

# STATE OF COLORADO



**Colorado Department of Human Services**

*people who help people*

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## **2007 Annual Report Colorado Department of Human Services Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs**

**Office of Homeless Youth Services  
February 1, 2008**

This report is submitted to the Governor and the General Assembly in support of the Homeless Youth Services Act (House Bill 02-1159 and House Bill 04-1107) concerning the accomplishments of the Office of Homeless Youth Services. This report provides a summary of the Office of Homeless Youth Services activities. More detailed information is available on the Homeless Youth Services website <http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm>. The submission of this report is not legislatively required and is provided for informational purposes only.

### **History of the Office of Homeless Youth Services**

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 is 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 Office of Homeless Youth Services (OHYS) was housed under the Colorado Department Public Health and Environment with proposed funding from the U.S. Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools 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, Division of Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs (SHHP). A full time Homeless Youth Coordinator position was created, supported with federal funding administered by SHHP. The OHYS became fully operational in December 2004.



## **Objectives of the Office of Homeless Youth Services**

The Office of Homeless Youth Services is strongly encouraged by statute to work with the Executive Directors, or their designees, of the Departments of Corrections, Education, Health Care Policy and Financing, Human Services, Public Safety, Public Health and Environment, the Judicial Department, as well as private nonprofit and not-for-profit organizations, appropriate federal departments and other key stakeholders in the community. The Office of Homeless Youth Services seeks to:

- Identify and remove obstacles to the provision of services to homeless youth;
- Improve the quality of services provided to homeless youth;
- Reduce needless expenditures caused by the provision of overlapping services; and
- Identify funding resources available to entities serving homeless youth.

## **Colorado Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth**

An Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth (ACHY) was created to advise and assist the OHYS in carrying out the intent of the Homeless Youth Services Act. The ACHY meets quarterly with participation from approximately 60 members representing federal, state, and local government entities; school districts; homeless and other human service agencies; elected officials; and homeless youth.

## **Trends: Youth Homelessness in Colorado**

According to recent point in time counts of the homeless conducted in Colorado in 2006 and 2007, there are approximately 1500 homeless youth on any given night. Unfortunately, this may be an undercount as homeless youth are especially difficult to count due in part to Colorado's largely rural and mountainous landscape and the transiency of youth staying in temporary housing situations. Youth come from a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Many family and systemic issues contribute heavily to youth homelessness.

Although homeless youth in Colorado are not a well researched group, homeless youth shelter providers in Colorado recently reported that the number of sheltered youth experiencing major mental health issues as increased to at least 70%. This causes significant challenges as providers attempt to reunify these youth with family or assist them in transitioning towards independence.

## **The Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan: An Overview**

In 2007, the Homeless Youth Coordinator with significant participation from members of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth (ACHY), facilitated the development of a five-year strategic action plan. The plan is designed to prevent and address youth homelessness in Colorado and to ensure that the primary objectives outlined in the Homeless Youth Services Act are accomplished. Ultimately, the successful implementation of this plan is intended to ensure that Colorado youth have the necessary opportunities and support for a successful transition to adulthood.

The Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan includes the following priority areas:

1. **Prevention:** *To prevent youth homelessness by promoting a culture of individual, familial, community, and government responsibility.*
2. **Housing:** *To have safe, decent, easily accessible, and developmentally appropriate homes for every youth.*
3. **Supportive Services:** *To provide comprehensive, wrap-around services to achieve maximum self-sufficiency or reunification with families.*

4. **Planning:** *To create awareness and establish best practices and policies based upon accurate data and strategic planning.*
5. **Outreach:** *To identify and link vulnerable youth to appropriate housing and services.*

The Homeless Youth Coordinator has primary responsibility for facilitating the overall plan implementation and monitoring progress towards the objectives. The ACHY created workgroups, representing each one of the five aforementioned priority areas, to complete specific action steps and to make necessary recommendations. Several other key youth initiatives have partnered with OHYS to collaboratively implement several plan strategies.

### **The Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan: 2007 Progress**

During 2007, the OHYS made significant progress in each section of the Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan. Some of the key accomplishments and activities are listed below by priority area.

#### **1. Prevention**

- a. Discharge Planning
  - i. OHYS delivered three training sessions to judges, court appointed special advocates, and guardians ad litem in Jefferson, Boulder and Arapahoe Counties on preventing homelessness among youth transitioning from systems of care through a training program sponsored by the Colorado Office of the Child Representative.
  - ii. Vital Documents - The ACHY and Bridging the Gap at Mile High United Way (MHUW) partnered to ensure that youth exiting systems of care have possession of their state issued photo identification, birth certificates, and social security cards. OHYS and Bridging the Gap worked with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Vital Records Registrar to develop a plan that will remove the primary barriers for caseworkers to obtain birth certificates by early 2008. OHYS initiated a national dialogue aimed at creating secure document storage solutions for transitioning youth.
  - iii. OHYS participated in a summit designed to facilitate the implementation of SB 07-02, which extends Medicaid to age 21 for former foster youth. OHYS educated summit participants on the role this expanded access to Medicaid will play in preventing and addressing youth homelessness. This summit resulted in the sponsoring legislators drafting a bill to clarify the language in the original legislation.
- b. Mental Health/Substance Abuse Services for Youth in Transition
  - i. OHYS provided technical assistance to Urban Peak, a community agency that provides shelter and support services to homeless youth, through participation in the planning and implementation of a symposium highlighting the gaps in developmentally appropriate mental health and substance abuse services for youth in transition.

#### **2. Housing**

- a. Gaps
  - i. OHYS partnered with Bridging the Gap at Mile High United Way (MHUW) to complete a gaps analysis of housing for homeless youth across Colorado.
  - ii. ACHY created a blueprint for the continuum of youth housing needed in Colorado.
- b. Housing Development
  - i. OHYS and ACHY presented a youth housing development workshop at the Housing Colorado Now conference.
  - ii. MHUW and ACHY Housing Workgroup members began initial planning and fundraising for several homeless and foster youth housing projects in Metro Denver.

- iii. OHYS and SHHP developed 5 units of project-based permanent supportive housing in Denver for homeless former foster and juvenile justice system youth with disabilities, which will be administered by Urban Peak.
- iv. OHYS implemented a plan to sustain the Family Unification Program Youth Component for homeless former foster youth beyond the initial five-year grant commitment required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. This program provides 18-month transitional housing matched with community supportive services.

### **3. Supportive Services**

- a. Information and Referral
  - i. OHYS and ACHY conducted a research project using surveys and focus groups to evaluate the key information and referral resources for homeless youth. This information was collected in preparation for a report and recommendations to be completed in 2008.
- b. Mental Health Services
  - i. OHYS provided technical assistance on youth homelessness to the Mental Health Planning and Advisory Council and the Youth and Young Adult Transition Committee to assist in the development of recommendations for increased youth access to developmentally appropriate mental health services.
  - ii. OHYS participated in activities hosted by Colorado LINKS for Mental Health, a state initiative designed to link interagency networks in order to improve services for children and youth. These activities resulted in the identification of new partnership opportunities to address the mental health needs of homeless youth.
- c. Education
  - i. The Colorado Department of Education and OHYS partnered to improve the connection between public school districts and homeless youth service providers in meeting the needs of homeless youth.

### **4. Planning**

- a. Homeless Youth Awareness Month
  - i. OHYS promoted National Homeless Youth Awareness Month in partnership with the Colorado Department of Education, Mile High United Way, and the Colorado Network of Youth Services membership, which resulted in community actions and media coverage.
- b. Data
  - i. OHYS partnered with the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, and Mile High United Way to determine youth research and data needs and opportunities.
  - ii. OHYS collaborated with CDE to increase data elements being collected on homeless youth in public schools to allow for better analysis of needs.
  - iii. ACHY conducted a research project using a survey tool designed to capture youth service information and gaps in Colorado. A report of the survey findings will be issued in 2008.
- c. Colorado Network of Youth Services (CONET)
  - i. This group, founded in 1980, dissolved several years ago. OHYS facilitated the reorganization of this group of homeless youth direct services providers for the purpose of better coordinating service delivery across agencies and to connect with regional and national homeless youth planning and policy initiatives.

- ii. Funding was secured to support travel for a CONET member to represent Colorado and the region on the National Network for Youth Policy Council, which allows for increased regional and national coordination.
- d. Coordination
  - i. OHYS, in partnership with the CDPHE Adolescent Health Director, co-hosted a luncheon for state agency youth program coordinators for the purpose of better coordinating state adolescent services across departments and divisions. This meeting resulted in the development of a matrix outlining the state's adolescent programming and a commitment to continue meeting.
- e. Public Awareness
  - i. The Homeless Youth Coordinator presented on the work of the OHYS at the State Youth Council's Think Big Conference and the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless Conference. These presentations resulted in the identification of key champions to help carry out the Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan in local communities across Colorado and coordination of the OHYS goals with other key youth initiatives.

## 5. Outreach

- a. Homeless Youth Exploitation and Human Trafficking
  - i. ACHY hosted two human trafficking trainings for over 30 homeless youth service providers and school district homeless liaisons.
  - ii. OHYS provided technical assistance that led to the creation of a planning group working to ensure reduced victimization and commercial sexual exploitation of homeless youth in Colorado.
- b. The OHYS website was expanded to include key referral and crisis line information as well as a frequently asked questions page.

### **Continuing the Work: Action Items for 2008**

OHYS will continue to focus on developing a more coordinated service delivery system to prevent and address youth homelessness in Colorado. Activities outlined in the Colorado Homeless Youth Action plan, which are targeted for completion during 2008 include:

1. Prevention
  - a. Vital Documents
    - i. Train caseworkers in the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice systems, and vital records staff on the birth certificate acquisition process.
    - ii. Develop a vital document retention process for transition age systems youth in coordination with national efforts.
2. Housing
  - a. Develop recommendations regarding the housing needs of older homeless youth in Colorado.
  - b. Facilitate the creation of additional units of youth housing.
3. Supportive Services
  - a. Create a report and present the key findings to information and referral providers for youth in Colorado to improve youth access to resources and services;
  - b. Through key partnerships, develop recommendations, carry out actions, and promote awareness of the need for increased access to and the creation of developmentally appropriate mental health services, mentoring programs and other promising program models.

- c. In partnership with the Colorado Department of Education, create recommendations to address the educational gaps and needs of homeless youth.
- 4. Planning
  - a. Provide technical assistance to communities as they implement local plans to address youth homelessness.
  - b. Continue to raise awareness in Colorado of the unique needs of homeless youth through the promotion of Homeless Youth Awareness Month and the distribution of key reports related to youth homelessness.
  - c. Create a report of the key homeless youth survey findings for use in conducting specific gaps analysis.
  - d. Increase relevant content on the OHYS webpage.
- 5. Outreach
  - a. Provide education and plans regarding human trafficking/exploitation of children
    - i. Host at least two human trafficking trainings for homeless service and other youth serving providers across Colorado.
    - ii. Partner with other key groups to create a community response plan to combat trafficking/sexual exploitation of homeless youth across Colorado.

### **Call to Action**

Youth Homelessness remains a significant issue in Colorado and it is imperative that the needs of these youth are elevated to a high priority. These needs can be addressed through a combination of awareness, action, policy decisions, and targeted funding allocations. Through the collective efforts of our public and private sectors, Colorado youth will be afforded the opportunities necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.

For more information on the work of the Office of Homeless Youth Services, please visit <http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm> or call 303-866-7366.