



A Report on Homeless Youth  
and the Justice System in New York City

— Youth  
— Justice  
— Board





Youth Justice Board members discuss youth-adult partnerships with Center for Court Innovation staff.

## This publication was written by Youth Justice Board members and staff.

The Youth Justice Board is a project of the Center for Court Innovation. It was established in 2004 to give young people a voice in policies that affect their lives.

Each year, a team of teenagers from across New York City investigates a current justice system or public safety issue, formulates policy recommendations, and works to promote and implement key ideas. This report represents the research and original ideas of the Youth Justice Board members as written by program staff. Board members contributed all artwork and reflection pieces.

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Points of view and opinions expressed in this document are the opinions of the Youth Justice Board members and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Center for Court Innovation or the above-named entities.

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# Dear Reader

We are a group of teenagers hailing from all five boroughs of New York City. Over the 2016–2017 school year, we focused on the issue of youth homelessness and its intersection with the criminal justice system. Our goal is to improve the lives of homeless youth from ages 16 to 24 across the city by proposing effective policy recommendations to help youth access resources and avoid criminal records.

We hope to bring attention to an issue that is often ignored by society. Seeing the disproportionate percentage of people of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people that are affected by homelessness affects us because these groups are a part of our community. Within our group, we have been affected by the criminal justice system through incarceration and police encounters. Some of us have been affected by discrimination against our race or our sexual orientation, and some of us have experienced homelessness ourselves.

Throughout the year, we conducted interviews, analyzed data and research, participated in trainings, and had discussions with homeless youth. During a focus group, we talked to 25 homeless youth who shared valuable insights about their personal experiences. They talked about their struggles involving a variety of issues, such as finding stable housing, accessing resources, and navigating the justice system. Many youth talked about facing abuse in shelters, being kicked out of their homes because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, and the impact of the instability of foster care.

This year we acquired many skills, such as teamwork, public speaking, leadership, and research. As many of us entered the program, we were oblivious to the extent of injustices happening to homeless youth in the justice system. Throughout the year, we were able to learn more not only about the daily struggles that many youth face, but how to come up with policies that will hopefully improve their everyday lives.

As determined and diverse teens, we hope that this report inspires you to act on these recommendations and that they will be implemented to better the lives of homeless youth and decrease their involvement in the justice system.

Sincerely,

**THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD**

# Acknowledgements

THIS REPORT IS DEDICATED TO ALFRED SIEGEL, A DEVOTED SUPPORTER OF THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD PROGRAM AND A MENTOR TO ITS MANY STAFF, MEMBERS, AND ALUMNI.

Many people helped to make this report possible. The Youth Justice Board would like to thank the following individuals for their knowledge, time, and support this year:

## INTERVIEWEES:

Judge Jody Adams, Leslie Britt, Imogen Carr, Louis Cholden-Brown, Detective Tanya Duhaney, Victor Furtick, Audace Garnett, Nancy Ginsburg, Matt Green, Shaquana Green, Dan Hafetz, Beth Hofmeister, Katy Kam, Tina Kelly, Arija Linauts, Katherine Marshall-Polite, Dr. Barbara McKeon, Benita Miller, Denise Niewinski, Kendal Nystedt, Lisa Parrish, Betty Pierre, Chansi Powell, Jamie Powlovich, Kyle Rapiñan, Michael Santos, Randy Scott, Sideya Sherman, and Bill Torres.

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

We are grateful to the 25 young people who shared their opinions and experiences during our focus groups.



Members of the Youth Justice Board visit the Queens Youth Justice Center.

## CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION:

Afua Addo, Mohammed Alam, Andre Anteliz, Linda Baird, Shubha Bala, Raye Barbieri, Amanda Berman, Greg Berman, Debbie Boar, Aaron Charlop-Powers, Serin Choi, Sharese Crouther, Alejandra Garcia, Viviana Gordon, Dory Hack, Margaret Harris, Elise Jensen, Keisha Jones, Ross Joy, Ignacio Juareguilorda, Anna Krist, Tracey Little, Michele Maestri, Adam Mansky, Samiha Amin Meah, Saadiq Newton-Boyd, Shernette Pink, Chante Ramsey, Zoe Ridolfi-Starr, Sally Sanchez, Dipal Shah, Kristina Singleton, Brett Taylor, Brett Vetterlein, Haddijatou Waggeh, Matthew Watkins, and Robert V. Wolf.

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## YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD ALUMNI:

Nazir Shaw and Ivoryona Williams.

# The Youth Justice Board Model

Over the course of a two-year program cycle, a team of teenagers from across New York City investigates a current justice system or public safety issue, formulates policy recommendations, and works to implement its proposals. The Youth Justice Board brings young people's perspectives to public policy discussions while supporting members' personal and professional growth. The program aims to foster ongoing dialogue between policy-makers and informed youth leaders. In the first year of the program's two-year cycle, Board members research a selected issue, develop and publish informed policy recommendations, and present them to policy-makers and key stakeholders. During the second year, members work to implement the recommendations. Each year, new teens representing a diverse cross-section of neighborhoods and backgrounds are selected to join the Board. Participants include youth with firsthand experience of the issues addressed by the program. After completion of the project, many alumni stay engaged with the program and pursue other civic engagement activities in their neighborhoods and schools. The program's curriculum builds Board members' leadership, research, and public speaking skills and helps them develop and advance substantive and actionable policy recommendations.

## **TRAINING:**

Members receive training on research strategies, active listening, interviewing, public speaking, and more. Members also learn how local government works.

## **FIELDWORK:**

The Board designs and implements a research plan that includes interviews, focus groups, and site visits with a wide range of sources. Members meet with experts in the field, community members, and public officials. Members design and lead focus groups of young people affected by the issue under investigation to learn how it affects their peers.

## **POLICY DEVELOPMENT:**

The Board's research culminates in the development of targeted policy proposals. The Board issues a final report and presents its recommendations to government officials and policy-makers.

## **IMPLEMENTATION:**

The Board works to influence practice in the field through action and advocacy. Board members design, develop, and pilot new initiatives based on their policy proposals. Members also work to convince decision-makers and service providers to implement their recommendations.

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# Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and recommendations of the 2016-2017 Youth Justice Board, an after-school program that engages New York City teenagers in studying public policy issues that affect young people. The Youth Justice Board has looked at the relationship between youth homelessness and the justice system in New York City to identify opportunities to better support homeless youth, minimize justice system involvement, and prevent homelessness in the future. During the 2017-2018 program year, the Board will work to implement many of the ideas contained in this report.

The Youth Justice Board conducted interviews with 34 topic experts and led three focus groups with 25 young people who have experienced homelessness. The Youth Justice Board developed ten recommendations to support homeless young people in New York City and limit their interactions with the justice system:

- A. IMPROVE SHELTERS AND SHORT-TERM SERVICES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH**
  1. Simplify and clarify the shelter intake process.
  2. Ensure homeless youth can access emergency temporary shelter when in crisis.
  3. Improve onsite services offered by shelters.
  4. Provide homeless youth with adequate information about available resources.
  
- B. IMPROVE THE JUSTICE AND CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS TO BETTER SERVE HOMELESS YOUTH AND TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS**
  5. Expand diversion opportunities.
  6. Support incarcerated youth in planning for their release and securing safe, stable housing.
  7. Develop cross-system trainings with input from young people.
  8. Increase support for LGBTQ youth in foster care.
  
- C. PROVIDE SERVICES AND SUPPORT WITH LASTING IMPACT**
  9. Increase affordable long-term housing options for youth.
  10. Provide the Department of Education with more resources to support homeless students.

# Introduction

Rates of homelessness have surged across New York City in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Young people face unique challenges once they lose access to stable housing. Their experiences are profoundly affected by the practices and policies of multiple systems, including the child welfare, juvenile justice, and criminal justice systems. These systems are complex, interrelated, and notoriously hard to navigate.

The Youth Justice Board looked at the relationship between youth homelessness and the justice system in New York City to identify opportunities to better support homeless youth, minimize justice system involvement, and pre-

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— Focus group participant

vent homelessness in the future. Though youth homelessness is an urgent issue in New York and other cities, there is little opportunity for positive collaboration between young people and other stakeholders. To develop informed solutions, policy-makers must have a deep understanding of young people's experiences.

Counting homeless youth is tricky. Unlike adults who often rely on shelters or public spaces for housing, young people are more mobile and are more likely to “couch-surf” and benefit from the help of friends and extended family. When homeless youth are out in public spaces, they more easily blend in and try to avoid notice. As one young person in our focus group told us, “Homeless youth [are] so hidden because a lot of homeless youth try so hard to blend in and not look homeless, try to seem like they live a regular life... Anybody can be going through anything—you'll never know, because they're trying to hide it.”

As mandated by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) annually conducts a “Homeless Outreach Population Estimate,” referred to as the “HOPE Count.” The HOPE Count is essential to understand the scope of homelessness in New York City, but is limited in its ability to capture the numbers of homeless youth. According to Beth Hofmeister, staff attorney at The Legal Aid Society's Homeless Rights Project, the HOPE Count is “horribly ineffective” in part because it uses HUD's definition of

<sup>1</sup> | (Coalition for the Homeless n.d.)

homeless, which is too narrow to fully capture the circumstances of many homeless youth.<sup>2</sup>

In recognition of the HOPE Count's limitations, beginning in 2015 New York City's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) has coordinated efforts to more accurately capture the number of homeless youth through a supplemental "Youth Count." The Youth Count surveys youth through programs that serve homeless youth, such as drop-in centers, outreach teams, and emergency shelters. The Youth Count uses a broader definition for homelessness than HUD, including unstable living conditions, such as couch-surfing, staying with a significant other, or providing sex in exchange for shelter.<sup>4</sup> The February 2016 Youth Count found that, on the night identified for the count, there were 1,805 homeless youth in New York City. Randy Scott, unit head at the Vulnerable and Special Needs Youth Division, Runaway and Homeless Youth Services at DYCD, noted that DYCD has been working to improve the accuracy of the Youth Count by collaborating with service providers, city agencies, and youth. However, advocates and service providers we spoke to remain critical of the Youth Count's accuracy. Hofmeister asserted that advocates and providers know "the problem is way bigger than what is captured in the Youth Count."

There are also issues with information collected through service providers and city agencies. Good data requires reliable self-disclosure by homeless youth, which can be difficult to obtain. Young people don't always understand themselves as "homeless;" they may have a place to sleep at night, even though it is unsafe or unreliable. Youth who do understand themselves to be homeless may choose not to self-disclose for several reasons. First, identifying oneself as homeless and getting services can require navigating complex bureaucracy and invite unwanted system involvement.

Second, youth—like adults—are aware of social stigma around homelessness. Third, youth often feel there is nothing to gain, and a lot to lose, by disclosing their housing insecurity.

#### HOW DO TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS BECOME HOMELESS?

Some of the root causes of youth homelessness are the same as those for the larger population of homeless New Yorkers, such as economic hardship or loss of housing due to eviction, unexpected illness, or medical costs. Youth may also become homeless as a result of leaving an abusive or unsafe living situation. According to a 2014 study of youth served by organizations in 11 major U.S. cities, over half of homeless youth first became homeless because a parent or caregiver asked them to leave home.<sup>5</sup> Other self-reported reasons for initially becoming homeless included being unable to find employment, being physically abused, a caregiver's use of drugs or alcohol, their own drug or alcohol use, or exiting jail or prison.<sup>6</sup> Board members learned in interviews that youth with undocumented parents or caregivers may also become homeless due to a provider's detention or deportation.

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I think the foster care system is a driver of homelessness, and also a recipient. But the underlying cause is LGBTQ rejection.

— Lisa Parrish, New York City Administration for Children's Services

<sup>2</sup> (Health Services and Resources Administration 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> (New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence and New York City Department of Youth and Community Development 2016)

<sup>5</sup> The majority of the Street Outreach Program Data Collection Study sample (69.7%) is between 19 and 21 years of age.

<sup>6</sup> (Administration on Children, Youth and Families 2016)

Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) are often subject to discrimination at home and in foster care settings. According to a national survey of service providers who serve youth who are homeless or are at risk of becoming so, approximately 40% of their clients identify as LGBTQ.<sup>7</sup> Service providers also reported that, of the LGBTQ youth they serve, 68% cite family rejection as a major factor contributing to their homelessness. LGBTQ youth who enter the foster care system may find themselves again experiencing abuse and discrimination due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. As Lisa Parrish, senior advisor at the Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice at the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), said, “I think the foster care system is a driver of homelessness, and also a recipient, but the underlying cause is LGBTQ rejection.”

New York City service providers see a high number of transgender youth who are homeless. As Kyle Rapiñan, director of survival and self determination at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, explained, “The rate of homelessness for trans people, especially trans women of color, is through the roof.” Multiple interviewees and focus group participants explained that transgender youth who are homeless face additional challenges. For example, they may not have identification that matches their gender identity, which can cause tension when interacting with law enforcement, city agencies, and service providers, and can result in discrimination, detention, or denial of services.

#### **WHAT IS THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN HOMELESSNESS AND JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT FOR OLDER TEENS?**

As the Board learned in interviews and focus groups, homeless youth are more vulnerable than non-homeless youth to arrest and system involvement. Actions taken by homeless youth in order to survive are often arrestable offenses, such as shoplifting, trespassing, sleeping on trains, and turnstile jumping.

Simply spending more time on the street and in public places means more contact with police officers. One focus group participant told us, “Homeless people are more likely to be outside and... we have more interaction [with the cops] than if you had a job working nine to five.” Homeless youth engage in arguments in public spaces because they do not have private spaces in which to deal with interpersonal conflict; this can lead to arrest. Young people who are homeless often lack government-issued identification, which can make interaction with law enforcement more complicated.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) can be an ally in helping homeless youth access support and services. For example, staff from the Midtown Community Court explained that officers in the Times Square area will sometimes refer homeless youth to the Covenant House shelter on 41st Street. At the same time, the Board learned through its focus groups that homeless youth frequently feel harassed and treated violently by police officers. As Hofmeister shared, “I have seen police officers do amazing things with my clients, and I have seen them do terrible things to my clients.”

Through interviews and focus groups, the Board learned that many homeless youth engage in sex work to secure a place to sleep or to earn income. For their own safety, young people often prefer to work with each other, or help their friends by suggesting safe clients or setting up dates or locations. However, trafficking laws mean that these youth—especially if the one helping is over 18 and the other is under 18—can be charged with trafficking, a serious charge that carries heavy criminal consequences. Transgender youth are particularly vulnerable to sex work or trafficking arrests; LGBTQ youth in New York are seven times more likely to engage in sex work than their cisgender peers,<sup>8</sup> young trans women engaged in sex work are significantly more likely

<sup>7</sup> | (Durso and Gates 2012)

<sup>8</sup> | (Dank, et al. 2015)

than cisgender women to be arrested,<sup>9</sup> and LGBTQ youth, particularly trans youth of color, are especially vulnerable to being profiled as sex workers and arrested on “loitering for the purposes of prostitution” charges, regardless of whether they are working.<sup>10</sup>

Frequently, experts interviewed by the Board brought up the complicated needs and concerns of homeless or justice system-involved youth who are also undocumented (or who have undocumented parents). Once homeless, undocumented youth are extremely vulnerable to interactions with law enforcement. According to Kendal Nystedt, immigration attorney at Make The Road, “Every interaction with the criminal legal system is more dangerous if you’re an undocumented person... As soon as you have an arrest you become a target for deportation.”

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## The rate of homelessness for trans people, especially trans women of color, is through the roof.

— Kyle Rapiñan,  
Sylvia Rivera Law Project

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Justice system involvement can be a catalyst for housing insecurity, and can make many essential resources—like housing, employment, and government benefits—more difficult to obtain. As the Board learned from Nancy Ginsburg, director of the Adolescent Intervention and Diversion Team at The Legal Aid Society, “The collateral consequences of convictions are serious. They can prevent you not just from getting housing, but also from getting a job to help you pay for housing.”

### WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF RAISE THE AGE LEGISLATION AND OTHER POLICY DEVELOPMENTS?

A consistent theme throughout the Board’s research was the challenge presented by the age of criminal responsibility in New York State, which is currently 16-years-old. Many services and programs for justice system-involved young people were created in recognition that the age of criminal responsibility did not reflect best practices for helping young people and ran counter to other state systems’—such as foster care and New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)—definitions of “adulthood.”

On April 10, 2017, New York State passed legislation to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to 18 as of October 1, 2019. The passage of the “Raise the Age” legislation will fundamentally change how young people move through the justice system, and will make it possible for thousands of young people to avoid criminal records and their collateral consequences. Two impacts of the legislation relevant to the Board’s work are the plan to reroute cases involving 16- and 17-year-olds to family court instead of criminal court, and to stop detaining youth under the age of 18 with adults.

Also during the Board’s work, in April 2017 the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform released a final report detailing recommendations for a new vision of criminal justice in New York City.<sup>11</sup> Based on a year of study, the final report calls for reducing the New York City jail population by half and for a robust investment in alternatives to incarceration, particularly for adolescents and young adults. The Commission’s recommendations for a justice system that both avoids the unnecessary use of jail and connects young people to tools that are particularly meaningful for homeless youth.

<sup>9</sup> “Trans females (37%) were significantly more likely than cis males (12%) or cis females (17%) to report a prior prostitution arrest and at least three times more likely to report a prostitution arrest in the past year (30% v. 9% v. 10%).” (Swaner, et al. 2016)

<sup>10</sup> (Hanssens, et al. 2014)

<sup>11</sup> (Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform 2017)

New York City and New York State are also taking steps to actively address the needs of homeless New Yorkers through policy change. In February 2017, New York City released a report entitled *Turning the Tide on Homelessness in New York City* outlining strategies to increase the number of neighborhood-based shelters, reduce the number of people living in shelters, and expand supports and services available to homeless New Yorkers.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the state's 2018 budget, released in April 2017, provides municipalities with the ability to double the length of time youth can spend in crisis and transitional programs and to increase the maximum age of participation in programs for homeless youth from 21 to 24.<sup>13</sup> Individual municipalities will decide whether to implement these extensions.

#### WHAT DO YOUTH SAY THEY WANT?

There are many agencies and services that serve homeless young adults. Youth in our focus groups identified key elements these providers have in common. First, young people of all identities trust them and feel safe and welcome. Second, they recognize that young people have multiple needs and take a comprehensive approach. Finally, the programs and agencies most valued are those that specifically serve youth, and don't also serve adults in the same spaces or programs. Youth interviewed by the Board also felt that programs and services that were welcoming to and inclusive of LGBTQ youth were better and more likely to meet the needs of homeless youth overall.

<sup>12</sup> (New York City Department of Homeless Services 2017)

<sup>13</sup> (Office of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo 2017)

# Recommendations

The Youth Justice Board hopes our recommendations will spark conversation between city agencies, legislators, service providers, and homeless youth. Over the next year, the Youth Justice Board will work with these stakeholders in an effort to encourage the implementation of the ideas contained in this report.

The Board's recommendations fall under three themes:

- A. IMPROVE SHELTERS AND SHORT-TERM SERVICES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH**
  1. Simplify and clarify the shelter intake process.
  2. Ensure homeless youth can access emergency temporary shelter when in crisis.
  3. Improve onsite services offered by shelters.
  4. Provide homeless youth with adequate information about available resources.
  
- B. IMPROVE THE JUSTICE AND CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS TO BETTER SERVE HOMELESS YOUTH AND TO PREVENT HOMELESSNESS**
  5. Expand diversion opportunities.
  6. Support incarcerated youth in planning for their release and securing safe, stable housing.
  7. Develop cross-system trainings with input from young people.
  8. Increase support for LGBTQ youth in foster care.
  
- C. PROVIDE SERVICES AND SUPPORT WITH LASTING IMPACT**
  9. Increase affordable long-term housing options for youth.
  10. Provide the Department of Education with more resources to support homeless students.

# 1.

## Simplify and clarify the shelter intake process

Overwhelmingly, we heard in our interviews and focus groups that the city shelter system is difficult to enter and the intake process is challenging to navigate. Improving the intake process and overall shelter system experience is important, because if young people are turned away or feel overwhelmed with the process, they may give up altogether and end up in a place—or engage in behaviors—that are unsafe. Easing burdensome requirements associated with the shelter intake process could help to keep young people off the streets.

### **CONVENE A WORKING GROUP OF AGENCIES AND SERVICE PROVIDERS TO MAP, REVIEW, AND RECOMMEND IMPROVEMENTS TO THE SHELTER SYSTEM INTAKE PROCESS.**

Intake is the first step in entering the shelter system, and it is a very complex process for young people to navigate. Each DYCD shelter has its own intake process. There are advantages to this—for example, youth can show up to a shelter and be admitted, instead of having to first travel to an intake center and then travel to a shelter. Providers fought for this approach. Jamie Powlovich, executive director at the Coalition for Homeless Youth, told us that providers prefer not to have a unified database of names in order to protect the privacy of clients. At the same time, when each shelter has its own intake process it can be confusing and time-consuming for youth. The lack of available beds means that youth often have to travel to multiple shelters before being admitted. (For more information on this issue, please see recommendation #2 on

pages 11-13). Youth in our focus groups said they expect each DYCD intake to take an hour and a half to two hours. Youth also expressed frustration that they are repeatedly asked the same information, often including painful personal memories and trauma history, at each new site or shelter.

DHS shelters have a different centralized intake system that requires all prospective residents to show up at one of four processing locations, provide documentation, and undergo interviews before being placed. Then, they are required to travel with all their belongings to their placement shelter. The process can be difficult and stressful; Judge Jody Adams, former senior advisor for children and families in shelter to the commissioner of DHS, described the family intake center as “a scene in which families are often desperate and unhappy.” We learned from Imogen Carr, supervisor of alternatives to incarceration programming at the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, that DHS shelters offer only one intake point for men, two for women, and one for families with children. The limited number of intake points means youth often have to travel far and sit through long wait times, among other complications. In our focus groups, youth described waiting for days at DHS intake centers and sleeping on chairs overnight. Even as the city works to build 90 neighborhood-based shelters, DHS intake currently remains concentrated at select locations.

Additional areas that could use improvement include eliminating the requirement that parents bring their children to intake; making the physical space feel more comfortable; training shelter staff to help applicants feel welcome; training staff in LGBTQ sensitivity; addressing undocumented immigrants' fears about what information might be shared with immigration officials; and supporting homeless youth who don't have identification and other documentation, especially transgender youth whose documents may not correspond with their gender identity.

We recommend that a working group examine the intake processes at both DYCD and DHS shelters and recommend improvements. The group should include:

- Staff responsible for conducting and supervising intake;
- Shelter managers;
- Social workers;
- Legal service providers and advocacy groups specializing in homeless issues;
- Representatives from the district attorney's offices who focus on diversion;
- Representatives from the Department of Corrections and Department of Youth and Family Justice who oversee reentry planning;
- Staff from organizations that specialize in serving homeless youth, such as The Door;
- The Department of Education's (DOE) Students in Temporary Housing unit; and
- Youth who have experienced homelessness.

#### **CREATE A VISUAL GUIDE TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE DHS INTAKE PROCESS.**

The intake process at DHS can be confusing for young people. To clarify the process and what to expect, we recommend creating a visual guide that explains the intake process and outlines what youth need in order to get placed in a shelter. This guide should be available in multiple languages and include:

- A list of every step in the intake process;
- A list of documents youth need to bring and who they should contact for help if they do not have the necessary documents;
- An estimate of how long the process will take;
- A notice that youth need to bring their children along if they are applying for family placement;
- Whether any of their personal information can be shared with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE);
- Information on how DHS places transgender and gender-nonconforming people; and
- Information about who youth should contact if they feel they are treated in an unfair or inappropriate manner.

# 2.

## Ensure homeless youth can access emergency temporary shelter when in crisis

The existing continuum of shelters and short-term housing programs cannot serve the growing number of homeless youth in New York City. Practitioners widely agree that there is insufficient funding to provide enough beds on a nightly basis and that existing options must be expanded in order to better serve youth in crisis. We recommend expanding access to emergency, temporary shelter.

### **GUARANTEE YOUTH A RIGHT TO EMERGENCY SHELTER.**

While anyone over the age of 18 has a legal right to shelter in New York City and DHS has a legal responsibility to provide it, youth under 18 have no such protection. Homeless youth in New York City should never be left to fend for themselves on the street, and should have a right, as adults do, to emergency shelter.<sup>14</sup> Jamie Powlovich, executive director at the Coalition for Homeless Youth, explained that without a legal right to shelter, “there is no pressure on the city or state to provide enough beds for the many youth who need them.” Many young people end up resorting to survival crimes in order to find shelter, or get arrested for trespassing or sleeping on the subway. Beth Hofmeister, staff attorney, Homeless Rights Project at The Legal Aid Society said, “There aren’t enough beds for the number of people who want them... There is never enough money for beds.”

Our focus group participants described waiting for weeks before finally getting a bed at a youth shelter. “It’s really hard, because you have to wait a while on the list... You got to wait about like almost a month,” said one young person. Another told us, “There are never enough beds, there’s never enough money. There’s never enough anything, there’s never enough resources. So it’s like, what are your other options?”

Haddijatou Waggeh, youth justice coordinator at the Midtown Community Court, has observed that when young people cannot access emergency shelter they are likely to sleep on the street, where they are exposed to violence and risk being arrested for trespassing. Many engage in survival sex in exchange for shelter. She told us that adults will wait outside of shelters for youth to be turned away, and as they leave, attempt to solicit young people into prostitution or otherwise exploit them. Youth who leave a shelter without a clear plan are also at significant risk, both of exploitation and of becoming involved in the justice system as a result of these actions. Louis Cholden-Brown, deputy chief of staff for legislation, planning, and budget at the office of Council Member Corey Johnson, believes the legal right to shelter, and a consequential increase in beds, should be an urgent issue for city

<sup>14</sup> | The Legal Aid Society’s Homeless Rights Project currently has an open suit against the City of New York arguing for this right.

lawmakers. “This is a population that has been crying out for a long time,” he said. “This is not a new issue and there is a long way to go. We have to push the envelope... This is what it means to be a progressive city.” As one of our focus group participants said, “If you’re homeless, you should always have somewhere to go. No matter what, somebody should help you. Don’t matter where, because nobody deserves to sleep outside. Nobody deserves that.”

#### **INCREASE THE NUMBER OF BEDS DESIGNATED FOR LGBTQ YOUTH.**

There are not enough crisis beds for homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ. These youth are frequently housed in shelters where staff and other residents may discriminate and even use violence against them, and there are not enough shelters designed to house and support them. Hofmeister said that many of her LGBTQ clients face intense discrimination in the shelter and welfare systems. “Most of my clients... identify as LGBTQ, and a number of them are trans. They’re often really discriminated against,” she said. “I can’t tell you how many times, when you really get down to the root of the issue, it has to do with someone’s bias against the youth’s sexuality or gender identity.” A focus group participant agreed, saying, “It’s just harder to find queer housing that’s like comfortable and safe and... actually good for resources.”

#### **CREATE A 24-HOUR DROP-IN CENTER IN EACH BOROUGH.**

Drop-in centers are the most temporary option in New York’s shelter continuum, and are often the first point of contact between homeless youth and city services. They serve youth 14- to 24-years-old and provide food, showers, Internet access, charging stations, clothing, entertainment, and referrals to shelters and other social services. They are operated by private nonprofits through contracts with DYCD. Youth in our focus groups told us they often rely on drop-in centers when they are looking for referrals and other support.

Randy Scott, unit head at the Vulnerable and Special Needs Youth Division, Runaway and Homeless Youth Services at DYCD, explained that drop-in centers offer youth an opportunity to meet other young people who may be struggling with similar issues, access resources, and build friendships and community. “Our drop-in centers are great places where youth can watch TV, shower, use a computer, connect with other young people, and link to services,” he said. “The centers get [youth] off the street until they are ready to move to the next step.”

There are seven drop-in centers across New York’s five boroughs open at different times. Six of the drop-in centers are closed at night, and they do not provide beds or a place to sleep. There is currently only one drop-in center open 24 hours a day, the Ali Forney Center in Harlem. DYCD, with support from its state oversight agency, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), should seek to create a 24-hour drop-in center in each borough. This will help youth in immediate crisis get access to the resources they need.

#### **EXTEND THE AGE OF ELIGIBILITY FOR DYCD PROGRAMS AND SERVICES TO 24, AND INCREASE THE LENGTH OF TIME YOUTH ARE PERMITTED TO STAY IN CRISIS SHELTERS AND TRANSITIONAL INDEPENDENT LIVING FACILITIES.**

Under DYCD’s range of services, there are two levels of shelter for homeless youth:

1. Crisis shelters provide short-term emergency food and shelter for youth between 16- and 21-years-old. Youth can remain in the shelters for between 30-60 days, and during that time may receive short-term case management services to help them find housing, employment, mental health care, and other resources. Youth are entitled to receive 30 days of aftercare after being discharged.
2. Transitional independent living facilities (often called “TILs”) provide extended temporary shelter, food, programming, and case management services. TILs are

open to youth between 16- and 21-years-old, and youth are allowed to stay up to 18 months. (Youth who enter at age 16 or 17 can apply for an extension of up to six months, though it is not guaranteed.) TILs are required to provide onsite programs like job training and educational support to help residents work towards economic independence. Youth are entitled to receive 90 days of aftercare when they are discharged or age out.

Scott explained that DYCD's goal is to help youth get a job, find housing, and stabilize their lives before turning 21 so they no longer need to live in shelter. "In cases where there is no success with that, they can go into DHS," he said.

The homeless youth we spoke to said these options are insufficient. They want more time in shelter programs to look for jobs, continue their education, and seek long-term housing. "Being in different youth shelters, they're really helpful... but the only problem is that it's so short-term, so everything that you want to do you have to do at a fast pace, because after 60 days you'll have to get out," said one young person during our focus group. Another told us, "Going from crisis shelter to this one to this one... In my experience, it's not set up in a way where you're built to succeed." Many youth over 18 we spoke to (who have the option to go to DHS once they are discharged from DYCD shelters) also expressed anxieties about being discharged from DYCD programs and forced to choose between living on the street or in a DHS shelter. They felt safer and more comfortable in youth shelters than in adult ones. They want to be able to stay in the youth shelters up to the age of 24 instead of being discharged into the adult system. One young person in our focus group talked about their frustration at being discharged from shelters at age 18, saying, "I think that age is one of the most biggest things, because it's like some people don't even get into this predicament until they're 18 or after that."

Several of the policy experts we interviewed agreed that increasing access to short-term shelter and other services offered by DYCD could make a difference. Hofmeister said, "For many youth, they feel it's not worth the risk going to a DHS shelter. They'd rather take their chances on the street and hope a bed becomes available at a DYCD shelter." She also said that violence and conflict, especially targeting young or LGBTQ people, is significantly more common at DHS shelters than at DYCD ones.

Existing regulations present a challenge. According to Scott, "That age range is not driven by DYCD, but by the state... State regulations say we can only house youth until their 21st birthday." He also said that state regulations limit the time youth can stay in a DYCD shelter. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the 2018 New York State budget will give municipalities expanded options. DYCD will have the option to extend the age of youth they serve up to 24, and double the amount of time youth are able to stay in shelter and TIL programs.<sup>15</sup> According to Scott, state and city agencies are currently discussing whether and how New York City might implement these extensions. We encourage DYCD to make these changes and seek the funding they need to do so.

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**If you're homeless, you should always have somewhere to go. No matter what, somebody should help you. Don't matter where, because nobody deserves to sleep outside. Nobody deserves that.**

— Focus group participant

# 3.

## Improve onsite services offered by shelters

In our focus groups, youth told us they struggle to find services and to travel all over the city to access them. One focus group participant described the process this way: “You’ve just got to create a Frankenstein to be able to do anything. It’s like, oh, I can go here to get these resources, here to get these resources, and here to get these resources. This I can stay for 30 days, this I can stay for three months, this I can do that... You shouldn’t have to work that hard.” Young people pointed to The Door as an example of a service provider they often rely on, because it offers onsite programs and assistance navigating a wide range of issues, from healthcare to legal representation. We were encouraged to learn that the city’s plan for addressing homelessness includes a commitment to offering services onsite at shelters and adding more purpose-built shelters.<sup>16</sup> The

city’s current plan for expanding services onsite at shelters includes:<sup>17</sup>

- Expanded mental health services for families;
- Employment training for shelter residents; and
- Job training, recreation, and support programs.

This is a strong starting point. There are additional services and supports that would benefit young people in particular.

### EXPAND THE BREADTH OF WRAPAROUND SERVICES AVAILABLE ONSITE AT SHELTERS.

One young person in our focus group said there were many things she would change about shelters, but the most important is offering more services onsite. “I guess one thing would be just actual help,” she said, “Besides just the whole physically being able to stay there, there should be more places that actually help you... Like you get a caseworker from a shelter. Somebody that actually tries to help you get a job and actually works with you.”

According to youth in our focus groups, services that would be useful onsite include:

- Legal help and referrals, including immigration services;
- Employment services;
- Health, mental health, and reproductive health services (the city’s current plan prioritizes mental health services for families with children);



Board members talk about the services offered onsite at youth shelters with Randy Scott of DYCD.

<sup>16</sup> (New York City Department of Homeless Services 2017)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

- Education, including GED/TASC and tutoring services;
- Enrollment for NYC ID;
- Support with addiction and referrals to treatment services;
- Childcare;
- Support in accessing and updating personal records and documents including medical records, social security cards, and birth certificates (many homeless youth are estranged from their families and do not have a safe way to collect these);
- Enrollment for Medicaid and other benefits; and
- Support with finding long-term housing.

We also recommend that shelters provide pamphlets and other resources related to these issues that young people can take with them, even if they do not stay in the shelter. In addition to the areas listed above, resources on how to interact with police and “know your rights” documents would be useful for teens.

#### **IMPROVE SHELTERS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH.**

While all of the above suggestions will benefit LGBTQ youth, shelters can take additional steps to become safer and more welcoming for young people who identify as LGBTQ. Many young people and interview subjects described shelters as unwelcoming for LGBTQ youth. One focus group participant told us, “Now I’m in a DHS shelter... and I’m LGBTQ. I’m a lesbian, and it’s just a lot of difficulties when you’re in those type of environments that don’t really accept you.”

You’ve just got to create a Frankenstein to be able to do anything. It’s like, oh, I can go here to get these resources, here to get these resources... This I can stay for 30 days, this I can stay for three months... You shouldn’t have to work that hard.

— Focus group participant

Specifically, shelters should:

- Offer gender-neutral bathrooms;
- Train shelter staff in LGBTQ sensitivity;
- Ensure transgender youth have access to prescribed medications they need, such as hormone therapy; and
- Provide support for transgender youth to request changes to their birth certificate and personal identification.

# 4.

## Provide homeless youth with adequate information about available resources

Many homeless young people do not know where to find information about the resources available to them. They often rely on word-of-mouth and tips from fellow homeless youth they encounter on the street. While this kind of peer-to-peer information sharing can be valuable, the information is not always complete or current. There is a need for a more systematic, targeted approach to ensuring youth are aware of resources. Many homeless youth do not have regular access to the Internet so displaying resources in public will help homeless youth find them. All information should be available in multiple languages to ensure all New York youth can understand and access this information.

### **ADVERTISE RESOURCES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH IN LOCATIONS THAT THEY FREQUENT.**

Focus group participants suggested that the city develop an advertising campaign to raise awareness of resources available for homeless youth, including multi-service agencies like The Door. This campaign could include posting ads in public places that homeless youth often frequent, including the subway, the Hudson River piers in the West Village, or the public charging stations and LinkNYC towers throughout the city. “There’s so many advertisements all over New York City, and all over anywhere. There should be more about homelessness... It should be broadcasted all over,” said one young person in our focus group. Another agreed

and added, “The subway is a good place too, because everybody uses the subway when they’re homeless. Half of us f----- sleep on the subway, and it’s like I see all these advertisements for f----- food delivery services and breast implants, but not one about adolescent homeless services.” Further, Betty Pierre, deputy director of preventive services, children and family specialist at OCFS, recommends that schools and other youth-serving organizations clearly post information about resources for homeless youth so they can access them anonymously.

### **CREATE A RESOURCE THAT EXPLAINS THE VARIOUS SHORT- AND LONG-TERM HOUSING OPTIONS AVAILABLE FOR HOMELESS YOUTH.**

The housing continuum in New York City can be difficult for attorneys and city officials to understand, let alone a young person trying to navigate the system on their own. We learned that many young people have trouble understanding their options, are unaware of the housing resources available to them, or simply don’t know how to access the various programs. One focus group participant told us, “I wish I had known about vouchers. I didn’t know about vouchers,” and another said, “I wish I would have known about youth crisis shelters. If I would have known about that then maybe then I wouldn’t have slept on the street.” Another homeless young person told us, “I just wish that I would have known like

where to go... I wish there was something that would have let me know that it was possible to go to an overnight shelter. I wish I would have known people or known about the systems and stuff.” We recommend the creation of a visual guide (or multiple guides) that outlines the short- and long-term housing options available for homeless youth aged 16 to 24 in New York City. This guide should be available in multiple languages, and include:

**1. Information on short-term housing options:**

- A list and explanation of drop-in centers, crisis shelters, and TILs at DYCD and adult shelters at DHS;
- A notice that DOE schools are required to provide students with free transportation from shelters and provide support to continue their education;
- For each DYCD and DHS shelter:
  - Location and closest public transportation;
  - Time limits for stays;
  - Eligibility restrictions (e.g., age limits and criminal records);
  - Available onsite resources (e.g., medical help, Internet access, Metrocards, food, clothing, and laundry services);
  - Whether the program serves any specific demographic (e.g., LGBTQ youth, young parents);

- Documents and information required for intake;
- Whether personal information may be shared with ICE;
- Whether a report will be filed with ACS if applicants are under age 18; and
- Whether applicants will be placed according to their gender identities.

**2. Information on long-term housing options:**

- A list and explanation of available vouchers and rental subsidies, qualification requirements, and how to apply;
- An explanation of the city’s supportive housing program, qualification requirements, and how to apply;
- Information on NYCHA housing and eligibility criteria for priority placement;
- For each long-term housing option:
  - Eligibility restrictions (e.g., age limits and criminal records); and
  - Documents and information required for intake and how to get missing documents.

# 5.

## Expand diversion opportunities

Entering the justice system can be difficult and damaging for any young person: their education may be disrupted in confinement; they may experience violence and trauma; and convictions may limit their future job opportunities and housing options. These challenges are even greater for homeless youth, who are less likely than their peers to have a supportive network in place. Transgender and gender-nonconforming youth in particular are at greater risk of mistreatment and abuse following arrest, and therefore stand to gain even more by staying out of the justice system. As Kyle Rapiñan, director of survival and self determination at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, told us, “Jail is not good for anyone, and it is especially difficult for trans people.” We recommend increasing opportunities for diversion that provide homeless youth with alternatives to criminal conviction.

### **INCREASE HOMELESS YOUTH'S ACCESS TO DIVERSION PROGRAMS.**

Over the past few years, New York City has greatly expanded diversion programs that offer young people the opportunity to participate in community-based programs instead of going through the traditional justice system. Youth who successfully complete diversion programming may avoid jail time and a permanent criminal record. Diversion programs target different stages of the justice system process (e.g., post-arrest, alternative to prosecution, or post-adjudication) and have specific eligibility criteria (e.g., type of charge and prior criminal history).

However, some diversion programs designed for low-level nonviolent offenses are inaccessible to homeless youth because the underlying case criteria requires them to have identification or a permanent address.

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One time I hopped the train and the cops came... They were like, ‘Give me an address,’ and I was like, ‘I don’t have an address.’ They want an ID. I don’t have none of my documents, so they took me to booking.

— Focus group participant

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For example, in 2015 city stakeholders launched Project Reset which operates in Manhattan and several neighborhoods in Brooklyn and is run by the Center for Court Innovation. Project Reset serves 16- and 17-year-olds who have been arrested for low-level, nonviolent crimes. They must be first-time offenders with no involvement in any other ongoing investigations or cases. The program handles cases involving charges of drug possession, trespassing, and shoplifting, among other low-level

offenses. Project Reset provides an alternative response to Desk Appearance Tickets (referred to as a “DAT”). Police screen for eligibility at the point of arrest, issue a DAT, and alert the young person about the opportunity to participate in Project Reset. Prosecutors review each case and a defense advocate discusses the merits of the program with the client. If the young person elects to participate, they must engage in a short community-based program. Upon successful completion, the prosecutor declines to prosecute the case, the participant does not have to go to court, and no record of their engagement with the justice system is retained.

However, to receive a DAT at the point of arrest, young people must have identification and provide an address. This criteria excludes many homeless youth from receiving a DAT, and therefore from the opportunity of a community-based program in lieu of being held in custody and appearing in court. First, homeless youth may be less likely to have identification; second, they may not have an address (while they have the option to provide the address of a shelter or place they are staying, the youth may move to another location before receiving case information, therefore missing their court date and risking a bench warrant).

If a youth gets arrested, police officers and prosecutors need to have a way of reaching that youth. However, youth should not be penalized for being homeless. One young person in our focus group told us, “One time I hopped the train and the cops came... They

were like, ‘Give me an address,’ and I was like, ‘I don’t have an address.’ They want an ID. I don’t have none of my documents, so they took me to booking.”

Homeless youth face escalating consequences from even the briefest justice system involvement. As one participant in our focus group told us, “If you get caught up and you can’t get a DAT, they can’t issue a ticket and send you away, they arrest you... Usually I get caught up at night because I’m on my way home from work, so I have gotten multiple write-ups from my [shelter], because I’ve gotten arrested and not been able to make the curfew... That was just like, a scary experience, because not only did I just sit here and spend an entire night in jail after going through the trauma of being arrested, again... now I’m worried about having to fight this housing situation while also trying to get the rest of my life together.”

The implementation of Raise the Age legislation will direct 16- and 17-year-olds away from criminal court processes such as DAT issuances, but this will continue to be an issue for homeless youth between 18 and 24. Justice system stakeholders, including law enforcement and the district attorneys’ offices, should collaborate with community-based diversion programs to develop ways for homeless youth to qualify for DATs and other diversion-eligible case statuses (and subsequent diversion programs) without jeopardizing case processing. Stakeholders should include homeless youth in this conversation to help inform practices.

Encouragingly, we learned from Adam Mansky, director of operations at the Center for Court Innovation, that Project Reset may expand in Manhattan and parts of the Bronx to be available for all ages. We recommend all diversion programs extend the age of eligibility to 24. Diversion programs should also expand their list of eligible offenses to include common survival offenses, such as solicitation, loitering for the purposes of prostitution, and sleeping on the subway. This would increase opportunities for more homeless young people to have their cases resolved without getting a criminal record.

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Even though they're just doing their job it's just like, damn, I'm homeless. I've got bigger s--- to worry about. I've got to worry about where I'm going to sleep tonight and you're giving me a whole ticket for like, \$125 for walking through cars?

— Focus group participant

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#### **CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH TO AVOID BENCH WARRANTS.**

Homeless youth who are fined for minor offenses often struggle to pay these fines. Youth in our focus groups said they often couldn't afford to pay the ticket, or they never got a copy of the ticket because they didn't have an address where it could be mailed. One focus group participant told us, "I don't really pay for tickets...I can't. I literally tell the cop, like, I'm homeless. How am I going to pay this? And then he still gives it to me... even though

they're just doing their job it's just like, damn, I'm homeless. I've got bigger s--- to worry about. I've got to worry about where I'm going to sleep tonight and you're giving me a whole ticket for like, \$125 for walking through cars?"

When youth are unable to pay their fines, they may be issued a bench warrant. This escalates a minor offense to one with more serious consequences, which can in turn lead to incarceration and make it more difficult to get a job, housing, and other resources. There are some existing opportunities to have these bench warrants vacated; however, many young people do not know about them. Warrant forgiveness programs such as the Begin Again program offered by the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office and the Clean Slate program offered by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office should be offered more frequently, directly promoted through channels that reach homeless youth, such as in subways, schools, and mass transit centers, and hosted onsite at youth centers like The Door or the Ali Forney Center.

In 2016, the City Council passed the Criminal Justice Reform Act, a piece of legislation that gives police officers the discretion to treat several offenses (open container, littering, public urination, excessive noise, being in the park after closing, and others) as civil violations and not criminal offenses. As a result, nonpayment or failure to appear will not result in a warrant. The Center for Court Innovation was contracted by the city to provide community service options as nonmonetary alternatives for respondents who cannot afford or choose not to pay their fines. We recommend that the City Council and mayor expand the number of charges that move out of the criminal and into the civil domain, including nonviolent quality of life offenses such as theft of service, walking through subway cars, and obstruction of seating.

# 6.

## Support incarcerated youth in planning for their release and securing safe, stable housing

Young people exiting the justice system are at extremely high risk of homelessness. Currently, discharge practices vary greatly between agencies, detention centers, courts, and other sites, and youth are often released with little or no transition planning. Jamie Powlovich, executive director at the Coalition for Homeless Youth, said, “The justice system doesn’t do enough to help youth in the system transition back into society. They are literally just dumped back into the community.” A young person in our focus group said, “When they discharge you from jail or prison, they give you a couple bucks basically to get home, not caring if you have a home or not.”

Benita Miller, executive director at the New York City Children’s Cabinet, and Chansi Powell, policy advisor at the Children’s Cabinet, told us that the current level of transition planning “could be improved” and that Mayor Bill de Blasio’s administration is focused on closing gaps by developing aftercare services and supportive housing options. “You can’t just drop them off at the train station and say ‘good luck,’” said Miller, “They need more support than that.” Powell agreed, saying, “Youth need more transition planning, and it should begin long before they leave our care.” Michael Santos, an attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, agrees that youth often receive inadequate transition planning, if any at all, during and after incarceration. Youth

in our focus groups told us this was a problem too. One said, of being incarcerated, “You go away and you come out... you have to figure out, like, what am I going to do? Or where do I go?” Another young person described the night he was released from detention, saying, “They just leave you there... That night I had no way of transportation, no way of getting on the train. So, I had just got out and I was like, ‘Oh, my God, I have to hop the train. This is so bad...’ They’ll kick you to the curb until it’s your turn to come back in here.”

### **JAILS AND DETENTION CENTERS SHOULD ASSIGN STAFF TO SUPPORT YOUTH DISCHARGE PLANNING.**

Any jail or detention center responsible for youth aged 16 to 24 should designate at least one staff member to support discharge and transition planning for youth. This effort should include detention centers, Rikers Island, and

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When they discharge you from jail or prison, they give you a couple bucks basically to get home, not caring if you have a home or not.

— Focus group participant

other sites, and should be coordinated with the courts. Staff members should work with youth to develop clear discharge plans which include housing and resources for addressing common challenges associated with living on one's own (e.g., paying rent, managing bills, and reporting problems to landlords). As recommended by both Santos and Louis Cholden-Brown, deputy chief of staff for legislation, planning and budget at the Office of Council Member Corey Johnson, staff should actively coordinate with the various service providers and city agencies that the young person may rely on, including the DOE, DHS, DYCD, NYCHA, ACS, and Department of Probation.

#### **CREATE A HOUSING ACADEMY FOR INCARCERATED YOUTH.**

The Foster Care Housing Academy, developed by Miller during her time at ACS, helps prepare youth to exit the foster care system by providing free training in independent living skills to any youth who is preparing to age out of foster care. Miller says the Academy is valuable because “it helps educate the kids about how to be a tenant, how to navigate in an adult world... It allows them be messy and ask dumb questions.” We recommend that a similar program be created for justice system-involved youth. The Academy should help youth learn how to address common challenges associated with living on one's own (e.g., paying rent, managing bills, and reporting problems to landlords). This will help equip young people who have a high risk of becoming homeless with the knowledge and skills they need to secure and maintain stable housing.

# 7.

## Develop cross-system trainings with input from young people

Homeless youth commonly interact with adults from many systems, including the education, foster care, justice, and shelter systems. Beth Hofmeister, staff attorney at The Legal Aid Society's Homeless Rights Project, told us, "It's very common that homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, have been in foster care, have had involvement in the criminal or juvenile justice system, have interacted with the public health system, or have trauma histories." Training staff across systems in trauma-informed practices and LGBTQ support and inclusion will help gain the trust of homeless youth, increasing the likelihood youth will make use of services.

### **OFFER TRAININGS IN TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES AND DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES TO ADULTS WHO ARE LIKELY TO INTERACT WITH HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE.**

We heard from Katy Kam, crisis coordinator at The Door, that using a client-centered, trauma-informed approach benefits homeless youth by meeting them where they are. Yet many adults who are likely to interact with homeless youth as part of their jobs do not have training in trauma-informed approaches. We recommend that all adults who are likely to interact with homeless young people receive training in trauma-informed practices, including de-escalation techniques that do not trigger further trauma for young people who have already experienced so much of it. Nancy Ginsburg, director of the Adolescent Intervention and Diversion Team at The Legal Aid Society, told us that all police aren't trained

to deal with trauma and mental health issues, which can lead to more arrests because officers don't have the tools to defuse situations in which these issues are contributing factors. Learning how to recognize, respond to, and de-escalate behaviors associated with trauma could help lower youth arrest rates. These trainings will be even stronger if young people who have experienced homelessness firsthand are actively involved. Adults who participate in these trainings will have a better understanding of the experiences of homeless youth and the effect of trauma on their lives.



Board members learn about the legal needs of transgender homeless youth from Kyle Rapiñan of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

#### DEVELOP TRAININGS FOR SYSTEM PROFESSIONALS ON LGBTQ ACCEPTANCE AND INCLUSION.

We heard in our interviews and focus groups that there is a need for better understanding the experiences and needs of LGBTQ youth. In particular, we recommend training shelter staff, school staff, and police officers on understanding diverse gender identities, using youths' preferred pronouns, recognizing trauma, and supporting transgender youth.

Kyle Rapiñan, director of survival and self determination at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, said that the relationship between transgender youth and law enforcement is "...very bad. Trans people and trans youth especially are called the wrong pronouns, their IDs are questioned or taken, they are often wrongfully detained and harassed by the police. They are also unreasonably profiled and arrested for sex work and other survival economies."

Meanwhile, most shelters don't have gender-neutral bathrooms or other protections for transgender youth, and youth in our focus groups reported seeing and experiencing LGBTQ discrimination by both residents and staff. One young person said, "I'm like, yo, you say that you're LGBT-friendly, but you're targeting the community... If you have a problem with that community, you don't need to be working there... I feel like they should train their people right to be around the LGBT community."

Another participant shared this story: "I saw a young boy sleeping outside and I said, 'Do you need any help going somewhere?' I told him about Ali Forney [which provides emergency shelter and other services for LGBTQ youth], and he said, 'I don't want to do a shelter system. I'd rather sleep outside than getting disrespected by people again and again.' That made me cry because like yo, that's where we go for shelter and then we get abused and disrespected and laughed at." Focused training would benefit both young people receiving services and help staff establish more trusting relationships with LGBTQ homeless youth, thereby improving the effectiveness of their work.

#### EXPAND THE USE OF YOUTH ADVISORY BOARDS TO ADDRESS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS.

The Mayor's Office is planning to involve 30,000 young people in youth leadership councils by the year 2020.<sup>18</sup> These programs place young people between the ages of 14 and 21 as advisors on policy, practice, and advocacy to city agencies, schools, and community-based organizations. Youth build their professional and leadership skills while making connections with adults and providing meaningful input. Following a similar model, DYCD convenes homeless youth through its Runaway and Homeless Youth Advisory Committee. As momentum builds around this type of programming at the city level, we recommend that DYCD ensure there is representation on its committee from justice system-involved youth and that their needs and concerns are included in the committee's work. We also recommend that DHS convene a youth advisory board of homeless and justice system-involved youth. In addition, other city agencies that already have youth leadership councils through the Mayor's Office, including NYCHA, should consider a focus on preventing homelessness, a topic that several NYPD precinct youth councils have already taken on.

<sup>18</sup> (NYC Service 2017)

# 8.

## Increase support for LGBTQ youth in foster care

Family rejection and discrimination against LGBTQ youth remain pressing issues in the foster care system. Many of the young people in our focus groups described experiencing abuse, harassment, and discrimination in the foster care system because of their sexuality or gender identity. When youth are pushed out of foster care, they are more likely to end up homeless and are at greater risk of justice system involvement. According to Tracey Little, women’s wellness navigator at the Center for Court Innovation, when youth flee from unsafe or unwelcoming foster care placements, they typically live on the street and are more likely to engage in survival crimes like sex work. We recommend expanding the support available to protect youth in foster care placement from discrimination and decrease their chances of living on the streets and engaging in survival crimes.

### **SUPPORT AND EXPAND THE WORK BEING DONE BY THE ACS OFFICE OF LGBTQ POLICY AND PRACTICE.**

More resources should be allocated to support the work of the ACS Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice, which has no budget of its own. Lisa Parrish, senior advisor at the Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice at ACS, explained, “Our office exists because LGBTQ youth are over-represented in the foster care system. We believe that this is largely due to family and community rejection, and structural discrimination.” Denise Niewinski, deputy director of the Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice at ACS, agreed, and added, “We try to ensure that all our homes are affirming. It’s a real challenge.”

The ACS Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice implemented a system-wide policy in November 2012, giving youth the right to a safe and respectful home, but according to both the people we interviewed and the youth in our focus group, there is still much work to be done to ensure this policy is respected. Many participants in our focus groups who had been in foster care described experiencing abuse, discrimination, and neglect in their placements. “We have a policy that requires our LGBTQ youth to be treated with care and respect. But do we think that’s always the case right now? No.” said Parrish.

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**We have a policy that requires our LGBTQ youth to be treated with care and respect. But do we think that’s always the case right now? No.**

— Lisa Parrish, New York City Administration for Children’s Services

Three specific initiatives this office is working on are particularly worthy of investment:

- 1. Increase the training that agencies and placement families receive on LGBTQ acceptance.** ACS is working to increase training for families. Staff from the Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice told us that training for foster families is required once when they are first approved to foster children and every two years thereafter, but they believe it needs to be more frequent and sustained in order to address the deep roots of LGBTQ discrimination. We recommend that youth with lived experience in the foster care system participate in shaping and delivering training to foster parents, and receive compensation for their efforts. Parrish and Niewinski said that their team would like to create a paid youth leadership program for LGBTQ foster youth in which they deliver training to future foster families, but that the office currently lacks the resources to do so. In accordance with ACS's LGBTQ acceptance policy, this training should include information on the use of gender pronouns and on gender-nonconforming identities. Although we understand that resources are scarce, ACS should prioritize the value of youth voice in these trainings and find a way to include them.
- 2. Increase efforts to recruit foster parents who identify as LGBTQ.** "Our goal is to help [youth] be their authentic selves, become independent, and be happy and healthy like everybody else," explained Niewinski. Having foster parents they can relate to could help youth feel more comfortable, create safer homes, improve placement stability, and help prevent youth from running away or becoming homeless.

- 3. Ensure youth know how to file a grievance complaint if they are uncomfortable in their placement and that complaints are acted upon promptly and in the best interests of the child.** "We wish that more young people would contact us," said Parrish. Though many youth struggle with acceptance issues in their placements, "We get very few incident reports from youth themselves," said Niewinski. Youth should have easy access to file a complaint and should receive regular reminders about how to ask for help if they need it. ACS should consult with youth currently in foster care to learn what would be most convenient for them, and consider an online app or other digital platform, based on youth input.



Board members learn about LGBTQ youth in the foster care system from Lisa Parrish and Denise Niewinski of ACS.

# 9.

## Increase affordable long-term housing options for youth

Every person we interviewed—from law enforcement to attorneys, from city officials to homeless youth themselves—identified the shortage of affordable and accessible long-term housing options as a critical barrier facing homeless youth. According to Jamie Powlovich, executive director at the Coalition for Homeless Youth, “There’s really no good way out of shelter. Runaway and homeless youth are the only population that has been left out of any existing housing access program.” Additionally, “The number one way to fix homelessness is to help people find long-term housing,” said Beth Hofmeister, staff attorney at The Legal Aid Society’s Homeless Rights Project, “otherwise, they will just move from shelter to shelter for years.” Katherine Marshall-Polite, director of the Students in Temporary Housing Unit at the DOE, echoed these concerns, saying, “There just isn’t enough housing for youth who are unaccompanied.”

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**The number one way to fix homelessness is to help people find long-term housing. Otherwise, they will just move from shelter to shelter for years.**

— Beth Hofmeister, The Legal Aid Society

Some groups of young people are particularly harmed by the lack of affordable housing. For example, Imogen Carr, supervisor of alternatives to incarceration programming at the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, told us that she sees young people who are forced to remain incarcerated because they cannot show the judge they have a stable housing situation. In Carr’s experience, “The court can be concerned about releasing someone to an unstable environment.” Carr told us that, from what she has seen, DHS shelters usually don’t qualify as “stable environments” in the court’s eyes, so defendants who might otherwise be released can be left waiting on Rikers Island, often for months, until they can secure an alternative housing option. “From both a cost and mental health perspective, it’s not what we want to be doing,” she said.

Carr said, “If you give someone a safe, stable place to stay, their justice system involvement will drop dramatically.” Powlovich echoed this, saying, “When people want to exit the survival economy, having access to safe and secure housing is the make or break factor in whether they might be able to leave.” We want all young people to have access to housing and increase their personal safety and economic stability.

### **OFFER MORE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING SLOTS FOR HOMELESS YOUTH AND YOUNG MOTHERS.**

Supportive housing is one way New York City has endeavored to respond to the housing shortage. In supportive housing programs, which are operated by nonprofit organiza-

tions, residents typically pay one third of their rent and receive a government subsidy for the remainder. Supportive housing units include a comprehensive array of services onsite, such as medical and mental-health care, child care, and help finding employment. Hofmeister said that the unique combination of housing subsidies and onsite support can be beneficial for many residents, particularly youth with complex and connected needs. Many people we interviewed named supportive housing as an excellent potential option for homeless youth, but agreed that there are too few units available and not enough specifically for homeless youth. Carr told us that, though supportive housing might be a life-changing program for homeless youth, the lack of slots and long waiting lists make it challenging for many of them to access.

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**If you give someone a safe, stable place to stay, their justice system involvement will drop dramatically.**

— Imogen Carr, Manhattan District Attorney's Office

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Young parents who are also homeless face particularly acute needs. According to Judge Jody Adams, former senior advisor for children and families in shelter to the commissioner of DHS, a large number of young parents live in shelters. “Within homeless shelters,” she explained, “the percentage of head of households under the age of 25 is significant. It’s a constant issue.” Benita Miller, executive director of the New York City Children’s Cabinet, explained that many young parents in New York struggle to provide safe, stable long-term housing for their children. “Young

mothers are at greater risk [of homelessness] given the economic realities of parenting at a younger age. For young homeless mothers, there are few resources. There are fewer than 30 supportive housing slots. This number is woefully low,” she told us. She also noted that Mayor de Blasio’s administration has been advocating to increase the number of slots available to young mothers who are custodial parents since 2014. Judge Adams agreed with Miller’s concerns. She suggested that, in order to help young families support their children and avoid becoming entangled in the justice system, “Young mothers should be eligible for a particular focus in supportive housing.”

To address these challenges, we recommend the creation of more designated supportive housing slots for homeless youth and young mothers.

**CHANGE THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR SUPPORTIVE HOUSING SLOTS TO REFLECT THE REALITIES OF HOMELESS AND JUSTICE SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH.**

Currently, youth must show one year of documented homelessness to qualify for supportive housing slots. Only a stay in a recognized shelter counts as homelessness under the current program requirements. This effectively excludes a huge portion of homeless youth because many homeless youth couch-surf or sleep on trains. Additionally, there is unclear information about whether time spent incarcerated or in substance abuse treatment programs counts towards the requirement. Participants in our focus groups described applying for supportive housing after being released from prison or from substance abuse treatment, only to be told they were not yet eligible and would have to spend more time in homeless shelters before they would be eligible. One of the young people in our focus group said of supportive housing, “There’s so many different qualifications, and one of them is to have a year of documented homelessness. But I asked if I could bring a letter from my mom saying that she kicked me out and stuff, and they was like ‘No. That’s not good enough.’” Carr says

that, when she works with people on Rikers Island or with open court cases who are trying to apply for supportive housing, “It is really difficult for them to show the documentation necessary to meet the HUD homelessness criteria.” Time spent incarcerated, in treatment programs, or in informal and temporary housing (e.g., couch-surfing) should count towards qualifying for supportive housing.

#### **EXPAND VOUCHER ELIGIBILITY FOR HOMELESS YOUTH.**

The city has different voucher programs. The Living in Communities (LINC) voucher program helps people living in shelters afford private apartments. The city pays 70% of the rent and the individual pays the remaining portion. Currently, youth staying in DHS shelters are eligible to apply for LINC vouchers to help them cover the cost of private apartments, but youth staying in DYCD shelters are not. Powlovich told us, “Mayor [de Blasio] keeps saying he’ll extend the vouchers to DYCD too, but he hasn’t yet.” She worries that many young people are left in unsafe and unstable conditions when they hit the maximum time they can stay in DYCD shelters and are bounced back out into the street. Youth staying at any city-recognized shelter, including DYCD shelters, should be eligible for the LINC voucher.

The city has additional vouchers that homeless youth might apply for, but current voucher requirements often make them inaccessible for homeless youth. For example, some vouchers require youth to live without any roommates or with only one roommate, and pay their entire portion of the rent independently. Hofmeister described these expectations as “unrealistic” for youth and said that adjusting the voucher requirements could help more homeless youth access safe apartments. Young people who are not homeless often live in shared apartments with roommates to defray the cost of living; youth who are homeless but seeking to use vouchers to supplement their rent payments should be allowed to as well.



Board members visit the Manhattan District Attorney’s office to learn more about the role of housing in criminal court cases.

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#### **NYCHA SHOULD CONTINUE TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HOUSING ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS.**

NYCHA is a primary provider of affordable housing for low-income New Yorkers, and could play a unique role in helping prevent homelessness. According to Powlovich, “Certain convictions prevent young people from returning to NYCHA.”

We learned about two NYCHA programs in particular that impact justice-involved youth at risk of becoming homeless.

##### **Permanent Exclusion**

NYCHA’s permanent exclusion policies bar people convicted of certain crimes<sup>19</sup> from returning to NYCHA grounds to live or even to visit friends or family. Nancy Ginsburg, director, Adolescent Intervention and Diversion Team at The Legal Aid Society, told us that housing exclusions often impact whole family units and are a common cause of homelessness. If a child gets convicted of a crime and their family lives in public housing, the family is faced with a difficult choice: let them stay and risk being evicted, or kick them out. “The systems have spent a lot of energy trying to exclude people and not a lot trying to figure out how to actually help them,” Ginsburg said.

<sup>19</sup> | These charges include but are not limited to murder, sex offenses, robbery, assault, drug dealing, and guns. (New York City Housing Authority n.d.)

In partnership with NYCHA, the Vera Institute of Justice recently released a report recommending significant changes to the permanent exclusion policies.<sup>20</sup> Vera's recommendations include focusing exclusions on violent conduct or serious threats to safety and clarifying and improving the process by which people can apply to have their exclusions lifted.

In our interview with NYCHA, we learned the agency rarely applies permanent exclusions to youth under 18 but that older youth are typically treated as adults. We agree with Vera's recommendations, particularly its recommendation that "Policies and practices should recognize that minors and young adults have unique needs, and permanent exclusion for younger residents must be handled differently than the permanent exclusion of adult residents, where permitted by law."<sup>21</sup>

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The systems have spent a lot of energy trying to exclude people and not a lot trying to figure out how to actually help them.

— Nancy Ginsburg, The Legal Aid Society

### Reentry Pilot Program

Staff from NYCHA also told us about its reentry pilot program, which "aims to help formerly incarcerated people by reuniting them with their families in public housing."<sup>22</sup> The program is open to people 16 and older with a variety of criminal backgrounds. In a 2016 program evaluation conducted by the Vera Institute, almost 50% of program participants said they would have been homeless if they were not accepted into the program.<sup>23</sup> This is another encouraging step by NYCHA to increase housing access for people with criminal records, and we are particularly pleased that it includes youth 16 and older. The program is still small (just over 100 people have participated in the two-year pilot) and, because of the shortage of available NYCHA apartments, is primarily focused on reuniting people who already have family in NYCHA buildings and providing supportive services. According to Sideya Sherman, executive vice-president for community engagement and partnerships at NYCHA, they hopes to attract the external funding necessary to expand the program and serve 100 new participants each year. We recommend that NYCHA prioritize enrolling youth aged 16 to 24 who might otherwise end up homeless and continue to increase the number of program slots annually.

<sup>20</sup> (DiZerega, Umbach and Ba 2017)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> (DiZerega n.d.)

<sup>23</sup> (Bae, et al. 2016)

# 10.

## Provide the Department of Education with more resources to support homeless students

Arija Linauts, senior program associate at the New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students at Advocates for Children, told us that youth experiencing homelessness are at higher risk of dropping out of school, diminishing their earning potential and increasing their risk of justice-system involvement.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is especially important for youth experiencing homelessness to know about the supports available both inside and outside of school and receive help connecting with those services.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act affirms each student's right to attend school, regardless of their housing situation, and requires school districts to ensure that students in temporary housing can continue their education.<sup>25</sup> The DOE's Students in Temporary Housing unit within the Office of Safety and Youth Development provides support to school-based liaisons and to students in temporary housing, along with trainings, technical assistance, and programming at shelters and schools. This unit includes nearly 120 Family Assistants who work in shelters and schools to assist homeless students and their families. Katherine Marshall-Polite, director at the Students in Temporary Housing Unit at the DOE, explained to us that each school in New York City has a McKinney-Vento liaison "who manages programs and services designed to

help homeless youth pursue their educations." We applaud New York City for exceeding the federal mandate in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which only requires a liaison (referred to as the "McKinney-Vento liaison") at the district level.

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Why don't the teachers or even the government officials let people know about these resources that could be available to people that have nothing?

— Focus group participant

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However, despite each school having a professional onsite responsible for supporting homeless youth, we heard from young people in focus groups and adult experts in our interviews that many students do not know they are eligible for support managing the logistics associated with school and housing, including enrollment, transportation, and free school lunch. One of our focus group participants asked, "Why don't the teachers or even the

<sup>24</sup> (Sum, Khatiwada and McLaughlin 2009)

<sup>25</sup> (New York City Department of Education 2016)

government officials let people know about these resources that could be available to people that have nothing?” We also heard that school support staff are overburdened and struggle to meet the needs of students.

In 2016, the city allocated nearly \$30 million in new funding to provide academic support for students living in shelters and to build school-based health centers in schools that serve a high percentage of homeless students.<sup>26</sup> We recommend additional efforts to support homeless youth in their schools.

#### **ADVERTISE RESOURCES TO ALL STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS**

School staff often don't know which students are experiencing homelessness, making it difficult for staff to reach out to them. A survey is administered at the beginning of each school year to learn about student housing and identify youth who might qualify for support under the McKinney-Vento Act. Yet students' housing situations can change at any time without school staff members' knowledge. Students might also not want to identify themselves as homeless because of the associated stigma. We recommend that schools clearly identify and promote the McKinney-Vento liaison to all students so that young people in unstable housing situations know where to go for support.

#### **INCREASE PERSONNEL IN SCHOOLS TO BETTER SUPPORT HOMELESS YOUTH.**

Students would also benefit from additional staff support, including an increased number of staff at the Students in Temporary Housing Unit run by the DOE, and a greater number of social workers in schools, particularly in schools with high levels of student poverty. The latter could be achieved by expanding DOE's "Bridging the Gap" program, which places social workers in 32 schools that have a large percentage of students in temporary housing.<sup>27</sup>

This support would help schools fully understand and address the needs of homeless students. As noted by Marshall-Polite, homeless

youth often struggle with timeliness and attendance because of transportation challenges, as well as the increased responsibilities they may bear for managing their personal lives. For example, a homeless student might have to take the subway for two hours each way between the shelter they were placed at and their school, or need to visit the Human Resources Administration office during business hours to apply for public benefits. As one youth in our focus group described, "Since I was homeless and jumping around, and having all these ACS cases and stuff like that, I was in court a lot or in a new group home or foster home... I wasn't going to school that often, and whenever I was able to it was once in awhile, and I got in trouble for it and punished a lot."

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**We want to make sure that students who are homeless know their rights and ensure these rights are never compromised or minimized. The need has grown.**

— Katherine Marshall-Polite, New York City Department of Education

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Some of the new city funding will support increasing DOE staff at DHS shelters that have the highest rates of attendance problems;<sup>28</sup> this is a promising step towards the significant personnel increases necessary to meet the needs of students. As Marshall-Polite said, "We want to make sure that students who are homeless know their rights and ensure these rights are never compromised or minimized. The need has grown."

<sup>26</sup> (Office of the Mayor of New York City 2016)

<sup>27</sup> (School Allocation Memorandum NO. 59, FY 2017 2016)

<sup>28</sup> (New York City Department of Homeless Services 2017)

## REMOVE TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS FOR HOMELESS YOUTH.

The DOE should work with DHS and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to remove transportation barriers for homeless youth. We heard from young people that getting to and from school was challenging when they were in unstable housing situations. One focus group member said, “I wish shelters would actually help us with transportation. That is a big thing, to get anywhere really in New York City besides... 10, 15 blocks from where you’re currently residing.” The city is planning on increasing the number of neighborhood-based shelters<sup>29</sup> which will eliminate some but not all of the transportation challenges faced by homeless young people, especially since city high school students often attend schools outside of their neighborhoods. Currently, student Metrocards are available only to youth who live further than two miles from their school, and they expire at 8:30 pm every day. We recommend offering a low-income/student fare that always applies and doesn’t require a permanent home address to receive. If these cards were available to all low-income students all the time, it would support students not only in getting to and from school but also to work and other obligations. Further, students would not need to jump a turnstile—thus risking arrest—just to attend school.



Board members learn about the educational rights of homeless students from Arija Linauts of Advocates for Children.

# Closing Message from the Youth Justice Board

As our year together comes to an end, we hope our work will serve as a catalyst for change. Youth homelessness and its relationship to the criminal justice system is a serious and growing issue in New York City. We believe these recommendations will be a stepping stone to improve housing stability for youth who are removed from their homes due to lack of acceptance from their families, financial hardships, or other traumatizing issues.

Through our recommendations, we hope to improve the lives of homeless youth and reduce arrest rates and recidivism. We also want homeless shelters in the city to improve their living conditions and increase the number of beds available. During the 2017-2018 school year, the Youth Justice Board will continue to push for these policy changes and implement projects to address some of the issues we raise in this report. We also want to work on finding solutions for these problems and eliminating the stigma associated with homelessness. We hope our recommendations become reality.

We want our report to call stakeholders and people in power to action. Any emotions evoked by the experiences of homeless youth as well as the information provided by our recommendations will spread awareness and begin further discussions about the issue. Thank you for taking the time to read our report!



Youth Justice Board members debrief after a successful focus group.

# Voices of Homeless Youth

## CLOSING THOUGHTS FROM THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD FOCUS GROUPS

**Find something that you like or that you find joy in, or you feel purpose in, even if it's something small... You invest your time into something, and people will invest in you. I feel like that's the biggest thing that I would tell someone, is just to like, invest in something.**

I feel like all the stuff that I went through as a homeless person has actually made me stronger, so I wouldn't change it.

**When I get older like 21 or 25, I want to be... I don't know what it's called, like a youth advocate or something to listen to the youth... Be there for them and talk to them and try to give them the best help I can. To let them know, 'Hey, I been through this, this is how it is, you could do it. If I could do it, you could do it.'**

Always keep your motivation. Even when you're at the lowest of your lowest, know that there is always going to be that one thing that is going to get you up. Whether it's school, or if it's work... whatever it is, it doesn't matter what it is, as long as it gets you to where you need to be in life, never stop your motivation.

**I was so afraid to say anything to anyone, and I wish I would have known just to speak out, and to try and get as much help as possible, because there is help out there. It might not seem like there's help out there, but there is.**

Thank God I'm very strong-minded and throughout all I've been through it makes me build myself up. Instead of breaking myself down, it's like 'Okay. Fine. I got my job back. I only got four more weeks of parole, and I'll be off and finally do what I have to do for myself, and make me go quicker because I don't have nothing else on my back.'

**Even though some people would call my life a rough life, I would say that my life has been a happy life. I've always stayed happy regardless of whatever I've been through... Keep positive and keep my head held high. Everything works out.**

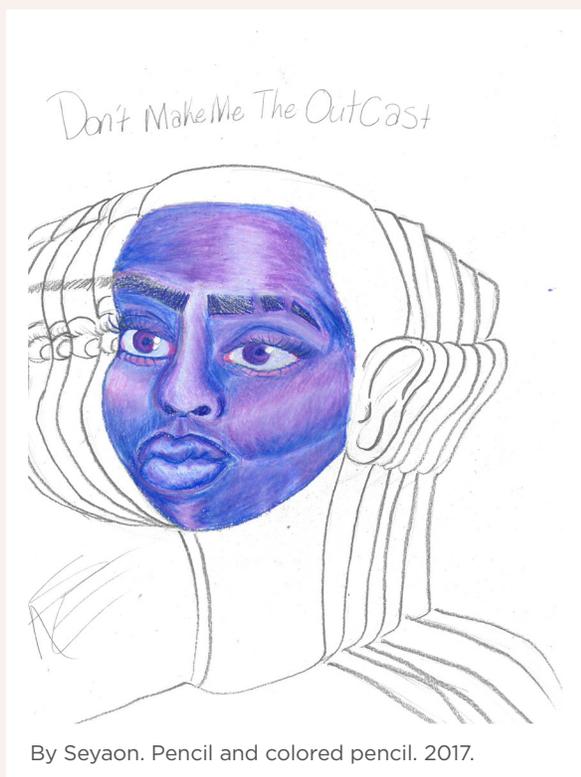
I have friends that tell me they quit high school, they felt like homelessness was going to stop them. I said it's not... Just never give up.

**I appreciate the Youth Justice Board... because I held this in for a very long time. I don't talk to nobody about my personal life, and I realized that when I cry, it makes me feel better. So I felt like this was a safe space for me to let me personal life out, so I wanted to say thank you.**

I want to be... self-sufficient, have my own apartment... In the future I see myself starting a nonprofit for young teenagers who want to get into the arts and photography or acting, spoken word, anything.

**I just want to further my education and go on a really nice vacation one day.**

# Youth Justice Board Member Reflections



13

**BY NAMRA**

when i was 13  
i ran away from home  
because of a reason too stupid to recall  
made it all the way until the end of the block  
before i realized that it was  
too cold  
too scary  
too dark  
so i went back home  
where my mother knowingly  
had some warm milk and cookies  
waiting for me

when she was 13  
she was kicked out of her home  
because she was pregnant  
she made it to the park  
and realized that it was  
too cold  
too scary  
too dark  
so she went to the trains  
where she had no choice but to jump the turn-  
stile  
unknowing that the cops were patrolling  
waiting for her

## WHY?

BY MELANIE

Sometimes after the chatter  
And the chaos of the world  
Has died down, gone to sleep, closed the shutters,  
and pulled up the covers, I start to wonder

Why do others go cold in the night, shiver as  
the wind

Howls its lonely cry, while I snuggle into my  
warm

Bed, safe, content, and dry?

Sometimes I just stop and take a second to  
wonder why

Why do I get to live the life I lead?

Was it the roll of the die,

The shake of the hands,

The clatter of the dotted cubes?

Was it all randomness,

And coincidence decided to give one a house,

And the other a cardboard box?

Are we all just debris, wisps of something past,  
floating in the wind,

Shifting and flipping whichever way the current  
leads?

I then wonder if I'll ever know

## UNTITLED

BY OUSMAN

stepping out in the street with a wondering  
face

looking at the people before me, seeing the  
suffering,

the anger, the unspoken justice and powerless  
people

consumed by jobs that give no room for social  
changes or time to care about things that

really matter. Should I just close my eyes like  
everyone did or should I break the cycle and do  
something about it. But how can I advocate for  
change? Where should I start? Who do I want  
to help? I constantly ponder about these ques-  
tions and

as everyone else I start to close my eyes to the  
far light in the horizon, until YJB amplified the  
light to a point where it was utterly impossible  
to not see it.

## VOICELESS

### ANONYMOUS

I never knew the day would come  
The day where all I was thinking about was,  
“where will I sleep next week?”  
These thoughts were the nightmares in my  
head  
that never left my side.

After a couple of weeks  
I was placed in a shelter  
where an apartment was called “a unit”  
where I had to tell them when I am going out or  
coming back  
where I had to ask permission to go on far  
away trips.

Not only that, but they had the key to my so-  
called home  
where privacy was nonexistent  
where my friends and other family couldn't  
enter my building.

Isolated is what I became,  
stripped of my freedom.  
A place where it was supposed to feel like  
home  
became the place to go to.

These places are supposed to be good –  
How come I felt alone and abandoned?  
This was the reality I had to face every day in  
shelter.

## YOUTH JUSTICE BARS

### BY RALIEK

My name is Raliek,  
And you know me  
Now let me tell you how I joined YJB:

I first found out in the penitentiary,  
but now I want to help out the community!

I got recommended,  
and now I'm up in it,  
so from now on,  
Raliek is committed. AY!

**UNTITLED**

**BY JAIRE**

Walking into YJB  
Feeling so happy  
Full of glee  
Glad to be part of YJB  
We are part of something bigger  
Ain't working for daily figures  
The problem can't get any clearer  
Let's all reflect and look in the mirror

We work to help the homeless youth  
And we always make sure to tell their truth  
We ask & find out about their life experiences  
and challenges  
It can be get a bit hard to balance this, but we  
are up for the challenges  
YJB ain't for short term satisfaction like daily  
allowances

**UNTITLED**

**BY ERICKA**

When I would get scolded as a little girl, I would  
go into my bathroom and convince myself into  
running away

While crying profusely, I would come up with a  
game plan on how I could execute this like only  
a child's imagination could

With a couple hours of sleep, my infantile exit  
strategy no longer existed once my mother  
would utter the words "I love you"

Those words alone would bring warmth  
throughout my four foot tall body as if it were  
the only thing that kept me from building gla-  
cial layers on my skin

When I am lectured as a teenager, I always lock  
myself in my room, thinking if all else fails, the  
tranquility in the silence of these four walls will  
bring stillness to my soul in the midst of havoc  
outside my door

In the core of my feelings, I'm unable to detect  
how fortunate it is to take myself out of a place  
I don't wish to be or how selfish it is not to  
think of the others that cannot do the same

When a bench or pavement is where you rest  
your head at night, the choices of locking your-  
self inside of a bathroom or bedroom to escape  
conflict is not given to you

When a bed placed in your room is where you  
rest your head at night, your privilege lays with  
you as well.

# Youth Justice Board Member and Staff Biographies

## ALDAIR

Aldair is a 17-year-old senior at Millennium Brooklyn High School and will be attending Baruch College in the fall of 2017 to pursue a career in finance. In his free time, Aldair likes to sleep, hang out, listen to Kendrick Lamar, play soccer, eat tacos, and go on bike rides all over the city. In the Youth Justice Board, Aldair is a committed member who is always present and ready to help the group with his ideas and questions. He joined because he wanted to be a positive contributor to his community by helping those who are in need. Over the course of the year, Aldair has grown in the program and values the opportunity to create change to better the lives of youth in the city.

## ALEX

Alex is a 17-year-old junior at the Bronx High School of Science. He is very active in his school and the local community, participating in sports every season through track and tennis, as well as finding time to volunteer as a tennis coach for underprivileged children at the local park in the Bronx. He is also a member of his high school's concert band and a research assistant at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Alex has grown more and more active in the political and social spheres of New York through his involvement in the Youth Justice Board this year. He loves the goals of the program and the diversity among the members of the group. He is truly humbled to have had the experience to work with the Youth Justice Board staff and his fellow talented members. He hopes to continue making a significant impact in the lives of

those around him. Alex hopes to attend Columbia University in the fall of 2018 and pursue a career in business.

## ANANYA

Ananya is a 15-year-old Bangladeshi who is a freshman at the Bronx High School of Science. She enjoys reading books with LGBTQ protagonists and strong female characters. In her free time, she tries to learn as much as she can about intersectional feminism and social justice, as well as trying to be more politically active. In college, she wants to major in international law and psychology, while finding a field to accommodate both. Her hope in joining the Youth Justice Board was to explore law and policy to advocate for improvements in the government to better help people.

## CLARA

Clara is a 17-year-old junior at the Bronx High School of Science. In her spare time, she likes to paint, take photos, and write. She also enjoys reading; her current favorite book is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Diaz. She is especially interested in history and politics. The Youth Justice Board interested her because homelessness is such a relevant and important topic that needs to be addressed. She hopes to continue to impact positive change within her community and other communities. In the future, she aims to research other current social and political issues.

## ERICKA

Ericka is a 19-year-old senior at West Brooklyn Community High School. She is a writer and

aspiring social activist. In her efforts to become active in social and political issues, Ericka intersects her poetry with today's injustices and her psyche with being a black woman in the Donald Trump era. She promotes self-care for other social activists who are relied on to fight the powers that be. With years of educating herself, she also promotes intersectionality in activism; she has come to learn that people come in multi-layered facets and are oppressed in many different ways. In her process of wanting to end oppression for different minority groups, she joined the Youth Justice Board to be one more active voice participating in her community and to also speak for ostracized teens who don't conform. Being on the Youth Justice Board has taught her how to network and conduct research in order for her activism to be as effective as possible. As she goes on to college, she seeks to take all the tools taught by the program to reach out to people being oppressed and speak for the "round pegs in the square holes."

#### HEZEKIAH

Hezekiah is an 18-year-old senior at the Ralph R. McKee Career and Technical Education High School, and is a second-year member of the Youth Justice Board. Throughout his high school career, he has sought various external programs and opportunities to further enhance his aspirations and hone his skills in writing, leadership, and advocacy. In 2014, he was accepted into The Fellowship Initiative, a program sponsored by J. P. Morgan Chase designed to help young men of color and close the achievement gap. He also went on a 16-day

multicultural excursion to South Africa to learn about the Apartheid era through the fellowship. In December of 2016, Hezekiah won The Posse Foundation Scholarship, a leadership-based full tuition scholarship that aims to diversify top colleges and universities across the United States. He will be attending Lawrence University in the fall of 2017, and plans to major in international affairs and minor in economics.

#### IANDRA

Iandra is a 15-year-old sophomore at St. Catharine Academy. She came to New York City at the age of ten from the Dominican Republic. She enjoys living in New York City. Iandra is a very inquisitive young woman, which is why she joined the Youth Justice Board. The training, interviews, and focus groups have given her a different perspective on life. She hopes to take this learning experience with her to inspire kids in her neighborhood to learn about their



Youth Justice Board members and staff unwind during session with a game of Human Knot.

city and to make a difference in the world. She hopes she can be as brave as the inspiring Mirabal sisters and change even just a piece of the world. She loves science, math, and writing. She loves her family and friends. She is a social butterfly who enjoys making people laugh and have fun. Her motto is “con amor y cariño,” which means “with love and kindness.”

### JAIRE

Jaire is a 15-year-old sophomore at Benjamin Banneker Academy. He enjoys analyzing movies and TV shows, reading comic books, writing, and discussing different topics. In his free time, he tries to be socially aware and politically active. He is very interested in film and wants to find a career in that field but is also interested in the justice system and making a difference. Through joining the Youth Justice Board, he acquired the skill of interviewing as well as strengthened his public speaking skills. He would describe himself as someone who is confident, eager to learn, and well-rounded.

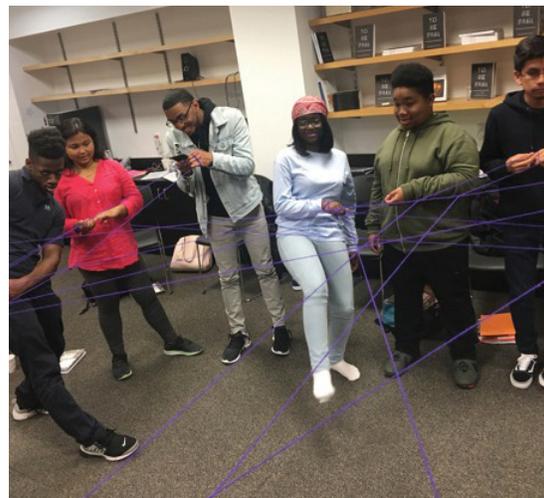
### JORDAN

Jordan is a 17-year-old junior at Manhattan Early College for Advertising. Growing up in New York City, Jordan was always taught to give back in any way possible. Jordan aspires to attend Howard University to pursue a dual degree in fashion design and African-American studies. In his free time, Jordan likes to engage in many activities that focus on his values of service, determination, and creativity. Jordan is a part of many organizing clubs in school and a captain of a dance group. With all that Jordan does, he plans to donate money to an organization at the age of 25 and travel to Africa to build homes and schools. In the near future, Jordan sees himself owning a fashion brand. Jordan understands the world’s imperfections, but he doesn’t see it getting anywhere close to perfect without his help.

### JOSIAH

Josiah is an 18-year-old senior in Manhattan Early College school for Advertising. He enjoys working with technology, including

building computers, robots, studying gaming software, and making music through music production software. He has benefitted from joining the Youth Justice Board by learning interview, social, and public speaking skills. The Youth Justice Board has opened up a new perspective for him, and he one day wishes to incorporate the hobbies he loves to make an impact on society.



Youth Justice Board members have fun with a team-building affirmations activity.

### KHALEEK

Khaleek is a 17-year-old senior at Chelsea Career Technical Education High School. He is a very involved scholar who takes his work seriously. Khaleek is graduating on June 23, 2017, and wants to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology. In his free time, Khaleek enjoys shopping, watching movies, spending time with his family, and hanging with friends. When he is older, he wants to be involved with photography, graphic design, and fashion design. He is proud to be a part of the Youth Justice Board to benefit himself and his community.

### KIANNA

Kianna is a 15-year-old freshman at Hunter College High School. Some of her favorite

subjects to study include English and Global History. Outside of school, Kianna enjoys studying photography, dancing, writing, and playing numerous instruments, including the saxophone and guitar. She expresses an interest in the justice system and hopes to enter the criminal psychology field in the future, which is one of the main reasons why she joined the Youth Justice Board. Through the Youth Justice Board, she has not only strengthened her data analysis skills, but also has developed public speaking as a new skill.

#### MELANIE

Melanie is a 17-year-old sophomore attending Cristo Rey New York High School. She is very dedicated to her work and responsibilities outside of school. Outside of the Youth Justice Board, Melanie works at Citibank one day a week. She works with the Credit Markets Department, helping them with headcount spreadsheets, PowerPoints, and different projects throughout the year. Melanie loves to travel and enjoys new adventures. In the summer of 2016, Melanie went to Villanova University for The Great Debate program and traveled to Spain to spend time with her family. In the summer of 2017, she is going to Ohio for the Kenyon Review Young Writers Program, and to the University of San Diego for the California Lorenzo de Zavala Youth Legislative Session (LDZ) program. Later on in the summer, Melanie will also go to the Dominican Republic to visit her family. Melanie wanted to be part of the Youth Justice Board to learn more about youth homelessness and to make a change.

#### NAMRA

Namra is a 17-year-old senior at Stuyvesant High School. She loves being involved in her community and frequently volunteers at nonprofits throughout the city. In school, she has been active in the student union, as well as the theater and dance communities. In her free time, she loves to binge watch shows on Netflix, eat good food, and dance. Through the Youth Justice Board, and other internships this year, Namra has discovered her love for social

justice activism. This fall, she will be attending Yale University to study in its Ethics, Politics, and Economics program. She hopes to pursue a career in government because she feels that there is a severe lack of female and minority representation in the current political sphere.

#### ODETTE

Odette is a 15-year-old sophomore at the High School for Health Professions and Human Services. Growing up, Odette has always been a force to be reckoned with. Odette aids the elderly in her community by making sandwiches for the homeless, and is an usher at her church. She is very competitive. All that matters to her is being the best she can and continuously improving. Upon joining high school, her eyes were set on medicine. She then became more opinionated and strong-willed, and she acquired an interest in law. Miraculously, the Youth Justice Board came upon her. She still feels stuck between two fields. Odette is working to develop her public speaking and advocacy skills and always strives to be her best self.

#### OUSMAN

Ousman is an 18-year-old senior at Hillcrest High School in Jamaica, Queens. He is a very driven person who always finds a way to contribute to the betterment of the society. When he lived in Guinea, he volunteered for United African Youth, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping underprivileged children in Guinea-Conakry. He is also a student leader in his school's leadership program through which he continues to impact both the school and the local community. He organizes blood drives for New York City hospitals, toy and coat drives for underprivileged kids in the city, and collects funds for UNICEF and the March of Dimes. Ousman joined the Youth Justice Board because he wanted to impact the society on a broader scale and help young people realize their potential. He wants to further develop his knowledge and grow as an individual in an environment where he can impact and be impacted. Ousman will double major in political science and economics at the University of Buf-

falo in the fall of 2018. His dream is to become a diplomat and work for the United Nations where he can impact the world.

#### **RALIEK**

Raliek is a 16-year-old sophomore at Harlem Village Academies High school. Raliek is a very charismatic, relaxed, cool, and chill dude that gets the job done. Raliek's dark past in the justice system is what brought him to the Youth Justice Board; he is proud that he turned his life around in the blink of an eye. Raliek's hobbies are his very intense workouts and his deep passion for drawing and writing poetry. Raliek aspires to become a superstar boxer one day. Raliek puts one hundred percent effort into everything he does.

#### **ROSEMARY**

Rosemary is a 17-year-old senior at Rachel Carson High School for Coastal Studies. In her free time, she loves to write and spend time with friends and family. She joined the Youth Justice Board because she wanted to help other young people who are experiencing what she once experienced in a homeless shelter and to learn more about the criminal justice system. Throughout her senior year, she has learned new skills such as public speaking. She is the 2017 winner of the Beat the Odds scholarship, an award given by the Children's Defense Fund that honors top high school students who have overcome personal hardship and contribute to their communities. She plans to attend college and double major in criminal justice and psychology, as well as a minor in journalism.

#### **SEYAON**

Seyaon is a very outspoken young woman from Harlem. She is a 14-year-old freshman who attends Thurgood Marshall Academy and plans on graduating with a full scholarship to Howard University. She usually spends her spare time reading and drawing and has even found a way to incorporate that into her work with the Youth Justice Board. She joined the program as an effort to help those less fortunate than herself. During her time with the Youth Justice

Board, she has developed better people skills and has become an exceptional interviewer. Seyaon has a goal to change the world with the skills she acquired while being part of the Youth Justice Board.

#### **TERRELL**

Terrell (also known as Rell) is a 16-year-old junior at Manhattan Early College School for Advertising. He usually spends his spare time playing basketball, singing or dancing. Terrell is known by his friends as a funny, smart, outspoken, and willing young man. Terrell often makes sure that he is able to get his point across in a respectful manner. Terrell wants to go to Syracuse University to pursue his dream in basketball and business. This is Terrell's second year on the Youth Justice Board and he joined to make a change in his community. When he found out he had the opportunity to come back for the second year of the program, he knew he would be making a big change and was happy to jump at the chance. Terrell plans to do two years at Borough of Manhattan Community College to get his degree in business and advertising.

#### **ZHIYA**

Zhiya is a 16-year-old junior who attends Manhattan Center for Science Mathematics. Zhiya intends on graduating in 2018 with a full Regents Diploma. Through all the hard work that comes with being a junior in high school, Zhiya has been committed to attending the Youth Justice Board twice a week and following through with her schoolwork, even if it means working on weekends. Aside from academics, Zhiya spends her spare time reading, writing, listening to music, and practicing different make-up looks. She joined the Youth Justice Board to make a positive impact on society and plans to be a part of next year's cohort. Through the program, Zhiya has developed her leadership, note-taking, and listening skills and has been offered amazing opportunities.

### ZOE RIDOLFI-STARR

#### PROGRAM COORDINATOR, YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD

Zoe is the Youth Justice Board program coordinator at the Center for Court Innovation. Prior to joining the Center, Zoe served as deputy director of Know Your IX. There, she trained and mobilized college students to end gender violence and led legislative advocacy efforts to strengthen campus reporting options and reduce reliance on the criminal justice system. She earned her B.A. from Columbia University, where she spearheaded the creation of an Emergency Health Care Fund for students in need and was the lead complainant in a prominent Title IX complaint against her school. She co-founded and currently runs the Fund for a Safer Columbia, which raises money from alumni to support student activism on campus, and volunteers with the New York Abortion Access Fund and the Red Umbrella Project. She adores working with young people and is also passionate about improving the way our legal system interacts with gender, reproductive health, family building, and sexuality. Her writing on these topics has been published in the Yale Law Journal, ReWire, the Huffington Post, and more. She loves dancing, writing, shoes, and cooking yummy vegetarian food for friends and family.

### KRISTINA SINGLETON

#### PUBLIC ALLY, YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD

Kristina is the Youth Justice Board Public Ally at the Center for Court Innovation. As an AmeriCorps member of the Public Allies New York program, Kristina has developed her leadership and facilitation skills in her work with the Board. She earned her B.A. in Criminal Justice from Southern Vermont College. Kristina is very passionate about her work with young people and is changing the world with her kind and determined demeanor. From co-facilitating Youth Justice Board sessions to writing alumni newsletters, Kristina is grateful to have been given the opportunity to work with such intelligent and willing young people, and will always remember each and every Youth Justice Board member.

# Appendix: Research Design

## TRAINING

Prior to conducting their fieldwork, Youth Justice Board members learned about youth homelessness and its intersections with the criminal justice system. Members also received training in skills such as interviewing, teamwork, and focus group facilitation.

## INTERVIEWS

The Youth Justice Board met with a wide range of New York City stakeholders and community leaders. Members, working in small groups, conducted 27 interviews with 34 participants:

### Advocates for Children

- Arija Linauts, Senior Program Associate, New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students

### Ali Forney Center

- Bill Torres, Director of Community Resources

### Broome Street Academy

- Dr. Barbara McKeon, Head of School

### Center for Court Innovation

- Ignacio Jaureguilorda, Director of Poverty Justice Solutions
- Tracey Little, Women's Wellness Navigator
- Shernette Pink, Youth Development Coordinator, Queens Youth Justice Center
- Sally Sanchez, Project Director, Queens Youth Justice Center
- Haddijatou Waggeh, Youth Justice Coordinator, Midtown Community Court

### Coalition for Homeless Youth

- Jamie Powlovich, Executive Director



Youth Justice Board members learn about New York City government during their training.

### Covenant House

- Tina Kelly, Writer

### Day One

- Audace Garnett, Training Coordinator

### The Door

- Victor Furtick, Runaway Homeless Youth Supervisor
- Katy Kam, Crisis Coordinator

### The Legal Aid Society

- Nancy Ginsburg, Director, Adolescent Intervention and Diversion Team
- Beth Hofmeister, Staff Attorney, Homeless Rights Project

### National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty

- Michael Santos, Attorney

### New York City Administration for Children's Services

- Shaquana Green, Community Liaison, Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice
- Denise Niewinski, Deputy Director, Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice

- Lisa Parrish, Senior Advisor, Office of LGBTQ Policy & Practice

#### **New York City Children’s Cabinet**

- Benita Miller, Executive Director
- Chansi Powell, Policy Advisor

#### **New York City Department of Homeless Services**

- Judge Jody Adams, Retired Judge of the Family Court of the State of New York and former Senior Advisor for Children and Families in Shelter to the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Homeless Services

#### **New York City Department of Youth and Community Development**

- Randy Scott, Unit Head, Vulnerable and Special Needs Youth Division, Runaway and Homeless Youth Services

#### **New York City Department of Youth and Family Justice**

- Leslie Britt, Executive Director of Programming, Close to Home Initiative

#### **New York City Department of Education**

- Katherine Marshall-Polite, Director, Students in Temporary Housing

#### **New York City Housing Authority**

- Dan Hafetz, Senior Advisor to the General Counsel, Law Department, Strategic Initiatives & Special Policies
- Sideya Sherman, Executive Vice-President for Community Engagement and Partnerships

#### **New York City Police Department**

- Detective Tanya Duhaney, Community Affairs Division, 113th Precinct

#### **New York County District Attorney’s Office**

- Imogen Carr, Supervisor of Alternatives to Incarceration Programming

#### **New York State Office of Children and Family Services**

- Betty Pierre, Deputy Director of Preventive Services, Children and Family Specialist

#### **Make the Road New York**

- Kendal Nystedt, Immigration Staff Attorney

#### **Office of Council Member Corey D. Johnson**

- Louis Cholden-Brown, Deputy Chief of Staff for Legislation, Planning and Budget
- Matt Green, Deputy Chief of Staff for Community Affairs

#### **Sylvia Rivera Law Project**

- Kyle Rapiñan, Director of Survival and Self Determination



Youth Justice Board members and staff visit New York City Hall for a meeting with the Children’s Cabinet.

### FOCUS GROUPS

The Youth Justice Board designed, recruited for, and ran three focus groups for young people who have personally experienced homelessness. Twenty-five young people 16- to 24-years-old participated.

### SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS

After each interview, site visit, and focus group, members identified key information learned. Then, they presented this information to the entire group. Members then discussed how each interview fit into the larger context of homelessness and its intersections with the criminal justice system. As their body of knowledge grew, members reviewed common challenges and recurrent issues and themes. The Board then prioritized areas where they, as young people, could contribute meaningful insights and ideas, eventually developing recommendations to address these issues. Staff at the Center for Court Innovation advised the Board on which ideas were strongest and would be most consistent with their goals. The recommendations presented in this report are the Board's final product for the 2016-2017 year.

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