

Many Faces, No Voice:

Runaway and Homeless Youth in New Jersey



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a report prepared by

**The Garden State Coalition for
Youth and Family Concerns, Inc.**

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Executive Summary

In January 1994, The Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc. undertook a research project to address the lack of information on the state's runaway and homeless youth population. The overall purpose of this project was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the runaway and homeless youth problem in New Jersey and to examine the service delivery system that responds to the needs of this population, with an eye towards making recommendations to improve the system's response where necessary.

Detailed information on runaway and homeless youth was collected from a sample of shelters in New Jersey, to provide a profile of this population. Seven shelters provided this data through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System which was established by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to track national trends on issues related to this population. Additional information on runaways was gathered through focus group discussions, interviews and surveys.

As part of this project, the Garden State Coalition also convened the New Jersey Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth to closely examine the service system that currently responds to these youth, and identify problems or issues that hinder the effective delivery of services to this population. The goal of the task force was to develop a statewide action plan designed to improve services for runaway and homeless youth.

Scope of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Problem

The Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc. estimates that at least 13,000 youth run away, are thrown away, or find themselves otherwise homeless in New Jersey each year.

During 1993, 16,891 juveniles in New Jersey were reported missing to the police. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Center estimates that 80% of these youth are runaways. Therefore, approximately 13,000 youth were reported as runaways in 1993. Based on these figures:

It is estimated that one youth runs away or becomes homeless every forty minutes in New Jersey.

Profile of Runaway and Homeless Youth

Data was collected on youth who entered seven shelters throughout the state between January 1, 1994 and December 31, 1994. During this time, 599 youth were admitted a total of 662 times. The typical youth who entered one of these shelters was 14.5 years old and was slightly more likely to be female than male. Although these youth came from all ethnic backgrounds, in comparison to the general population, minorities comprised a disproportionate number of youth entering the shelters.

The majority of youth (64%) who entered a shelter have a history of runaway behavior. In fact, these youth had run away from home an average of 4 times. Of the youth with a past history of runaway behavior, nearly 70% had run away from home more than once, while 20% of the youth had run away on more than five separate occasions.

Most of the youth who entered the shelter as a runaway did not travel far from their home. Slightly more than half lived within ten miles of the shelter. These youth generally accessed shelter services within a short period of time after running away. In fact, 42% were gone one day or less before entering the shelter, and an additional 38% entered the shelter within one week of leaving home. This underscores a need for services for this population in every community.

There is no such thing as a typical runaway, they truly have many different faces. Factors which cause one youth to leave home may be very different from those which lead another youth to run away. The average youth who entered a shelter was coping with multiple problems. For example:

- ◆ Abuse and neglect were common problems for these youth and their families. Nearly 35% of the youth had histories of physical abuse, 17% were victims of sexual abuse, and more than 40% of the youth experienced emotional abuse.
- ◆ Thirty-six percent of the youth were dealing with alcohol and other drug abuse or were coping with the substance abuse problem of one or both parents.
- ◆ Twenty-eight percent of the youth were involved in the juvenile justice system. These youth either had charges pending at the time of intake to the shelter or were on probation.

In addition, other key problems noted among these youth were serious family conflict, educational related problems (including academic performance and behavioral), and psychological problems (including depression, low self-esteem and thoughts of suicide).

The vast majority of youth successfully completed the residential services provided by the shelter. Although the majority of youth were reunited with their families when they were discharged, many were not. Thirty percent of the youth discharged were placed in another residential program or out-of-home setting such as foster care.

The Systems Response

The systems that currently respond to runaway and homeless youth are fragmented, with agencies often working in isolation. Due to their varied problems, runaways are involved in many systems (e.g. Juvenile-Family Crisis/Family Court, Division for Youth and Family Services (DYFS), Division of Juvenile Services (DJS), Division of Mental Health Services (DMHS), Department of Education, etc.). One consequence of this overlap is that the lines of responsibility for this population are blurred.

The system that responds to runaway and homeless youth is essentially categorical, with children and youth being served based on a label or classification scheme an agency/department maintains. However, few runaways, who typically face multiple problems, easily fit under one category or label. Controversy arises across agencies, over the primary needs of the youth and what placements or interventions are necessary. As a result, agencies/divisions do not work well together and often work hardest at trying to shift the case from one division to another. Runaway and homeless youth are shuffled back and forth, languish in shelters and detention centers while awaiting placement, and fall between the cracks.

In addition, the system is currently in flux. Major changes are under way in the juvenile justice system with the creation of the proposed Juvenile Justice Commission. This system's role and responsibilities to youth with at-risk behaviors is in the process of being defined. As this occurs, resources to many state departments and divisions are shrinking, forcing them to streamline services and limiting their ability to

meet their mandates. Faced with the increasingly difficult decision as to how to allocate scarce resources, they are forced to narrow the scope of who they can serve. Given these factors, the potential exists for gaps in services for runaway and homeless youth to increase.

In order to ensure this does not occur, the NJ Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth recommends that:

- ◆ the Juvenile Justice Commission establish a committee/subcommittee to focus on runaway and homeless youth as a priority
- ◆ the legislature enact a New Jersey Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to specifically address the needs of this population
- ◆ the needs of runaway and homeless youth be considered a priority of each Department/Division or agency that works with this population; each must review, strengthen and improve its response to runaway and homeless youth.

Multiple system involvement, fragmentation, and lack of coordination limits the effectiveness of any one agency's efforts to work with this population. In order to improve the entire system's response to runaway and homeless youth, a coordinated effort across all youth service agencies is necessary.

One example of such a coordinated response is illustrated by the changes currently under way in the juvenile justice system. The Governor's initiative to reform the juvenile justice system is extremely positive and demonstrates the state's concern with the well-being of its youth. There is a recognition that far too many of New Jersey's youth are growing up in situations that place them at-risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Many of the problems juvenile delinquents experience are similar to those facing runaway and homeless youth including school-related problems (performance and behavioral), psychological problems, family dysfunction, physical and/or sexual abuse, and substance abuse problems, among others. The Governor's Advisory Council's recognition that prevention and early intervention programs are critical to reducing the overall level of juvenile delinquency in the state and its recommendations for developing and expanding such programs in every county is a positive step forward.

As this project revealed, many runaway and homeless youth are involved in the juvenile justice system and even more experience problems that place them at risk of becoming involved in delinquent behavior. Programs that are designed to address the needs of this population will also serve to minimize their involvement in delinquent activities and ultimately the juvenile justice system. In addition, providing runaway and homeless youth and their families with the support and services they need will help to minimize future dependence on the social service system. Such efforts will give runaway and homeless youth the opportunity to grow up and lead healthy, productive lives as adults, and ensure that their children have the chance to do the same.

Although the focus of this project was on runaway and homeless youth, many of the conversations of the task force and providers touched upon the needs of all youth in high risk situations. Many of the issues pertaining to improving services to runaways apply to all youth and their families. Therefore, the Garden State Coalition recognizes the need for systemwide reform to encompass services for all youth and their families.

In order for such reform to occur, all youth service systems must work together to develop efficient, effective strategies that maximize interagency coordination, and minimize duplication of effort. This will necessarily entail a review of existing practices to identify what works and eliminate or change practices that are no longer effective. In addition, the state must reinforce its commitment to youth by reversing its pattern of reducing funding to agencies that serve youth and their families. The Governor and the legislature must provide the allocations necessary to support the systemwide reform vital to improve services to youth and families.

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I. The Many Faces of Runaway and Homeless Youth

Case 1:

Desiree is a fourteen year old female who lives with her mother, two brothers, one sister, and her mother's paramour, in a three bedroom apartment in a low income housing project. She has not seen her natural father in years and he is currently in jail. Each of her siblings has a different father. Desiree's mother abuses crack and cocaine, trading food stamps to support her addiction. Her mother's boyfriend is a drug dealer, with a violent temper, who supplies Desiree's mother with drugs. He has been violent towards Desiree's mother several times and once threatened her with a gun.

Due to her mother's drug habit, there is a history of neglect. Often there is not enough food in the house for the children, and they have turned to the neighbors for assistance. Desiree, the oldest child, has assumed many of the household responsibilities, taking care of her brothers and sister. She is embarrassed about her family's situation, and has tried to conceal her mother's neglect from authorities. Caseworkers involved with the family have referred Desiree's mother to a drug treatment program but she refuses to go, denying that she has a problem. Desiree wishes her mother would stop using drugs so that she can see the negative impact her boyfriend has on the family. Desiree has frequent fights with her mother over these issues and has run away several times out of anger and frustration. When she runs away she generally stays with friends and returns home within a day or two. The last time she ran away she was brought to the shelter by the police. Desiree wants to return home but she is tired of being the "mom" in her family.

Case 2:

Until recently, Karen, age 15, was living with her one year old daughter, named Nicole, at her aunt's house. Prior to this she lived with her mother, father, and brother. When she was seven years old she was sexually abused by an uncle who was living with her family. When she told her parents, the uncle was kicked out of the house, but there was no formal action taken against him. Unfortunately, Karen has never received any counseling or assistance to cope with this victimization. Karen's father, a manager in a large corporation, often must work long hours and travel on business. Her mother has a history of mental illness and has been taking psychiatric medication for ten years. Karen's mother recently attempted suicide.

Karen began sexually acting out when she was thirteen by sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night to be with her boyfriend. Due to allegations of physical abuse by her parents, and Karen's behavior, DYFS has been involved with the family for a couple of years. Unfortunately, due to escalating problems in the home, Karen began to lash out violently, and in a recent fight she broke her mother's arm. As a result, Karen, who was seven months pregnant, went to live with her aunt. Although things initially went well, conflict with her aunt arose over Karen's behavior, and she ran away leaving her daughter in her aunt's care. Karen's aunt filed for and received custody of Nicole. Karen was referred to the shelter by DYFS. Due to her violent behavior, she cannot return to her parents house and her aunt is not willing to let her live with her.

Case 3:

Jennifer, age fourteen, has been involved in the system for the past two years. Until three years ago, she had lived with her father and brother in another state. Her mother, a chronic drug addict and prostitute,

abandoned the family when Jennifer was four years old. Jennifer remained with her father for the next seven years until she and her brother were removed by child protective services and sent to live with their grandmother in New Jersey. Her father had also been involved in prostitution, and she and her brother may have witnessed these activities. Her father's current whereabouts is unknown.

Jennifer has been sexually active since she was twelve years old, and had a number of different partners by age fourteen. Her grandmother is concerned with her sexual activity and suspects that some of the boys Jennifer has dated have treated her violently. Her grandmother contacted DYFS for assistance when she could no longer control her granddaughter's behavior. In the past two years Jennifer has run away at least twenty times and has been placed in a shelter five times. Jennifer does not stay in any one place for very long. Each time she entered a shelter, she would run away after just a few days, before extensive services could be provided. Recently, she was placed in a diagnostic center for evaluation, but she acted out and was removed before any assessments were completed. She was subsequently returned to the shelter where she managed to stay six weeks while awaiting placement in a foster home.

Case 4:

Walter, age seventeen, became involved in the system four years ago. At that time he was living with his mother and two half sisters, neither of whom have the same father. Walter does not know much about his father, except that he has been involved in criminal activity over the years and has spent time in jail on several occasions.

Walter first came to the shelter at age fifteen when his mother threw him out of the house. There had been a considerable amount of rivalry between Walter and his sisters. Walter was jealous of his sisters because of his mother's preferential treatment of them. Their father is his mother's current partner. Many fights at home have stemmed from his feelings of not being wanted, jealousy, and the rivalry between him and his sisters. As a result, Walter demonstrated aggressive behavior towards his mother and sisters by pushing them around, although no serious violent episodes have occurred.

Since leaving home, Walter has been living on the streets, off and on, for the past two years. He is currently on probation for theft and criminal mischief. He committed these offenses in order to support his cocaine addiction. A drug rehabilitation placement to respond to this addiction was too short to impact on his problem. Most of the time, Walter survives by entering sexual relationships with older women, usually living with them until they ask him to leave. Although he has a part-time job, it does not provide him with enough money for him to live on his own. Most recently, Walter has been living with a man, with whom he also has a sexual relationship. Given his history of substance abuse, participation in survival sex with multiple partners, he is considered to be high risk for contracting HIV/AIDS.

These are just a few examples of the thousands of youth who runaway from home each year, and the types of problems they cope with on a daily basis. Sadly, not all of these youth are able to access the services that they badly need and deserve. Most are virtually invisible and all are limited in their ability to voice their needs on a personal level, much less a state level. These children have many faces and no voice.

II. Introduction

Various estimates indicate that between 500,000 and 1.3 million youth nationwide run away from home, are kicked out of their homes, or find themselves otherwise homeless each year.¹ The scope of this problem in New Jersey is unclear. The estimated number of runaways in the state varies depending upon which agency is asked. Furthermore, very little information exists on who these youth are and what factors contributed to their status as a runaway or homeless youth. No single agency in New Jersey is solely responsible for meeting the needs of this population and no single piece of legislation specifically addresses their needs.

In January 1994, The Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc., through a grant from the Fund for New Jersey, undertook a research project to address the lack of information on the state's runaway and homeless youth population. One objective of the project was to bring these vulnerable youth to the forefront in order to ensure that their needs are not forgotten and that no youth slips through the cracks or becomes lost to the streets.

An additional objective of this project was the creation of a statewide task force which would closely examine the service system that currently responds to these youth, and identify problems or issues that hinder the effective delivery of services to this population. The goal of the task force was to develop a statewide action plan designed to improve services for runaway and homeless youth.

These objectives have become even more critical during the past year. The current political climate requires New Jersey, and the rest of the nation, to downsize government and streamline services provided through public and private agencies. Budgets are shrinking and critical decisions are being made as to how to allocate scarce resources. It is a time when the needs of runaway and homeless youth can easily be overlooked. Failure to address the needs of these youth will have long term implications.

For some youth this will mean becoming entrenched in a life on the streets which may include substance abuse, resorting to survival sex, prostitution, drug dealing, and theft as a means of getting by, and ultimately, involvement in the juvenile justice system. Many youth, regardless of whether or not they enter the juvenile justice system, may transition into adulthood dependent on the social service system. Clearly, the long term effects of neglecting these youth will be very costly.

In summary, this report will paint a picture of these youth, to give them a face and ultimately, a voice. This report will provide a profile of runaway and homeless youth and an examination of the services available to them. In addition, recommendations will be made that will address shortfalls in the system's response to these vulnerable youth.

III. Research Methodology

The overall purpose of this project is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the runaway and homeless youth problem in New Jersey and to examine the service delivery system that responds to the needs of this population, with an eye towards making recommendations to improve the systems' response where necessary.

This project will attempt to shed some light on a number of questions relating to runaway and homeless youth including:

- What is the scope of the runaway and homeless youth problem in New Jersey?
- Who are these youth and what are their background characteristics?
- What factors contribute to a youth's decision to leave home?
- What types of problems do they face?
- What happens to them once they leave home?
- How does the system respond to the needs of these youth?

A twofold approach was taken to address these issues. First, data was collected from a variety of agencies and shelters serving runaway and homeless youth in order to address the scope of the problem, and to develop a profile of this population. Second, the New Jersey Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth was created to undertake an extensive examination of the services available to runaway and homeless youth and the problems associated with the delivery of services to this population.

A. Definitions of Runaway and Homeless Youth

A review of the literature on this population reveals that the definitions of runaway and homeless youth vary considerably. In addition, these are not the only terms that have been applied to this population. Other frequently used terms include throwaways, street kids, push outs, system kids, and unaccompanied youth; these labels are often used interchangeably. Some of these terms imply a conscious decision on the part of the youth and/or his caretaker. A youth may make a decision to run away from home. Likewise, a parent makes a decision to no longer care for his/her child and throws him/her out on the streets. Being homeless may be the end result of either of these scenarios. These youth, presumably, no longer have access to their original homes and lack substitute care.² Despite the labels used to describe these youth, the National Network for Runaway and Homeless Youth Services notes that their "needs are similar: food, shelter, and access to a nurturing environment that promotes self-respect and self-sufficiency as they rebuild their lives and strive for a healthy, productive future."³

For the purposes of this report the following definitions are used:

- **Youth:** children and youth under eighteen years of age.⁴

- **Runaways:** youth 18 or under, who, by their own actions, are away from home at least overnight⁵.
- **Throwaways:** youth who are forced to leave home because their parents or guardians will no longer accept responsibility for them or allow them to reside in their household.
- **Homeless youth:** youth in need of services who are without a place of residence where they can receive supervision and care⁶.

B. Data Collection:

A combination of surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews were used to gather information on (1) the number of runaway and homeless youth, (2) their backgrounds, (3) the types of problems they face, (4) services that are available, as well as (5) barriers that exist which hinder the delivery of services to this population. Statistical information on the number of runaway and homeless youth served was collected from various agencies including juvenile family crisis intervention units, the police, the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), Department of Education, and various hotlines.

Detailed information on runaway and homeless youth was collected from a sample of shelters in New Jersey, to provide a profile of this population. The shelters which participated in this process all receive federal funding through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. In 1993, ACF required all agencies receiving these funds to participate in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHY-MIS) in order to track national trends on issues related to this population. Through this system, detailed information is collected on:

- basic demographic characteristics,
- living situation prior to entering the shelter,
- status of the youth as a runaway, homeless, or throwaway youth and the length of time away from home,
- the types and severity of the youth's problems such as educational, psychological, substance abuse, family conflict, history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, involvement in the juvenile justice system, etc., and
- types of services received through the shelter.

Ten shelters in New Jersey currently receive this funding, seven of which provided data for this project. Shelter staff collect the above data through initial interviews with the youth at intake, and update it throughout the course of the youth's stay at the shelter, as new information becomes available. While the youth is at the shelter, staff have contact with parents, DYFS caseworkers, CIU staff, the school system, as well as other relevant agencies and individuals. Through these sources, they verify information reported by the youth and receive additional insight and information on the youth and his/her family.

C. Focus Groups and Interviews

Four segments of the system including shelter providers, police, crisis intervention units, and DYFS, were identified as needing a closer examination due to the key roles these groups have in serving runaways. Since shelters are the primary residential programs for this population, a more intensive review of their services was deemed necessary. Telephone interviews were conducted with administrators of sixteen shelters across the state including a mix of county and private shelters and host homes.

In addition, the three focus groups discussions were held with (1) juvenile officers representing a cross section of police departments in the state including urban, suburban and rural municipalities from the northern, central and southern regions of the state, (2) representatives from thirteen of the twenty-one juvenile family crisis intervention units including both in court and out-of-court units, and (3) DYFS caseworkers from each of the four regions (as defined by the Division: northern, metropolitan, central, and southern) of the state. These groups were chosen because they play a primary role in identifying and serving runaway and homeless youth in New Jersey.

The focus group discussions and interviews were designed to identify the needs of runaway and homeless youth, as well as problems or barriers experienced when working with this population from the perspective of these key segments of the service delivery system.

D. New Jersey Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth

Through this project the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc. convened the New Jersey Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth. The task force was comprised of representatives from various segments of the social services system, as well as youth advocates and advisory groups (see appendix A for a list of task force members). The diverse representation on the task force enabled the group to examine the needs of runaway and homeless youth and the service delivery system from a variety of perspectives. The objective of the task force was to identify the emerging needs of runaway and homeless youth in New Jersey, and examine the service system that responds to this population, identifying barriers or obstacles that limit the effective delivery of services. Through this process the task force was able to identify barriers to coordinating services for runaways and to make recommendations to resolve these issues. A survey of direct line staff in shelters was conducted to validate the task force's discussion on the emerging needs of runaways.

IV. Scope of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Problem

The actual number of runaway and homeless youth in New Jersey is difficult to pinpoint. No single agency addresses the needs of the entire runaway population on the state level, and therefore, no one maintains comprehensive information on these youth. Various agencies working with runaway and homeless youth track them using different information systems which rarely, if ever, communicate. Furthermore, aggregate data maintained by these agencies

is extremely limited, primarily because serving this population is not their central function. These agencies work with runaway and homeless youth largely because of the types of problems with which the youth is coping (i.e. physical or sexual abuse, alcohol or other drug abuse, delinquent behavior, etc.). As a result, it is difficult to get an accurate, unduplicated count of the number of runaway and homeless youth in the state. The best that can be done is to derive an estimate of the number of runaways based on the existing data.

A. Family Court/Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units Data

The 1984 New Jersey Juvenile Code changed the way status offenders (youth who engage in behavior which would not be illegal if committed by an adult) were treated by the juvenile justice system through the elimination of the classification juveniles in need of supervision (JINS). In its place, this legislation reclassified JINS cases as juvenile-family crisis situations. This new classification was designed to place the youth's behavior within the context of the family and make the family unit the focus of any necessary interventions. Today, every county in New Jersey is mandated to operate a Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Unit (CIU). CIUs are designed specifically to handle cases involving the state's "troubled" youth including truants, runaways, youth experiencing serious family conflict, etc. Juvenile-family Crisis Intervention Units in ten counties operate within the court, while CIUs in the remaining eleven counties are run by an outside agency. The CIUs provide 24 hour crisis intervention services to youth and their families, counseling, and referrals for service to community based agencies.

According to a recent report by the Juvenile Delinquency Commission, during 1992, runaways comprised 14.1% of the 12,661 cases handled by all CIUs statewide. Nearly one-third of all cases referred to a crisis intervention unit for runaway behavior were from Union, Monmouth and Camden Counties. Runaways comprised more than 20% of the CIUs total caseload in the following counties: Union (27.6%), Sussex (25.3%), Hunterdon (23.4%) and Salem (20.1%).⁷ Although the same information was not available for subsequent years, according to the Administrative Office of the Courts 1,686 juveniles were referred to CIUs due to runaway behavior. It should be noted that youth may be classified in other categories, such as having a serious family conflict, who also have a history of runaway behavior which contributed, in part, to the referral to the CIU. These individuals would not be included in the above statistics. Therefore, the exact number of runaways receiving assistance through a crisis intervention unit is unclear.

B. Police Data

Police departments paint a somewhat different picture of the runaway and homeless youth problem in New Jersey. Data on runaways is maintained two ways: through the Uniform Crime Report and the National Crime Information Center. The Uniform Crime Report records juveniles picked up and placed in protective custody for runaway behavior. During 1993, a total of 5,853 adolescents were picked up by police as runaways. This represents a four percent increase over 1992. More than half of these youth (58.4%) were females. In terms of geographic distribution, counties in Northern New Jersey (Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Morris, Passaic, Sussex, Warren, and Union) account for nearly 61% of the state's runaways. Police in

Essex, Passaic, and Union counties dealt with the greatest percentage of the state's runaways with handling 16.9%, 13.7% and 12.7% of the cases respectively.

In addition to the Uniform Crime Report, another indicator of the extent of the runaway problem in New Jersey is the number of youth reported missing through the National Crime Information Center. In 1993, a total of 16,891 youth were reported missing statewide, with an average of 1,407 juveniles reported missing each month. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Crime Information Center estimates that 80% of these youth are runaways. Based on this, slightly more than 13,500 youth were reported as runaways in 1993. Unfortunately, there is no way to gauge how many of these youth were repeat cases, or chronic runaways. Although these figures would include duplicate cases or repeat runners, it does not include youth who go unreported. Some parents/guardians may be relieved that their "problem" child has left home and therefore, do not notify the police or any other agency when their son/daughter is missing. It should be noted that although the majority of cases are resolved (the youth is found and/or returns home), accurate information is not available at present on how many cases go unsolved.

C. Division for Youth and Family Services Data

There are thirty-three juvenile-family crisis and children's shelters located throughout the state that provide short-term residential services to children and youth. The Division for Youth and Family Services (DYFS) licenses all of these facilities and funds them at varying levels. Although the types of services available through these agencies varies considerably, all shelters generally provide 24-hour crisis intervention services, temporary housing (in most instances the length of stay should not exceed 30 days), food, clothing, counseling, etc. Some agencies offer an extensive array of services including, but not limited to: individual and family counseling, substance abuse screening and counseling, independent living skills training, etc. In general, these agencies serve primarily an adolescent population. However, many will serve children as young as eight. A small number of agencies specifically target youth under thirteen years of age.

According to the Division of Youth and Family Services, during 1993 a total of 4,364 youth were admitted into a shelter in New Jersey. This figure represents a slight increase over the number of admissions in 1992 and a 9% increase over 1991. Although not all youth admitted to a shelter are placed due to runaway behavior, many youth have either a past history of running away or are at-risk of running away due to various problems. Males were just as likely as females to be admitted to a shelter during this time period (52% vs. 48%). Forty-five percent of the youth admitted to a shelter were African American, 39% were white, 14% were Hispanic and 2% were from other ethnic backgrounds. In 1993, 732 youth were discharged and readmitted to the same shelter. This represents a 8% increase in readmissions from 1992.

D. Other Data

There are two hotlines for runaways and homeless youth that operate nationwide: Covenant House's Nineline which is based in New York City and The National Runaway Switchboard, based in Chicago. According to Covenant House, more than 75,000 calls were received from the

state of New Jersey during 1993. This figure represents a 41% increase in calls over the previous year. In terms of crisis calls to the Nineline, New Jersey ranked the fifth highest in the nation. However, this ranking may be a function of proximity to New York where the hotline is based. In addition, the Nineline may be better known to youth in New Jersey since Covenant House operates several youth service programs in the state. In addition, a smaller number of youth from New Jersey seek assistance through the National Switchboard. During 1993, a total of 2,232 crisis calls were received from New Jersey.

TABLE 1
New Jersey's Runaway and Homeless Youth

Information Source	Number
NJ Uniform Crime Reports	5,853* runaways were picked up by police and placed in protective custody in 1993
National Crime Information Center	16,891* reports were received of juveniles missing in New Jersey during 1993; The FBI estimates that 80% of these reports involve runaways
Division of Youth and Family Services	4,364* youth were admitted to shelters in 1993
Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units	1,686* youth were referred for runaway behavior in 1993
NJ Department of Education	estimates that 7,681* junior high and high school youth were homeless during 1993
Covenant House National Runaway Hotline-The Nineline - New York	75,515* calls were received from New Jersey in 1993
National Runaway Switchboard - Chicago	2,232* calls were received from New Jersey during 1993
Overall Estimate	13,000 youth run away, are thrown away, or find themselves otherwise homeless each year in New Jersey

* These figures include duplicate cases - youth who run away, are thrown away, or become homeless more than once during the year.

E. Summary

Even with a review of the above data, it is difficult to get an accurate unduplicated count of the number of runaway and homeless youth in New Jersey. Data that exists on this population is very limited. Agencies that do record this information often do not track the number of times they deal with a repeat or chronic runner. Furthermore, because runaway and homeless youth

are involved in many different systems, there is overlap in the numbers across agencies. At present, there is no mechanism by which to determine how many runaways who enter a shelter are served by a Crisis Intervention Unit and/or the Division for Youth and Family Services, have contact with the police, utilize the services of a hotline, etc. Finally, not all youth who runaway will come into contact with any of these systems. Some will live with friends, other relatives, or on the streets. Currently, there is no way to determine how many fall into this category.

As noted above, during 1993, 16,891 juveniles were reported missing to the police. The FBI's National Crime Information Center estimates that 80% of these youth are runaways. Based on these figures, the Garden State Coalition estimates that 13,000 youth run away, are thrown away, or find themselves otherwise homeless in New Jersey each year. This means:

It is estimated that one youth runs away or becomes homeless every forty minutes in New Jersey.

It should be noted that many people we spoke with through the course of this project (including shelter providers, CIU staff, and DYFS caseworkers) felt that a large number of runaways go unreported by parents to the police, a CIU, or another formal agency. Many of these youth will live with friends or other relatives, while others will end up on the streets. Although juvenile officers felt that most runaways are reported missing, DYFS caseworkers and CIU staff disagreed. They estimated that between forty and fifty percent of youth who run away are not reported missing by their parents⁸. They noted that this was particularly true for youth with a history of runaway behavior. A similar finding was reported in a national incidence study of missing abducted, runaway, and throwaway children. This study involved a household survey of more than 34,000 families to determine the prevalence of missing, abducted, runaway, and throwaway children in the nation. According to this report, caretakers contacted the police to file a missing persons report in only 40% of the runaway episodes.⁹

V. Profile of Runaway and Homeless Youth

Information on runaway and homeless youth in the state is not routinely maintained and analyzed. Yet, in order to effectively plan and serve this population it is essential to have an understanding of who these youth are in New Jersey. Are females more likely to receive residential services than males through a shelter? Are youth in shelters from all ethnic backgrounds? What types of problems are these youth facing when they enter a program?

To answer these questions, comprehensive data was collected and analyzed from shelters in New Jersey that receive federal funding, under Titles III A and B of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, to provide services to runaway and homeless youth. A key feature of this act was recognition that not all youth who run away or find themselves otherwise homeless come to the attention of the formal youth service system in each state. Many youth fall between the cracks and become lost to the streets.

Through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act emergency shelters were established to provide these youth with a safe, accessible alternative to the streets. These shelters provide youth with direct access to 24-hour crisis intervention and stabilization services, temporary housing, counseling, and referrals for services. The central goals of these programs are to provide immediate assistance to runaways, help the youth reunite with his/her family, and assist the youth and family with resolving family conflicts and problems through counseling and referrals to other support services.

All shelters that receive federal funding through this act participate in a nationwide effort to gather detailed information on this population through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System. Seven of these programs voluntarily provided this information to the Coalition for the purpose of this report. These agencies include: Atlantic County Youth Services, Anchor House, Ocean's Harbor House, Crossroads, Inc., Together, Inc., Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children, Covenant House, and Group Homes of Camden County.¹⁰

A. Characteristics of the Youth

The data included information on youth who entered these shelters between January 1, 1994 and December 31, 1994. During this time, 599 youth were admitted a total of 662 times.

- ◆ 8% of the youth were discharged and readmitted more than once during the year, accounting for 112 intakes. Of these youth:
 - ◆ 86% were readmitted to the same shelter.
 - ◆ 14% entered a different shelter.

- ◆ 59% of the youth were females and 41% were males

- ◆ Youth were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds:
 - ◆ 45% were Caucasian
 - ◆ 40% were African American
 - ◆ 12% were Hispanic
 - ◆ 3% were other ethnic groups

- ◆ The average age of youth admitted to a shelter was 14.5 years
 - ◆ 5% were 11 years old or less
 - ◆ 43% were between 12 and 14 years old
 - ◆ 51% were between 15 and 17 years old
 - ◆ 1% were 18 years old or older

- ◆ Youth were referred to the shelters through a variety of sources:
 - ◆ 47% were placed in the shelter through DYFS or a CIU or were informally referred to the shelter by these agencies
 - ◆ 19% were referred to the shelter through some other agency
 - ◆ 13% were self-referred

- 11% were referred or brought to the shelter by their parents/guardians
- 6% were referred by the police
- 4% were referred by some other person

B. Runaway Histories:

The majority of youth (64%) who entered one of the shelters have a history of runaway behavior. In fact, these youth had run away from home an average of 4 times in the past.

Of the youth with a past history of runaway behavior:

- ◆ Many have run away from home multiple times:
 - 32% had run away once
 - 48% had run away 2 to 5 times
 - 10% had run away 6-9 times
 - 10% had run away 10 or more times
- ◆ These youth had an average of 1 prior placements in a shelter. Their placement history is broken down as follows:
 - 23 % had never received prior residential services through any shelter
 - 49% had one prior placement
 - 28% had 2 or more prior placements in a shelter
- ◆ 37% had a sibling who had a history of running away from home.

Thirty-six percent of the youth were identified as being either a runaway, throwaway, or homeless youth at the time of intake.

- ◆ Most youth who entered the shelter as a runaway did not travel far from their homes:
 - 53% lived within ten miles from the shelter
 - 23% lived within 11-20 miles of the shelter
 - 12% lived within 21-50 miles of the shelter
 - 12% lived more than 50 miles away from the shelter
- ◆ These youth generally accessed shelter services within a short period of time after running away:
 - 42% were gone one day or less before entering the shelter
 - 38 % entered the shelter within one week of leaving home
 - 12% were away from home 1-4 weeks before entering the shelter
 - 8% were gone more than one month before entering the shelter

C. Recent Living Situations:

For many youth, their recent living situations were unstable. These youth were often living away from home and had lived in several different places in the month prior to entering the shelter.

- ◆ 55% were living with at least one parent immediately prior to entering the shelter while 45% lived away from home.
- ◆ Of the youth who did not reside with their parent(s):
 - ◆ 34% were living with friends or another relative
 - ◆ 58% were in some type of out-of-home placement
 - ◆ 6% were living on the streets
 - ◆ 2% had other living situations
- ◆ 23% of all youth moved at least once during the month prior to entering the shelter and 6% moved 2 or more times.
- ◆ 69% of the youth lived with their parent(s) for at least six months during the year prior to their admission to the shelter while 31% lived away from home.

D. Youth Problems

There is no such thing as a typical runaway. Research suggests that runaway and homeless youth experience a variety of problems including conflict with parents, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, etc. which contribute to a youth running away from home, becoming homeless, or being thrown out of the house. Factors which cause one youth to leave home may be very different from those which lead another youth to run away.

Through the RHY-MIS database, detailed information was collected on a number of different problems that the youth may experience. These included: household dynamics/family conflict; school/educational issues; psychological issues; health issues; physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse; neglect; alcohol and other drug abuse; socialization issues; involvement with the justice system; and employment problems. The average youth who entered a shelter was coping with five of these problems.

1. Household Dynamics/Family Conflict

One of the most common problems noted by all youth who enter shelters is serious family conflict. Nearly 93% of the youth who entered the shelters during 1994 reported that there were serious family conflict or communication problems within their family.

Of these youth:

- ◆ 43% experienced problems in their relationship with their father
- ◆ 73% experienced problems in their relationship with their mother
- ◆ 11% experienced problems in their relationship with their parent's partner
- ◆ 10% experienced problems with another household member
- ◆ 10% were having difficulty coping with parental divorce

2. School/Educational Issues

Educational problems were common among these youth. Half (50%) of the youth experienced at least one school related problem. Of these youth:

- ◆ 48% had poor grades
- ◆ 3% were illiterate
- ◆ 17% had some type of learning disability
- ◆ 18% experienced conflict with their teachers
- ◆ 38% had a poor attendance record or were truant for an extended period of time
- ◆ 10% had dropped out of school
- ◆ 14% were suspended at intake or during their stay in the shelter
- ◆ 7% had been expelled prior to intake or during their stay in the shelter
- ◆ 12% had other school related problems

3. Psychological Issues

Nearly 72% of the youth who were admitted to the shelters were dealing with a variety of psychological issues including depression, a poor self image, suicidal ideation, loss and grief issues, issues related to their sexuality and sexual behavior, etc. Of these youth:

- ◆ 51% were depressed
- ◆ 58% had a poor self-image or low self-esteem
- ◆ 13% had problems related to their sexuality/sexual behavior
- ◆ 21% were coping with feelings of grief/loss in relation to the death of a significant person in their life
- ◆ 26% experiencing problems in relation to current or past abandonment by a parent or loved one
- ◆ 10% had other psychological problems

In addition, 29% of the youth had seriously contemplated or had attempted suicide in the past.

4. Abuse and Neglect

- ◆ 34% of the youth had a history of being physically abused by either a parent, their parents partner, or some other person
- ◆ 17% of the youth were sexually abused or sexually exploited/assaulted by either a parent, their parents partner, or some other person
- ◆ 41% of the youth were emotionally abused by either a parent, their parents partner, or some other person
- ◆ 31% were neglected by either a parent, their parents partner, or some other person

5. Health Issues:

- ◆ 17% of the youth were experiencing significant health-related problems when they entered the shelter. Of these youth:
 - ◆ 8% had or suspected they had a sexually transmitted disease
 - ◆ 4% had or suspected they had HIV/AIDS
 - ◆ 43% were pregnant
 - ◆ 17% had some type of eating disorder (i.e. anorexia/bulimia)
 - ◆ 24% experienced problems coping with a serious health problem of a family member
 - ◆ 13% had an ongoing long-term health problem

6. Substance Abuse Problems

- ◆ 36% of the youth were dealing with alcohol and other drug abuse or were coping with the substance abuse problem of their parents. Of these youth:
 - ◆ 64% had parents with substance abuse problems
 - ◆ 53% had a drug or alcohol problem of their own

7. Socialization Issues:

- ◆ 40% of the youth had difficulties interacting and communicating with others or displayed deviant behavior. Of these youth:
 - ◆ 55% lack skills necessary to interact or communicate with others
 - ◆ 42% had problems getting along with peers or relationships with peers is creating problems for him/her
 - ◆ 32% displayed violent behavior
 - ◆ 8% were a member of or involved in a gang
 - ◆ 1% were a member of a cult
 - ◆ 3% used sex in exchange for basic necessities such as food or a place to sleep
 - ◆ 1% engaged in prostitution

- ♦ 12% has sold drugs to make money
- ♦ 16% had other social problems

8. Involvement with the Justice System:

- ♦ 28% of the youth were involved in the juvenile justice system. Of these youth:
 - ♦ 35% had disorderly persons offense charges pending at intake
 - ♦ 11% had felony charges pending at intake
 - ♦ 13% had alcohol or drug possession/distribution charge pending at intake
 - ♦ 28% were on probation

9. Employment Problems:

- ♦ 21% of the youth experienced problems due to parental unemployment or their own unemployment

E. Discharge Status of Youth

The vast majority of youth successfully completed the residential services provided by the shelters.

- ♦ 48% completed services and were discharged with aftercare arranged or referrals made
- ♦ 18% completed services and were discharged without aftercare
- ♦ 14% youth or parent terminated services early
- ♦ 12% of the youth violated program rule and were discharged
- ♦ 2% of the youth were removed by a child welfare agency
- ♦ 6% other outcomes

Although the majority of youth return home when discharged from the shelter, many do not. The youth's living situation at exit were as follows:

- ♦ 52% returned home to live with their parents/guardians
- ♦ 30% were placed in another residential program within the state
- ♦ 8% went to live with a friend or another relative
- ♦ 8% were on the run/on the streets
- ♦ 2% of the youth had other living situations at exit

Summary:

Runaway and homeless youth truly have many different faces. They come from a variety backgrounds and experience a wide range of problems. The typical youth was 14.5 years old and was slightly more likely to be female than male. Although these youth came from all ethnic

backgrounds, in comparison to the general population, minorities comprised a disproportionate number of the youth.

The vast majority of youth who entered a shelter had histories of running away from home. For some, this behavior was a chronic problem. Sixty-eight percent of the youth had run away more than once, and 20% of the youth had run away on more than five separate occasions. When these youth ran away they tended to stay close to home, in surroundings that were familiar. In fact, 53% of the youth did not travel more than ten miles from their home.

These youth accessed shelter services through a variety of sources. Forty-seven percent were referred or placed by either DYFS or a CIU. However, nearly one quarter of the youth sought assistance from a shelter on their own or through their parent(s).

Runaways were typically coping with multiple problems when they entered a shelter. Many of these youth came from troubled families with very significant problems. Nearly 93% of the youth experienced difficulty in their relationships with their parents and other family members. These parents and youth often lacked the skills to communicate and interact in a positive manner, which created significant family conflict and led to other problems for the youth.

Abuse and neglect were also common problems for these youth and their families. Thirty-four percent of the youth had histories of physical abuse, 17% were victims of sexual abuse, and more than 40% of the youth experienced emotional abuse, while 31% had been neglected. As a result of these problems, many had histories of involvement with the social service system. In fact, at the time of intake more than half of the youth were in some type of out-of-home placement including foster care, other shelters, residential treatment programs, group homes and other residential settings.

Half of the youth also experienced significant educational-related problems. Many were chronic truants or had simply dropped out of school. A number of youth had behavioral problems for which they had been suspended or expelled at the time of intake. Problems in other areas of their lives make it difficult to succeed in school, and as such, many had a poor academic record.

Extensive family problems often translate into other issues for these youth. For example, many had difficulty interacting with others in the community. Not only did runaways experience problems in their relationships with family members, but a substantial number of youth also had difficulty getting along with their teachers and peers. For some youth, their inability to cope and limited communication skills translated to aggressive and violent behavior. A small proportion of youth engaged in deviant behavior such as prostitution, drug dealing, or became involved in a gang. In addition, 28% of the youth were involved in the juvenile justice system at the time of intake. These youth either had delinquency charges pending or were on probation.

The vast majority of youth were struggling with a number of psychological issues. Depression and low self-esteem were common problems. In addition, nearly 30% of the youth had seriously contemplated or attempted suicide in the past.

Drugs and alcohol were pervasive problems in the lives of many of these youth. Fully 36% of the youth were either coping with parental substance abuse and/or had drug and alcohol problems of their own. However, this data is based on self reported information from the youth, and as such, is likely to underestimate the extent of substance abuse problems of the youth and his/her parents. Substance abuse was identified, by shelter providers interviewed during this project, as one of the most critical issues facing runaway and homeless youth today. They emphasized the need for more prevention and treatment programs for youth.

In sum, there is no such thing as a typical runaway. Their problems are many and varied.¹¹ In order to effectively help these youth, a coordinated response across a number of different systems is necessary. Failure to respond effectively to the needs of these youth will likely mean they become further entrenched in the social service system and many will become involved in the juvenile and adult correctional systems.

VI. Needs of Runaway and Homeless Youth

The task force completed a comprehensive assessment of the needs of runaway and homeless youth. Through the group's discussions nine basic areas of need were identified. In order to validate the task force's perception of the needs of this population, a survey was distributed to direct counseling staff in shelters throughout the state. Counseling staff, who provide direct service to runaways on a daily basis, were asked to identify the needs the youth they work with. A total of twenty surveys were completed by line staff in ten different shelters. Overall, the needs identified by survey respondents corresponded with the task force's perception of this population. However, counseling staff noted several issues that were not initially identified by the task force. These were then incorporated into the overall needs assessment. The needs that emerged were categorized into the nine areas described below.

1. The Need for Physical Safety

Runaway and homeless youth need access to emergency food, clothing, and shelter. In addition, they also need options for safe accessible housing on a short-term and long-term basis. For those youth who cannot return home due to safety reasons, or who have no home to return to, long term residential alternatives are necessary. For some youth, in particular the older adolescent for whom placement options are extremely limited, transitional housing is needed on a long-term basis as they age into adulthood.

Moving beyond basic needs, youth who runaway from home often leave to escape a history of physical abuse and violence. Unfortunately, life on the streets can be just as perilous, particularly for this population. These youth, with their troubled backgrounds and limited coping abilities, are vulnerable to exploitation and victimization. Therefore, runaway and homeless youth also need to know how to be safe in a variety of settings and circumstances including on the street, in school, in the community, at home, and in their interpersonal relationships. They need education and training on how to avoid violence and victimization.

2. Emotional and Mental Health

All too often, runaway and homeless youth struggle to cope with a variety of problems which threaten their emotional well being and mental health. Many of these youth have a low level of self-esteem and a negative self-image. Youth entering a shelter are often depressed and some are even suicidal. Many runaway and homeless youth have histories of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse. These youth need access to peer support groups and counseling services to assist them with issues such as depression, physical or sexual abuse, abandonment, grief issues, and substance abuse (both their parents and their own). They also need access to suicide prevention and intervention services. Furthermore, youth with serious mental health needs, require long-term treatment options including residential treatment services.

3. Family Needs:

Problems runaway and homeless youth experience often stem from issues related to their families. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, economic distress, mental health problems, poor parenting skills, are all factors which may contribute to troubled family dynamics and poor relationships. These youth need to be able to develop positive relationships with family members and create healthy family environments. The youth, as well as his/her family members, should be involved in all treatment and placement decisions.

Family counseling and support services are vital to ensure all the factors that contributed to the youth's runaway behavior or homeless situation are addressed. Services should be family oriented even when the youth is placed outside the home. Ultimately services should be designed to strengthen and empower the youth and his/her family, and foster self-sufficiency from the social service system. Family reunification, where appropriate, should remain a central goal of all services provided. When family reunification is not possible, helping youth create alternative familial relationships is necessary in order to meet a youth's need to belong. These roles may be filled by extended family members, foster parents, friends, teachers, neighbors, counselors, etc.

4. Social Needs:

Runaway and homeless youth frequently have troubled family backgrounds. Relationships with family members are strained and often riddled with conflict. In addition, many youth establish relationships with peers who have a negative influence in their lives.

Runaway and homeless youth need to be able to create and nurture healthy, caring relationships and participate in positive social activities. These youth need positive role models or mentors within their own communities that they can identify with (i.e. from the same cultural backgrounds). They also need access to healthy drug-free recreational activities, perhaps through teen centers and summer camp programs. Such activities would provide them with positive peer supports and healthy alternatives to gang involvement.

5. Health:

Runaway and homeless youth need basic medical and dental care. But, they also need access to a variety of health related services to address specific concerns including: nutrition and eating disorders, alcohol and other drug abuse, pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS. In general, minors in New Jersey cannot seek health services without parental consent. Since runaway and homeless youth are a transient population, and at best, have strained relationships with their parents or have parents who are unavailable to them, these youth must be given the ability to access health services without parental consent.

6. Educational Needs

Youth who run away from home experience a number of education related problems which need to be addressed through the school systems and other agencies. These youth, while struggling to cope with many different problems, often fall behind their peers academically and many eventually become truants. Some youth will eventually drop out of school, while those with behavioral problems will be suspended or even expelled. In order to address these issues runaways need access to a range of non-traditional and alternative educational services.

Runaway and homeless youth also need comprehensive family life education and basic skills training including communication skills, problem solving, decision making, anger management, etc. In addition, youth need information on pregnancy prevention, preventing sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS as well as substance abuse education and prevention.

7. Employment:

The task force noted that employment opportunities for all of New Jersey's youth are limited. This is particularly true for runaway and homeless youth who often lag behind their peers academically and lack the education/basic skills necessary to complete a job search, prepare resumes, fill out employment applications, and give successful job interviews. Youth need short-term opportunities for employment, including after-school and weekend jobs, as well as access to education/training in pre-employment skills.

In addition to short-term jobs, runaway and homeless youth need access to employment opportunities with longevity and career advancement capabilities. Too often, adolescents are short-sighted, being concerned only with the present moment. They fail to see the consequences of their actions and the need to complete their education in order to succeed in the workplace. Initiatives targeted for younger teens, including those that focus on career development and building pre-employment skills, would help to encourage youth to plan for their futures and explore a variety of career options.

8. System Needs

Youth need access to a comprehensive service system that empowers and involves them in all aspects of placement and treatment decisions. It is vital that services be client centered and

responsive to the needs of the youth, rather than based on what is available or convenient for the system. Services should be flexible to accommodate the needs of this population. Specifically, given the transient nature of this population, runaway and homeless youth need immediate access to a variety of services.

Since runaway and homeless youth are involved in many different systems, there is a need for ongoing networking and coordination of services across agencies to ensure efficient, effective provision of services. Improved training on adolescent development, and runaway and homeless youth specifically, would enhance understanding of the needs of this population as well as the services that various agencies provide, thereby eliminating misconceptions.

9. Access

Runaway and homeless youth need barrier-free access to services. This includes cultural, financial, language, and transportation barriers as well as service availability. Too often there are significant gaps in services or the level of available services is insufficient to meet the demands of the youth and their families. A lack of available crisis services in a community presents an often insurmountable barrier for a youth who lacks the resources to get food, let alone transportation to another community.

VII. The Service Delivery System

The task force reviewed the existing service delivery system from two perspectives. First, members identified a broad array of services necessary to meet the wide range of needs of runaway, homeless, and throwaway youth. Second, the group examined the existing system to determine how well it currently responds to this population and to identify ways in which services to runaways can be improved.

In addition to the work of the task force, focus group discussions were held with staff from juvenile-family crisis intervention units, juvenile officers and DYFS caseworkers and telephone interviews.¹² The focus groups and interviews were designed to identify the needs of runaway and homeless youth and identify issues that make it difficult for them to provide or coordinate services for this population.

The following section details the services that are needed, at a minimum, across the state to serve runaway and homeless youth and general barriers that make it difficult to achieve effective service delivery.

A. The Minimum Services:

As noted earlier, runaway behavior does not occur in isolation. The youth and his/her family often experience many problems which precede the youth's decision to leave home or parent's decision to no longer care for their child. If these problems are not addressed, at the time of

reunification the likelihood that runaway behavior will reoccur increases. In order to effectively respond to the needs of this population, a continuum of services are needed which include:

1. **Prevention Services** geared towards reaching out to youth and their families before problems reach a crisis point and the adolescent runs away from home. Some examples of prevention oriented services include: hotlines, information and referral services, school-based services, parent training programs, parent support groups, community education programs, child assault prevention programs, and police initiatives such as the DARE Program.

2. **Early Intervention Services** that reach out to youth and families at the first sign they are experiencing problems which may lead to runaway behavior. Such services include: truancy and drop-out prevention programs, parent training programs, support groups, outpatient counseling for the individual and family, drop in centers, hotlines, and family preservation services.

3. **Intervention Services** that respond to an immediate crisis situation with the youth and/or family, outreach efforts to assist runaway and homeless youth on the streets, etc. These services are designed to help resolve the immediate crisis situation, link the youth and family with support services, counseling, treatment, and provide temporary residential services where necessary.

4. **Aftercare Services** provide follow-up with youth who have been reunited with their families to ensure that problems do not reoccur. This would include support services that address new problems as they arise. For example: when a youth returns home from a shelter, aftercare services would ensure that the family complies with discharge plans. Problems that are identified during this stage can be addressed immediately and help prevent a further crisis within the family that might lead to another runaway episode or out-of-home placement. Some examples of aftercare services are support groups such as Alateen/Alanon, individual and family counseling services, in-home counseling and group support services, as well as peer leadership programs, both school and agency-based.

5. **Transitional Services** geared toward those youth who cannot return home and are not of legal age. Long-term placement options and support services are necessary for these youth to ensure successful transition to independent living as adults. Some examples of this type of programming include group homes, transitional living programs, supervised apartment programs, homes for pregnant teens, the Youth in Transition Program, and Job Corp.

Although many of the above services exist to some extent, availability varies widely across the state. In some counties, a greater array of services exist than in others. Even where services are available, they are often insufficient to meet the needs of youth in that area. Further, some of the programs or services mentioned do not specifically target runaway and homeless youth, however with minor modifications they could be useful tools in preventing runaway behavior.

B. Limitations of the Existing System's Response

Through the focus group discussions and interviews with providers, a number of themes emerged that highlight general problems with the systems' response to the needs of runaway and homeless youth.

1. Understanding Runaway and Homeless Youth

There was a general consensus among all groups interviewed that the nature of the runaway and homeless youth population has changed in recent years. Today, youth are running away at earlier ages¹³, they have more extensive and severe problems including serious mental health needs; they are dealing with substance abuse problems (their own and/or their parents); they are more violent and aggressive than ever before; an increasing number are involved in delinquent behavior and the juvenile justice system; and there is an increased use of weapons and involvement with weapons related offenses. Furthermore, focus group participants stressed that there are no race, class, or gender boundaries to running away from home or becoming homeless. These youth come from all different backgrounds.

In addition, it was recognized that many of the youth's problems stem from ongoing family issues (i.e. parental substance abuse, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, domestic violence, economic distress, and mental health problems of parents or other family members, among others). Therefore, the youth's behavior must be viewed within the context of the family.

Although there was a consensus that the nature of the population has changed in recent years, most felt that the system as a whole did not adequately understand the needs of runaway and homeless youth. This lack of understanding often leads to a poor or ineffective response by various segments of the system. For example, rather than taking into consideration the family dynamics and arranging the most appropriate services for the youth as well as his/her parents/family, a youth might simply be referred for drug treatment or a psychiatric evaluation, or even placed outside the home. Unfortunately, this emphasizes that the youth is the problem, instead of considering all of the family issues. When this occurs, many parents fail to participate in services that would help resolve the family problems that led to the youth's situation.

In addition, it was noted that a lack of understanding of the needs of runaway and homeless youth may lead to a resistance to working with this population. This often makes it difficult for providers to coordinate appropriate services for runaway and homeless youth.

A thorough understanding of the needs of this population would enhance the ability of all segments of the system to respond. It is important that comprehensive evaluations and case assessments are done upon initial contact with the youth and family to ensure that the most appropriate services can be coordinated. Although the goal should be to use the least restrictive services, in some instances a youth would benefit from residential placement. These service should be provided when deemed necessary. In addition, ongoing case management allows for modification of services (i.e. more or less intensive and costly) as needed.

2. Service Needs/ Gaps

While the needs of runaway and homeless youth have become increasingly complex, the systems and services that respond to them are shrinking. The DYFS focus group noted that the system has not kept pace with the changes in the population and that the range of services available for youth are much more limited than in the past. Changes in the population reveal a need for a variety of services that either do not currently exist or are insufficient to meet the current demands. CIU workers and shelter providers echoed these concerns. As a result, the ability of agencies and providers to respond effectively to runaway and homeless youth is limited. A lack of resources may lead to service coordination based on what is available, rather than what is the most appropriate for the youth and his/her family.

As noted earlier, runaway and homeless youth and their families need to be able to access a range of services including community based services such as mental health counseling, substance abuse services, family counseling and support services, respite and residential services, among others. Unfortunately, these services are not uniformly available across the state. A lack of resources and appropriate services may lead to escalating problems for the youth and his/her family. Expanded community based programs, especially those geared towards prevention and early intervention, would minimize the need for more costly interventions later.

While every effort should be made to use the least restrictive services for youth, there are situations where the youth and his/her family would benefit from residential services. Both the CIU and DYFS focus groups noted that the existing number of shelters and shelter beds are insufficient to meet the needs of all runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth in the state. Some counties, such as Warren, do not have a shelter and must use residential services in other areas of the state. The shortage of services often makes it difficult to find placements for youth with more extreme problems. Furthermore, the lack of resources is creating competition for beds, and may lead to adversarial relationships across agencies that should be working together to provide services for youth.

DYFS caseworkers noted that because the demand for residential services is high, shelters can be selective in terms of the youth they admit. This is exacerbated by a system of funding that allows certain beds to be allocated for "DYFS kids" and a certain number reserved for "county" kids. If DYFS needs to place a youth and has no beds available, they must negotiate with the CIU to use one of their beds. Depending on the circumstances, the CIU may be reluctant to give up a bed.

The lack of resources is not limited to shelter services. It includes group homes, residential treatment centers, transitional living programs, and other residential services. This is highlighted by a recent report from the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) which revealed that a substantial number of youth are languishing in detention centers while they await residential placement. In their review, ACNJ found that nearly one-third of the youth in detention were waiting for placement elsewhere.¹⁴ In addition, a one day count of youth in twelve shelters by the Garden State Coalition, revealed a similar finding. More than half of the youth in these

shelters were awaiting some form of residential placement by DYFS. There simply aren't enough residential services for New Jersey's youth.

In addition, the impact of the family on the youth's behavior and situation underscores the need for family based services. Family counseling and support services are vital to ensure that factors that contributed to the youth's situation are addressed. However, both the DYFS and CIU focus groups as well as interviews with shelter providers stressed that the demand for family based services, especially in-home services, exceeds availability.

Furthermore, it was noted that aftercare services are often necessary to ensure that when a child returns home, supports are in place to prevent the reoccurrence of runaway behavior or crisis situations. Unfortunately, these services are also insufficient or nonexistent. Unless there is ongoing case management by either DYFS or a CIU, when a youth leaves the shelter and returns home, there is virtually no follow up to ensure compliance with discharge plans. Some shelters have built in aftercare components to their services, but for most agencies, the ability to do this is limited.

A number of other services were also identified that are insufficient or nonexistent to meet the current level of demand including drug treatment programs, mental health services, school-based programs, services for older adolescents (i.e. transitional living programs to provide support, training and assistance as they enter adulthood), and programs for pregnant and parenting teens, among others. Without an adequate level of services in every community, many youth and their families will not receive the assistance they need.

3. Accessibility of Services

Beyond service availability, a number of factors exist which make it difficult for youth and their families to access much needed services. Transportation poses a major problem for many youth and their families. In some regions of the state, especially where public transportation is limited, clients without their own resources may experience considerable difficulty getting to a treatment program, counseling sessions, etc. As a result they are forced to drop out of counseling or fail to complete recommended services. Thus, problems that led to the runaway episode will often reoccur and new crisis situations may arise. A pattern of addressing problems only in times of crisis is an ineffective method of dealing with these issues, but for some families with limited resources it is the only alternative.¹⁵

In addition to transportation issues, many youth and their families do not have sufficient financial resources to pay for the treatment services they need. Financial barriers were noted as a significant problem by focus group participants as well as providers that were interviewed. The need for free or affordable counseling services, both family (including in-home) and individual is widespread. Even those families with some resources frequently find that, after a period of time, they have exhausted what resources they have (i.e. through their insurance - many will reach their maximum on their lifetime limit for coverage). Runaway and homeless youth and their families need to be able to access free/affordable counseling/treatment services.

The ability of runaway and homeless youth to directly access emergency shelter services is extremely limited. The majority of shelters in the state do not provide walk-in services. This means that a youth in crisis must first contact another agency such as DYFS or a CIU for assistance before being able to access shelter services. A limited number of shelters (nine in total), however, do provide walk-in services. Of these programs, only one is located in the northern region of the state, three are in central and five in southern New Jersey. As our data revealed a substantial number of youth do directly access services, by themselves or through their parents, when they are available.

Another factor which hinders the effective delivery of services to this population are services that have lengthy start up times or long waiting lists. The length of time it takes to initiate services poses a critical barrier for runaway and homeless youth. This population is highly mobile, and as a result there is a narrow window of opportunity within which to link a youth up with a needed service. For example, youth in most shelters typically stay an average of 30 days, although some will stay longer. Many services, such as those provided through the Case Assessment Resource Team¹⁶ or child study team evaluations provided through local schools, take much longer than thirty days to arrange and complete. As a result, these services are not realistic options for these youth despite the need they may have for them.

4. Service Coordination

Among groups interviewed, a number of factors were identified that hinder the coordination of services. A basic lack of trust in the system by youth and families often limits the ability of agencies to provide or coordinate effective services. Parents may feel threatened by outside intervention often fearing they will lose custody of their children. As a result, they may be uncooperative. There is also the tendency to deny the existence of problems and thus refuse services.

DYFS caseworkers, CIU staff, and some providers also expressed frustration with the structure of the system that often requires agencies to exhaust a range of services before youth they can arrange more costly, intensive, or restrictive programs. For example, Crisis Intervention Units are required to exhaust community resources before placing a youth in an out-of-home setting. The systems emphasis on the use of least restrictive (and less costly) services often means that youth have to fail repeatedly in many different programs/settings before they can access a service they clearly needed at the outset. As a result, youth become frustrated, their problems intensify, and their lack of trust in the system grows.

In addition to the lack of awareness of the needs of runaways noted earlier, each group believed that other components of the system did not fully understand the services their agency/division/department was intended to provide. This often leads misconceptions about what each agency should be doing to respond to runaways. Lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each system creates the potential for gaps in services to occur.

Many also noted that given the diverse needs of runaway and homeless youth, other systems that have traditionally played a limited role in working with this population need to become more

involved. For example, because the mental health needs of runaway and homeless youth have increased in recent years, mental health providers need to assume a greater role in working with these youth.

There was a general consensus that the relationship an agency has with other providers or agencies is critical to their ability to access or coordinate services for youth. Ongoing networking across the system is critical to maintaining positive relationships between DYFS, CIUs, shelter providers, the police, mental health providers, etc. Nearly everyone acknowledged the need to improve networking with other components of the system in order to eliminate misconceptions and barriers. Expanded efforts in this area would help foster an understanding of the services various agencies provide and lead to more efficient and effective coordination of services for all youth.

VIII. Discussion:

According to the National Crime Information Center, in 1993 more than 13,000 juveniles were reported missing to police in New Jersey as runaways. Yet only a fraction of these youth received assistance through the youth service system. Only 5,853 runaways received intervention from the system designed to look for them - the police. Even fewer, only 1,686 youth, received assistance through a family crisis intervention unit which is designed to provide assistance to runaways. Is this adequate? In all likelihood, a large number of youth who need assistance are not being served.

At what point should the state intervene - the first time a youth runs away? Certainly not in all cases. Research indicates that most youth who run away will return home on their own. Many of these youth will be able to resolve their problems with their families without outside intervention. However, for far too many youth this is not the case. Their families experience significant problems for which they need help. Many of these will run away more than once either because there was no resolution to their problem the first time they ran, or because they are experiencing very serious problems. The system cannot afford to wait until these problems become chronic, when it becomes more difficult to intervene effectively.

There is no such thing as a typical runaway. The traditional stereotype of a runaway popularized in literature as an adventure seeking youth similar to Huckleberry Finn does not hold true.¹⁷ Today, runaway and homeless youth represent a very diverse group. These youth come from a variety of backgrounds and experience a wide range of problems. Many youth run away to escape histories of violence and victimization. Research indicates that runaway and homeless youth are often victims of physical and sexual abuse.¹⁸ This was true for many of the youth in our sample. Under these circumstances, running away from home may be a healthy response to an unhealthy situation.¹⁹

The impact of abuse can be devastating. In a recent evaluation of foster care placements, the Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) reported that although behavioral problems were a key factor contributing to placement of older youth, they had extensive histories of abuse and neglect.²⁰ A vast majority of these youth had prior case involvement by DYFS, often

needing treatment for serious emotional problems by the time they were placed in foster care. This raises a larger issue as to whether the system's response to abuse and neglect is as effective as it should be. ACNJ noted that although DYFS foster care placement decisions were appropriate and necessary, in many instances, placement should have occurred sooner.

Is the same reality true of shelter care placement? Although this project did not focus on the placement history and the effectiveness of these interventions for runaway and homeless youth, many of these youth did have prior involvement with the system, as well previous out-of-home placements. Given these factors and that these youth are experiencing problems significant enough to warrant shelter care, the question has to be asked could interventions have come to late for this population to be effective?

In addition to abuse and neglect problems, many runaway and homeless youth also cope with parental substance abuse problems, with a significant number experiencing drug and alcohol problems of their own. Mental health problems are also common among these youth and their families. Many runaways are depressed, have negative self-concepts, and some youth are even suicidal. These youth, given extensive family and personal problems, also experience problems related to school. A significant number of youth fall behind their peers academically. Some are chronic truants, and many completely give up on school by dropping out. Furthermore, runaway and homeless youth often become involved in the juvenile justice system, resorting to illegal activities such as prostitution, drug dealing, and theft, etc., as a means of survival.²¹

Youth who run away often do so on more than one occasion. In addition, when they run they tend to stay within their own community in surroundings that are familiar. This underscores the need for services for these youth in every community. For some youth, running away becomes a chronic problem. Not only do these youth run from their homes but they run from institutions as well. Research suggests that the more often a youth runs away, the more likely they are to stay away for longer periods of time, and to become lost to the streets.

Since runaway and homeless youth experience a wide range of complex problems they need access to a comprehensive array of services that places them under the jurisdiction of many different systems. They need to be linked to these services -- such as mental health services, substance abuse treatment, medical care, educational alternatives, and employment training, among others -- simultaneously. Interagency coordination of services is vital. Consideration of the special needs and circumstances of runaway and homeless youth must be taken into account when coordinating services for this population.

Unfortunately, services for adolescents in general appear to be inadequate to meet the demands of youth in New Jersey. ACNJ's recent report on foster care noted that services for adolescents, including day treatment, residential programs, educational, programs for pregnant and parenting teens, and counseling, among others, are critically needed.²² Lack of appropriate resources leads to service coordination driven by the system rather than by the needs of the youth and his/her family. When this occurs failure is often inevitable, and problems with the youth and family intensify. These problems expand to include a growing distrust in the system, and resistance to participation in services.

Failure to adequately address the needs of these youth will likely mean a very bleak future for many of them. Some youth will become entrenched in a life on the streets getting involved in illegal activities and the juvenile justice system. Without services to address their needs and provide them with the skills necessary for successful independent living as adults, many of these youth may become long term dependents on the social service system. Some may even face homelessness as adults.²³

IX. Recommendations of the NJ Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth

Runaway and homeless youth in New Jersey are not being effectively served. The systems that currently respond to their needs are fragmented, with agencies often working in isolation. Many barriers exist which need to be eliminated in order to move towards an improved coordinated response to this population statewide. The following recommendations represent the first step in this process.

1. ESTABLISH A COMMITTEE OF THE JUVENILE JUSTICE COMMISSION TO FOCUS ON RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH AS A PRIORITY

With the exception of the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc., there is no statewide agency that monitors the needs of runaway and homeless youth and the system's response to these youth. As a result, this population is largely invisible. Runaway and homeless youth are involved in many systems (e.g. Juvenile-Family Crisis/Family Court, Division for Youth and Family Services (DYFS), Division of Juvenile Services (DJS), Division of Mental Health Services (DMHS), Department of Education, etc.). One consequence of this overlap is that the lines of responsibility for this population are blurred. Lack of clearly defined roles in working with runaways often results in "serial case management", "dumping", and youth getting caught between systems such as family court, DJS, and DYFS. A review of the existing service delivery spectrum notes two things:

1. The system that responds to runaway and homeless youth is essentially categorical, with children and youth being served based on a label or classification scheme an agency/department maintains. However, few runaways, who typically face multiple problems, easily fit under one category or label. Controversy arises across agencies, over the primary needs of the youth and what placements or interventions are necessary. As a result, agencies/divisions do not work well together and often work hardest at trying to shift the case from one division to another. Runaway and homeless youth are shuffled back and forth, languish in shelters and detention centers while awaiting placement, and fall between the cracks.
2. The system is currently in flux. Major changes are under way in the juvenile justice system with the creation of the proposed Juvenile Justice Commission. This system's role and responsibilities to youth with at-risk behaviors is in the process of being defined. As this occurs, resources to many Divisions are shrinking, forcing agencies to streamline services and limiting their ability to meet their mandates. Agencies, faced with the

increasingly difficult decision as to how to allocate scarce resources, are forced to narrow the scope of who they can serve.

Given these factors, the potential exists for gaps in services for runaway and homeless youth to increase. In order to ensure this does not occur, runaway and homeless youth programs should be considered a cornerstone in the development of prevention programs under the proposed Juvenile Justice Commission being recommended by the Governor's Advisory Council on Juvenile Justice. By nature, these services are prevention oriented and help to divert youth from involvement in delinquent behavior and the juvenile justice system, as well as preventing involvement in other systems. Strengthening services to this population through expanded community-based programs within each county will ultimately help to decrease delinquency throughout the state.

Therefore, the task force recommends that a committee or subcommittee be established under the Juvenile Justice Commission to address the needs of this population. Given the state's failure to respond effectively to the needs of these youth, this step is vital. Although the creation of the Commission is in the preliminary stages, a delinquency prevention committee has been established which may be an ideal place to create a subcommittee to focus on runaway and homeless youth.

The subcommittee would be responsible for:

- Establishing standards for a minimum level of services to meet the needs of all runaway and homeless youth in each county.
- Ensuring that a continuum of services for runaway and homeless youth exist in each county including prevention, early intervention, intervention, transitional, and aftercare services. Services should be geared towards family preservation, minimizing the use of out-of-home placements. When placement is necessary, agencies should strive for family reunification whenever feasible. All services should be designed to foster long term independence from the social service system.
- Ensuring that as the system evolves, lines of responsibility for runaway and homeless youth are clearly delineated. Where necessary cooperative agreements should be established between agencies to minimize the potential for gaps in services, and foster improved interagency coordination of services.
- Assisting county Youth Services Commissions (the entity responsible for planning for youth at the county level) with the planning and development of programs for runaway and homeless youth.
- Creating statewide initiatives to intervene successfully with this population, and ensuring a coordinated response with the federal priorities established for this population under Titles III A and B of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act of

the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. This would be a starting point for the creation of comprehensive services for runaways.

- Reviewing existing management information systems to strengthen the documentation of runaway and homeless youth, their needs, levels of recidivism, and the system's response to this population.

2. ESTABLISH THE NEW JERSEY RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT

In New Jersey, Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention units (CIUs) have been established to divert "troubled" youth (i.e. truants, runaways, incorrigible youth) from the family court system. Ten of the twenty-one CIUs in operation throughout the state are run within the court system and the remainder are operated by external agencies. Although CIUs approach to addressing runaway behavior within the context of the family is a positive, progressive mechanism by which to address the problems of runaway and homeless youth, they represent only one part of the solution.

In addition to the courts, runaway and homeless youth are involved in many other systems, with minimal interagency coordination. Due to the lack of clarity in responsibility for this population, youth are shuffled from one agency to another and often languish in shelters and detention centers while awaiting services. There is a clear need for the integration of services and the development of resources devoted directly to these youth.

Furthermore, there is considerable debate nationwide as to whether the juvenile justice system/ juvenile code is the most effective way to address the needs of these youth. In a recent analysis of laws pertaining to runaway and homeless youth nationwide, the American Bar Association recommends that states adopt comprehensive legislation to address the needs of this population and that such legislation "emphasizes the delivery of community-based services outside of the juvenile justice, child welfare, and other juvenile control systems".²⁴

In conclusion, the task force recommends that legislation, with the allocated resources necessary to support its objectives, be enacted to:

- Establish an array of community-based services for New Jersey's runaway, homeless, and throwaway youth. This would require that all shelters provide youth with direct 24 hour access to emergency services. It must also include crisis intervention and counseling, access to health care, educational assistance, mental health, as well as alcohol and other drug abuse services.
- Expand and strengthen long-term transitional living programs which are utilized when family reunification is not possible. These programs should have a target population of 16-21 year old adolescents. Services should be built in to assist youth with the transition to adulthood and independence including: life skills training, educational assistance, employment counseling and training, etc.

- Strengthen links between Crisis Intervention Units and community-based services to encourage a coordinated response to the needs of runaway and homeless youth.
- Provide for legal emancipation with the necessary support structures built in for youth who cannot return home. Such legislation would provide these minors with the ability to obtain health care, mental health services, alcohol and other drug treatment, to sign a lease to secure housing, and contract to purchase goods. Safety measures, such as a requirement that the youth complete an independent living skills program, would have to be built in to ensure this option is only utilized for youth who are self-reliant and capable of successfully living independently. Coordination with the adult service system may also be necessary to ensure necessary transitional services are in place. Furthermore, emancipation should be utilized as a last resort, only after all other resources/alternatives have been considered/attempted.

3. PRIORITIES FOR RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, there are several other issues that must be addressed. These include but are not limited to improving the response of juvenile officers, the Division for Youth and Family Services, Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units, Department of Mental Health Services, and Department of Education to runaway and homeless youth.

A. Juvenile Officers

Not only do juvenile officers play a pivotal role in working with New Jersey's juvenile delinquents, but they assume a primary role in working with runaway, homeless, and other at-risk youth. A considerable amount of discretion is exercised by juvenile officers when making decisions regarding whether or not to divert youth from formal systems. Unfortunately, within many police departments, juvenile officers and juvenile divisions are not considered a priority or given adequate support. As a result, juvenile divisions, if they even exist within a department, are insufficiently staffed and juvenile officers in general are often given additional responsibilities beyond juvenile work. This task force supports the recommendations put forth by the Governor's Advisory Council on Juvenile Justice pertaining to juvenile officers. The Advisory Council recommended that juvenile services be a priority of all police departments and that, at a minimum, one officer be assigned to juvenile services; juvenile officers should be involved in prevention and diversion activities in addition to investigative functions; and juvenile officers should be specially trained to work with youth.²⁵ In response to these recommendations, a week long training program was initiated in February, 1995 for juvenile officers through the Division of Criminal Justice.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that police officers serve as a key entry point into the system for runaway and homeless youth. Many parents make a report to the police when their child runs away from home. Juvenile officers are responsible for immediately investigating these reports and attempting to locate the missing youth. However, the average juvenile officer receives little specialized training in working with adolescents, and even less on runaway and

homeless youth in particular. Therefore, the task force recommends that specialized training on runaway and homeless youth and the services available to them be incorporated into the newly established training program for juvenile officers. Further, additional one day in-services should be offered on an ongoing basis to update officers on emerging trends and needs of this population. The Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc. could coordinate and provide this training.

B. The Division for Youth and Family Services

Due to limited resources, the Division for Youth and Family Services (DYFS) has been reevaluating its priorities and mandates. Shelter providers interviewed reported that the needs of younger children are being given priority over the needs of adolescents because, in theory, younger children are the ones who are at risk of abuse. The shelter providers stated that there is an inherent assumption that by virtue of age, an adolescent has the ability to speak out and walk away from abuse and serious family problems, and as a result, they do not need child protective services. However, the reality is that many runaway and homeless youth left home to escape a history of physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or neglect. In addition to running away, some of these youth may also attempt to escape via substance abuse, suicide attempts, etc.

Furthermore, many providers we spoke with through this project report that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get DYFS to substantiate an abuse allegation. The Division has been taking an increasingly narrow view of child abuse and as such is substantiating fewer and fewer cases, particularly those involving adolescents. Many cases that in the past were defined as an abuse/neglect case are now being reclassified as a family problem case, with the end result being DYFS will not accept these cases.

Even in situations where abuse is substantiated, responsibility for monitoring the ongoing safety of the adolescent is often left to other systems. The Division will open a case for a short period of time, and make referrals to other agencies for the appropriate family services. Often, the case is then closed without further monitoring of the family by the Division.

The Division historically has relied on shelters for crisis stabilization and emergency placement services. However, once a youth is placed in a shelter s/he has minimal contact with the assigned caseworker. The Division's regulations stipulate that youth should only remain in a shelter for a maximum of 30 days. Frequently, caseworkers contact the youth and shelter just days before this time period is over to develop a discharge plan. The end result is poor planning and coordination of services for the youth. Subsequent placements may not effectively meet the needs of the youth. In order to avoid this, most shelters engage in considerable case management activities establishing case plans, and arranging subsequent placement where necessary.

From the providers perspective, it was revealed that DYFS relies on shelters as a placement alternative for the difficult to place youth because of a lack of other appropriate options. Shelters were designed to provide 24 hour emergency placement services, crisis intervention and counseling. Increasingly, however, the Division is referring children and youth that require more services than the shelters were designed to provide, and than they have the resources to

provide (i.e. seriously emotionally disturbed youth, youth on psychotropic medications, etc.). In fact, shelters are frequently called upon to house youth, sometimes for long periods of time, who have failed in other more structured, costly settings (i.e. group homes, residential treatment programs, etc.) due to a lack of alternative placements. It is expected that shelters will be able to effectively serve these youth, yet they have fewer resources, than other residential programs, with which to provide appropriate services.

Recent dialogue within the Division around the proposed creation of regional diagnostic shelters, which would conduct comprehensive evaluations to determine the needs and problems of the youth and his/her family, and make appropriate recommendations regarding placement and treatment plans, may resolve some of these issues. As the Division moves in this direction it is important to continue to involve local agencies with expertise in this area, in the planning stages.

Careful planning is necessary to ensure that as a new initiative is developed, potentially through the redirection of funds, that it is not done at the expense of existing services which could create a new gap in services. In addition, such an initiative must be fully funded and staffed in order to ensure it can fulfill its objectives.

Further, coordination within DYFS needs to be strengthened. When policy changes occur in one bureau or unit within the Division, (e.g. Bureau of Licensing, Contract Management, Institutional Abuse, et c.) there is little communication with other units. This impedes the ability of the division to implement changes effectively and often places the burden of this communication on service providers who interact with each bureau/unit.

To resolve these issues the task force recommends that the Division for Youth and Family Services:

- ♦ Review and strengthen training programs for caseworkers to improve abuse investigations and interventions for adolescents.
- ♦ Conduct a quality assurance review of abuse investigations for cases involving adolescents to ensure consistent, high quality investigations and services for youth across all caseworkers in each region and district office. This should include not only a review of caseworker investigations, but the process by which supervisors review individual caseloads as well. Through this process problems would be identified in these areas which could then be resolved.
- ♦ Review and strengthen coordination across bureaus/units within the Division, perhaps through a quarterly meetings with representatives from each bureau/unit to create ongoing dialogue on policy changes, the impact they have on various bureaus/units, and mechanisms necessary to ensure effective implementation at all levels.

- Create a shelter task force with representatives from each bureau/unit and providers, to enhance communication on shelter issues and resolve problems as they arise, as well as planning new initiatives.

It should be stressed that the state cannot expect the Division for Youth and Family Services to continue to fulfill its mandate if it continues to cut its funding. This year alone, DYFS received a budget cut of more than six million dollars. Staff shortages and increased caseloads for caseworkers makes it difficult to provide the intensive services some youth and families need. The Division has made strides to streamline services and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency, thus minimizing the negative effects of funding reductions. However, contracts with providers are being cut and services to children and youth are shrinking. The impact of this is that fewer children in need of services will be served.

C. Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Unit's (CIUs)

Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units are mandated through the 1984 Juvenile Code to handle cases involving runaways, truants, serious threats to the well-being/safety of the youth, and youth experiencing serious family conflict. Insufficient funding and understaffing make it difficult for the CIUs to fulfill their mandate effectively. Last year the state legislature completely eliminated a \$225,000 appropriation which was distributed by the Administrative Office of the Courts to all CIUs throughout the state. Although this amount may appear to be insignificant, for already underfunded units it represents a significant cut. Furthermore, as DYFS continues to experience staffing shortfalls, more and more cases are being referred to CIUs resulting in increased caseloads and further straining these limited resources.

When Crisis Intervention Units were originally established, each county had the option to have the unit be a function of the court or an external agency. Ten of the twenty-one counties operate their CIU within the court system while the remaining eleven units are run by external agencies.

As of January 1, 1995, the state officially took over the operation of the entire court system. This included the operation of all internal Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units. Although no evaluation has been done to determine which approach is more effective (internal vs. external) in serving youth and families, state takeover has created a disincentive for counties to continue to operate an external crisis intervention unit. Counties which no longer wish to bear the burden of this expense may move in the direction of an internal CIU.

Another issue which remains problematic for CIUs is standardization of services. Although a manual of standards exists for the operation of CIUs there is no process by which the implementation of them is monitored across the state. As result, there is considerable variation in the types and quality of services provided. In 1993, a quality assurance initiative was begun to address this issue. Due to a lack of central coordinator of CIUs in the Administrative Office of the Courts, this initiative was halted in early 1994.

Since the Administrative Office of the Courts recently hired a person to be responsible for coordinating CIUs at the state level, the quality assurance initiative should be resumed to ensure

that service delivery is effective and consistent across all units. This initiative should review whether CIUs function better as part of the family court system or as an external social service agency. Additionally, quarterly meetings between CIU Directors and the CIU Coordinator, which were recently restored, must continue to be a priority to allow ongoing dialogue on issues impacting services provided, and to identify solutions to various problems units may experience.

D. Review and Update the Cooperative Agreement Between DYFS and CIUs

Although the Juvenile Family Crisis Intervention Units (CIU) were established to work with runaways, truants and families with serious conflict, these youth frequently have multiple problems including physical or sexual abuse, serious mental health problems that cause them to overlap different systems. While this overlap should prevent gaps in services, it usually results in conflicts concerning jurisdiction and who is responsible for service provision and payment. Many runaway and homeless youth could fall under the auspices of both the CIU and DYFS with neither agency clearly assuming service and placement responsibility. As previously noted, DYFS' seemingly narrowed definition of what constitutes abuse has directly resulted in an increase in cases labeled as having serious family conflict/problems which are then referred to the CIU. The end result is that CIUs not only have an increase in their caseloads but they are working with more families with long histories of abuse and violence.

The task force recommends that DYFS and the CIUs review the model cooperative agreement, initially written in 1985, update it, and clearly establish the lines of jurisdiction over various types cases. This agreement, revisited in 1992/1993, was never finalized. It is essential that this occurs. This agreement would also be a key component of agreements which delineate responsibilities for runaway and homeless youth that are established across all youth service agencies.

Once the agreement is revised, all counties need to tailor it to meet local needs, taking into consideration community resources. A training component is essential to ensure its' accurate, consistent implementation. This training should be extended to include not only staff from CIUs and DYFS, but service providers as well, to ensure that referrals are made to the appropriate agency. In addition, meetings between DYFS and CIUs on an ongoing basis should be held to strengthen coordination of services across agencies and resolve problems that may arise.

E. Division of Mental Health Services

Through the work of the task force and interviews with providers it became clear that, due to the increasing mental health needs of runaway and homeless youth, there is a need for improved networking and coordination of services between the mental health system and other systems. The Division of Mental Health Services (DMHS) recently completed a survey of juvenile detention facilities to assess the mental health needs of youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and identify gaps in services to these youth. This initiative is being replicated with a survey of domestic violence shelters and all youth shelters to determine the mental health needs of runaway and homeless youth, and problems that providers experience accessing and coordinating mental health services for these youth. Using the findings of this survey, DMHS

should collaborate with providers to identify ways to resolve issues surrounding the mental health needs of runaway and homeless youth and ways to improve services to this population.

F. Department of Education

The educational system can play a vital role, through early identification and intervention, in preventing runaway behavior. Early indicators that a youth is experiencing problems which may lead to running away from home include truancy, a decline in academic performance, and behavioral problems. The task force supports the recommendations of the Governor's Advisory Council on Juvenile Justice pertaining to the creation of truancy prevention programs and alternative education programs. The Advisory Council recommended that New Jersey law mandate all schools to intervene when a student is truant five times within a single school year. The Council developed a model truancy prevention program which school districts can use as a guide to establish this type of program. Incentives should be provided to school districts with significant truancy and drop out problems to reduce these rates.²⁶

School districts should be further encouraged to develop alternative educational programs for students having difficulty doing well in traditional school settings. In addition, other school-based initiatives should be supported including drug and alcohol education and prevention programs, after-school programs, extra-curricula activities, study groups, peer leadership programs, as well as others. Many of these initiatives can be established in collaboration with community service providers.

4. EDUCATING THE COMMUNITY ON RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

A. Action Strategy to Lift the Veil of Invisibility of Runaway and Homeless Youth and Clarify the Needs of this Population

Runaway and homeless youth remain a largely invisible population. Through the focus group discussions, interviews with providers, and the work of the task force, it became clear that the needs of these youth are not well understood by both the public and the service delivery system. Runaway and homeless youth typically face a myriad of problems ranging from family conflict, physical or sexual abuse, and substance abuse, to having serious mental health problems. In addition many their problems stem from parental problems such as substance abuse, unemployment, etc.. Due to the diverse problems of this population and their families, runaway and homeless youth are seen in all systems including the Division for Youth and Family Services, Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units, the mental health system, the juvenile justice system etc. Given the extensive problems many runaways cope with, and their involvement in multiple systems, a comprehensive, coordinated approach to working with these youth is necessary.

The task force recommends that a plan be developed to educate the public and the service delivery system about the needs of runaway and homeless youth. This can be accomplished through the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc. The Coalition should coordinate a conference on Runaway and Homeless Youth which could be attended by juvenile

officers, the Division for Youth and Family Service, Juvenile-Family Crisis Intervention Units, Youth Service Commissions, school administrators and educators, mental health professionals, etc. The conference would be geared towards educating service providers about the needs of this population and the services available to them. It should also highlight model programs utilized throughout the nation that serve runaway and homeless youth. In addition, the conference would serve as a forum through which various systems can network and open lines of communication to eliminate existing barriers to coordinating services for this population.

In addition to a conference, the Coalition should provide assistance to each system (DYFS, CIUs, educators, juvenile officers, etc.) to establish ongoing training programs, seminars, or in-services on the needs of this population. Periodic training in this area is necessary not only as staff changes but as the needs of runaways evolve over time.

B. Annual Voices for Youth Campaign in Trenton

In order to ensure that the voices of New Jersey's most vulnerable adolescents are heard and their needs are addressed by the state, it is imperative that youth service providers and advocates work closely with the state legislature to ensure they have an accurate understanding of the issues facing youth and their needs. The task force recommends that the Garden State Coalition for Youth and Family Concerns, Inc., together with other youth advocates, coordinate an Annual Voices for Youth Campaign. A certain day should be designated each year, preferably during April which is Child Abuse Prevention Month, for service providers and youth advocates to meet with members of the State Assembly and Senate to educate legislators on the needs of all at-risk youth in New Jersey, and to advocate for the necessary legislative changes that would ensure that the state responds more effectively to the needs of its youth.

X. Conclusion

As this project revealed, runaway and homeless youth face a myriad of problems that involve them in many different systems. The youth service system that currently responds to their needs is fragmented and uncoordinated which limits the effectiveness of any one agency's efforts to work with this population. In order to improve the entire systems response to runaway and homeless youth, a coordinated effort across all youth service agencies is necessary.

One example of such a coordinated response is illustrated by the changes currently under way in the juvenile justice system. The Governor's initiative to reform the juvenile justice system is extremely positive and demonstrates the state's concern for the well-being of its youth. There is a recognition that far too many of New Jersey's youth are growing up in situations that place them at-risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Many of the problems juvenile delinquents experience are similar to those facing runaway and homeless youth including school-related problems (performance and behavioral), psychological problems, family dysfunction, physical and/or sexual abuse, and substance abuse problems, among others. The Governor's Advisory Council's recognition that prevention and early intervention programs are critical to reducing the overall level of juvenile delinquency in the state and its recommendations for developing and expanding such programs in every county is a positive step forward.

As this project revealed, many runaway and homeless youth are involved in the juvenile justice system. Programs that are designed to address the needs of this population will also serve to minimize their involvement in delinquent behavior and the juvenile justice system. In addition, providing runaway and homeless youth and their families with the support and services they need will help to minimize future dependence on the social service system. Such efforts will give runaway and homeless youth the opportunity to grow up and lead healthy, productive lives as adults, and ensure that their children have the chance to do the same.

Although the focus of this project was on runaway and homeless youth, many of the conversations of the task force and providers touched upon the needs of all youth in high risk situations. Many of the issues pertaining to improving services to runaways apply to all youth and their families. Therefore, the Garden State Coalition recognizes the need for systemwide reform to encompass services for all youth and their families. The need for broad reform has also been highlighted by other recent reports on fostercare placement²⁷ and youth in residential treatment centers in New Jersey.²⁸

In order for such reform to occur, all youth service systems must work together to develop efficient, effective strategies that maximize interagency coordination, and minimize duplication of effort. This will necessarily entail a review existing practices to identify what works and eliminate or change practices that are no longer effective. In addition, the state must reinforce its commitment to youth by reversing its pattern of reducing funding to agencies that serve youth and their families. The Governor and the legislature must provide the allocations necessary to support the systemwide reform vital to improve services to youth and families.

XI. Directions for Future Research:

While this project focused on runaway homeless youth in general, there are some special subgroups of runaways that warrant a closer examination. These subgroups include street youth, who are so disenfranchised from the traditional system that specialized services are necessary to reach out to them, gay/lesbian youth, for whom the traditional service system may not be sympathetic to their lifestyles, and minority youth, who tend to be over-represented in the juvenile justice system. It is essential to determine their needs and identify effective strategies to serve these youth. In New Jersey, no youth should slip between the cracks because the system fails to understand their needs and how best to help them.

1 National Network of Runaway and Homeless Youth Services, Inc. 1985. *To Whom do They Belong?*
Washington, D.C.; David Finkelhor, Gerald Hotaling, and Andrea Sedlack, 1990. *Missing, Abducted,
Runaway and Throwaway Children in America: Executive Summary*, Washington, D.C.: Office of
Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention.

2 Marjorie J. Robertson, 1991. *Homeless Youth: An Overview of Recent Literature*, in Homeless Children
and Youth, Julee H. Kryder-Coe, Lester H. Salamon, and Janice M. Molnar (eds.), New Brunswick, NJ:
Transaction Publishers.

3 National Network of Runaway and Homeless Youth Services, Inc. 1991. *To Whom do They Belong?*
Runaway, Homeless and Other Youth in High-Risk Situations in the 1990's, Washington, D.C., p 4.

4 While the majority of shelters provide services to an adolescent population between the ages of ten and
seventeen or eighteen years old, a number of agencies will also serve eight and nine year olds as well.

5 Although New Jersey's juvenile code does not provide an official definition of a runaway, an
unauthorized absence of a youth from his home for more than 24 hours is considered runaway behavior
by the family court system. The issue of parental consent may be problematic however, in that some
parents, frustrated by parent child conflict are ambivalent that their son/daughter has left home. These
parents, therefore, may not report their child missing, attempt to locate them, or try to access services for
them.

6 Throughout this report, the terms "runaways" and "runaway and homeless youth" are used to refer to
runaways, throwaways, and homeless youth. This is purely a matter of writing style.

7 Juvenile Delinquency Commission, 1993. *Profile '93: A Sourcebook of Juvenile Justice Data and Trends
in New Jersey*, Trenton, NJ: Juvenile Delinquency Commission.

8 It was noted that in these instances parents may not report their son or daughter missing because past
experience indicates they will eventually return home. In addition some parents, do not report the child
as missing because for a variety of reasons they no longer care that their child has left home.
Furthermore, some parents force their children to leave home and these youth are unlikely to be reported
missing.

9 Finkelhor et al. 1990, p.11.

10 A survey of eleven county and private shelters and host homes was also conducted to collect similar
information on the characteristics of youth served. The data received from these agencies generally
provided support and confirmation of the information collected through RHY-MIS. This suggests that
youth served through shelters that receive some federal funding are similar in characteristics to youth in
other New Jersey shelters.

11 These findings are similar to other studies on runaway and homeless youth. For an overview of the
literature in this area see: Robertson, 1991 (op cite).

12 Three caseworkers from each region participated in the focus group discussion with DYFS caseworkers,
with the exception of the southern region which had five caseworkers participate. Representatives from
twelve of the twenty-one crisis intervention units participated in the CIU focus group discussion.
Thirteen juvenile officers representing a mix of urban, suburban and rural police departments from
various regions of the state participated in the police focus group. Sixteen shelter administrators
representing a mix of county and private shelters were interviewed.

- 13 Participants in both the DYFS and CIU focus groups stated that while runaways are generally between 12 and 14 years old, some noted that they are working with an increasing number of youth as young as eight and nine. It was felt that the earlier they could work with the youth the more likely the interventions would be successful.
- 14 Paterson, Mary Jo, May 10 1995. "Kids held in Lock-ups Waiting for Other Programs," *The Star Ledger*.
- 15 Some agencies have taken it upon themselves to build in a transportation component to their services, however, this varies considerably. Most organizations do not have sufficient resources to provide extensive transportation services to their clients.
- 16 Case Assessment Resource teams are multi-disciplinary teams which assess the needs of children with special emotional needs and their families. The target population is youth: (1) at Arthur Brisbane Children Treatment Center, (2) placed in residential treatment centers in-state or out-of-state, and (3) at risk of long-term out of home placement.
- 17 According to one shelter provider, less than two percent of the runaways they work with would fit this category. See also: Forst, Martin L. and Martha-Elin Blomquist, 1991, *Missing Children: Rhetoric and Reality*, New York: Lexington Books.
- 18 Estimates vary depending on the study and method of data collection Robertson, 1991 (op cite). See for example: National Network, 1991 (op cite); United States General Accounting Office, 1989, *Homeless and Runaway Youth Receiving Services at Federally Funded Shelters*, (GAO/HRD-90-45). Washington, D.C.: General Accounting Office; Burgess, Ann Wolbert, 1986. *Youth at Risk: Understanding Runaway and Exploited Youth*, Washington D.C. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
- 19 Gutierrez, S.W. and Reich, J.W. 1981. "A Developmental Perspective on Runaway Behavior: It's Relationship to Child Abuse," *Child Welfare League of America* 60(2):89-94.
- 20 Zalkind, Cecilia, 1994. *Stolen Futures*, Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey.
- 21 Robertson, M.J., 1989. *Homeless Youth: Patterns of Alcohol Use. A Report to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, Berkeley, CA: Alcohol Research Group; Robertson, 1991, GAO, 1989.
- 22 Zalkind, 1994.
- 23 Several recent studies of homeless adults indicate that many had runaway experiences as adolescents. See for example: Susser, Struening, and Conover, 1987. "Childhood Experiences of Homeless Men," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 144:1599-1601.
- 24 Paradise, Emily and Robert Horowitz, 1994. *Runaway and Homeless Youth: a Survey of State Law*, Washington, D.C.: American Bar Association.
- 25 Governor's Advisory Council on Juvenile Justice, December, 1994. "Final Report", Trenton, New Jersey.
- 26 Governor's Advisory Council, pp. 70-73.
- 27 Zalkind, 1994.
- 28 Turner, J. 1995. *Lost Childhoods: A Survey of Children in Residential Care*, New Jersey Association of Children's Residential Facilities.

Appendix A

New Jersey Task Force on Runaway and Homeless Youth

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