

Rural Homeless Youth Listening Sessions Project Summary Report

**Office of Economic Opportunity
Minnesota Department of Human Services
In Partnership with
The Otto Bremer Foundation**

Project Overview and Methodology

The Rural Homeless Youth Listening Sessions Project was developed by the Office of Economic Opportunity, Minnesota Department of Human Services (OEO-DHS) in partnership with rural homeless youth service providers and the Otto Bremer Foundation. The purpose of the project was to research issues related to youth homelessness in rural and tribal communities in greater Minnesota in order to help educate policy makers, public and private funders, and the general public. The project was made possible by a grant from the Otto Bremer Foundation.

OEO-DHS facilitated ten 2 ½ hour listening sessions to gain insights into the following areas:

- Learn what poverty and youth homelessness looks like in rural and tribal areas;
- learn how systems such as children’s mental health, juvenile justice, law enforcement and child welfare work (or do not work) with youth in the area;
- learn what the needs are of at-risk and homeless youth in rural and tribal communities;
- learn more about what rural communities need and want for youth in their area; and,
- learn how private and public funders can best do grant making in rural and tribal areas.

Listening sessions were conducted in the following ten rural and tribal communities to ensure geographic diversity.

- Bois Forte Reservation
- Cass Lake (Leech Lake Reservation)
- Fargo/Moorhead
- Mankato
- Willmar
- Brainerd
- Detroit Lakes
- Lower Sioux Reservation
- Virginia
- Winona

Questions for the listening sessions were collaboratively developed by staff from the Office of Economic Opportunity, the homeless youth service providers across the state, and the Otto Bremer Foundation. Questions can be found in Appendix A of this report. The project was implemented and facilitated by Beth Holger-Ambrose, Homeless Youth Services Coordinator for OEO-DHS, and three youth/young adult interns who were either currently homeless or recently homeless at the time of the project.

Adults and youth community members who were concerned about the issue and who wanted to share their insights and knowledge were encouraged to attend the listening sessions. Local nonprofits that serve youth and/or the homeless population helped promote and publicize the listening sessions. Fliers were distributed throughout the local communities, announcements were made at meetings and events, and people were told about the listening sessions through word of mouth. Efforts were made to ensure that youth, youth social service providers, homeless service providers, school staff, child welfare staff, juvenile justice and children’s mental health staff, local law enforcement, local public officials, and health care providers were invited to attend.

As a result of these recruitment efforts, 181 people, including 36 youth, participated in the discussions. The attendees represented a variety of local stakeholders from multiple sectors and organizations. The diverse insights provided by listening session attendees proved invaluable and resulted in the the key learnings and recommendations identified through the project.

Summary of Listening Session Participants (not including facilitators)

Location	Attendees	Adult Attendees by Organization/Affiliation
Bois Forte Reservation	7 people, including 2 youth	Community Member - 3 Fond du Lac Reservation – 1 Tribal Homeless Youth Services - 1
Brainerd	24 people, including 3 youth	Crow Wing County Child Welfare - 1 General Community Member - 1 Homeless Youth Services - 5 Legislator - 1 Legislative Staff (Senator Franken) - 1 Local College - 1 Mental Health - 2 MN DHS - 1 MN DOE - 1 Restorative Justice - 1 Sexual Assault Services - 1 Tribal Human Services - 1 U of M Extension - 1 Vocational Rehab – 1
Detroit Lakes	14 people (no youth)	Adult Poverty/Homeless Services – 13 Becker County Child Welfare – 1
Leech Lake Reservation	40 people, including 17 youth	Area High School - 4 Area Learning Center- 1 Chippewa Tribe (MN) - 1 Community Member - 1 Crow Wing County Child Welfare - 1 Indian Area Agency on Aging (MN) - 1 Non Tribal Homeless Youth Services - 7 Sports & Recreation - 1 Tribal Homeless Youth Services - 5 Tribal Police – 1
Lower Sioux Reservation	5 people (no youth)	Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Program (Non-Tribal) - 1 Area Middle School - 1 Lower Sioux Recreation Center – 2 Tribal Police - 1
Mankato	20 people , including 1 youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Programs - 3 DHS - 1 Faith Based Community -3 Food Shelf - 1 Homeless Youth Services -3 Local High School - 2 MCCA - 1 United Way - 1 University Student - 2 Veterans Services -1 YWCA Youth Services - 1
Moorhead (and Fargo)	21 people, including 7 youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homelessness - 3 Bremer Bank (local branch) - 1 Clay County Child Welfare - 2 Faith Based Community - 1 Local Police Officers - 3

Location	Attendees	Adult Attendees by Organization/Affiliation
		Mental Health - 1 Youth Homeless Services - 1
Virginia	21 people, including 2 youth	Homeless Youth Services – 3 Legal Aid - 1 Mental Health - 1 MN Coalition for the Homeless -1 Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Services - 4 U of M Extension - 1 Foster Care Transition Services - 1 Family Service Collaborative - 1 LGBTQ Services - 1 Mental Health - 4 Public Library – 1
Willmar	18 people, including 4 youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Services - 1 Homeless Youth Services - 5 HRA - 1 Immigrant Services - 3 Kandiyohi county Child Welfare - 1 Local High School – 1 United Way -1
Winona	11 people (no youth)	Adult/Family Homeless Program Staff (3) DHS (1) Family & Children’s Center (1) General Community Members (2) Retired Public Health Nurse (1) Southern MN Regional Legal Services (1) United Way (1) Winona State (1)
Total Attendees at 10 Listening Sessions: 181 people, including 36 youth		

Homeless Youth in Rural Minnesota

Wilder Research Center estimates that approximately 2,500 Minnesota unaccompanied youth experience homelessness on any given night. This includes an estimated 550 minor youth ages 17 and under, and 1,950 young adults age 18 through 21.¹ These numbers are conservative estimates and the number of unaccompanied youth is likely considerably higher since youth are among the least visible and most vulnerable homeless people. It is important to emphasize that these estimates are unaccompanied youth, and do not include homeless youth who are accompanied by their families.

Across the state, listening session participants described similar features of youth homelessness in rural areas and reservations. Unlike urban areas where youth may be on the streets and visible to the public, homeless youth are largely hidden in rural communities. Youth often “couch hop” moving between various friends and family who are willing to put them up for a night or two, but who cannot provide permanent housing. They may be “doubled-up” living with multiple families in housing of inadequate size. They may be

A homeless programs outreach worker described a recent situation involving a youth who had been kicked out of the house by his mother at age 16. He had been discovered sleeping in a dog boarding kennel. Because there was no shelter or housing options for him in the area, he had decided he could at least stay warm sleeping next to the dogs. Once identified, he was assisted into an adult shelter located several hours away. With no services in his area, the youth had to leave his community to get help.

¹ Wilder Research Center, *Homelessness in Minnesota* 2009. October 2010.

living in a garage or in their cars, sleeping in parks, camping during the warmer months, or living in other locations not intended for human habitation. For some youth, engaging in “survival sex” or staying in unhealthy or abusive relationships may provide a temporary place to stay. Over the course of the listening sessions, a dominant theme that emerged was the significant need for safe, stable emergency shelter and housing options for youth throughout rural and reservation areas.

Listening session participants described similarities and differences between youth who are experiencing homelessness in rural areas in comparison to twin cities metro area homeless youth. Both groups of youth face similar issues associated with the causes of homelessness, such as poverty, economic insecurity, childhood abuse, chemical dependency, mental health issues, and aging out of the foster care system. However, the groups differ in their racial and ethnic composition. Participants described homeless youth in their area as predominantly White/Caucasian or American Indian. In the metro area, there are a large number of African American youth who are homeless. In rural communities, there are also less youth that “come out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. If they do come out, they often try to move to the twin cities metro area where they believe they will have a better chance of being accepted and getting support.

Availability of Homeless Youth Services

Across the state of Minnesota, there has been an inadequate response to the needs of homeless youth. Mainstream systems are not appropriately transitioning all youth into stable housing which can lead to homelessness. There is a lack of safe shelter and housing options for youth. In Minnesota, there are 108 emergency shelter beds designated for youth, of which 15 are located in rural areas. There are a total of 341 transitional living program units, otherwise known as transitional housing, of which 159 are located in rural areas and on reservations. There are an additional 258 units of permanent supportive housing designated for unaccompanied homeless youth, of which 12 are located in rural areas.² The 108 emergency shelter beds and 599 units of housing for youth fall far short of meeting the current needs of homeless youth.

Project Results and Key Learnings

The following summary describes the results and key learnings of the ten listening sessions that were completed across the state.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

Youth are at-risk or become homeless due to varied circumstances in rural communities across the state. Listening session participants described similar causes regardless of where they were located. The following section describes the causes of homelessness that were identified during the listening sessions.

Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Economic conditions in many rural communities do not support a sufficient supply of jobs with living wages and benefits. These circumstances result in families struggling with chronic poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and insufficient income. This is particularly true of tribal communities, where stable, well-paying jobs are severely limited. Youth experiencing chronic economic

² Minnesota Department of Human Services, Data from Homeless Youth Services Coordinator. July 2013.

hardship often live in families with high levels of stress and lack adequate food, stable housing, preventative healthcare, and other resources to meet their basic needs.

Unstable Families and Chemical Dependency (of Parents/Guardians)

Parents who are chemically dependent, physically or emotionally abusive, or neglectful contribute to home environments that put youth at risk of homelessness. Many homeless youth leave families that have been unstable, chaotic and even abusive since they were children. In the majority of the rural and reservation listening sessions, the chemical dependency of the youth's parents or caregivers was a contributor to the youth becoming homeless. Youth reported that because of their parents' drug or alcohol use that their parents were at times unable to provide housing and food, would be abusive towards the youth, or just simply leave the youth alone for days or weeks to fend for themselves. A lack of effective parenting skills and social support is another risk factor that can lead to youth homelessness. Parents of teenagers may not have the skills, tools or support to effectively intervene when their youth begin exhibiting at-risk behaviors, such as academic or behavioral problems in school, truancy, involvement in gangs, or drug use. Youth may choose to leave their homes as a means of escaping these circumstances or be pushed out by their parents' choices and behaviors.

Unstable Housing

Finding and maintaining affordable housing is difficult in many rural communities. Affordable housing is often not available for low-income families, larger families, families with extended relatives in the household, and families with teen parents and their children. Various eligibility and tenancy requirements associated with Section 8 and public housing also put youth at risk of homelessness. Youth living in overcrowded households may be forced or encouraged to leave in these circumstances.

Interaction with Mainstream Systems

While policies and practices in the children's mental and chemical health, juvenile justice, law enforcement and child welfare systems vary across the state, each of these systems were cited by listening session participants as contributing to youth homelessness. Some youth become homeless after release from juvenile justice facilities, jail or a rehabilitation program for drugs or mental health issues. Some youth reported that interactions with local police were not helpful to them when they were experiencing abuse and crisis with their parents or caregivers. Youth struggling with mental health or chemical dependency issues may be unable to access or maintain the services they need. Youth aging out of the foster care system are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless. Some county child welfare services do not coordinate with nonprofits and other community support services when youth are aging out. Agencies are then unable to help youth transition into stable housing before a crisis develops. These mainstream systems were in many cases identified by youth as failing to intervene at crucial times in their lives. From the perspective of the youth, help from these systems would have prevented them from becoming homeless in the first place.

Limited Youth Development Opportunities Increase Risky Behavior

Insufficient funding for youth centers and recreational programs, such as the Boys & Girls Club, drop-in centers or social activities, means limited youth development and extracurricular activities are available in most rural communities. Without constructive activities, some youth begin using alcohol and drugs, become involved in gangs, or engage in other risky behaviors. These choices increase the risk of a youth

having issues with chemical dependency, involvement with gangs, interaction with the legal system, or conflict with family all of which can in turn increase the risk of the youth experiencing homelessness.

Community Needs

Listening session participants described a variety of needs that must be addressed in working with at-risk and currently homeless youth. Currently, there is inadequate funding, staff and services available to address these needs.

Emergency and Housing Programs for Homeless Youth

In every discussion the critical need for safe emergency shelter and housing came up within the first few minutes. Rural communities have no or limited shelter and housing options specific to youth. Youth are either forced to figure out how to make it on their own, or to work with a social service provider who can try to get them into an adult program or connect them with shelter or housing options in a different community. There are insufficient homeless services for youth in rural areas across the state.

Safe, affordable Housing

Many areas have a limited supply of safe, affordable rental housing. Landlords are hesitant to rent to youth and other factors, such as high rental application fees in some areas, lease cosigner requirements, background checks and lack of rental history, present real barriers to obtaining housing.

Education, Job Training and Employment

Most youth have not completed their high school education and need assistance in obtaining their diplomas or GEDs. They need access to life skills training, job training, and employment opportunities that will allow them to earn the income required for housing. There is generally a lack of entry level employment for youth. In some of the listening sessions, it was also reported that if a youth had a bad reputation in the community (or their family did) then they face a barrier to employers wanting to hire them.

Transportation

In smaller communities, there is limited bus service or no bus service and a lack of transportation from one community to another. Without a car, youth have limited job opportunities, housing options and find it difficult to obtain the services they may need.

Supports for Daily Living

Youth and adult participants reported that at-risk and homeless youth need help with learning life skills that are required for independent living. Since youth often are not getting this help from their parents or caregivers, they need support in learning how to take care of themselves and their household, managing their finances, learning parenting skills, navigating the local county or tribal human services system, accessing reliable transportation, and managing other areas of daily living.

Parenting Support and Education

Youth who are homeless are also likely to be pregnant or parenting. According to the 2012 Wilder Research Study, nearly one third (29%) of youth who are homeless are parenting.³ Youth who are homeless and parenting present unique needs and challenges. Shelter and housing for these youth and their children needs to be larger and offer privacy. Youth need opportunities to access parenting education and support. Children of youth parents require child specific services and support to meet their needs.

Mental Health and Chemical Health Services

Services for mental health and chemical dependency that are specific to the unique needs of youth or work well for at-risk and homeless youth are limited or unavailable in many areas. Youth may be unwilling to seek out or consistently use mental health and/or chemical health services. They may also lack transportation to reach services where they are available. For these reasons, there are significant needs being unmet in both the families that youth leave and for youth themselves.

Health Services

Health care services across the board were identified by participants as a significant need. From preventative care and family planning to longer term health care, youth face major barriers in caring for their health.

Tribal Traditions and Cultural Pride

During the three listening sessions on the reservations, youth and adult participants strongly communicated that the teaching of cultural traditions, pride, language and activities is critical in supporting youth. One youth in particular described his feelings about drumming and singing since a young age. He explained that this practice has helped him through several tough times during his life and that he wouldn't know what to do without it. It is important for programs serving youth (both on reservations and off) to incorporate the teaching of cultural traditions and promote culturally specific programming and activities in order to help American Indian youth who are at-risk or experiencing homelessness succeed.

LGBTQ Supports and Resources

It was identified in many of the rural (and reservation) listening sessions that there is a complete lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) services. This is a huge barrier to youth who are LGBTQ in these areas as they often feel isolated and without many peers or even adults that identify as LGBTQ. In some of the listening sessions, participants also identified the significant amount of bullying and discrimination that youth face if they chose to “come out” in rural areas. Participants explained that there a real need for LGBTQ specific services, activities and support groups to support the youth in their communities.

Services to Address Sexual Exploitation

In many of the listening sessions, participants identified that one of the ways that homeless youth survive is by trading sex or sexual acts for a place to stay, food or clothing. Currently there are no resources

³ Wilder Research Center, *2012 Minnesota Homeless Study Fact Sheet, Initial Findings: Characteristics and Trends*. 2013.

specific to sexual exploitation in the rural communities. While there are some sexual assault services, as well as homeless youth service providers that do help if youth approach them for help about sexual exploitation, these services are severely limited and nearly unavailable throughout rural Minnesota.

Recommendations

Adult and youth participants generated a variety of insights and recommendations for addressing the problem of youth homelessness. While some recommendations relate to improving the response to individuals at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, others address the systemic issues underlying the problem.

Invest in prevention, education and outreach

- 1. Stabilize youth living situations by addressing underlying family and systems issues.** In order to stabilize individual youth living situations, it is necessary to address large social and systemic issues, such as poverty, economic opportunities, mental and chemical health systems, law enforcement responses and the child welfare system.

Some specific examples:

- a. A faith based organization, non-profit or YMCA/Boys & Girls Club could hire a specific staff to work with at-risk and homeless youth. This agency could then partner with the local junior high and high school and identify youth who are “at-risk” for homelessness and provide supportive services, counseling and homeless prevention services such as rental and utility arrears and/or monthly financial support to try and help the family stay together and prevent the youth from becoming homeless.
- b. Create employment programming and opportunities specific to homeless youth. This could be done in a local rural community through a partnership with a youth serving organization and a local business, for example, where the business would help train in and hire homeless youth and the agency could help support the youth in these employment opportunities by providing additional job mentoring and case management services.
- c. Create career training and internship opportunities for homeless youth by starting a small program that teaches youth a skills such as catering, bike mechanics, child care, etc.(or in key industries located in the rural community) so that the youth may be more employable in their local community.
- d. Encourage mental health and chemical dependency counselors in rural areas to receive training in adolescent development, best practices working with homeless youth and trauma informed care so these entities can do a more effective job with youth in their communities.
- e. Local youth serving providers should reach out to law enforcement officers and invite them into their programs for a tour and build up relationships with them. Additionally they should encourage local law enforcement to get trained in adolescent development, best practices in working with homeless youth and conflict resolution.
- f. A local organization or faith based group could set up a community meeting with county child welfare/human service staff to find out what they feel their needs are for serving adolescent youth more effectively and see if there are federal, state or local grant opportunities that their county could apply for to address some of these needs.

- 2. Expand youth development opportunities.** Participants identified the opportunity to expand activities that tribal communities, youth organizations and faith based communities have developed to provide a safe, nurturing place for youth to be, such as Saturday night coffee houses, cultural specific activities, and other recreational and leadership opportunities.

Some specific examples:

- a. Find out if there is an interest in a church or faith based organization or current non-profit that could arrange for volunteers to staff an after-school or evening drop-in center site where youth could come and get access to hygiene supplies, food and other basic necessities while also offering activities such as games, movies, etc.
- b. In tribal communities find out if there are elders or others in the community who would be willing to teach drumming and singing lessons, take youth to Pow-Wow's, teach language classes or other cultural activities.
- c. Identify places within communities where youth tend to congregate and see if there would be any interest in businesses or organizations in that area to open up a Friday or Saturday night coffee house or youth recreational nights which could be supervised by volunteers or paid staff if available.
- d. Establish a one-on-one mentoring program where youth could be matched with adults in the community that fit their interests and career aspirations.

- 3. Educate youth about homelessness and community resources.** Participants identified the need for education in local schools about homelessness and the resources available to help youth. Incorporating independent living and financial literacy skills in school would also be beneficial.

Some specific examples:

- a. Find out who the local "McKinney Vento Homeless School Liaison" is and see if they would be willing to provide training to their colleges on the topic of youth homelessness-if not have a local non-profit provider come in and do a training for school staff on the topic.
- b. Create fliers and brochures about the supports offered through the McKinney Vento law and services and distribute them at all large school assemblies, parent teacher conferences, etc.
- c. Incorporating financial literacy and basic life skills into existing curriculums at schools for all students.

- 4. Expand and improve school based outreach.** Youth at risk of losing their housing or who are homeless are often not identified by teachers, school administrators and other adults who might be able to intervene. Educating teachers and principals, as well as front-line staff who come into contact with students, such as secretarial, food service and custodial staff, about the signs of homelessness is essential for a more proactive outreach approach in the schools.

- 5. Expand and improve community based outreach.** Building stronger relationships with youth serving organizations and other organizations that have contact with at-risk or currently homeless youth would be helpful in expanding community outreach. For example, staff at food shelves where youth come for help could make referrals and building up relationships with local law enforcement who may encounter homeless youth.

- 6. Increase public awareness and understanding of youth homelessness.** It is vital that the public better understand the causes of youth homelessness, effective solutions to address the problem, and ways that they can impact the issue. Communicating the significant return on investment that services for homeless youth can deliver is an important strategy as well. Youth experiencing homelessness create costs in the law enforcement, child welfare, education, health

care and social services systems. Public funding could be more effectively targeted to addressing the causes of the problem, rather than its symptoms.

Some specific examples:

- a. A local community member could host a dinner party where they talk about the needs of homeless youth, watch a video (TPT's Homeless Youth Finding Home, etc.) and having a discussion afterwards.
- b. Asking a local church or faith based organization to host a speaker or educational forum on the topic of youth homelessness.
- c. Organizing community awareness events such as sleep outs where youth sleep outside or one night (supervised by adult volunteers) to represent the youth without places to live.
- d. Have a local community member write a letter to the editor on the topic of youth homelessness.

Enhance service delivery

1. Change and expand eligibility guidelines for services that would help homeless youth.

Current federal, state and local policies related to eligibility for housing and social services prevent many youth from accessing the resources they require to stabilize their lives. Systematic change is needed in this area.

Some specific examples:

- a. Determine who is responsible for which eligibility requirements and approaching them with a coalition of community members in a respectful way to talk through how to create a more effective eligibility policy can work to create change if the requirement is not in state or federal law.
- b. If the requirement is in law gathering a coalition of key stakeholders together to potentially approach state or federal policy makers to see what it would take to get the requirement changed and then potentially drafting legislation to do so.

2. Lower the barriers to accessing housing and getting services.

There are perceived and actual barriers (e.g. paperwork, eligibility guidelines, etc.) that prevent youth from accessing services where they are available. Complicated, bureaucratic systems that are hard to navigate should be more youth friendly.

Some specific examples:

- a. A youth should be able to go into a shelter or housing program and if there is an opening and they meet the eligibility criteria for that program they should be able to receive shelter and housing and then submitting paperwork to the county v. having to go into the county first which could force a youth to be homeless when there is actually a shelter bed or housing unit open.
- b. Creating a "one stop shop" or coordinated assessment process for youth to obtain multiple services within one application/intake process.
- c. Non-profit shelter and housing service providers should be sure to know what the legal eligibility requirements are and then not add on additional eligibility requirements that are burdensome to youth such as urine analysis tests, residency requirements, extensive background checks, etc.

3. Develop and strengthen faith based community partnerships.

Building and expanding partnerships with faith based community partners could support the creation and expansion of

programming for youth in many rural areas. (see above drop-in center and other examples of these partnerships)

4. **Create emergency shelter and housing programs that will not jeopardize or separate the family of parenting youth.** A variety of public and program policies result in parenting youth having the fear that they will be separated from their children in order to obtain services. This problem particularly affects youth fathers who are unable to stay with their families in some shelters and housing programs.

Some specific examples:

- a. Develop host home programming that has some hosts that are willing to take in parenting youth (mother and/or father or other parents) with their children so that they do not have to be split up.
- b. If there are scattered site housing programs in the community encourage them to serve parenting youth as well as single youth.
- c. If there are no youth shelter or housing providers but there is a family provider see if there is a way that family shelter or housing provider could serve young families.

5. **Strategize methods for transportation.** Resources and services in rural communities to develop better transportation systems for youth should be identified and implemented such as a volunteer carpool program, dial a ride, etc.. Funders should also understand and allow for higher staff mileage reimbursement costs. Staff often have to provide transportation to youth they are working with due to the lack of public transportation in rural areas.

6. **Develop emergency shelter and housing options for homeless youth.** In every listening session the lack of emergency shelter and housing programs for homeless youth was brought up as a critical gap in services. It is essential that funders support these initiatives in rural areas and that the local community supports the development of these programs as well.

Some specific examples:

- a. Develop a host home program where screened and trained people in the community could open up their home and share it with a homeless youth. These are typically run through a non-profit but could also be operated out of a faith based organization.
- b. If there is a current adult or family provider search for funding options that would allow the agency to expand to serve youth-through host home programs, by renting a 2-3 bedroom apartment and providing staff for a small emergency shelter, identifying existing churches or other organizations that have open space that could be used for shelter and housing and open a program for homeless youth.

7. **Increase funding to rural and reservation communities.** Listening session participants expressed the strong perception that resources stay in the twin cities metro area and are not shared with rural areas. Nonprofit and tribal organizations in rural areas need more services and operating support to address the significant needs that exist. Funders should be sure to include providers from rural and tribal areas within their funding decisions whenever possible.

8. **Identify effective McKinney-Vento School Liaisons and replicate these approaches.** There are examples of successful school liaisons, service delivery models, and best practices that can be identified and replicated across the state to better serve rural and tribal communities.

9. **Foster best practices, cooperative learning, and competitive collaboration among service providers.** Participants identified the need for organizations to identify what they do well and to

challenge each other to improve their services. Collaboration with an eye towards sharing best practices and service delivery improvement is an approach that would be beneficial in rural areas.

Strengthen partnerships with mainstream systems and advocate for changes in policies and practices

- 1. Improve connections between mainstream systems and local nonprofits to help youth make major transitions.** Youth serving agencies need advance warning and adequate time to partner with youth and to prepare them for their transition to independent living. Currently, youth are referred to community agencies too late to make meaningful transition plans, to develop independent living skills, and to gain economic resources and support they will need to meet their basic needs. For example, the county can't refer youth to an agency 2 weeks before they age out of foster care and expect youth to be able to learn life skills and secure housing during that period of time.
- 2. Local law enforcement can improve and develop positive relationships with youth in rural communities to be seen as a source of help for youth.** Listening session participants reported that local police officers are often the only staff that are available 24/7 and are the first responders in a crisis situation involving youth. It is critical that rural police officers be trained in working with youth, specific cultural communities, conflict resolution, and be knowledgeable of the resources available for youth in their local area and region.
- 3. More effective child welfare, children's mental health, and juvenile justice interventions would reduce youth homelessness.** These three systems often interact with youth who are at-risk of becoming homeless. It is critical that the social workers and probation officers that have youth on their case load be appropriately trained, be able to work effectively with youth and their families/care-givers, and be prepared to help youth make appropriate transitions out of the mainstream systems and into the community safely and with stable housing.
- 4. Schools need to better understand how to best support homeless youth.** The staff within local schools come into contact with youth who are at-risk of homelessness or who are currently homeless and may have little or no knowledge about how they can help these youth. It is important that staff within rural and tribal community schools be trained on the McKinney Vento law, that a staff be designated as the "McKinney Vento Homeless Liaison," and be trained on best practices in working with youth at-risk of homelessness or who are homeless. School staff should also proactively connect with any available programs in their area serving homeless youth.

Improve the effectiveness of grant making programs

- 1. Distribute grant funds directly to service providers rather than intermediary organizations or local units of government (e.g. county or intermediary organization).** In several of the listening sessions, participants explained that it is best when funders provide grants directly to nonprofits or tribes, rather than granting funds to an intermediary organization or local unit of government and then having this entity make funding decisions and grant contracts. Concerns focused on the fact that intermediaries may take a portion of the funds away from much needed direct service funds to serve homeless youth. Intermediaries or counties may have to consider local politics in the grant decision making. In some cases this could harm homeless youth

providers which may not be seen as a “funding priority” in the areas of homelessness and antipoverty funding.

2. **Streamline applications and coordinate funding.** There are multiple federal and state funding sources available for homeless services, although limited funding is exclusively targeted to homeless youth. A great deal of time is spent completing the complex applications required for different funding sources administered by different federal or state agencies. For example, different state or federal agencies use different terminology or definitions for homelessness, eligibility criteria and budget categories. A streamlined application process that allows agencies to apply for multiple funding sources at one time would decrease administrative burden. It would also be helpful if federal and state agencies simplified their funding applications and used common language.
3. **Create longer grant periods and funding cycles.** Federal and state grants are typically awarded on a two-year cycle. This time period is too short according to some listening session attendees and doesn’t allow agencies to effectively implement their proposed project and services. A longer grant period would allow agencies to plan, implement and invest in their programs more strategically.
4. **Increase the amount of flexible funding available to service providers.** Listening session participants identified a lack of flexible funding to meet the needs of youth. Rigid policies and guidelines sometimes prevent local staff from paying for items and services that youth need.
5. **Educate funders and policymakers about the issues.** There is a perception that some funders and policymakers are disconnected from the reality of the lived experience of homeless youth and the service providers working to help them. Several comments addressed the desire that key decision makers within funding entities would visit their programs and walk a day in the shoes of homeless youth. More work needs to be done in educating funders and policymakers about youth experiencing homelessness.
6. **Trust local service providers for their experience and expertise in working with homeless youth.** Some participants described their feelings that some funders do not trust them in their knowledge of what works best with working with homeless youth even though they are the ones doing the work. Funders who are open to a different programmatic and service delivery approach help to ensure funding stays focused on best serving the end client – youth – rather than the nonprofit, funder or other stakeholders.
7. **Build the capacity of local organizations.** Participants identified the need for funding that can be used for staff training, capacity building and strategic planning to improve their services.
8. **Conduct additional in-depth research on the issue of youth homelessness in rural areas, as well as a longitudinal study of what has helped, or not helped, youth who have been homeless.** It has been difficult to accurately measure the size of the homeless youth population in rural areas since youth are largely invisible. When the Wilder Research Survey and the HUD Point in Time Counts are completed, there is a lack of capacity to conduct the count and survey in rural areas; especially the count of unsheltered youth. More research, particularly, longitudinal studies are needed to better understand homeless youth in rural and reservation areas.
9. **Address systemic causes and issues related to youth homelessness.** Service delivery focuses on the individual issues youth are facing, but does not address the public policies and systems that underlie the problem. Dealing with systemic issues is more costly and difficult to deal with, but essential to alleviating and eventually eliminating youth homelessness.

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Appendix A: Questions for Rural Community Listening Sessions on Youth Homelessness

Introduction & Welcome

Ice Breaker Activity: Your name, agency & if you could have dinner with any 3 celebrities who would they be?

General Questions:

1. Let's start off by talking about young people in your community-what is it that that you want for young people in your community?
2. In your experience what are the things that impact or put up barriers for youth achieving those things that you want for them?
3. In my/our experience working with homeless youth we sometimes see families and youth themselves forced to make difficult decisions in order to try and survive-does this happen in your community?
4. For youth that do end up experiencing homelessness-what does this look like in your community? What are the reasons youth are homeless in your community?

Prodding Questions if things don't come up:

- Racial Make-Up
 - LGBTQ
 - Mental Health Issues
 - CD Issues
 - Poverty
 - Aging out of the Foster Care System & Juvenile Justice
5. How is the child welfare system involved with homeless youth in your community?
 - Children's Mental Health
 - Juvenile Corrections
 - Schools & McKinney-Vento Homeless School Liaisons (ask youth specifically what their education consistency has been like)
 - If the child welfare system is involved-what has worked about it? What doesn't work?
 6. How are these youth surviving/living in your community?
 7. Do you see youth trading sexual acts/sex to survive-a place to stay, food, clothing, etc. Are youth being approached for this and/or other illegal activity in your community?
 8. How do you think a youth's family or kin (biological or not) fitting into this-could they be a resource to help youth and if so how?

Youth Services & Community Supports Questions:

1. Are there any services available to homeless youth in your community?
 - How do youth find out about the services?
 - What are the major barriers youth have in accessing services and housing?
 - Question for Youth in Attendance Specifically: What are the top obstacles you have to getting into stable housing?
2. What services and supports do you think are missing in your community to help support homeless youth?
 - How often do youth in your community have to travel long distances or go into the cities to get the support they need?
 - Are there services in urban areas that you'd like to see in your rural community?
 - What services (including family reunification), shelter and housing do you think would best help homeless youth in your community?
3. How do youth get around to resources they need in their community-is transportation an issue?

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4. What services and supports do you think would help youth from becoming homeless in the first place?
 5. For youth: Did you ever feel unsafe in your home and if so did you reach out for help?

Grant Making & Funding Questions:

1. How do you think funders and government staff can best help support your community in addressing the needs and building your capacity to help homeless youth?
2. What have you seen work in your community in terms of grant making?
3. Are there certain areas of research or answers to questions that your community needs in order to educate others and gain support for homeless youth in your community?

Moving Forward:

1. What can we do to further move this issue forward?

Closure:

1. Is there anything else you feel like we should know about that hasn't been talked about yet?

Thank you so much for your support of youth experiencing homelessness in your community and your contributions at today's listening session!