

Compass House

Good Morning, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address you today. My name is Sylvia Nadler and I am the Executive Director of Compass House a small not-for-profit agency in the City of Buffalo. What I want to talk to you about are the thousands of runaway and homeless youth throughout NYS that need your support.

Last Wednesday, as I left the Resource Center with my Youth Services Director, it was late; dark; cold and rainy. As we walked to our cars, we noticed a young girl carrying a plastic bag walking towards us through the parking lot. We asked if she needed help and she told us that she had nowhere to go and her friends told her to come to Compass House. We asked her how old she was and if she needed a place to stay. When she told us she was 15, she was offered a ride to the shelter. She said thank you and as she got in the car with “a stranger” from Compass House, and I was truly thankful that we were there. Hundreds of frightened young people show up at the doors of Compass House each year. Once there they are provided with shelter, food, clothing, medical attention and counseling services by trained compassionate counselors ready to listen and help.

Compass House operates two programs to provide emergency shelter and services for runaway and homeless youth.

- Our first program is a 13-bed emergency shelter that offers a wide range of services for runaway and homeless youth between the ages of 12–17. A 24-hour helpline responds to community calls and supports our Safe Place program with more than 40 satellite sites available throughout Erie County to provide youth in crisis with immediate access to services, 365 days a year. *(In 2006, 2,810 days of care were provided to 319 RHY. More than 95% left the shelter for safe living situations with almost 50% returning to their families.)*
- Our Resource Center is a non-residential Case Management program for homeless youth, or youth at-risk of homelessness between the ages of 16-20. Open M-F from 9-5, The Resource Center provides immediate access to individual assessment; case management; advocacy; linkage and referral services; crisis, group and individual counseling; independent living instruction, food, clothing, household donations, age appropriate recreational activities, and virtually anything else a young person might need to achieve stability. Four nights a week from 5–7 we provide educational and recreational groups so that these young people have a safe environment for learning social skills. For many of these kids, we are their only support system or family. *(In 2006, 202 homeless youth were provided with services from the Resource Center.)*
- This year, Compass House was one of the few fortunate programs to receive a new Federal Street Outreach grant, in addition to the Basic Center Grant that we have had since 1978. This program will increase our capacity to reach out to street youth and increase our core services to aid some of the most vulnerable and resistant youth populations. .

In 1978, New York State recognized the need to protect these vulnerable youth by passing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. The assistance provided through RHYA Part 1 and Part 2 programs are cost efficient and have a proven track record of helping young people find immediate access to crisis and preventative services. We provide the very services that reduce the need for residential placements and keep our children out of the juvenile justice system.

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The theme of your Budget Town Hall Hearings is titled Achieving Balance through Prioritization. I am here to tell you about the serious budgetary issues that are facing the New York State's runaway and homeless youth service system. I am also here to urge you to consider the children that I serve and protect as a priority to the citizens of New York.

This year, New York State lost significant Federal Funding from many excellent programs throughout the state, reducing essential services for youth in many communities. In addition to direct services, we lost Federal Training and Technical Assistance funding, which for over 20 years has been provided to state and regional entities, and was instead awarded to one national contractor, The University of Oklahoma. New York's training grant funded over 30 days of free training at locations throughout the state; a minimum of three training conferences and on-site technical assistance. The new national project will sponsor one national conference, and 8 days of training nationally (all eight trainings will be identical and held at locations around the nation.) These trainings have been essential in helping agencies achieve our NYS OCFS 40 hour annual training requirements for each staff member. This years Federal Funding cuts throughout New York State has led me to realize that all of our funding is almost as vulnerable as our children

The losses to programs in New York State are compounded by the fact that there has been no new money for runaway and homeless youth programs in seven years. The current increase of \$500,000 merely brings the appropriation back to where it was at the turn of the century when the Legislature increased the appropriation after 13 years of stagnant funding. Governor Pataki eliminated that \$500,000 add-on money in every subsequent budget. The legislature fully or partially restored the \$500,000 during some of the years. *(This \$500,000 increase provided Compass House with an additional \$13,000.)* **Essentially our NYS OCFS funding has not increased since 1989.**

While RHYA services have not been given an increase, there is a new appropriation of almost \$5 million for programs that will help reduce placements in juvenile detention facilities. RHY programs can and do assist youth before they enter or re-enter that system and have a proven track record of resolving the issues that can lead young people to commit offenses that result in detention. Below is the language from this year's budget bill:

Department of Family Assistance - OCFS

STATE OPERATIONS AND AID TO LOCALITIES 2007-08 - For services and expenses related to reducing office of children and family Services institutional placements through program modifications and/or services including but not limited to, mental health and substance abuse programs, demonstrated effective programs such as evidence-based initiatives to divert youth at-risk of placement with the OCFS and/or as alternatives to residential placements with such office, Not withstanding any other provision of law to the contrary, the office may authorize one or more demonstration projects to co-locate respite beds for youth alleged or at risk of juvenile delinquency in a runaway and homeless youth program. 4,960,000

In the language from this year's budget bill RHYA services are recognized by the NYS OCFS as a means of diverting youth at-risk of placement in RHY programs. Our programs are successful in large part because they are voluntary and youth choose to be there. Our philosophy of empowering youth, assisting them with learning a process for good decision

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making, and holding them responsible for their decisions is supported by our voluntary nature. In addition, these programs are designed specifically for youth that are outside of the child welfare or juvenile justice system. Our programs provide valuable prevention services; our programs are designed to help the youth that has no other system reaching out to them. For many children we may be both the first and/or last opportunity to provide a safety net that prevents hundreds of New York State's children from having to live in abusive or neglectful situations, or from having to learn how to survive on the streets.

Over the past 35 years, as an educator and child advocate I have seen many changes. I believe that many are made with diligence to make fiscally responsible choices and still meet the needs of our children. However cuts in governmental funding have decimated many programs, and make "available" services extremely difficult to access.

- The reduction in budgets and personnel at the Department of Social Services makes child protection services more difficult to access, especially for a youth 16 and 17.
- Reductions in the Probation Department make it very difficult to access services through the PINS process. Parent's call for services when they are in crisis, making dates for appointments with Diversion, and Diversion from Diversion frustrate them with the result being that more frequently than not they don't complete the process often resulting in further deterioration of the situation.
- Reduction in residential options for 16 & 17 year old youth; few transitional living programs; less access to Foster Care leave many youth forced to live in unsafe or very marginal situations.
- Reductions in non-secure and secure detention placements overburden many systems not designed to meet the needs of seriously disturbed youth, and leave young people with difficult problems to fall through the cracks, with the potential to drift deeper into the system.
- Reluctance to accept voluntary placements from parents who do not want to take their children, or their problems back leave these youth unsupervised, unwanted and just surviving.

While the need is greater than ever, the options for runaway and homeless youth have diminished. For many kids we are the only option they have. Without additional support these programs will also be forced to reduce services. Leaving confused children whose families have disintegrated due to illness; death; incarceration; unmet mental health needs; substance abuse; physical or emotional abuse to seek help on the streets and vulnerable to gangs that offer a sense of family and safety. These children will not be able to make it without support. They will not be able to gain a meaningful education and be prepared to enter the workforce to work towards self-sufficiency.

I would like to provide you with some information about Compass House that may help you to understand the difficulties being faced by the amazing system of RHY services in NYS.

- Compass House currently has 24 staff, we used to have 28,
- 80% of the staff at Compass House must work 2 jobs to be able to afford to work here.
- Up until 3 years ago, all of my counseling staff were required to have a minimum of a BA or BS in counseling or social work, we now accept Youth Counselors with an Associates Degree. Their annual salaries are between \$17,000 and \$22,000, some with more than 15 years of experience at Compass House. My staff understands from their first interview that there are no scheduled annual salary increases; no cost of

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living increases; and no retirement benefits will be accrued. They work here because they care about the youth that we serve and know that they are making a difference.

The services that are provided by the Runaway and Homeless Youth programs throughout the state are cost effective and work. We prevent the decline into chronic homelessness, entry into the mental health or criminal justice systems.

Our dedication is solid, but the reality is that our programs cannot survive on stagnant funding. With all of our services free, as mandated by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, we are reliant on the funding we receive from the Federal and State Government to assure that our children are protected. Program expenses like food, utilities and health insurance continue to increase. Many of our staff live very close to poverty level in spite of how hard they work and the valuable work they provide. Staff transition is a difficult and expensive process for our program and our kids, losing a trusted counselor is but one more rejection and loss in their lives. Still we come to work each day because we know these children. We know their histories, their daily struggles, and the unbelievable resilience they show as they face each day living with the uncertainties of where they will be sleeping that night, or if they will survive the streets safely next weekend. I have seen my kids murdered by gangs, and lost to the criminal justice system. I have seen a tremendous loss of potential and lives. I have also seen myriads of young people who return to us to say thank you and show us pictures of their beautiful children and tell us about their very productive and normal everyday lives.

I know why I get up every morning and come to work. I am grateful for the opportunity to make such a profound difference in the lives of these children.

All of our children, those in our homes and those on our streets are the future of our communities. What they make of their lives will have an impact on all of us. We have the opportunity to give them hope for a future and the support that they need to become productive, self-sufficient citizens.

I urge you to consider these children to be a priority in New York State, not just in sound bites on TV, but in the budget deliberations which is essential to support the safety net designed to protect them. Without your help, these children and future generations will be lost.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

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