promise of the future for the next generation would be irresponsible. That is why we must address this issue of youth homelessness.

In some ways the problem of youth homelessness is considered to be too small to warrant serious concern, "Homelessness only affects a small percentage of the population, and youth are only a small percentage of the homeless that are out there anyway." In other ways this problem is seen as too big, "What can we do about youth homelessness anyway?" A large part of what we suggest in this paper is that neither of these perceptions is correct. The problem of youth homelessness is tied quite directly to issues of workforce development, the health of the economy, structural poverty, urban renewal, crime, investment in human capital, family dynamics, societal goals, and human development. It is also a problem which is solvable, as we have seen in the many excellent examples of efforts being supported in the current service environment. What is needed, we suggest, is way of sharpening our collective focus on this critical issue. We are not looking to reinvent the wheel, but perhaps our recommendations can be thought as a way of making the wheel turn a bit more efficiently, along a somewhat more direct path, toward a goal that we all recognize.

Appendix McKinney-Vento Definitions

Homeless Definition

All families or individuals who both lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence and who reside in emergency or transitional shelter programs, or who live in places not designed for human habitation such as cars, abandoned buildings, woods or the street. Persons residing in institutional or recovery programs, who were homeless upon entry and are without housing upon release, are considered homeless

At Risk Definition

All families or individuals who both lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence including those who are temporarily sharing occupancy of housing not intended for multiple families or other individuals. Persons residing in institutional or recovery programs without housing upon release are considered at-risk of homeless.