**Testimony to the New York City Council**

Executive Budget Hearing

May 21, 2020

My name is Jayne Bigelsen and I am the Vice President of Advocacy at Covenant House New York (CHNY), where we serve runaway and homeless youth (RHY) ages 16 to 24. I would like to thank the New York City Council for the opportunity to submit written testimony for this Executive Budget Hearing.

CHNY is the nation’s largest, non-profit adolescent care agency serving homeless, runaway and trafficked youth. During this past year, CHNY served over 1,600 young people in our residential programs, as well as through our drop-in center and street outreach efforts. On a nightly basis, we provide shelter to approximately 200 young people, including, LGBTQ youth and pregnant women and mothers with their children as well as survivors of human trafficking/commercial sexual exploitation. Our youth are primarily people of color and over a third of our youth have spent time in the foster care system. Many of our youth have experienced abuse or neglect at the hands of parents or other caregivers, and a disproportionately high percentage of our youth struggle with the pervasive impacts of trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuse. We provide young people with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, mental health and substance abuse services, legal services, high school equivalency classes and other educational and job-training programs, as well as a safe house and specialized services for survivors of human trafficking/commercial sexual exploitation. Any chance you could turn it All of these services help young people overcome the trauma of abuse, homelessness and exploitation and move toward stability.

We are keenly aware that our city, state, nation and world are in the midst of a global economic recession due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. We also understand that difficult decisions will need to be made due to decreasing tax revenue. However, sadly but unsurprisingly, data from the pandemic has demonstrated that minority groups have been especially hard-hit and have faced a larger death toll respective to their representation in the greater population. As we know too well, global and national crises shine a spotlight on the inequalities that exist in our society with the most vulnerable among us often faring the worst. At CHNY, the most vulnerable among us are exactly who we serve: young people without homes, financial support, adequate vocational or educational skills and little-to-no safety net before they reach our doors. Additionally, rather than closing our doors, youth homeless shelters must welcome and shelter even more at- risk young people during a pandemic. Our direct service staff cannot work from the safety of their home, and instead are essential workers who must directly care for our young people at our 41st St. and Bronx based shelters. We therefore implore you not to forget our youth and staff in the New York City budget.

**Right-size Runaway and Homeless Youth Provider Contracts. $3.01M- 3% COLA contract increase for 5 years and an additional 7% general contract increase for all current DYCD funded RHY contracts**

First and foremost, we are asking that our essential workers/direct care staff, who have risked their lives every day of this pandemic caring for our young people experiencing homelessness, be paid a living wage. New York State has cut human services local aid by 5% annually since 2012. Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) funded RHY provider contracts continue to fall short of covering the true cost of running RHY programs. Sadly, it is the human services workforce that bears the brunt of the reduced funding, thereby leaving the average human services employee living at or below the poverty line. It is simply unacceptable for essential workers with full-time jobs, who are jeopardizing their own health to serve others in this pandemic, to be living at the poverty line. Additionally, low and stagnant wages due to insufficient state and city funding cause staff turnover rates in parts of the nonprofit sector that are over 40%. High turnover rates are detrimental to the young people we serve as it is important that our youth develop rapport with the adult staff who act as mentors and guides as they rise out of poverty to lead self-sufficient lives. Frequent staff changes can disrupt that rapport and make it more difficult for youth experiencing homelessness to leave poverty behind. We are therefore asking for a 3% increase on contracts and rates for the next five years and an additional 7% general contract increase for all current DYCD funded RHY contracts. This will “right size” DYCD contracts to more closely resemble the true cost of a bed for a young person experiencing homelessness in New York City.

**Continue to fund CHNY’s anti-human trafficking program**

Unfortunately, traffickers like to make homeless youth a primary target**.** Recent research has demonstrated that approximately one in five of the young people we serve have had experiences that fit the federal definition of ‘severe forms of human trafficking’ or felt so desperate that they believed they had no choice but to trade sex for basic life necessities, such as food or shelter[[1]](#footnote-1). Many of our survivors have told us that they are finding this period of social isolation especially difficult because it reminds them of being isolated with their trafficker and in some cases makes it harder to access their support systems in person. Additionally, survivors often rely on part-time jobs in the retail and restaurant industries as they get back on their feet and pursue their long-term educational and vocational goals. Unfortunately, many survivors of trafficking/commercial sexual exploitation have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 which increases their chances of relapsing back into the life of prostitution if they cannot find employment. We are extremely grateful to the NYC Council for providing with us with $50,000 annually towards our anti-human trafficking programming. We are in the process of moving our current safe house for survivors to a new location in the Bronx. We are extremely excited about the move as it will allow us to serve more survivors in a beautiful home closer to our main 41st St. hub. However, this relocation will be costly, with an increase in both rent and staffing costs. The $50,000 provided by the NYC Council will help defray some of those costs, and it is therefore extremely important that we continue to receive this funding. Due to these increase costs and the fact that human trafficking survivors are especially vulnerable during this pandemic, we are requesting an increase to $150,000 per year for our anti-trafficking programming.

**Fund two mental health focused TIL Program Pilots. $2.6M**

Living through a global pandemic can exacerbate mental health symptoms in anyone. However, individuals who were previously struggling with mental health concerns and the neediest among us are the most susceptible to declines in mental health. Prior to COVID-19, homeless youth service providers often did not have the appropriate staff capacity or structure to support RHY with significant mental health needs. At CHNY, we are fortunate to have twelve social workers, a part-time psychiatrist and a mental health day program to serve youth with a wide range of mental health issues. Our mental health staff is adept at dealing with mental health concerns including, anxiety, depression, PTSD, bipolar disorder, among many other disorders. However, in recent years we have seen an increase in young people with schizophrenia, psychosis and active suicidality. Young people with these conditions often need more mental health support than we can provide. In these cases, we will advocate to hospitalize the young person in order to ensure their safety. However, frequently the hospital will only keep the youth for 24 hours before returning them to our care. The young person is then bounced back and forth between RHY service providers and hospitals and do not receive the intensive 24/7 mental health care that it is essential to their recovery. There are no youth mental health beds in New York City, which means we have had to make referrals out of state. CHNY is therefore asking the City to issue an RFP for two programs to serve RHY with mental and behavioral health needs that would include on-site clinical services and intensive case management to provide these youth with the services they need.

**Make CityFHEPS vouchers available to RHY immediately**

Over three years ago, RHY in the DYCD system were promised access to city sponsored housing vouchers. To date, they still do not have access. Time and time again, our dedicated and experienced aftercare housing managers struggle to find housing options for young people who are about to leave Rights of Passage (ROP), our transitional living program (TIL), even when the client has met all of their individual and program goals. This can create a bottleneck as a young person in our crisis program will not be able to move into our TIL until there is a bed available. Yet we will not release that bed until we can be assured that the young person exiting our TIL has an appropriate place to stay.

Ultimately, youth who have successfully completed a TIL need access to affordable housing, and a CityFHEPS Voucher would be an essential tool in making that happen. However, since our clients are receiving services from a DYCD funded shelter instead of an HRA funded shelter, they are currently denied the opportunity to receive an HRA voucher. It simply does not make sense that because a person is accessing services through a different city agency, one that specializes in developmentally appropriate services for their age group, they should be denied a major pathway to achieving housing stability.

Although the current rules do provide an avenue for a youth in a DYCD shelter to receive a CITYFHEPS voucher, it seems to be written as an exception as opposed to allowing for general eligibility for DYCD youth in the CITYFHEPS program. In order to be eligible for CITYFHEPS, the regulation requires that the individual be referred by the Commissioner of another city agency and that the HRA Commissioner determine that due to the particular circumstances of the household, CITYFHEPS rental assistance is needed to avert entry to a DHS shelter. CHNY believes that eligibility for CITYFHEPS should be based on someone’s lived experience with homelessness and not dependent on which agency they have sought shelter from. We therefore recommend that any young person who receives services, whether residential or outreach, from a DYCD provider be granted equal access to CITYFHEPS.

**Award the contract for the NYC Unity Works Program**

CHNY urges the City to immediately award the contract for the NYC Unity Works Program to be administered by DYCD that was scheduled to begin on July 1, 2020. In October 2019, the City announced the NYC Unity Works program, explaining that it was the “Nation’s Most Comprehensive Workforce Development Program for Homeless and Runaway LGBTQI Youth.”

As LGBTQ young people are overrepresented in the homeless youth population, we were disheartened to learn that the awarding and implementation of this groundbreaking initiative is being placed on “pause” indefinitely. This funding is especially vital in the wake of the unemployment and financial recession caused by COVID-19. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and a number of other organizations have just begun to underscore the inequalities and inequities experienced by LGBTQ populations related to employment. Of note, transgender/gender-nonconforming individuals experience unemployment at four times the national average. Current realities have demonstrated the people of color are disproportionately impacted by both the health and financial repercussions of COVID- 19. A large majority of the LGBTQ young people we serve and the general population of youth we serve at CHNY are people of color. These youth will undoubtedly be disproportionately impacted, and we have already seen many lose their employment or have a drastic reduction to their income due to COVID-19. Therefore, at a time when marginalized communities are already being disproportionally impacted financially by the COVID-19 crisis, it is even more important that a program that was intentionally developed to address income inequality faced by LGBTQ youth be awarded as planned.

We again thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We understand that the City has difficult spending decisions to make in this unprecedented time. However, we also know that young people experiencing homelessness in NYC were already marginalized and that the current economic realities will make it even harder for them to break free from poverty. Additionally, many of our frontline staff are barely making a living wage yet continue to heroically risk their health to care for our young people. We believe that the above recommendations, particularly the 3% COLA for five successive years and the 7% contract increase, are essential steps to ensuring that the people who serve homeless youth are compensated fairly and that young people experiencing homelessness in NYC have an opportunity to thrive instead of falling further behind.

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