

# STATE OF COLORADO



**Colorado Department of Human Services**

*people who help people*

**OFFICE OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND HOUSING**

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**2005 Annual Report**  
**Colorado Department of Human Services**  
**Supportive Housing and Homeless Program**

**Office of Homeless Youth Services**  
**January 15, 2006**

This report is submitted to the Governor and the General Assembly pursuant to the Homeless Youth Services Act (House Bill 02-1159) and House Bill 04-1107 concerning the performance of the Office of Homeless Youth Services and whether the office is effectively and efficiently meeting the goals specified.

## **History of the Office of Homeless Youth Services (OHYS)**

The Legislature passed the Homeless Youth Services Act (House Bill 02-1159) in 2002 in response to the overwhelming and diverse needs of homeless youth in Colorado. The intent of this legislation was to create a vehicle through which services to homeless youth statewide could be improved by coordinating current services and facilitating interagency collaboration to identify gaps, remove barriers, improve access and share information.

Initially, the OHYS was under the Colorado Department Public Health and Environment with proposed funding from the U.S. Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (OSDFS) to support a full time staff position. However, the anticipated funding did not become available and the OHYS was in operation for just one year (July 2002 through June 2003) with a half-time staff position.

On May 21, 2004 the Governor signed House Bill 1107, authorizing the transfer of the Office of Homeless Youth Services from the Department of Public Health and Environment to the Department of Human Services, Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs (SHHP). A full time position was created, supported with federal funding administered by SHHP. The Homeless Youth Programs Coordinator position was filled and the OHYS became fully operational in December, 2004.



## Objectives of the Office of Homeless Youth Services

The Office of Homeless Youth Services is specifically directed to work with the executive directors (or their designees) of Corrections, Education, Health Care Policy and Financing, Human Services, Public Safety, Public Health and Environment, Judicial, private nonprofit and not-for-profit organizations, appropriate federal departments and other key stakeholders in the community to collect and share information and to facilitate collaboration between stakeholders to achieve the following objectives:

- The identification and removal of obstacles to the provision of services to homeless youth;
- Improved quality of services provided to homeless youth;
- Reduction of needless expenditures caused by the provision of overlapping services to homeless youth; and
- Identification of funding resources available to entities serving homeless youth.

In 2005, the Office of Homeless Youth Services focused on the identification of key stakeholders and the development of a planning infrastructure, the needs of homeless youth and the gaps in current service delivery to this population, building and maintaining housing capacity, collecting and sharing data about youth who are homeless or at significant risk of homelessness, and facilitating new opportunities for collaboration among stakeholders to better serve these young people.

### *Identification of Key Stakeholders*

One of the first activities of the Homeless Youth Coordinator was build relationships with homeless youth providers who have funding through the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHY), administered by the U.S. Dept. of HHS, Administration for Children and Families. These grantees are primarily located in metropolitan Denver (Comitis Crisis Center, Family Tree, Volunteers of America and Urban Peak Denver) as well as Urban Peak Colorado Springs and Hilltop Youth Services/Tree House Youth Shelter in Grand Junction (opening soon). Other providers contacted were Third Way Center (RTC), Colorado's Finest Alternative School (Englewood), Academy of Urban Learning (opened Fall 2005), Rainbow Alley and Jefferson Center for Mental Health.

Contact was also made with federal (Denver region), state, county and municipal agencies who serve youth experiencing homelessness or at significant risk of becoming homeless. This included: the Administration for Children and Families (Denver office), Colorado state departments of Education, Public Health and Environment, Labor and Employment, Public Safety, Judicial (Probation Services) and Human Services, Divisions of Child Welfare, Youth Corrections, and Alcohol and Drug Abuse. In addition, dialogue was initiated with the Denver Office of Workforce Development, Denver Police Department, and the departments of social services/human services in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Jefferson, El Paso, Larimer, Mesa and Pueblo counties.

In addition to these stakeholders, there are a number of collaborative initiatives across Colorado, focusing on youth in the margins and the obstacles they face in transitioning to adulthood successfully. These vulnerable or "at-risk" youth are a broader population in addition to those already homeless, but are at tremendous risk of becoming homeless as well. As a result, the Office of Homeless Youth Services has been a visible and vocal presence in a number of these initiatives:

- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

- Youth Empowerment Systems (YES!) Academy
- Urban Peak, Better Places SSI Acquisition Project
- Colorado Youth Forum
- Rocky Mountain Equal Care Coalition
- CDPHE / Linking Interagency Networks for Kid's Services (LINKS)

#### *Development of a Planning Infrastructure*

In March 2005, the OHYS established the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth (ACHY), with representation from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), eight state agencies, nine counties, two public schools and eight community providers. The Advisory Committee also has three working groups on topics critical to addressing youth homelessness: Data Collection, Mainstream Benefits Acquisition and Employment. Meetings of the ACHY focused on networking, information sharing among stakeholders, identifying the needs of this population and opportunities for collaboration, analyzing gaps in service delivery across the state and featured expert panels on topics such as job readiness and youth employment. The ACHY will continue to serve as an essential strategic planning body around youth homelessness and will be producing a set of specific policy recommendations in 2006.

Another important entity with responsibility for strategic planning around issues of youth and family homelessness is the Committee on Homeless Families and Unaccompanied Youth, a subcommittee of the Colorado Interagency Council on Homelessness. This committee is chaired by the OHYS and the Colorado Department of Education on an annual rotating basis. In November 2005, a state team of thirteen traveled to California to attend a federal policy academy on family and youth homelessness. The team returned with a four-point strategic plan to address this issue and the Committee will commence with the development of measurable action items in January 2006. These meetings have increased communication and collaboration among stakeholders and turned needed attention to the importance of planning around the issue of families and youth who are homeless.

#### *Building and Maintaining Housing Capacity*

The OHYS was instrumental in establishing a new homeless youth shelter *outside* the Denver metropolitan area (which boasts the lion's share of emergency housing resources) in Grand Junction, Colorado, set to open in March 2006. Building on the relationships formed between federal and Mesa County representation on the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth, the OHYS facilitated initial discussions about potential funding opportunities, collaboration with other Mesa County stakeholders to provide an in-kind or financial match for start-up and traveled to Grand Junction to coordinate a stakeholder meeting. The OHYS also provided technical assistance with regard to the licensing process, grant writing, identifying additional funding resources, memorandums of understanding (MOU's) and strategic planning to the Tree House Youth Shelter Board of Directors retreat. With funding from the Administration for Children and Families, the Herb Bacon Foundation, Mesa County and the City of Grand Junction, in addition to collaborative agreements with the school district, county social services, Hilltop Youth Services, Colorado West Mental Health, Marrilac Clinic and Community Hospital to provide services, the new Tree House Homeless Youth Shelter is a critical resource to improve our ability to effectively serve homeless and runaway youth outside the Denver metropolitan area.

In addition to building housing capacity with a new shelter resource in Grand Junction, the OHYS focused on maintaining the Family Unification Program (FUP) vouchers currently administered by Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs (SHHP) in partnership with the Denver Department of Human Services, Family Tree, Urban Peak Denver and Colorado Springs and Volunteers of America by serving in an ombudsman or community liaison position. This collaborative project involves one hundred limited-term housing vouchers (18 months) to serve young adults 18 – 21 who were in foster care on or after their sixteenth birthday. Combined with wrap-around services provided by the partner agencies, the FUP voucher program is an essential element in developing a housing continuum to serve this population.

### *Collecting and Sharing Data*

Because there is no statewide source of data on homeless youth statewide, the OHYS is collaborating with the Colorado Division of Housing to do a statewide count of the homeless—including youth and young adults—in summer, 2006. In addition, the OHYS is collaborating with the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI) to significantly increase the number of youth and young adults surveyed in the annual point-in-time survey, January 23, 2006.

The OHYS has worked throughout 2005 to synthesize and share data about homeless youth through quarterly features in the SHHP Navigator, the creation of a regular “Grants Watch” feature to connect stakeholders with grant funding opportunities, the creation of a homeless youth website and the dissemination of materials covering all aspects of youth homelessness at meetings of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth and the ICH Committee on Homeless Families and Unaccompanied Youth. The OHYS also anticipates tremendous progress in collecting comprehensive and meaningful data about homeless youth in Colorado through the launch of the statewide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in January 2006. An analysis of this data at the end of 2006, combined with the summertime statewide homeless count, will yield the best information to date on homeless youth and will drive planning efforts forward in a sound and strategic way.

### *Facilitating Opportunities for Collaboration*

- **Benefits Acquisition:** The OHYS regularly participates in the Urban Peak Better Places SSI Acquisition Project and serves as a liaison between this initiative and the ACHY workgroup on Mainstream Benefits. The promising work of this initiative will pave the way for developing an effective best practice model that may be possible to expand to other areas of the state.
- **Discharge Planning:** The OHYS initiated dialogue between the Division of Youth Corrections-Central Region and Urban Peak-Denver to develop a process of coordinated referral for appropriate youth offenders who will not be returning home upon discharge and who need supportive services, particularly housing assistance, which Urban Peak provides. This resulted in a better understanding between both parties and a process of advance planning to the benefit of these young people.
- **Identification & Records:** OHYS is working with two state agencies, CDE and CDPHE, to make progress toward developing expedited or streamlined processes to acquire school records (prior CSAP scores) and birth certificates for youth who are in shelter care and do not have access to these records through family. The OHYS is investigating a possible collaboration with the City of Denver in 2006 to work on identification (ID's) for these youth as well.

- **Data:** The OHYS is working with the Colorado Division of Housing to coordinate the efforts to count youth and young adults in the statewide homeless count planned for summer, 2006. The planning around these efforts began in mid-2005. The OHYS is also working with the Metro Denver Homeless Initiative to increase the number of youth surveyed in the metro area in January 2006.
- **Mental Health Services:** OHYS facilitated the expansion of free mental health services to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered youth by bringing Rainbow Alley, a GLBT drop-in center with on-site counseling provided by Denver University, together with Urban Peak to develop a process of referral so these services were not duplicated and were fully utilized. With the additional number of youth referred by Urban Peak, Rainbow Alley has been able to expand this program, a service of particular importance because the therapists involved are specialists in sexual orientation issues.

#### *Identifying Needs of Homeless Youth and Gaps in Service Delivery*

The OHYS and the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth (ACHY) spent substantial time working through the extent to which Colorado has in place essential components to meet the needs of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, including sub-populations based on age (15 – 17, 18 – 22), sexual orientation, mental and physical health disability, youth aging out or being discharged from state systems of care and teens who are parenting. This process served to identify gaps in current service delivery and barriers to successfully accessing what we have in place. The comprehensive gaps analysis document will be available shortly and can be accessed on the homeless youth website.

#### Essential Components to Meet the Needs of Homeless Youth

- **Strategic Planning and Data:** The extent to which entities at the state, county and local level have responsibility for strategic planning to effectively address youth homelessness and the extent to which planning decisions are driven by accurate data to assess how long youth are homeless, what their needs are, what the causes of homelessness are, how people interact with mainstream systems of care, the effectiveness of interventions, and the number of homeless youth.
- **Emergency Shelter and Crisis Services:** The extent to which minors (15 – 17) have access to emergency shelter care, crisis counseling and family unification services (when appropriate); and the extent to which young adults have access to emergency shelter care, crisis counseling, rent assistance or other appropriate intervention services to get through crisis situations without losing housing.
- **Discharge Planning:** The extent to which state systems of care such as child welfare and youth corrections are able to support housing for youth who are emancipating from foster care or discharged from juvenile parole at 18.
- **Outreach:** The extent to which an organized effort is made to encourage homeless youth to enter appropriate housing linked with appropriate services.

- **Transitional and Permanent Housing:** The extent to which there are appropriate, available and affordable housing options, both transitional and permanent, for young people leaving shelter care or emancipating from state systems of care as well as young adults with low income living on their own and for whom homelessness is a likely outcome in any time of crisis.
- **Access to Mainstream Benefit Programs and Supportive Services:** The extent to which youth have access to funded services (medical, mental health, substance abuse, educational, vocational, life skills, parenting, childcare) and the extent to which these services are provided by mainstream benefit programs.
- **Education:** The extent to which opportunities for remedial education, drop-out recovery, GED or diploma acquisition, post-secondary enrollment with supportive services, job skills and vocational training are available to youth and young adults who are homeless or at significant risk of homelessness.
- **Income:** The extent to which homeless youth are able to secure enough income to afford rent, by rapidly linking them with supportive employment and/or benefits.
- **Youth Development Opportunities:** The extent to which agencies and providers engage youth in meaningful ways, shifting their role as a recipient of service to that of a leader and decision-maker in program development, delivery and evaluation, organizational management, and advocacy.

### **Continuing the Work: 2006 and Beyond**

In 2006, the Office of Homeless Youth Services will focus on collecting better data and analyzing that data to draw the contours of a statewide picture of youth homelessness. The OHYS also plans to expand the website and to offer increased technical assistance to stakeholders about potential funding opportunities. Other projects will include building and maintaining housing capacity, working to improve the acquisition process for mainstream benefits and serving as a link between the many Colorado initiatives that have vulnerable youth as their focus.

In conjunction with the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth, the OHYS will develop a strategic plan, including specific policy recommendations, to facilitate the reduction or removal of gaps, barriers and redundant services to homeless young people in Colorado. The Office will also continue to facilitate increased interagency communication and to identify opportunities for collaboration.