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TESTIMONY
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ACQUISITIONS

The House Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Human Resources

My name is Dr. Toni Collarini and this testimony is presented in my capacity as Executive Director of the Westchester County Youth Bureau which coordinates the Runaway and Homeless Youth System in our county.

Background: The Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter Program has been in existence since 1980 in Westchester County. As the years have progressed, the findings about the runaway youth population being served suggest that they are a more dysfunctional group with very few coping mechanisms. Over the years our findings have shown that we are working with more parents who are alcoholics and substance abusers. Their children are, consequently, influenced in that way and unfortunately many of them become abusers of drugs and alcohol as well.

Housing is a primary need for the majority of runaways in Westchester County. In the 1970's many youth service providers thought that runaways should be served by a series of host homes. However, the complexity of problems and the needs of youngsters indicated that a structured facility was needed.

Located in the geographic center of Westchester County in Valhalla, New York, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter Program serves all of Westchester County and includes all socio-economic levels. The number of runaways from Yonkers, Mt. Vernon, Peekskill, and White Plains, are predominant due to the fact that they are densely populated urban areas and all are considered either "high risk" or "high priority" for youth services. Areas considered "high risk" or "high priority" are targeted for outreach services. Westchester County spreads over 449 miles and stretches from Long Island Sound on the southeast to the Hudson River on its western boundary and borders rural areas to the north in Putnam County and New York City on its southern border. Westchester County is characterized by great diversity of geography and population. Westchester runs the gamut of social environments, with highly urbanized areas such as Yonkers and Mount Vernon in the southern portion of the County, to posh suburbs such as Scarsdale in central Westchester to rural areas in the northern region, such as Cortlandt.

Over 80% of Westchester's children live in municipalities which contain high priority and high risk communities which are specifically identified with disadvantaged populations and pockets of poverty.

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In 1980, the total population in Westchester County was 866,599 which represented 5% of New York State's population. 259,113 (29.9%) of the county's population was below the age of 21. Population density in Westchester, averaging 1,936 persons per square mile in 1980, ranged from 175 persons per square mile in the Town of Pound Ridge to approximately 17,000 persons per square mile in the City of Mt. Vernon.

In 1970, Westchester County was ranked the 4th wealthiest of 1,341 counties in the U.S. This rank moved to 13th in 1976 and 19th in 1980, suggesting that although the county's overall relative affluence remains high, the comparative standing has been declining. While the county's population has been declining on a whole, the black and Hispanic populations have increased substantially. Westchester's youth represent one-quarter (24%) of the total 1989 population of the county. Of this, 28,359 are at or below poverty level, 829 of which dropped out of school and 278 ran away from home.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter: The Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter Program provides a centralized, coordinated multi-disciplinary approach aimed at addressing the complexity of the problems facing this population. Service methods supporting this concept are the provision of a 24-hour emergency shelter, a 24-hour hotline service and a comprehensive case management delivery system.

Emergency Shelter Service: This service is provided 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. The basic Shelter services include: 24 hour supervision; intake services; Case Management Services; food services are provided at scheduled hours 3 times a day; clothing services; linen services; hygiene services including provision of a toiletry kit; and emergency medical service on a 24-hour basis.

Recommendations:

Westchester's Runaway and Homeless Youth System is coordinated by the Westchester County Youth Bureau. The emergency shelter is operated through a subcontract with Volunteers of America, Inc. New York State is unique in the nation as the only state which maintains a system of youth bureaus which exist at the municipal level as part of county, city and many village governments. The role of a youth bureau is to research needs, plan programs and develop systems of services which address the particular youth problems and issues within a county.

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As part of our county's coordinated system, our Runaway and Homeless Youth Program has been able to benefit from both government institutionalized services, such as Department of Social Services, Health and Mental Health Departments as well as those programs which are provided through county contracts with not-for-profit agencies. This has allowed for a wider range of alternatives to meet the needs of those young people who are identified by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program. This systematic presence in the community helps to maximize local resources. This unique youth bureau structure in New York State has mandated responsibilities for providing comprehensive services and help to assure maximum "bang for the buck."

I urge federal support for the coordination of Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs through youth bureau structures where they exist. This also provides for a local mechanism for monitoring accountability and program direction.

During these times of tight fiscal constraints, the resources made available by the federal government are more and more urgently needed. In many communities, the services that are being cut are often those which impact on children and youth, yet it is our children and youth whose economic and social status has continued to decline in this county (as many national studies have documented) so that social and community supports are more greatly required. There is nothing more basic to an individual's well-being than the safety and security of home, yet the youngsters who run away have had that basic security threatened. We have seen in our county the profound positive changes that can result from the intervention of a Runaway and Homeless Youth Program. This is not by chance nor accident, but a planned systematic intervention. Our county has many services - yet the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program has often been cited by parents and young people as having made the significant difference that changed the course of the young person's life. If this is true in our county, I can only imagine the degree to which a Runaway Program makes the critical difference in other parts of the country where services are generally less available.

I urge the continuation of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act as part of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. I hope that you will increase support in this area so that youth throughout this nation will have a chance for survival during these difficult times.

Thank you for your attention.