

Homeless Youth

The topic of homeless youth was approved for an update at the League of Women Voters of Lane County (LWVLC) annual meeting May 2022.

LEAGUE POSITIONS

The LWVLC does not have a position that explicitly addresses homeless youth. However, the national League and the state League both have positions that are relevant to the study of homeless youth.

The League of Women Voters of the United States has two positions that are relevant to homelessness: One states that “the League supports access to safe and stable housing for people with behavioral health challenges, including those who are chronically homeless.” The other position states that “When families or individuals cannot afford decent housing, government should provide assistance in the form of income and/or subsidized housing.”

The League of Women Voters of Oregon (LWVOR) has a robust policy that was adopted in 2007, and the local League can take action using the state or national policy. A summary of the LWVOR policy is: When parents are unable to care for their children, the LWVOR believes that the communities and governments should provide programs and services to runaway and homeless youth. LWVOR supports services to help families stay together. When youth are separated from their families, the League supports providing services directly to the youth including food, shelter, education, health care, etc. Services should be coordinated and evaluated. Private organizations are encouraged to provide funding and services. Youth should be served regardless of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. ¹

THE PROBLEM

Oregon is one of five states with the highest rate of homeless youth in the country.² The rate includes unaccompanied youths not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Abuse, neglect, drugs, no room at home, abandonment, dysfunctional home life, and sexual orientation are among the reasons that drive these youths to run away. They range in age from 12-21, although there have been younger runaways. Youths of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths are disproportionately represented in the unaccompanied youth population. The rate also includes youths within homeless families, by far the larger number. In 2019-2020, 1549 students experienced homelessness in Bethel, Eugene, and Springfield school districts. Nearly 500 of these students were unaccompanied youths.³

Barring intervention, homeless youths, whether within families or unaccompanied, face a future of chronic homelessness. Without a stable place to live, they cannot attend school regularly and, because of this, have the worst educational outcomes - the lowest attendance, the lowest scores on standardized tests, and consequently, the lowest graduation rates. Nationally only 29 percent of homeless students passed state exams in reading and 24 percent in math. ⁴ Oregon’s scores match the national averages.⁵ Many homeless youths have a hard time simply getting to school because they are exhausted from sleeping in an apartment with more people than beds, aren't able to clean their clothes, have slept somewhere far from their school, or have to miss school to attend mandatory appointments with their parents.

Being homeless and failing to graduate from high school are the greatest risk factors for future homelessness. Without the structured setting of school, homeless youth and young adults (YYA) are on the streets and “vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking because they tend to experience a higher rate of risk factors for trafficking including poverty, unemployment, a history of sexual abuse, and a history of mental health issues. National studies have found that trafficking rates among YYAs experiencing homelessness range from 19 percent to 40 percent. The Family and Youth Services Bureau published a

2016 report that found about 36 percent of runaway and homeless youth (RHY) traded sex for a place to stay or another need.”⁶

Some of the most vulnerable unhoused youth and young adults are those who are pregnant or parenting. The Voices of Youth Count: Pregnant and Parenting Youth Experiencing Homelessness in America found that nationwide 44 percent of female-identified and 18 percent of male-identified YYAs ages 18 to 25 experiencing homelessness reported being pregnant or a parent. In the same findings, 10 percent of female-identified and three percent of male-identified youth ages 13-17 reported being pregnant or parenting.⁷

THE NUMBERS

Student homelessness is defined as children and youth who “lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence such as those who live in homeless shelters and transitional housing units, share housing with others because of economic hardship or live in motels, hotels, tents, or trailer parks or camping grounds, or are abandoned in hospitals.”⁸ The National Health Care for the Homeless Council reported that approximately 2.5 million children are homeless yearly.⁹ The Point-In-Time method - counting people who are experiencing homelessness on a single night in a given community - makes it difficult to get an accurate number, especially given the impact of COVID. A national survey conducted by School House Connection and the University of Michigan in 2020 estimated that roughly 420,000 homeless students had simply disappeared from the rolls, untracked and unassisted.¹⁰

The number of homeless students from Pre-K to 12th grade in Oregon was 21,080, according to Oregon Department of Education (ODE) statistics for 2019-2020. The ODE collects information through the school districts.¹¹ Analysis by InvestigateWest and the Center for Public Integrity suggests at least 21 percent of Oregon districts are under-identifying the number of homeless students attending their schools. Some research suggests that a more accurate estimate of homelessness in a student body should total at least five percent of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.¹² When the schools closed during COVID, so did the primary way of identifying and assisting students experiencing homelessness. For Bethel and Eugene in 2021-2022, school liaisons reported 800 homeless youth, of which 221 were unaccompanied.¹³ Lane Community College (LCC) reported that 14 percent of its current student population is homeless due to the pandemic.¹⁴

SERVICES

Federal

Staying in school is seen as a key to stopping the slide to chronic homelessness. “The right of homeless children and youth to have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education provided to other children despite lack of a fixed place of residence or a supervising parent or guardian is ensured under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.”¹⁵

Under the 1987 McKinney-Vento Act (MV), every local educational agency must designate a liaison for homeless children and youth. Every school district in Oregon has at least one designated MV Student Liaison. In many rural areas, principals or other school personnel, serve as the MV liaison, wearing multiple hats due to a lack of funding.

The liaisons identify and help homeless youth register and enroll in school, set up school transportation, provide advocacy and outreach services, and make referrals to local service providers for health, dental, mental health, housing, substance abuse, and other appropriate services. The liaison also helps students with basic needs (shoes, clothes, school supplies, meals), examines policies and procedures to remove barriers, provides sensitivity training to district staff on the rights of students experiencing homelessness,

provides support for school personnel, and ensures that unaccompanied homeless youth are informed and receive verification of their status as independent students for college financial aid. Currently, Eugene has two MV liaisons, Springfield has one, and Bethel has one. Rural parts of Lane County have also been assigned McKinney-Vento liaisons.

Successful implementation depends upon funding. As part of the American Rescue Plan Act (March 2021), \$7.4 million came to Oregon schools to identify homeless children and youth, providing them with services and assistance to attend school and participate in school activities.¹⁶ Because of this act, many rural school districts received grants for the first time. With the funding, schools became islands of resources. They contracted for dental and vision care, met basic needs, and provided transitional housing and mileage reimbursements to parents for transportation to school. The American Rescue Plan funding, however, is temporary funding. Oregon receives approximately “\$900,000 in federal funding tied to the McKinney-Vento law — dollars that are exclusively doled out through competitive grants.”¹⁷

State of Oregon

“The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a federal school accountability law rooted in supporting all students equitably and building systems that eliminate barriers to student success; it replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015. As part of ESSA, all states developed a plan for improving education and submitted it to the U.S. Department of Education.”¹⁸ Oregon’s plan is entitled “Oregon’s Consolidated Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act.” All districts that receive funding under this act must reserve a portion to address the needs of homeless students. State funding also provided an MV support specialist to help rural districts identify and support unhoused students. Additionally, the ODE correlates data received from the liaisons by district and county to get a count of unhoused youths (within families and unaccompanied), their living situations, academic performance, etc.

National statistics show 20 percent of youth aging out of foster care will experience homelessness the day they turn 18, and 25 percent of youth aged out of the foster care system experience homelessness within four years. Youth under the age of 18, in the care and custody of the Department of Human Services (DHS), are provided an Independent Living Program (ILP) beginning at age 16, which offers training and classes to prepare youth to live independently. The ILP Housing Subsidy Program can provide a decreasing subsidy for housing payments up to 30 months.

Another program, Foster Youth to Independence (FYI), provides housing assistance for youth aging out of foster care through the Oregon Department of Human Services in partnership with Lane County’s Housing Authority. Housing solutions for at-risk young adults are also being addressed with the passage of House Bill 2163. Beginning in the fall of 2022, Oregon is investing \$4.5 million to establish a long-term rental assistance program supporting individuals younger than 25 years old transitioning out of foster care, homelessness, a behavioral health or treatment facility, or a corrections or detention facility.¹⁹

Lane County

In August 2021, about ten percent of Lane County’s homeless population was comprised of youths 18 years and younger. The number is approximated by individual contacts made during street outreach, the ODE, Point In Time counts, Homeless Management Information Services (HMIS), and referrals from the various agencies that provide services.

The latest HMIS data in Lane County reflects that 133 pregnant and parenting YYA are at-risk of homelessness in Lane County.²⁰ There are few shelters in rural Lane County that provide specific services for pregnant and parenting unhoused youth; most are located in Eugene and Springfield, where an appropriate shelter might not always be available.

Funding for many of these services comes from the Department of Housing and Urban Development grants for Continuum of Care (CoC) programs to states and local entities. Lane County Human Services Division is the lead agency for the CoC program. It was awarded an initial \$3.6 million in federal funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) for its efforts to end and prevent youth homelessness. Initial grants will last two years. YHDP funding is renewable annually and may be used for eligible activities under the CoC.²¹

The proposed allocation of the funds includes \$2 million for transitional housing, rapid rehousing projects, and outreach projects. The remaining funding will go to furthering and supporting efforts to end youth homelessness. To advance those efforts, the agency, Lane County along with youth leaders, stakeholders, educators, and local city government, created the Coordinated Community Plan.

Coordinated Community Plan

One of the goals of the Coordinated Community Plan is to build outreach teams in rural areas and historically marginalized communities to identify and connect with youth and young adults who are unhoused or at risk of being unhoused. Another goal is to develop a youth-led awareness campaign utilizing social media, schools, peers, and other means to share information on how these youth and young adults can access services. Also planned is an accessible survey in all secondary and postsecondary settings to allow a safe and protected way for youth to self-identify as unaccompanied, unhoused, or at risk of being unhoused.

The Coordinated Community Plan mentions the overlap of unhoused youth and the justice system, with more than half of these youth experiencing an arrest at least once. Providing housing stability removes an important barrier to their reentry into their communities where, hopefully, they can engage in school or work training or obtain behavioral health services.

Additionally, Lane County applied for and was awarded a non-renewable Planning Grant of \$154,620 to cover the costs of staffing and youth leader stipends.²² They also have a host-home program.

In 2005 Lane County established a help line (211) as a means for anyone to call and provide information about their immediate needs. From that request, they will get back a list of possible providers that can fill that need. This service is open to all.²³

City of Eugene

The city does not have employees who work directly with homeless youth. Rather, the Eugene Library, Municipal Court and Eugene Police serve those populations on a case-by-case basis not directly related to their homeless status.

Caitlin McMahan, Teen Librarian at the Eugene Public Library, explains, “we don’t have programs that specifically focus on homeless youth, but we are very conscious of the fact that we see a lot of youth in crisis in our space, and we want to create programs where they feel welcome and share useful information, such as the ins and outs of housing (rent, deposits, cosigners, etc.). Teen Services has a dedicated portion of the budget that goes towards Comfort Cabinet supplies, which are basic necessities: toothbrush/paste, soap, shampoo, socks, deodorant, and some weather-specific items. The library is also a place where teens can come and hang out. It’s free, and there’s no time limit for how long they can be here (other than our closing hours). They have access to bathrooms, water, and our partner organizations stop by frequently to tell the teens about resources. They can also use our computers, play on our gaming system, do puzzles and crafts, play board games, and charge their personal devices. It’s safe, dry, and protects them from weather extremes.”²⁴

SOME LOCAL NONPROFIT PROGRAMS

Youth who are “new” to our streets are more likely to become chronically homeless if we do not intervene within 15 nights. In 2020, we had 791 Eugene 4J-Springfield unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness. Approximately 50 percent of the 791 students will not graduate high school.²⁵

1. 15th Night

According to Looking Glass, a youth who spends more than 14 consecutive nights on the street is 80 to 85 percent more likely to become chronically homeless. One-third of these youths drop out of school within a year. The 15th Night movement, founded in 2015, is a broad community partnership committed to preventing youth from going on the street and intervening quickly if they do.

15th Night provides a centralized place where needs can be met quickly. Through their Rapid Access Network System (RAN), they can provide access to clothing, shoes, personal care products, backpacks, food, housing specialists, transportation, doctor appointments, counseling, mentors or peer support, youth advocates, application assistance, library cards, etc. For example, they have a housing navigator who meets unhoused youth to determine the housing situation that will match their needs. This may mean helping the youth complete the front door assessment so that they can get on the county’s housing waiting lists or contacting housing programs that are not affiliated with the county's process. If there are no current openings, the 15th Night housing navigator works to find temporary shelter or housing options, if possible, while the youth waits for a housing resource to open up.

Their general services include training, monitoring, and triaging of Rapid Access Network (RAN) technology in the Eugene-Springfield community. They also coordinate the 40+ Network organizations and facilitate the work of the Youth Action Council for the Eugene-Springfield community.

15th Night developed its own technology system (RAN). For example, an unhoused youth at the school, library, White Bird, or Looking Glass can make a request. The liaison at one of the locations will send the request to the RAN system. An alert goes out to all the participating organizations on the network (there are currently 41 agencies such as St. Vincent dePaul, Catholic Community Services, and Looking Glass). An agency that can fill the request sends back a message through the RAN system. The system lets the other agencies know the request has been filled. The liaison will relay to the youth who has the item, and they can pick it up. The concept is to leverage the existing resources and services that already exist and are willing to participate. The RAN network is a resource line, not an emergency line. This gives agencies time to fill the request. According to Megan Shultz, the manager of the network who coordinates with agencies and schools, “it is an agreement. A promise among willing compassionate people that no student should ever have to choose to spend a fifteenth night on the streets.”²⁶

15th Night started its work in schools in 2017. The School Mobilization Model (SMM) uses the RAN system. Each participating high school has its own RAN system tailored to its needs. All the schools' resources are listed and vary from clothes to employment. The choice of resources within a school will vary from school to school. 15th Night goes into the schools to set up the network. They do an extensive assessment of what resources are available in the school. They interview students, teachers, and administrators to determine what is needed. They present their findings to the principal and work with the school to obtain the items needed. (Schools also create an Amazon Wish List that 15th Night looks to the community to fill through their social media and events).

Once the resources are known, the resource list is set up. 15th Night works with the teachers and staff to show them how to access the system and how to pick the requested item to fill the request. The system was expanded to include the community surrounding the school so community volunteers could also fill

requests. The use of the system is open to all students, thereby removing the stigma that its use is just for the unhoused student.

In 2019, 15th Night was awarded a 3-year United Way of Lane County Transformation grant that expanded their work to all high schools in 4J, Springfield, Bethel school districts, and Junction City. A grant from PeaceHealth expanded their work into Cottage Grove. A 3-year contract with Lane Educational Service District will expand the 15th Night school model to all rural high schools.²⁷

2. Looking Glass

Each year Looking Glass helps over 3,000 unhoused, unaccompanied youths and handles as many as 15 referrals daily. It is primarily a drop-in facility for youths ages 16-24 where they can get a meal, hygiene supplies, clothes, and blankets, use the laundry facilities, and interact with staff who have come from similar circumstances.

Many of the youth have left unsafe settings or abusive households and survive by panhandling or trading for food and personal needs with others living on the streets. Some have fallen into sex trafficking, and most have dropped out of high school.

Looking Glass provides a temporary overnight shelter, Station 7, with 12 beds and two cots for youths ages 11-20. Youths can stay for a max of 90 days. Looking Glass works with Lane County to help find transitional housing for unaccompanied homeless youth.

A new low-barrier harm reduction facility will open in 2023 for youths ages 16-24 and will have a nurse on staff. Looking Glass provides counseling with a therapist and a mental health advocate upon request to deal with issues relating to past abuse or sexual exploitation. In addition, Narcotics Anonymous offers a harm reduction program that provides clean needles and Narcan.

Looking Glass also offers educational help through the New Roads School for youths ages 16-24, which is part of School District 4J. Students are unenrolled after not attending for ten school days. However, students can return to New Roads School whenever they are ready and can be re-enrolled. In the last month, four students completed their GED through New Roads.

Looking Glass is dependent on donations and grants and also receives funds from the county.²⁸

3. A Family For Every Child

Established in 2006, the organization aims to help children in the foster care system and other youth to be permanently adopted by their “forever family.” The organization recently started a host home program specifically serving the area’s homeless youth, ages 11 to 17. The program works to find families willing to temporarily provide housing for youth who are attending school and working to earn their high school diploma or GED. Students are referred to the program through local school district liaisons.²⁹

4. C.O.R.E. Community Outreach through Radical Empowerment

C.O.R.E. is a low-barrier harm reduction program that does outreach and provides services with input from the youth they meet. Participants can fill out the C.O.R.E. Outreach Service Request Form, where a young person 29 and under can request a street outreach worker to come to their location. Community outreach workers can also visit camps and provide case management services, navigation, coordinated care, community training and education, Naloxone distribution and overdose education, and safe sex, survival, hygiene, and harm reduction supplies.³⁰

5. The Junior League of Eugene (JLE)

Many unhoused youth and young adults lack the identification needed for employment, public assistance, and educational or vocational services. The JLE has become a crucial part of the 15th Night RAN in assisting unhoused YYA in obtaining the necessary documentation, completing forms, paying fees, and escorting the YYA to the local Department of Motor Vehicles to complete the process of obtaining personal identification. In 2021, JLE received 21 alerts and in the first two months of 2022, they received 19 alerts.³¹

6. Hosea Youth Services (HYS)

Hosea Youth Services, primarily a faith-based program which serves all unhoused youth regardless of religion, offers respite, meals, a sense of community, and housing when funding allows. The HYS Resource Center offers many personal needs, such as food, clothing, computer access, laundry facilities, a napping room, pet kennels, and showers. HYS also partners with other agencies to help unhoused YYA ages 16-24 obtain services such as addiction treatment or mental health services. HYS helps 100 percent of the YYA they encounter; as many as 20-30 arrive during the day and often more arrive for dinner.

Most of the referrals to HYS come from White Bird, the county, and the city, and they have served approximately 450 individuals in the last year. They also partner with other agencies for services, such as White Bird and Serenity Lane, for addiction issues. Almost all of the youth have dental issues, which can lead to other health issues. According to Brad Bills, Executive Director of HSY, most of the youth they encounter come from challenging family situations such as poverty, abuse, abandonment, mental illness and addictions. Some also have mental health issues, including schizophrenia and addictions.

Most of the youth who come to HYS camp out and know how to navigate for food services from the community, such as SNAP benefits and Egan Warming. They also navigate on their own for educational services and tutoring.³²

CONCLUSION

The programs available to homeless youth, both public and private, try to stop the slide of youths into chronic homelessness. However, youth homelessness and homelessness, in general, will not be truly solved until society addresses the larger issues of affordable housing, a living wage, discriminatory practices, and underfunded support systems, all of which contribute to creating homelessness.

Discussion Questions

1. Were there statistics or information in the study that surprised you?
2. Do you think the schools or service agencies in our county are doing enough to prevent youth from becoming unhoused? What ideas or suggestions do you have to improve the services in our county for unhoused youths?
3. Are there other organizations in our area that you think should be encouraged to help with this problem of unhoused youth?
4. What actions can the League take to ameliorate the problem of unhoused youth in our community?
5. How, as individuals, can we make a difference for unhoused youth?

Footnotes

1. [LWVUS: The first position is in the section "Behavioral Health," and the second position is in the section "Meeting Basic Human Needs." (<https://www.lwv.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/LWV-impact-2020.pdf>). The LWVOR policy is part of the section "Social Policy/Homeless Youth." (<https://www.lwvor.org/lwvor-position-index>)]
2. WalletHub, "States With the Most Underprivileged Children," Adam McCann. August 2022.
3. Oregon Department of Education, Schools and Districts, ESEA 2019-2020.
4. National Center for Homeless Education. January 2018.
5. Oregon Department of Education. Homeless Education Webpage. www.ode.state.or.us/Go/HomelessEd

6. Coordinated Community Plan 2022, pg. 24
7. <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/pregnant-and-parenting-youth-experiencing-homelessness/#glossary>
8. Further examples: students who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; students who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations or similar settings; and migratory students who qualify as homeless because the students are living in circumstances already described. SchoolHouse Connection.” McKinney-Vento Act: Quick Reference. Sep 14, 2020
9. The National Health Care for the Homeless Council. “America’s Youngest Outcasts State Report Card on Child Homelessness.” 2014. Nashville Tenn.
10. SchoolHouse Connection.”Lost in the Masked Shuffle & Virtual Void: Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Amidst the Pandemic.” November 19, 2020.
11. Oregon Department of Education. Homeless Education Webpage. www.ode.state.or.us/Go/HomelessEd
12. InvestigateWest (invw.org) is an independent news nonprofit dedicated to investigative journalism in the Pacific Northwest. Center for Public Integrity, The Seattle Times, Street Sense Media and WAMU/ DCist. Register-Guard. December 5, 2022.
13. Interviews with Bethel and Eugene Liaisons, November 2022.
14. #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey Results. Institution Report for Lane Community College. The Hope Center. July 2020.
15. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VII-B. Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program.1987.
16. American Rescue Plan Act. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief- Homeless Children and Youth. March 11, 2021.
17. InvestigateWest (invw.org) is an independent news nonprofit dedicated to investigative journalism in the Pacific Northwest. Center for Public Integrity, The Seattle Times, Street Sense Media and WAMU/ DCist. Register-Guard. December 5, 2022.
18. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). “Oregon’s Consolidated Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act.” Oregon Department of Education.
19. <https://www.oregon.gov/ohcs/for-providers/Pages/Long-term-Rental-Assistance-for-Youth.aspx> House Bill 2163
20. Coordinated Community Plan, pg. 12.
21. <https://www.hudexchange.info/grantees/or-500/>
22. Lugo, Dianne.“A Game Changer.” *Salem Statesman Journal*. September 2021. Coordinated Community Plan, pg. 42.
23. Interview Kirstin London, Program Services Coordinator to Youth Homelessness Initiatives. Human Services Division. Lane County Government. November 2022.
24. Interview Caitlin McMahan, Teen Librarian. Eugene Public Library. November 2022.
25. <https://www.15thnight.org/why-1>
26. Interview Megan Shultz, MSH Consulting Northwest. 15th Night Community Coordinator. November 2022.
27. Interview Megan Shultz, MSH Consulting Northwest. 15th Night Community Coordinator. November 2022.
28. Interview with MaryKate Coy, Looking Glass Street Outreach Coordinator, New Roads. October 2022.
29. Nelson, Andy. “Finding Hope>” *Register Guard*, October 2018.
30. www.coreeugene.org
31. Coordinated Community Plan 2022, pg. 14
32. www.hoseayouth.org and Brad Bills, Executive Director, phone conversation, 10/27/22

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