

Rural Homeless Youth Listening Sessions Project Summary Report

**Office of Economic Opportunity
Minnesota Department of Human Services
In Partnership with
The Otto Bremer Foundation**

2013

Project Overview and Methodology

The Rural Homeless Youth Listening Sessions Project was developed by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity (DHS-OEO) in partnership with rural homeless youth service providers and the Otto Bremer Foundation. The purpose of the project was to research issues related to youth homelessness in rural and Tribal communities in greater Minnesota in order to help educate policy makers, public and private funders, and the general public. The project was made possible by a grant from the Otto Bremer Foundation.

DHS-OEO facilitated ten 2 ½ hour listening sessions to gain insights into the following areas:

- Learn what poverty and youth homelessness looks like in rural and Tribal areas;
- learn how systems such as children’s mental health, juvenile justice, law enforcement and child welfare work (or do not work) with youth in the area;
- learn what the needs are of at-risk and homeless youth in rural and Tribal communities;
- learn more about what rural communities need and want for youth in their area; and,
- learn how private and public funders can best do grant making in rural and Tribal areas.

Listening sessions were conducted in the following ten rural and Tribal communities.

- Bois Forte Reservation
- Leech Lake Reservation
- Fargo/Moorhead
- Mankato
- Willmar
- Brainerd
- Detroit Lakes
- Lower Sioux Reservation
- Virginia
- Winona

Questions for the listening sessions were collaboratively developed by staff from the Office of Economic Opportunity, the homeless youth service providers across the state, and the Otto Bremer Foundation. Questions can be found in Appendix A of this report. The project was implemented and facilitated by Beth Holger-Ambrose, Homeless Youth Services Coordinator for DHS-OEO, and three youth/young adult interns who were either currently homeless or recently homeless at the time of the project.

Adults and youth community members who were concerned about the issue and who wanted to share their insights and knowledge were encouraged to attend the listening sessions. Local nonprofits that serve youth and/or the homeless population helped promote and publicize the listening sessions. Fliers were distributed throughout the local communities, announcements were made at meetings and events, and people were told about the listening sessions through word of mouth. Efforts were made to ensure that youth, youth social service providers, homeless service providers, school staff, child welfare staff, juvenile justice and children’s mental health staff, local law enforcement, local public officials, and health care providers were invited to attend.

As a result of these recruitment efforts, 181 people, including 36 youth, participated in the discussions. The attendees represented a variety of local stakeholders from multiple sectors and organizations. The diverse insights provided by listening session attendees proved invaluable and resulted in the key learnings and recommendations identified through the project.

Summary of Listening Session Participants (not including facilitators)

Location	Attendees	Adult Attendees by Organization/Affiliation
Bois Forte Reservation	7 people, including 2 youth	Community Member - 3 Fond du Lac Reservation – 1 Tribal Homeless Youth Services - 1
Brainerd	24 people, including 3 youth	Crow Wing County Child Welfare - 1 General Community Member - 1 Homeless Youth Services - 5 Legislator - 1 Legislative Staff (Senator Franken) - 1 Local College - 1 Mental Health - 2 MN DHS - 1 MN DOE - 1 Restorative Justice - 1 Sexual Assault Services - 1 Tribal Human Services - 1 U of M Extension - 1 Vocational Rehab – 1
Detroit Lakes	14 people, no youth	Adult Poverty/Homeless Services – 13 Becker County Child Welfare – 1
Leech Lake Reservation	40 people, including 17 youth	Area High School - 4 Area Learning Center- 1 Chippewa Tribe (MN) - 1 Community Member - 1 Crow Wing County Child Welfare - 1 Indian Area Agency on Aging (MN) - 1 Non-Tribal Homeless Youth Services - 7 Sports & Recreation - 1 Tribal Homeless Youth Services - 5 Tribal Police – 1
Lower Sioux Reservation	5 people, no youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Program (Non-Tribal) - 1 Area Middle School - 1 Lower Sioux Recreation Center – 2 Tribal Police - 1
Mankato	20 people , including 1 youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Programs - 3 DHS - 1 Faith Based Community -3 Food Shelf - 1 Homeless Youth Services -3 Local High School - 2 MCCA - 1 United Way - 1 University Student - 2 Veterans Services -1 YWCA Youth Services - 1
Moorhead (and Fargo)	21 people, including 7 youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homelessness - 3 Bremer Bank (local branch) - 1 Clay County Child Welfare - 2 Faith Based Community - 1 Local Police Officers - 3 Mental Health - 1

Location	Attendees	Adult Attendees by Organization/Affiliation
		Youth Homeless Services - 1
Virginia	21 people, including 2 youth	Homeless Youth Services – 3 Legal Aid - 1 Mental Health - 1 MN Coalition for the Homeless -1 Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Services - 4 U of M Extension - 1 Foster Care Transition Services - 1 Family Service Collaborative - 1 LGBTQ Services - 1 Mental Health - 4 Public Library – 1
Willmar	18 people, including 4 youth	Adult & Family Poverty/Homeless Services - 1 Homeless Youth Services - 5 HRA - 1 Immigrant Services - 3 Kandiyohi county Child Welfare - 1 Local High School – 1 United Way -1
Winona	11 people, no youth	Adult/Family Homeless Program Staff (3) DHS (1) Family & Children’s Center (1) General Community Members (2) Retired Public Health Nurse (1) Southern MN Regional Legal Services (1) United Way (1) Winona State (1)

Total Attendees at 10 Listening Sessions: 181 people, including 36 youth

Homeless Youth in Rural Minnesota

Wilder Research Center estimates that approximately 2,500 Minnesota unaccompanied youth experience homelessness on any given night. This includes an estimated 550 minor youth ages 17 and under, and 1,950 young adults age 18 through 21.¹ These numbers are conservative estimates and the number of unaccompanied youth is likely considerably higher since youth are among the least visible and most vulnerable homeless people. It is important to emphasize that these estimates are unaccompanied youth, and do not include homeless youth who are accompanied by their families.

Across the state, listening session participants described similar features of youth homelessness in rural areas and Reservations. Unlike urban areas where youth may be on the streets and visible to the public, homeless youth are largely hidden in rural communities. Youth often “couch hop” moving between various friends and family who are willing to put them up for a night or two, but who cannot provide permanent housing. They may be “doubled-up” living with multiple families in housing of inadequate size. They may be living in a garage or in their cars, sleeping in parks, camping during

A homeless programs outreach worker described a recent situation involving a youth who had been kicked out of the house by his mother at age 16. He had been discovered sleeping in a dog boarding kennel. Because there was no shelter or housing options for him in the area, he had decided he could at least stay warm sleeping next to the dogs. Once identified, he was assisted into an adult shelter located several hours away. With no services in his area, the youth had to leave his community to get help.

¹ Wilder Research Center, *Homelessness in Minnesota 2009*. October 2010.

the warmer months, or living in other locations not intended for human habitation. For some youth, engaging in “survival sex” or staying in unhealthy or abusive relationships may provide a temporary place to stay. Over the course of the listening sessions, a dominant theme that emerged was the significant need for safe, stable emergency shelter and housing options for youth throughout rural and Reservation areas.

Listening session participants described similarities and differences between youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas compared to Twin Cities metro area homeless youth. Both groups of youth face similar issues associated with the causes of homelessness, such as poverty, economic insecurity, childhood abuse, chemical dependency, mental health issues, and aging out of the foster care system. However, the groups differ in their racial and ethnic composition. Rural participants described homeless youth in their area as predominantly White/Caucasian or American Indian. In the metro area, there are a large number of African American youth who are homeless. In rural communities, there are less youth that “come out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. If they do come out, they often try to move to the Twin Cities metro area where they believe they will have a better chance of being accepted and getting support.

Availability of Homeless Youth Services

Across the state of Minnesota, there has been an inadequate response to the needs of homeless youth. Mainstream systems are not appropriately transitioning youth into stable housing which can lead to homelessness. There is a lack of safe shelter and housing options for youth. In Minnesota, there are 108 emergency shelter beds designated for youth, with 15 located in rural areas. There are a total of 341 transitional living program units, otherwise known as transitional housing, with 159 located in rural areas and on Reservations. There are an additional 258 units of permanent supportive housing designated for unaccompanied homeless youth, with 12 located in rural areas.² The 108 emergency shelter beds and 599 units of housing for youth fall far short of meeting the current needs of homeless youth.

Key Learnings

The following describes key learnings of the ten listening sessions.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

Youth are at-risk or become homeless due to varied circumstances. Listening session participants described similar causes regardless of where they were located. The following describes causes of homelessness identified during the listening sessions.

Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Economic conditions in many rural communities do not support a sufficient supply of jobs with living wages and benefits for youth or adults. This results in families struggling with chronic poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and insufficient income. This is particularly true in Tribal communities, where stable, well-paying jobs are severely limited. Youth experiencing chronic economic hardship often live in families with high levels of stress and lack adequate food, stable housing, preventative healthcare, and other resources to meet their basic needs.

² Minnesota Department of Human Services, Data from Homeless Youth Services Coordinator. July 2013.

Unstable Families and Chemical Dependency (of Parents/Guardians)

Parents who are chemically dependent, physically or emotionally abusive, or neglectful contribute to home environments that put youth at risk of homelessness. Youth may leave families that have been unstable, chaotic and even abusive. In the majority of the rural and Reservation listening sessions, the chemical dependency of the youth's parents or caregivers was stated as a contributor to youth becoming homeless. Youth reported that because of drug or alcohol use, parents were at times unable to provide housing and food, would be abusive, or leave the youth alone for days or weeks to fend for themselves. A lack of effective parenting skills and social support is a risk factor that can lead to youth homelessness. Parents may not have the skills, tools or support to effectively intervene when youth exhibit at-risk behaviors, such as academic or behavioral problems in school, truancy, involvement in gangs, or drug use. Youth may choose to leave their homes as a means of escaping these circumstances or be pushed out by their parent's choices and behaviors.

Unstable Housing

Finding and maintaining affordable housing is difficult in many rural communities. Affordable housing is often not available for low-income families, larger families, families with extended relatives in the household, and families with teen parents and their children. Various eligibility and tenancy requirements associated with Section 8 and public housing put youth at risk of homelessness. Youth living in overcrowded households may be forced or encouraged to leave in these circumstances.

Interaction with Mainstream Systems

While policies and practices in the children's mental and chemical health, juvenile justice, law enforcement and child welfare systems vary across the state, each of these systems were cited by listening session participants as contributing to youth homelessness. Some youth become homeless after release from juvenile justice facilities, jail or a rehabilitation program for drugs or mental health issues. Some youth reported that interactions with local police were not helpful to them when they were experiencing abuse and crisis with parents or caregivers. Youth struggling with mental health or chemical dependency issues may be unable to access or maintain the services they need. Youth aging out of the foster care system are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless. Some county child welfare services do not coordinate with nonprofits and other community support services when youth are aging out. Agencies are then unable to help youth transition into stable housing before a crisis develops. Mainstream systems were in many cases identified by youth as failing to intervene at crucial times in their lives. From the perspective of the youth, help from these systems would have prevented them from becoming homeless in the first place.

Limited Youth Development Opportunities Increase Risky Behavior

Insufficient funding for youth centers and recreational programs, such as Boys & Girls Clubs, drop-in centers or social activities, means limited youth development and extracurricular activities are available in some communities. Without constructive activities, some youth begin using alcohol and drugs, become involved in gangs, or engage in other risky behaviors. These choices increase the risk of a youth having issues with chemical dependency, involvement with gangs, interaction with the legal system, or conflict with their family. All of these can in turn increase the risk of the youth experiencing homelessness.

Community Recommendations

Listening session participants described a variety of issues that must be addressed for at-risk and currently homeless youth. There is inadequate funding, staff and services available to address these needs.

Emergency and Housing Programs for Homeless Youth

In every discussion the critical need for safe emergency shelter and housing came up within the first few minutes. Rural communities have no or limited shelter and housing options specific to youth. Youth are forced to figure out how to make it on their own, or to work with a social service provider to try to get them into an adult program or connect with shelter or housing options in a different community. There are insufficient homeless services for youth in rural areas across the state.

Safe, Affordable Housing

Many communities have limited affordable rental housing. Landlords are hesitant to rent to youth. Other factors, such as high rental application fees, lease cosigner requirements, background checks and lack of rental history, present real barriers to obtaining housing.

Education, Job Training and Employment

Most youth have not completed high school and need assistance in obtaining diplomas or GEDs. They need access to life skills training, job training, and employment opportunities that will allow them to earn the income required for housing. There is generally a lack of entry level employment for youth. In some of the listening sessions, it was reported that if a youth had a bad reputation in the community (or their family did) then they faced a barrier to employment.

Transportation

In smaller communities, there is no or limited bus service and therefore a lack of transportation from one community to another. Without cars, youth have limited job opportunities, housing options and find it difficult to obtain the services they need.

Supports for Daily Living

Youth and adult session participants reported that at-risk and homeless youth need help learning the life skills required for independent living. Youth often are not getting this help from parents or caregivers. They need support with how to take care of themselves and their household, managing finances, parenting skills, navigating the local county or Tribal human services system, accessing reliable transportation, and managing other areas of daily living.

Parenting Support and Education

Youth who are homeless may also be pregnant or parenting. According to the 2012 Wilder Research Study, nearly one third (29%) of youth who are homeless are parenting.³ Youth who are homeless and parenting present unique needs and challenges. Shelter and housing should be larger and offer privacy for youth with children. Parenting education and support opportunities should be available to youth. Children of youth parents require child specific services and support to meet their needs.

Mental Health and Chemical Health Services

Services for mental health and chemical dependency that are specific to the unique needs of youth or work well for at-risk and homeless youth are limited or unavailable in many areas. Youth may be unwilling to seek or consistently use mental health and/or chemical health services. They may also lack

³ Wilder Research Center, *2012 Minnesota Homeless Study Fact Sheet, Initial Findings: Characteristics and Trends*. 2013.

transportation to reach services where they are available. For these reasons, there are significant needs unmet in both the families that youth leave and for youth themselves.

Health Services

Health care services across the board were identified by participants as a significant need. From preventative care and family planning to longer term health care, youth face major barriers in caring for their health.

Tribal Traditions and Cultural Pride

During the three listening sessions on Reservations, youth and adult participants strongly communicated that the teaching of cultural traditions, pride, language and activities is critical in supporting youth. One youth described his feelings about drumming and singing. He explained that this practice has helped him through tough times and that he wouldn't know what to do without it. It is important for programs serving youth (both on Reservations and off) to incorporate teaching of cultural traditions and promote culturally specific programming and activities in order to help American Indian youth who are at-risk or experiencing homelessness succeed.

LGBTQ Supports and Resources

It was identified in many of the rural and Reservation listening sessions that there is a complete lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) services. This is a huge barrier to youth who are LGBTQ as they often feel isolated, without many peers or adults that identify as LGBTQ. In some of the listening sessions, participants also identified the significant amount of bullying and discrimination that youth face if they “come out” in rural areas. Participants explained that there a real need for LGBTQ specific services, activities and support groups to support the youth in their communities.

Services to Address Sexual Exploitation

In many of the listening sessions, participants identified that one of the ways that homeless youth survive is by trading sex or sexual acts for a place to stay, food or clothing. Currently there are no resources specific to sexual exploitation in the rural communities. There are some sexual assault services, and homeless youth service providers that do help if youth approach them for help about sexual exploitation, these services are severely limited and nearly unavailable throughout rural Minnesota.

Recommendations

Adult and youth participants generated a variety of insights and recommendations for addressing the problem of youth homelessness. Some recommendations relate to improving the response to youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness and others address the systemic issues underlying the problem.

Invest in prevention, education and outreach

Stabilize youth living situations by addressing underlying family and systems issues. In order to stabilize individual youth living situations, it is necessary to address large social and systemic issues, such as poverty, economic opportunity, mental and chemical health systems, law enforcement responses and the child welfare system.

Examples:

- A faith based organization, nonprofit or YMCA/Boys & Girls Club could hire a specific staff to work with at-risk and homeless youth. These agencies could then partner with the local junior high and high school and identify youth who are “at-risk” for homelessness. They could provide supportive services, counseling and homeless prevention services such as rental and utility arrears and/or monthly financial support to help the family stay together and prevent the youth from becoming homeless.
- Create employment programming and opportunities specific to homeless youth. This could be done in a local rural community through a partnership with a youth serving organization and a local business. For example, a business could train homeless youth and the agency could support the youth in employment opportunities by providing job mentoring and case management services.
- Create career training and internship opportunities for homeless youth by starting programs that teach youth skills. Examples are: catering, bike mechanic or child care with key industries in rural communities.
- Encourage mental health and chemical dependency counselors in rural areas to receive training in adolescent development, best practices working with homeless youth and trauma informed care, so entities can do a more effective job with youth.
- Local youth serving providers should reach out to law enforcement and invite them into programs and build relationships with them. They should encourage law enforcement to get trained in adolescent development and best practices for working with homeless youth.
- Local organizations or faith based groups could set up community meetings with county child welfare/human service staff to learn about serving adolescent youth more effectively. The availability of federal, state and local grants could be reviewed.

Expand youth development opportunities. Participants identified the need to expand activities for Tribal communities, youth organizations, and faith based communities to provide safe, nurturing places for youth. Saturday night coffee houses, culturally specific activities, and recreational and leadership opportunities were discussed.

Examples:

- Find out if churches, faith based organizations or nonprofit could arrange for volunteers to staff after-school or evening drop-in center sites where youth could get hygiene supplies, food and other basic necessities while offering activities such as games, movies, etc..
- In Tribal communities, find out if there are elders or others in the community who would be willing to teach drumming and singing lessons, take youth to Pow-Wows, and teach language classes or other cultural activities.
- Identify places within communities where youth congregate and see if there is interest in businesses or organizations to open up a Friday or Saturday night coffee house or youth recreational night which could be supervised by volunteers or paid staff if available.
- Establish one-on-one mentoring programs where youth could be matched with adults that fit their interests and career aspirations.

Educate youth about homelessness and community resources. Participants identified the need for education in local schools about homelessness and the resources available to help youth. Incorporating independent living and financial literacy skills in school would be beneficial.

Examples:

- Find out who the local McKinney Vento Homeless School Liaison is and see if they would be willing to provide training to colleges on the topic of youth homelessness. Or, have a local nonprofit provider come in and do training for school staff.
- Create fliers and brochures about the supports offered through the McKinney Vento law and distribute them at large school assemblies, parent teacher conferences, etc.
- Incorporate financial literacy and basic life skills into existing curriculum at schools for all students.

Expand and improve school based outreach. Youth at risk of losing housing or who are homeless are often not identified by staff that could intervene. Educating teachers, principals, front-line staff, secretarial, food service and custodial staff, about the signs of homelessness is essential for a more proactive outreach approach in the schools.

Expand and improve community based outreach. Build stronger relationships with youth serving organizations and other organizations that have contact with at-risk or homeless. For example, staff at food shelves where youth come for help could make referrals to build relationships with law enforcement.

Increase public awareness and understanding of youth homelessness. It is vital that the public better understand the causes of youth homelessness, effective solutions to address the problem, and ways that they can impact the issue. Communicating the significant return on investment that services for homeless youth can deliver is an important strategy. Youth experiencing homelessness create costs in the law enforcement, child welfare, education, health care and social services systems. Public funding could be more effectively targeted to addressing the causes of the problem, rather than its symptoms.

Examples:

- A local community member could host a dinner party where they talk about the needs of homeless youth, watch a video such as TPT's Homeless Youth Finding Home, and have a discussion afterwards.
- Ask a local church or faith based organization to host a speaker or educational forum on the topic of youth homelessness.
- Organize community awareness events such as a sleep out where youth sleep outside on one night (supervised by adult volunteers) to represent youth without places to live.
- Have a local community member write a letter to the editor on the topic of youth homelessness.

Enhance service delivery

Change and expand eligibility guidelines for services that would help homeless youth. Current federal, state and local policies related to eligibility for housing and social services prevent many youth from accessing the resources they require to stabilize their lives. Systematic change is needed in this area.

Examples:

- Determine who is responsible for eligibility requirements and approach them with a coalition of community members, in a respectful way, to discuss creating a more effective eligibility policy.
- If the requirement is in law, gather a coalition of key stakeholders to approach state or federal policy makers to see what it would take to get the requirement changed.

Lower the barriers to accessing housing and getting services. There are perceived and actual barriers such as paperwork, and eligibility guidelines, which prevent youth from accessing services. Complicated, bureaucratic systems that are hard to navigate should be more youth friendly.

Examples:

- Youth want to go to shelters or housing programs. When there is an opening and they meet the eligibility criteria for that program, they should be able to enter the shelter or housing and submit paperwork later. This instead of going to the county first, which could force a youth to be homeless, when there, is a shelter bed or housing unit open.
- Creating a “one stop shop” or coordinated assessment process for youth to obtain multiple services with one application/intake process.
- Nonprofit shelter and housing service providers should be sure to know what the legal eligibility requirements are and not add on additional eligibility requirements that are burdensome to youth such as urine analysis tests, residency requirements, and extensive background checks.

Develop and strengthen faith based community partnerships. Building and expanding partnerships with faith based community partners could support the creation and expansion of programming for youth in many rural areas.

Create emergency shelter and housing programs that will not jeopardize or separate the family of parenting youth. A variety of public and program policies result in parenting youth fearing that they will be separated from their children in order to obtain services. This particularly affects youth fathers who are unable to stay with their families in some shelters and housing programs.

Examples:

- Develop host home programming that has hosts willing to take in parenting youth (mother and/or father or other parents) with their children so that they do not have to be split up.
- If there are scattered site housing programs in the community, encourage them to serve parenting youth as well as single youth.
- If there are no youth shelter or housing providers, but there is a family provider, see if there is a way family shelter or housing providers could serve young families.

Strategize methods for transportation. Resources and services in rural communities should be identified and implemented to develop better transportation systems for youth, such as volunteer carpool programs or dial a ride. Funders should understand and allow for higher staff mileage reimbursement costs. Staff often has to provide transportation to youth they are working with due to the lack of public transportation in rural areas.

Develop emergency shelter and housing options for homeless youth. In every listening session the lack of emergency shelter and housing programs for homeless youth was brought up as a critical gap in services. It is essential that funders support these initiatives in rural areas and that the local community supports the development of these programs.

Examples:

- Develop a host home program where screened and trained people in the community could open up their home and share it with a homeless youth. These are typically run through a nonprofit but could also be operated by a faith based organization.

- If there is an adult or family provider, search for funding options that would allow the agency to expand to serve youth through host home programs. Providers could rent a 2-3 bedroom apartment and secure staff for a small emergency shelter. Identify churches or other organizations with available space that could be used for shelter and housing.

Increase funding to rural and Tribal communities. Listening session participants expressed the strong perception that resources stay in the Twin Cities metro area and are not shared with rural areas. Nonprofit and Tribal organizations in rural areas need more services and operating support to address the significant needs that exist. Funders should be sure to include providers from rural and Tribal areas in their funding decisions whenever possible.

Identify effective McKinney-Vento School Liaisons and replicate these approaches. There are examples of successful school liaisons, service delivery models, and best practices that can be identified and replicated across the state to better serve rural and Tribal communities.

Foster best practices, cooperative learning, and competitive collaboration among service providers. Participants identified the need for organizations to identify what they do well and to challenge each other to improve their services. Collaboration with an eye towards sharing best practices and service delivery improvement is an approach that would be beneficial in rural areas.

Strengthen partnerships with mainstream systems and advocate for changes in policies and practices

Improve connections between mainstream systems and local nonprofits to help youth make major transitions. Youth serving agencies need advance warning and adequate time to partner with youth and to prepare them for their transition to independent living. Currently, youth are referred to community agencies too late to make meaningful transition plans, to develop independent living skills, and to gain economic resources and support they will need to meet their basic needs. For example, the county should not refer youth to an agency two weeks before they age out of foster care and expect youth to be able to learn life skills and secure housing during that short period of time.

Local law enforcement can improve and develop positive relationships with youth in rural communities to be seen as a source of help for youth. Listening session participants reported that local police officers are often the only staff that are available 24/7 and are the first responders in many crisis situations involving youth. It is critical that rural police officers be trained to work with youth, specific cultural communities, conflict resolution, and be knowledgeable of the resources available for youth in their local area.

More effective child welfare, children's mental health, and juvenile justice interventions would reduce youth homelessness. These three systems often interact with youth who are at-risk of becoming homeless. It is critical that the social workers and probation officers that have youth on their case load be appropriately trained, be able to work effectively with youth and their families/care-givers, and be prepared to help youth make appropriate transitions out of the mainstream systems and into the community safely and with stable housing.

Schools need to better understand how to best support homeless youth. Staff in local schools comes into contact with youth who are at-risk of homelessness or who are currently homeless and may have little or no knowledge about how they can help these youth. It is important that staff in rural and Tribal

community schools be trained on the McKinney Vento law, that a staff be designated as the McKinney Vento Homeless Liaison, and be trained on best practices in working with youth at-risk of homelessness or who are homeless. School staff should proactively connect with available programs in their area.

Improve the effectiveness of grant making programs

Distribute grant funds directly to service providers rather than intermediary organizations or local units of government (e.g. county or intermediary organization). In several of the listening sessions, participants explained that it is best when funders provide grants directly to nonprofits or Tribes, rather than granting funds to an intermediary organization or local unit of government and then having this entity make funding decisions. Concerns focused on the fact that intermediaries take a portion of the funds away from much needed direct service funds. Intermediaries or counties may have to consider local politics in the grant decision making. In some cases this could affect homeless youth providers which may not be seen as a funding priority.

Streamline applications and coordinate funding. There are multiple federal and state funding sources available for homeless services, although limited funding is exclusively targeted to homeless youth. A great deal of time is spent completing the complex applications required for different funding sources administered by different federal or state agencies. For example, different state or federal agencies use different terminology and definitions for homelessness, eligibility criteria and budget categories. A streamlined application process that allows agencies to apply for multiple funding sources at one time may decrease administrative burden. It would also be helpful if federal and state agencies simplified funding applications and used common language.

Create longer grant periods and funding cycles. Federal and state grants are typically awarded on a two-year cycle. This time period is too short according to some listening session attendees and doesn't allow agencies to effectively implement proposed projects and services. A longer grant period would allow agencies to plan, implement and invest in programs more strategically.

Increase the amount of flexible funding available to service providers. Listening session participants identified a lack of flexible funding to meet the needs of youth. Rigid policies and guidelines sometimes prevent local staff from paying for items and services that youth need.

Educate funders and policymakers about the issues. There is a perception that some funders and policymakers are disconnected from the reality of the lived experience of homeless youth and the service providers working to help them. Several comments addressed the desire that key decision makers in funding entities should visit programs and walk a day in the shoes of homeless youth. More effort is needed to educate funders and policymakers about youth experiencing homelessness.

Trust local service providers for their experience and expertise in working with homeless youth. Some participants described feelings that some funders do not trust their knowledge of what works best for homeless youth. Funding and programs should focus on best serving the end client, youth, rather than the nonprofit, funder or other stakeholders.

Build the capacity of local organizations. Participants identified the need for funding that can be used for staff training, capacity building and strategic planning to improve services.

Conduct additional in-depth research on the issue of youth homelessness in rural areas, as well as a longitudinal study of what has helped, or not helped, youth who have been homeless. It has been

difficult to accurately measure the size of the homeless youth population in rural areas since youth are largely invisible. When the Wilder Research Survey and the HUD Point in Time Counts are completed, there is a lack of capacity to conduct the count and survey rural areas, especially the count of unsheltered youth. More research, particularly longitudinal studies are needed to better understand homeless youth in rural and Tribal areas.

Address systemic causes and issues related to youth homelessness. Service delivery focuses on individual issues youth are facing, but does not address public policies and systems that underlie the problem. Dealing with systemic issues is costly and difficult to deal with, but essential to alleviating and eventually eliminating youth homelessness.

Acknowledgements

DHS-OEO thanks the many participants who took time to share their knowledge, ideas and experiences. The key insights and recommendations that emerged from these listening sessions are valuable in advancing efforts to address youth homelessness in rural Minnesota.

Additionally, DHS-OEO thanks the rural homeless youth providers who helped to find locations for the listening sessions and publicized them in communities, the three youth/young adult interns (Chris, Jeanna and Malika) who were essential to making the project a success, and the Otto Bremer Foundation for support of this project and continued dedication to addressing the problem of youth homelessness in Minnesota.

Appendix A: Questions for Rural Community Listening Sessions on Youth Homelessness

Introduction & Welcome

Ice Breaker Activity: Your name, agency and tell us if you could have dinner with any 3 celebrities who would they be?

General Questions:

1. Let's start off by talking about young people in your community. What is it that that you want for young people in your community?
2. In your experience what are the things that impact or put up barriers for youth achieving things that you want for them?
3. In my/our experience working with homeless youth we sometimes see families and youth themselves forced to make difficult decisions in order to try and survive. Does this happen in your community?
4. For youth that end up experiencing homelessness, what does this look like in your community? What are the reasons youth are homeless in your community?

Additional Questions, if needed:

- Racial Make-Up
 - LGBTQ
 - Mental Health Issues
 - CD Issues
 - Poverty
 - Aging out of the Foster Care System & Juvenile Justice
5. How is the child welfare system involved with homeless youth in your community?
 - Children's Mental Health
 - Juvenile Corrections
 - Schools & McKinney-Vento Homeless School Liaisons (ask youth specifically what their education consistency has been like)
 - If the child welfare system is involved, what has worked about it? What doesn't work?
 6. How are these youth surviving/living in your community?
 7. Do you see youth trading sexual acts/sex to survive, a place to stay, food, clothing, etc. Are youth being approached for this and/or other illegal activity in your community?
 8. How do you think a youth's family or kin (biological or not) fitting into this-could they be a resource to help youth and if so how?

Youth Services & Community Supports Questions:

1. Are there any services available to homeless youth in your community?
 - How do youth find out about the services?
 - What are the major barriers youth have in accessing services and housing?
 - Question for youth in attendance specifically: What are the top obstacles you have to getting into stable housing?

2. What services and supports do you think are missing in your community to help support homeless youth?
 - How often do youth in your community have to travel long distances or go to the cities to get the support they need?
 - Are there services in urban areas that you'd like to see in your rural community?
 - What services (including family reunification), shelter and housing do you think would best help homeless youth in your community?
3. How do youth get around to resources they need in their community? Is transportation an issue?
4. What services and supports do you think would help youth from becoming homeless in the first place?
5. For youth: Did you ever feel unsafe in your home and if so did you reach out for help?

Grant Making & Funding Questions:

1. How do you think funders and government staff can help support your community in addressing the needs and building capacity to help homeless youth?
2. What have you seen work in your community in terms of grant making?
3. Are there certain areas of research or answers to questions that your community needs in order to educate others and gain support for homeless youth in your community?

Moving Forward:

What can we do to further move this issue forward?

Closure:

Is there anything else you think we should know about that hasn't been talked about yet?

Thank you so much for your support of youth experiencing homelessness in your community and your contributions at today's listening session!