Star House

TESTIMONY OF ANN BISCHOFF, CEO
STAR HOUSE

HEARING ON "AN OVERVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA"

BEFORE THE HOUSE FINANCIAL SERVICES SUBCOMMITTEE ON
HOUSING AND INSURANCE

THURSDAY, MAY 17, 2018 AT 2:00 PM
ROOM 2128 OF THE RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

Good afternoon, Chairman Duffy and Ranking Member Cleaver. It is an honor to address this Committee about current, innovative efforts to address youth homelessness.

I will share five key points: 1) youth homelessness is complex and growing; 2) proven and promising approaches; 3) real stories of survival; 4) thinking outside of definitions; 5) innovative approaches for helping youth achieve stability.

My name is Ann Bischoff and I am the CEO of Star House, a drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness located in Columbus, Ohio. I am also a member of the Columbus Committee to Address Youth Homelessness, which is developing our community's response to address youth homelessness. I joined Star House two years ago after founding mentor programs for alumni of foster care and learning about their unique barriers to stable housing. My testimony is from the perspective of a drop-in center that operates in conjunction with, but outside of, the HUD system. I hope that you will find this outside-in perspective beneficial to the conversation today. I am prepared to answer any questions you might have about the drop-in center model, the need for youth-friendly shelter and housing, as well as innovative, trauma-informed approaches for meeting the housing and workforce needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

Star House is a 24/7, research-infused, drop-in center that is dedicated to finding and engaging the estimated 2,000 youth, ages 14-24, who are experiencing homelessness in central Ohio. We use the McKinney Vento (Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, per Elementary and Secondary Education Act) definition of homelessness, which includes youth who are sharing the housing of someone else due to hardship. We are not a shelter and do not receive HUD funding. Star House's outreach staff visit locations where homeless youth gather - soup kitchens, libraries, college campuses, parks, and wooded areas. They share information about Star House services and invite youth to refer others in need of services. For every individual youth we find on the streets, three additional youth find Star House by word of mouth. Young people who visit Star House have immediate access to basic needs and onsite mental health therapy, case management, health care, enrichment and connection to housing, transportation, employment, education, legal aide, government benefits, ID cards and other stabilizing resources. In 2017, we served 996 individuals with 34,000 unique visits, up from 400 individuals served in 2012. The youth we serve are by-and-large estranged from their immediate families; many are unaccompanied minors who have run away from abusive situations.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS COMPLEX AND GROWING

Recent Research by Chapin Hall found that 1 in 30 youth, ages 13-17, experienced homelessness over 12 months. One in 10 young adults, aged 18-25, experienced a form of homelessness over a 12-month period, which equates to three and a half million people. The Chapin Hall study involved a national population survey that included youth who were not able to access shelter.

Foster care. The 2017 quarterly surveys of Star House guests revealed that 47% have been involved with children services; 26% aged out of foster care at age 18 and are far less likely

to have support from their parents while transitioning into adulthood. Jewish Family Services in Columbus, Ohio shared the results of their PTSD surveys of youth aging out of care, as compared to what they know about the Holocaust survivors they serve. On average, youth who entered foster care due to abuse and neglect, scored an 8.5 on the 10-point ACES scale that measures severe traumatic experiences, such as death of a parent, rape, assault, starvation and neglect. This level of traumatic experience, according to JFS, is on par with the Holocaust survivors they serve.

Human Trafficking. One-third of homeless youth have experienced intimate partner abuse, which denotes human trafficking. The population is highly susceptible to exploitation, in part because too often no one is looking for them. Nationally, one in five homeless youths are trafficked.

Suicide. When youth are struggling to find food and a safe place to sleep, their hope for the future is too often diminished. Forty-one percent have attempted suicide at least once— suicide is a leading cause of death among this population that is 12 times more likely to die than their peers who are not homeless.

Ostracized. A quarter to 40% of this population, depending on the survey, identify as LGBTQ and have been reportedly ostracized from their families. According to Chapin Hall, LGBTQ youth were more than twice as likely to report homelessness, and unmarried parenting youth were three times as likely to report having been homeless.

Transient and unsafe. The Chapin Hall study revealed that 72% of youth who slept on the streets or in shelters also stayed in the housing of another person, i.e. couch surfing. More than half of these youth felt unsafe in these situations. Staying with other people puts youth at higher risk of harm and exploitation. These youth are not eligible for HUD homeless assistance services.

What all of these statistics point to is high orientation for trauma and low orientation for trust. Nearly all of these young people have been let down by the adults in their lives who were supposed to be there to love and support them. As a result, too often they would rather fend for themselves in the shadows of our society than reach out for help. Youth in this state prefer a drop-in center where there is immediate, low barrier access to resources at one location. Our research shows that social connections can spark the resilience needed to overcome adversity and achieve stability.

PROMISING AND PROVEN APPROACHES

Star House was founded in 2006 as part of a research project of The Ohio State University (OSU) by Dr. Natasha Slesnick. That year, Dr. Slesnick began the second part of a project that began in Albuquerque, NM, evaluating three separate treatments for homeless youth: CRA (Community Reinforcement Approach), MET (Motivational Enhancement Therapy) and case management. This project continues to guide our social connections-based service philosophy of unconditional regard for the youth we serve.

Social connections were found as the greatest predictors of exiting homelessness. The findings suggest that developing trust and linkages between homeless youth and service providers may be a more powerful immediate target of intervention than targeting child abuse issues, substance use and mental health problems. Substance use and associated issues were significantly reduced in all three treatment types, with little difference between the three, meaning the specific treatment is less important than finding which one encourages participation from the individual. It also found that social capital variable significantly predicted substance use frequency, sexual risk behavior, depression, delinquent behavior as well as number of days homeless. Meaningful change goes beyond addressing the individual, and gears towards modifying the social context of their lives.

In 2012, Dr. Slesnick began a new project that recruited non-service connected youth, randomly assigned them to a drop-in or shelter condition, and provided them with six months of Strengths Based Outreach and Advocacy. Youth were far more likely to access the drop-in center than a shelter. Of a sample of 79 street-living youth, 40 were referred to adult shelter and 39 were referred to a drop-in center. Of those referred to shelter, only 18% went. Of those referred to the drop-in center 80% went. What's more, 31% of youth referred to shelter found their own way to the drop-in center. Youth who went to the youth drop-in center, Star House, were linked to more service connection and a greater reduction in hard drug use. It also found that the longer youth experience homelessness, the more likely they are to experience substance use, victimization, and mortality, and the harder it becomes to exit street life. For this reason, the drop-in center model, which connects youth with stabilizing resources is an essential component of a coordinated community response.

We were very fortunate to have been incubated as a program of the University for ten years. On July 1, 2017, Star House became an independent social service agency. As the only drop-in center in central Ohio and the only drop-in in the nation that has on-going, in-house best practices research, it was important to us to ensure that this research continues. We house two OSU offices through which researchers continue to glean best practices for meeting the unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness ongoing. Notable current studies include providing 240 drug-abusing mothers experiencing homelessness with Ecologically Based Treatment to test the feasibility of providing complex housing and supportive services outside of an overburdened shelter system. Given the high risk for suicide, another project is providing 75 youth who report severe suicidal ideation with Cognitive Therapy for Suicidal Patients (CTSP) with the goal of reducing premature mortality, hospitalization and loss of human capital in a very high-risk population of youth.

REAL STORIES OF SURVIVAL

There is no one pathway to homelessness for youth and there is no one pathway to stability. Here are three very different youth experiences.

1) Recently, a young woman experiencing homelessness shared with me the horror of her upbringing. She was repeatedly physically and sexually abused and even pimped out by her parents. She escaped her family and has been living on the streets ever since. Last reported,

she was staying in an abandoned home, nailing wooden planks across the door with a make-shift hammer each night, just to get enough peace to sleep. Having been victimized, she prefers this living situation over going to the adult shelter for fear of being victimized by the older adults there. While she is employed, her employment history matches the transience of her housing patterns. She needs safe, youth-friendly shelter with a defined pathway to therapy, employment, housing and social connections.

2) One young man came to us after weeks on the street. He had relocated to Columbus, after leaving an abusive situation at home. He quickly secured a job at the local mall. To ensure that he arrived at work on time each day, he slept on an inflatable pool raft behind a nearby dumpster. He was relieved to find Star House where he could have a hot meal, a shower, a change of clothes, and a bus pass. He only needed our drop-in services for a short time before he was able to secure housing and continue on the trajectory toward stability.

3) Another young man, grew up in foster care from birth, living in several different homes before aging out at 18. Despite his transient schooling, he earned a B-average GPA from his suburban neighborhood high school. He had a dream of becoming a chef and owning a restaurant. After graduation, he secured an apartment with a friend. Each paid half of rent and utility costs. He also had a job as a line cook within walking distance of his home. Everything seemed to be going according to plan, until his roommate could no longer pay for rent or utilities. Without the means to cover his friend's half of the rent as well, the young man was evicted and forced to couch surf on the other side of the county. No longer living within walking distance of work, he could no longer get there consistently. He lost his job and became trapped in the catch-22 of no job, no transportation and no home. From this state of despair, he found other alumni of foster care who helped connect him with a job and housing and continued to be a source of support for him during his transition into adulthood.

THINKING OUTSIDE OF DEFINITIONS

I can understand the array of arguments regarding the definition of homelessness. On the one hand, advocates argue that the issue of homelessness is already insurmountable within the constraints of the current HUD definition. They argue that to change the definition, would mean taking away resources from the individuals who meet the current definition of homelessness, in order to meet the needs of those who would qualify under an expanded definition. They argue that funding should be expanded before a change in definition takes place. Without the assurance of sustained funding, there is reluctance among service providers to expand programming or to try new innovations to meet the needs of highly transient youth. This is a valid concern.

Because Star House is an independent drop-in center, rather than a shelter, and because we are supported for our innovative approaches, we do not operate within the confines of definitions. We simply see on a daily basis youth, ages 14-24, who are struggling to survive without family or home. Our research shows that the longer youth experience the transience of homelessness by any definition, the more difficult it becomes for them to exit street life. Utilizing the McKinney Vento Education Act definition allows us to assist youth before they become chronically homeless.

As the debate continues, I encourage us to think outside of the confines of definitions and to decide what we think is acceptable for youth who grow up in our nation. Youth without a

permanent place to call home, regardless of where they are staying from night to night, are without stability. Instability in housing, employment and transportation impacts the likelihood of breaking out of homelessness permanently. Solving this difficult issue requires the flexibility to incorporate known best practices from all youth serving agencies.

All agencies need the freedom to grow and try new concepts to lift youth who do not have a permanent home out of homelessness.

INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR ADDRESSING WORKFORCE AND HOUSING

Star House's strategic plan includes implementing social enterprise to address workforce needs among transient homeless youth and collaborating with partners to offer a trauma-informed village based on the Community First! Village in Austin, Texas.

In 2017, 57 percent of Star House guests surveyed stated that they acquired a job after coming to the drop-in center. However, when the same youth were asked if they were currently employed, 37% said yes. Sustaining employment is a recurring barrier to achieving stability in housing for two primary reasons: trauma-related triggers and behaviors in the workplace and inability to maintain transportation and housing proximity to their places of employment. Recognizing these challenges, Star House is implementing a trauma-informed workforce development pilot program, Star Works, in Summer 2018. The program includes: 1) trauma-informed workforce development, provided by trauma and workforce expert Jewish Family Services. The training empowers youth to recognize and overcome the effects of trauma on their resilience and behaviors; 2) flexible, Star House-based job opportunities through the assembly of table-top floral arrangements for local businesses in need of weekly arrangements; and 3) trauma-informed mentoring/coaching through a secure app. Successful graduates of Star Works would be able to sustain in-demand, livable wage jobs after securing stability in housing, transportation and community. Through this innovative model, Star Works will have the opportunity to offer flexible training and employment to highly transient youth who otherwise would not be able to work, until stability was achieved.

Star House and community partners are developing a community model based on the Community First Village in Austin, Texas, which serves older adults who are coming out of chronic homelessness. Through this model, one site is devoted to offering the four pillars of stability: affordable housing, employment, transportation and social connections. Three-fourths of homes would be devoted to the homeless population. One-quarter would house staff and mentors who chose to live on-site and abide by the purpose of the property— helping youth achieve stability. The community-focused design would enable young adults to focus on completing college and certification in in-demand career fields during life's crucial transition years between new adulthood and age 24. Ensuring housing, jobs and access to transportation are locked in, while establishing a safety net of supportive relationships, will ensure youth launch successfully to stability.

Thank you for inviting me to share today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have and invite you to consider visiting Star House or another drop-in center in your district to learn more about the barriers that youth experiencing homelessness face.

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