

Stronger Youth and Smarter Communities

An Analysis of Oregon's Investment in Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs

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Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Problem

The Oregon Runaway and Homeless Workgroup estimates that 24,000 unaccompanied youth experience homelessness each year in Oregon. National studies indicate that most of these youth run away due to family conflict or abuse, while others are kicked out of their home or ‘thrown away’. Research shows that without supportive services these youth are at much greater risk of:

- Sexual victimization
- Prostitution
- Physical abuse
- Physical illness
- Suicide
- Substance abuse
- Gang involvement
- Ending up in the adult chronic homelessness population
- Death

Oregon is home to innovative runaway and homeless youth services, but these rely heavily on federal funds and are available primarily in the I-5 corridor. Youth in rural areas, or smaller towns unable to access federal funds, are at risk.

Legislative Investment

In 2007 the Oregon State Legislature appropriated \$1 million to the 2007-2009 budget of the Oregon Commission on Children and Families (OCCF) to enhance, expand, or develop services and supports for previously un-served runaway and/or homeless youth. While 20 counties requested over \$4 million in assistance in response to the initial request for proposals, the funding allocated has enabled OCCF to “roll out” services in 8 counties. Through a leveraged federal grant, Portland State University’s Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services provided evaluation on some of the short-term the outcomes of this investment.

Findings

Researchers found that the funds invested yielded results for Oregon’s runaway and homeless youth at a low per-youth cost compared to the risk of non-intervention. In addition, researchers found benefits to communities in terms of more efficient use of limited resources.

Runaway and homeless youth Services are cost effective

- Total number of youth served from Apr-Dec 2008: **1,829**
- Estimated number served from initial startup thru June 2009: **3,047**
- Estimated number that will be served in 2009-2011 biennium: **4,877**
- Cost per youth for 2007-2009 biennium: **\$210**
- Estimated cost per youth for 2009-2011 biennium: **\$131**

Research indicates that costs of NOT providing services to high risk youth range from **\$470,000 - \$3 million per youth**. Local cost-benefit analyses show that **\$1 invested** in runaway and homeless youth provides over **\$4 in savings**.

Youth are safe and learning new skills

Examples include;

Benton County

- From Apr-Dec 2008, 86% of youth served exited to a safe and stable living circumstance.

Deschutes County

- From July- Sep 2008, 100% of youth served exited the program to safe and stable housing
- From July – Dec 2008, 86% of youth who participated in educational training demonstrate academic progress and re-engagement in the education process

Lincoln County

- 100% of youth served from July – Dec 2008 are now in a stable living situation

Washington County

- 84% of youth who participated in shelter care from Jan – Dec 2008 receive safe exits transitioning to a living situation that is stable and safe
- 86% of youth who participated in skill building groups from Jan – Dec 2008 report increased resistance and resiliency skills

Communities are working smarter

Programs utilizing these investments developed extensive community partnerships and collaborations that brought new community members to the table to address the needs of this vulnerable population. New and/or expanded partnerships were with:

- Individuals and community members
- Local businesses
- The faith community
- Existing social services:
- State agencies: DHS, Juvenile Departments, etc.
- Existing youth serving agencies
- Schools
- Youth

It would seem likely that other Oregon communities, given the opportunity, would be able to replicate similar models of services and community collaboration. Training and technical assistance from OCCF appears available and experienced to support such an expansion.

Family and youth are reconciling

Many of the runaway and homeless youth Rollout Programs provide family counseling or mediation to resolve the conflict that led to the youth requiring services. Initial analysis of an outcome survey, developed to capture this, among other changes in behavior, offers strong evidence that these interventions worked. Youth from a shelter program reported a significant improvement in their experience of family support six weeks after the program. There is a strong body of research that says youth who experience their families as supportive are much less likely to engage in delinquency, substance abuse, or other risky behaviors. This was a good investment.

Recommendation

Research shows that every youth kept in school and off the street saves the state much more costly interventions in the future such as those associated with substance abuse treatment, incarceration, and, among others, the costs associated with adult chronic homelessness. In light of this and other findings in this report, it would seem prudent to continue investments in the current programs and based on continued and expanded resources, replicate the services and supports in other counties. Such investments would afford other Oregon communities the opportunity to build collaborative mechanisms and thereby increasing the efficiency of their services to runaway and homeless youth. Such an investment will assure that youth in every community have the chance to become healthy young adults capable of giving back to their communities and families.

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