



*Photos taken by youth from Alamosa, Garfield, Moffat, and Montrose Counties for Colorado Homeless and Runaway Youth Awareness Month 2010*

# Office of Homeless Youth Services 2010 Annual Report

Colorado Department of Human Services  
Division of Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs



Division of Supportive  
Housing and  
Homeless Programs

# STATE OF COLORADO



**Colorado Department of Human Services**

*people who help people*

**OFFICE OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND HOUSING**  
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John W. Hickenlooper  
Governor

Reggie Bicha  
Executive Director

February 15, 2011

I am pleased to present the 2010 Annual Report for the Office of Homeless Youth Services located within the Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs.

Despite the many challenges posed by the current economic environment, significant progress has been made over the past several years as the Colorado Department of Human Services works to design and deliver quality human services for homeless youth, who are some of the State's most vulnerable citizens. Many Colorado youth continue to find themselves in situations without stable housing or support from caring adults. Although challenging, youth homelessness can be effectively eradicated through a vigilant blend of awareness, action, policy decisions, and targeted funding allocations. Through the continued collective efforts of our public and private sectors, Colorado youth will be afforded the opportunities necessary for a successful transition to adulthood.

I want to thank the many staff members of the State departments as well as the staff from the many community based organizations for committing considerable resources to ensure significant progress towards the goals outlined in this report.

The following report highlights the work of the Colorado Department of Human Services in providing leadership to collaboratively tackle the issue of youth homelessness through the Office of Homeless Youth Services.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Reggie Bicha".

Reggie Bicha  
Executive Director

# **OFFICE OF HOMELESS YOUTH SERVICES 2010 ANNUAL REPORT**

## **COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES DIVISION OF SUPPORTIVE HOUSING AND HOMELESS PROGRAMS**

This report is submitted to the Governor and the General Assembly in support of the Homeless Youth Services Act (C.R.S. 26-5.9) concerning the accomplishments of the Office of Homeless Youth Services. It provides a summary of the Office of Homeless Youth Services activities. More detailed information regarding the planning process, achievements, and services available is available on the Homeless Youth Services website at: [www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm](http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm).

### **HISTORY OF THE OFFICE OF HOMELESS YOUTH SERVICES**

The Colorado 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. This resulted in an ongoing collaborative effort between organizations all over the state 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. 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 (CDHS), Division of Supportive Housing and Homeless Programs (SHHP). A full time Homeless Youth Coordinator position was created, supported with federal funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. An Advisory Committee for Homeless Youth (ACHY) was convened in 2004 to assist with planning and implementation of the Statewide Homeless Youth Action Plan. This committee works to annually update the Action Plan, build collaborative networks of services, and assist OHYS in providing technical assistance to communities throughout Colorado.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE OFFICE OF HOMELESS YOUTH SERVICES**

The Office of Homeless Youth Services works with leaders from state and local government, private nonprofit organizations, federal departments, homeless and formerly homeless youth, 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 HOMELESS YOUTH ACTION PLAN SUMMARY**

The Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan was developed and has been updated annually to ensure that the primary objectives outlined in the Homeless Youth Services Act are accomplished. The following summary outlines the priority areas and key strategies contained in the plan.

**Prevention:** To prevent youth homelessness by promoting a culture of individual, familial, community, and government responsibility.

Key Strategies:

- Ensure comprehensive and consistent delivery of life skills and other support services for youth emancipating from systems of care and other at-risk youth in local communities;
- Ensure that youth have access to identification and other vital documents upon exit from systems of care;
- Improve the availability, accessibility and effectiveness of programs providing permanent connections, mentoring, and life coaching to youth at-risk of homelessness;
- Promote strengthening of high-risk families by increasing access to community based support and intervention services; and
- Ensure successful discharge planning for youth exiting systems of care.

**Housing:** To have safe, decent, easily accessible, and developmentally appropriate homes for every youth.

Key Strategies:

- Identify the housing needs and gaps for homeless and at-risk youth in Colorado; and
- Facilitate appropriate housing and shelter development to meet the local needs for homeless and at-risk youth.

**Supportive Services:** To provide comprehensive, wrap-around services to achieve maximum self-sufficiency or reunification.

Key Strategies:

- Improve youth information and referral processes;
- Ensure homeless youth have comprehensive access to developmentally appropriate health, mental health and substance abuse services;
- Increase effectiveness of school homeless liaison services to homeless youth; and
- Develop an array of supportive services to address education, employment, permanent connections, assets, guidance and other needs to ensure homeless youth have the necessary supports for successful transition to adulthood.

**Planning and Awareness:** To create awareness and establish best practices and policies based upon accurate data and strategic planning.

Key Strategies:

- Recreate and support Colorado Network of Homeless Youth Providers (CONET) to ensure interagency collaboration and coordination of services and resources, and to connect with regional and national efforts to address the issue of youth homelessness;
- Create a public awareness campaign for National Homeless Youth Awareness/Runaway Prevention Month each November;
- Increase awareness and education of homeless youth issues;
- Coordinate research and data activities related to homeless youth;
- Ensure a homeless youth voice to inform policy initiatives; and
- Create and distribute the Office of Homeless Youth Services annual report.

**Outreach:** To identify and link vulnerable youth to appropriate housing and services.

Key Strategies:

- Train providers on human trafficking issues and victim identification;

- Create homeless youth outreach web pages that include: 24-hour runaway and homeless youth crisis lines, human trafficking and suicide hotlines, and frequently asked questions; and
- Increase collaborative outreach statewide to link homeless and at-risk youth with resources and support.

## **EMERGING TRENDS**

Homeless and runaway youth and young adults are unaccompanied by a parent or guardian and are fending for themselves. Each youth has a unique story regarding his/her journey to homelessness. However, a few of the key indicators that a youth is at risk of experiencing homelessness include child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement; family dysfunction and abuse; mental health and/or substance abuse issues; issues related to sexual orientation; family homelessness; and poverty. Although homeless youth are difficult to count, approximately 1500 homeless youth were identified during one-night counts of the homeless across Colorado during 2006 and 2007. (Note: a full statewide count has not been completed since 2007.) Many rural communities are just starting to identify this very hidden population. These youth often blend in with their peers and experience stigma, safety, and legal concerns that keep them hidden from view. Despite the uniqueness of each youth, some common traits include the lack of significant connections with caring adults, deficient life skills and developmental assets necessary for transition to independent adulthood, and inadequate resources and opportunities in comparison to their traditionally housed peers.

Due to the current economic climate, it appears that the number of youth experiencing homelessness across Colorado has increased over the past year. Direct service providers reported that they consistently operated over their capacity in recent months. Data collected from local school districts across the state by the Colorado Department of Education indicates a 16 percent increase in homeless students from the 2008-2009 school year to the 2009-2010 school year. More young people than ever have been left to fend for themselves during these uncertain economic times.

A lack of sustainable funding for homeless youth services continues as a significant issue for those working to serve this vulnerable population. Designated federal funding for homeless youth services has become very competitive across the country and must be leveraged with local resources, which are becoming increasingly scarce as local budget cuts are implemented.

Homeless and other transitioning youth are struggling more than ever to secure employment. Unfortunately, viable job opportunities for youth continue to be difficult to identify.

## **RECOMENDATIONS**

The OHYS is continuing to offer recommendations as a part of the Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan. The following recommendations are most pertinent at this time:

- All child welfare and juvenile justice system youth exit/discharge plans include:
  - Safe and stable housing appropriate to the needs of the young person prior to exit;
  - At least 12 months of follow up services which include case management, on-going life skills classes, access to volunteer mentors/life coaches; and
  - Referrals to developmentally appropriate and accessible support services such as mental health, substance abuse, education, and vocational training.

(The homeless youth shelter and transitional housing system is funded to serve youth that are not involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems).

- Amend the Colorado Homeless Youth Act to bring it into alignment with the federal Homeless and Runaway Youth Act as amended in 2008. This includes allowing licensed

homeless youth shelters to serve youth under the age of 18 for up to 21 days. The current limitation of two weeks of shelter does not always allow enough time to begin addressing the underlying issues with the youth and the family or to develop an adequate reunification or transition plan with the youth. In addition, the age range in the definition of homeless youth needs to be expanded. The current definition of homeless youth in the Colorado Homeless Youth Act restricts communities from being able to offer crisis services to many homeless youth because it only allows for services to be provided to youth who are 15 through 17 years old. Youth outside of this age range frequently request services and federal grants provide funding for a broader age range of homeless youth. Finally, the Colorado Homeless Youth Act needs to expand upon the allowable shelter settings to include the provision of housing through host family homes in local communities.

- Amend the Homeless Youth Shelter licensing category to allow for alternative homeless youth shelter models such as host home shelter beds. This type of shelter allows rural communities to design their services based on local needs.

## **2010 HIGHLIGHTS**

The OHYS continues to function as the primary coordinating entity, clearinghouse, and expert on homeless youth for Colorado. The OHYS, in conjunction with the members of the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth (ACHY), continues to make significant progress in carrying out the Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan. Significant highlights from 2010 include:

- **Vital Documents Project** – Senate Bill 10-006 ensures that youth referred by a county department of social services or the Division of Youth Corrections will be provided a certified copy of their birth certificate at no cost. This continues to eliminate barriers for youth seeking employment and housing, and becoming self-sufficient.
- **Mentoring** – As a follow up to a statewide summit held in 2009, the OHYS facilitated a series of meetings focused on how to link youth that are most at risk of homelessness with positive caring adults. A toolkit containing strategies and considerations was developed for local communities.
- **State Adolescent Champions** – For the third year in a row, the OHYS partnered with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to host quarterly networking meetings for state agency coordinators of adolescent initiatives and programs. Results include increased cross-systems partnerships, networking, awareness, and collaboration. The group was represented during a statewide youth systems transformation planning process in late 2010 with the goal of better coordinating efforts to break through silos that may exist at the initiative, program, or agency levels.
- **Rural Collaborative for Homeless Youth** – Six rural regional sites across western and southern Colorado (Huerfano, Alamosa, Montezuma, Montrose, Garfield, and Moffat counties) are continuing develop services and housing for homeless and runaway youth. Several collaborative grants provide seed money for the project and sustainability planning is underway. The ACHY acts as a steering committee for the grant and provides ongoing technical assistance and support. The Colorado Department of Human Services, Divisions of Child Welfare and Supportive Housing and Homeless Program along with Urban Peak, Family Tree, Lutheran Family Services, and The Center for Systems Integration provide support for this innovative project. Youth continue to provide direction for the project through local youth leadership teams.

- **Human Trafficking Training** – The OHYS, in partnership with Prax(us), a statewide agency that serves exploited youth, developed a curriculum on human trafficking and sexual exploitation of runaway and homeless youth. The curriculum is specifically designed for homeless and runaway youth service providers. ACHY members held quarterly trainings. Direct service providers have signed agreements indicating that direct service staff will be required to attend the training.
- **Colorado Homeless/Runaway Youth Awareness Month** – The OHYS partnered with other state agencies, the National Runaway Switchboard, and multiple local government and non-profit agencies to successfully promote November as Homeless and Runaway Youth Awareness Month in Colorado. Governor Ritter, along with 10 local elected officials from communities across the state, issued proclamations declaring November 2010 as Colorado Homeless and Runaway Youth Awareness Month. As a part of the National Green Light Project, community members across the state were encouraged to replace their porch light with a green light bulb or to wear a green light lapel pin as a mechanism to create public awareness and dialogue regarding the issues facing homeless youth. Leading public and private human service organizations in Colorado partnered for the cause and held numerous events throughout November such as service learning projects through local schools, fundraising events and donation drives, provider training opportunities, and youth photography projects. A powerful public service announcement was developed and aired on local and cable television stations across the state during the month.
- **Housing** – The OHYS was able to secure an additional 77 units of housing for homeless former foster youth through a federal Family Unification Program grant. In addition, Family Tree and Urban Peak were able to expand their existing shelter and services to homeless youth through increased federal Basic Center Program grant funding. Attention Homes began offering shelter and services for homeless and runaway youth in the Boulder area in late 2010.
- **Education and Awareness** – The OHYS facilitated a two day statewide summit for providers and youth from across the state. The first day of the summit provided training on funding for runaway and homeless youth services. The second day focused models for reaching out to homeless and runaway youth. Both days provided significant networking opportunities for participants representing urban, suburban and rural parts of Colorado. In addition, the OHYS and ACHY members spoke at several conferences and trainings including the Office of the Child Representative’s South by Southwest Training Conference, the Housing Colorado Now Conference, and the National Pathways to Adulthood Conference.

## 2011 PRIORITIES

During 2011, the OHYS plans to focus on several important priorities. A few of the projects include:

- **Discharge Planning** – The OHYS will facilitate a process to identify collaborative strategies to better support the child welfare and juvenile justice systems in ensuring that youth are able to successfully transition from these systems into local communities thereby preventing homelessness.
- **Rural Collaborative for Homeless Youth** – This collaborative will focus on sustainability plan completion and housing and supportive services delivery.

- **Colorado Homeless and Runaway Youth Awareness Month** – In conjunction with national efforts, the OHYS will once again use November for a statewide public awareness campaign on the issues facing homeless and runaway youth, and the role the public can play in crafting solutions.
- **Homeless Youth Shelter/Host Home Licensing** – OHYS and the Division of Child Care will complete formal rulemaking recommendations and present them to the State Board of Human Services. This should allow for host family homes to be used to shelter homeless youth, which is especially important in rural communities.
- **Housing** – The OHYS will convene key parties for the purpose of creating plans for additional housing resources for youth across the state.
- **Outreach** – As a follow up to the 2010 Outreach Summit, a statewide youth outreach worker network will be developed using technology tools as well as an annual or biannual meeting. In addition, Human Trafficking training will continue to be offered for new employees of homeless youth serving agencies.
- **State Adolescent Champions** – Quarterly networking meetings will continue to facilitate collaborative partnerships and networking for youth serving programs across state agencies and divisions.
- **Plan Development** – The first five years of the Colorado Homeless Youth Action Plan will be evaluated and a plan for post 2011 will be developed by the OHYS and the ACHY membership.

## SUMMARY

Many Colorado youth continue to find themselves in situations without stable housing or support from caring adults. Although challenging, youth homelessness can be effectively eradicated through a vigilant blend of awareness, action, policy decisions, and targeted funding allocations. Through the continued 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 [www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm](http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/shhp/Homeless-Youth.htm), [www.ColoradoHomelessYouth.org](http://www.ColoradoHomelessYouth.org) or call 303-866-7366.