

**Oregon's Homeless and Runaway Youth  
Douglas County's Response**

**June 7, 2004**

On May 18, 2004, the Douglas Commission on Children & Families held a community forum to discuss Douglas County's Homeless and Runaway Youth. In partnership with the League of Women Voters of the Umpqua Valley and the Douglas County Homeless Coalition, the Commission addressed the following questions.

1) What is an (informal estimate) of the runaway and homeless population in your county (community)?

According to a study currently being conducted by the League of Women Voters of the Umpqua Valley, "it is hard to get a firm count because this is a transient population, some are members of homeless families, and many of the young homeless do not want to be identified and counted. So the numbers change constantly." Early in this year, Phoenix school (an alternative school in Roseburg) counted 36; Roseburg Public schools, 72; Samaritan Inn, 17; UCAN, 15 who were members of homeless families. Most people the League talked with had no real count.

2) What are some perceptions of the runaway and homeless youth in your community?

Concerning the perceptions of runaway and homeless youth in this area, various agencies are prepared to help them, but teens usually don't want to call themselves homeless for fear of being categorized in a system where they have already had trouble. When we talk about our findings, people are shocked by the numbers of children who are homeless, by the issues of abuse and neglect in these children's lives, and by the complexities of living homeless.

The identified reasons for going homeless are well described in the *In the Loop* document of April 13<sup>th</sup>. Locally, substance abuse by parents as well as teens (parents on meth do not take care of their kids), gender issues with the developing teen, mental health of the teen as well as the parent, domestic violence, hunger and unemployment are acknowledged causes.

a. What are their needs? According to Ron Breyne, Phoenix School's Executive Director, our runaway and homeless youth need a base to work from to build stability. For example, they need an address/phone number and clean clothes so that they can look for work. Once they get work, they need a place to stay and dependable transportation to get to work. They need health care when sick to keep from missing work. And, finally, they need help building a network for support – who do you call when . . . counseling for life issues including drug abuse, support for continued success, sobriety.

b. What are the causes? Some of the causes are generational - a culture of getting by the best you

can without family wealth/connections/education/belonging etc. situational - family break up/single parent, job loss & career displacement, significant health problems all result in losses of wealth/connections/education/belonging (hopefully these are more transitory and within months to several years can be remedied).

c. What is the impact to your county (community)?

Gaps in local service identified now include safe housing and temporary shelter, a drop-in center, effective response to the drug presence in Douglas County, help for dysfunctional parents, counseling for young people becoming aware of themselves as homosexual, and collaboration and coordination of service-providing agencies in guiding these young people through the use of services.

In this community efforts are being made to identify homeless youth, and to support them in finding safety, caring for themselves, getting their education, owning their lives with goals and decisions, and training for work. The Roseburg School District has an active and effective Liaison under the McKinney-Vento law. Phoenix School's mission is the empowerment of such teens in difficulty. The Independent Living Program supports and guides former foster youth who are homeless and living alone. Our judges are using their authority to encourage people out of drug use and domestic violence. All the agencies we have talked with express interest in being a part of the solution.

3) From your perspective what do you recommend for your county (community) and Oregon regarding the runaway and homeless population?

There are two levels of response to the needs of the homeless: temporary relief, and long-term preparation and training for independent living. We have seen attempts at assistance at both levels. In Douglas County temporary relief is available. Long-term solutions we have seen are the developing Casa de Belen, a homeless shelter in Roseburg, and the nationally acknowledged "best practices" program in Portland, New Avenues for Youth. We see there are islands of energy and commitment to our homeless youth. It is our intention to build the bridges that are essential to achieving a more effective response for these unsupported youth.

a. Service needs? Ron Breyne of Phoenix School (alternative education school with a large homeless population), listed the following service needs for the youth he serves:

- required family mediation,
- counseling and parenting skills for situations where there is a safe, supportive home but conflicts exist (i.e., re-forming a family after divorce, inappropriate parenting, adolescent demanding less control).
- Creating independence where a safe, supportive home does not exist through

shelter/affordable housing/group homes with required education, independent living skills, and work/work readiness elements.

b. Policies? Additionally, Mr. Breyne thinks we should establish a policy to investigate more thoroughly when a child has run away. He believes we should look beyond the surface stories of the parent and child. He said, "If we actually knew what went on, I believe that more cases would find that the parent shows a pattern of negligence/criminal behavior/violence/abuse and the criminal behavior of the child (i.e., running away) is a reaction to those circumstances. Our unwritten policy is to ignore these situations except for criminalizing the child's behavior."

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