



Written Testimony of
Massachusetts Appleseed Center

Submitted July 19, 2011

HB 1862 Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Bill

Massachusetts Appleseed promotes equal rights and opportunities for Massachusetts residents by developing and advocating for systemic solutions to social justice issues. Massachusetts Appleseed co-drafted House Bill 1862, An Act Providing Housing and Support Services for Unaccompanied Homeless Youth (“Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act”).

The Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Act proposes a continuum of housing and support services with the goal of creating education stability and better health outcomes for unaccompanied homeless youth. These youth face obstacles even greater than those faced by homeless youth that are in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. An estimated 5,900 unaccompanied homeless youth live in Massachusetts.¹ These youth may be found sleeping on a friend’s couch temporarily, living in emergency shelters, or wandering the streets.

Appropriate housing and support services are critical because they serve as a platform from which unaccompanied homeless youth can stabilize and improve their education and health outcomes. As we discuss below, education stability leads to positive long-term life outcomes. Investing early in our youth is critical to give them every opportunity to become fully engaged, contributing citizens in our local and statewide community.

Education stability has long been a key factor contributing to successful outcomes for youth living in poverty. Youth homelessness is strongly correlated with high school dropout rates. Seventy-five percent of homeless youth drop out of school before earning a high school diploma.² The factors influencing a youth’s decision to dropout – family volatility, economic uncertainty, and residential instability - overlap greatly with circumstances of youth homelessness.³ Unaccompanied homeless youth struggle to access a meaningful public education when confronted with more immediate life issues such as mobility and lack of an adult’s support. As noted by Touch Point Connection co-founder Joan Martin in Tuscan, AZ, “[m]any dropouts are capable kids who simply stop coming to school when life becomes overwhelming and school no longer makes sense.”⁴ When provided with safe and stable housing opportunities, these youth are present to learn and better able to prioritize and focus on education.

By investing now in housing and education stability for unaccompanied homeless youth, the Commonwealth can lower its costs and generate additional revenue in the future. Ensuring access to public education for all Massachusetts children has long been a priority in this state. Nonetheless, a subset of youth are not benefitting from this

commitment. High school dropout leads to lost earnings, lost tax revenue, and an increased dependence on public assistance for those who drop out. Lifetime earnings estimates indicate that high school graduates can earn between \$260,000⁵ and \$456,000 more than high school dropouts.⁶ Using the more conservative figure, high school dropouts from the class of 2007 could have earned an additional \$329 billion over the course of their lives, and \$12.3 billion in Massachusetts alone, had they graduated.⁷ As Table 1 demonstrates there is a strong correlation between an individual's level of educational attainment and his net financial contributions to society.

Table 1 Annual Earnings and Net Contributions of High School Dropouts in Massachusetts in 2007⁸

Education Level	Earnings	Taxes Paid	Cash plus In-Kind Benefits	Net Contribution
No H.S. or GED	\$16,764	\$2,498	\$7,798	-\$5,300
H.S. or GED	\$26,013	\$5,456	\$3,332	\$2,125
1-3 Years College	\$30,909	\$7,838	\$2,389	\$5,499
Bachelors Degree	\$50,887	\$14,769	\$1,150	\$13,620
Graduate Degree	\$74,562	\$20,753	\$854	\$19,899

Massachusetts residents feel this disparity acutely. Recent reports estimate that 60% of new jobs created in Massachusetts will require an associate's degree or higher, as compared with 38% in the United States as a whole.⁹

Providing today's unaccompanied homeless youth with access to stable housing helps to end the cycle of poverty and to mitigate the need for a disproportionately larger expenditure of social services resources. A disproportionately high number of high school dropouts are from low-income families.¹⁰ Nationally, 58% of high school dropouts are from low-income families.¹¹ In Massachusetts, students from low-income families account for only 30.6% of the state's total high school enrollment¹² but 50.2% of high school dropouts.¹³ These figures suggest that a portion of the drop-out population continues to perpetuate its cycle of poverty.

Funds allocated today to provide housing and education stability to our unaccompanied homeless youth could substantially mitigate future crime-related expenditures by the state. Having no fixed address correlates with a higher involvement in robbery and violent crimes.¹⁴ Additionally, utilitarian offenses such as robbery are common when necessities (e.g. food) are scarce due to unemployment or a general lack of income.¹⁵ A high school dropout is eight times more likely to be incarcerated than an individual with at least a high school degree.¹⁶ A high number of unaccompanied homeless youth are high school dropouts. High school dropouts constitute 59% of federal and 75% of Massachusetts state inmates.¹⁷ In 2010, the Massachusetts' Department of Corrections spent \$45,917.05 per inmate.¹⁸ Taking into account the high cost of incarceration, a 1% increase in the male high school graduation rate today could save \$1.4 billion in crime-related costs nationwide.¹⁹

With access to stable housing and education, today's homeless youth will experience far more desirable health outcomes, and society will be spared the cost of treating potential maladies in the future. Homeless youth face increased health risks as compared to housed peers. Homeless youth experience more irregular sleep and dietary patterns,²⁰ higher rates of major depression and post traumatic stress disorder (three times that of their housed peers),²¹ and increased vulnerability to victimization.²² In Massachusetts, homeless youth are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and more likely to experience sexual contact against their will than are their housed peers.²³ Less schooling leads to more risky behavior, such as smoking and obesity.²⁴ More educated individuals have access to safer homes in safer neighborhoods, better healthcare, healthier food, and have fewer social stressors.²⁵ Moreover, 24.8% of high school dropouts are on Medicaid, as compared to 1% of college graduates.²⁶ Processing this data in economic terms, if the dropouts from the high school class of 2004 had graduated, the country could have saved \$41.8 billion in healthcare costs over the course of those graduates' lives.²⁷

Data is fundamental to reducing the incidence of youth homelessness across the state. Understanding numbers and demographics is key to developing best practices to address the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth. At a time when the number of homeless families with children is growing, unaccompanied homeless youth remain undercounted and underserved.

One way in which unaccompanied homeless youth are currently identified is through public schools. Massachusetts public schools were able to identify 735 unaccompanied homeless youth in grades PK-12 during the 2009-10 school year.²⁸ Contrast that with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's youth risk behavior survey, which reported an estimated 5,900 self-identified unaccompanied homeless high school students in Massachusetts in the spring of 2009. The vast discrepancy between these numbers speaks to the challenges of reliable and comprehensive data collection.

Unaccompanied homeless youth are also identified through state agencies. This mechanism makes a complete count difficult because state agencies use different definitions of youth homelessness depending on the services the agencies provide.

Further clouding the picture, unaccompanied homeless youth "fly under the radar" and are reluctant to identify themselves to service providers and state agencies alike to access the available services.

Proper identification of unaccompanied homeless youth is critical. Unfortunately, as MA Appleseed recently learned from its recently conducted research to see what other states are doing to address the unique unmet needs of unaccompanied homeless youth, data collection is a significant challenge in serving this population nationwide.

A Special Commission is needed to develop strategies for accurate identification and to make recommendations on improving access to education, housing and services for unaccompanied homeless youth to ensure a comprehensive and effective systemic response to the unique needs of this population. Unaccompanied homeless youth face many barriers in accessing education and services. One goal of the Commission would be

to develop best practices to identify and conduct outreach to unaccompanied homeless youth. Mandatory reporting requirements are an example of one important policy which can inadvertently create a barrier to identification and outreach. Like many states, Massachusetts requires individuals in certain professions, such as social workers and child advocates, to report any interactions they have with certain at-risk underage youth. Within 48 hours of identifying a young person who, with reasonable surety, is a victim of neglect or abuse, these “mandatory reporters” must file a report with the state.²⁹ Additionally, state-licensed shelters cannot provide services to underage youth for more than 72 hours without parental consent.³⁰ While these important requirements are in place to ensure that at-risk youth receive as much state and family support as possible, they can, in certain circumstances, have negative consequences. The requirements may deter youth who fear return to an unstable home life, particularly in light of the fact that the majority of homeless youth have faced physical or sexual abuse in the home.³¹ Furthermore, homeless youth often have very specific emotional and physical needs, and 72 hours simply may not be enough time for shelters to connect with a youth, triage needs and tailor appropriate assistance. The Special Commission would have the capacity to investigate the practical implications and address such issues, along with any other barriers to access to justice faced by unaccompanied homeless youth.

The Legislature is best positioned to convene stakeholders, service providers, public interest advocates and unaccompanied homeless youth to develop statewide systemic solutions to meet the needs of this unique population.

Unaccompanied homeless youth face unique obstacles in securing stable housing and meaningful access to public education. Investing early to meet the needs of this population could have a direct bearing on the state’s financial well-being. Not only would the desired funding bring a level of permanence and consistency to the lives of these youth, but there would also be a profound return to the state and its residents on each dollar spent.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance or provide additional information.

Respectfully submitted by,

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¹ See MASS. DEP'T OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUC., MASS. DEP'T OF PUB. HEALTH, & THE CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, COMPARISON OF HOMELESS STUDENT DATA: YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY AND SCHOOL DISTRICT ENROLLMENT DATA (2010).

² See JAN MOORE, NAT'L CTR. FOR HOMELESS EDUCATION, UNACCOMPANIED AND HOMELESS YOUTH: REVIEW OF LITERATURE (1995-2005), at 13, *available at* http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/uy_lit_review.pdf. There are no available statistics on the dropout rates of homeless youth in Massachusetts. In fact, the DESE cites to this same national survey. See MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, A SNAPSHOT OF HOMELESSNESS IN MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS (2007), *available at* www.doe.mass.edu/mv/05homelessreport.doc.

³ See MASS. DEP'T OF EDUC., YOUTH VOICES: HOW HIGH SCHOOLS CAN RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND HELP PREVENT DROPOUTS 4 (2007), *available at* <http://www.doe.mass.edu/u/hsreform/youthfocusgroup.pdf> (outlining the major reasons for dropping out); MOORE, *supra* note 2, at 6-7.

⁴ HEIDI REYNOLDS-STENSON YOUTH ON THEIR OWN, FACTSHEET: HOMELESS UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH AND EDUCATION 3 (2009), *available at* http://yoto.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/FACTSHEET_HomelessUnaccompaniedYouth_Education.pdf.

⁵ See ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION, THE HIGH COST OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: WHAT THE NATION PAYS FOR INADEQUATE HIGH SCHOOLS 1 (2007), *available at* <http://www.all4ed.org/files/archive/publications/HighCost.pdf>.

⁶ See MASS. GRADUATION & DROPOUT PREVENTION & RECOVERY COMMISSION, MAKING THE CONNECTION 8 (2009).

⁷ See ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION, *supra* note 6, at 4.

⁸ See ANDREW SUM ET AL., CTR. FOR LABOR MARKET STUDIES, NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY, AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LABOR MARKET, INCOME, HEALTH, SOCIAL, CIVIC AND FISCAL CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL: FINDINGS FOR MASSACHUSETTS ADULTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY 25 tbl.5 (2007) (displaying earnings in relation to level of education); See *id.* at 90 tbl.36 (displaying net contributions in relation to level of education).

⁹ See EXEC. OFFICE OF LABOR & WORKFORCE DEV., COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS EMPLOYMENT PROJECTIONS 2006-2016, at 5 (2009), *available at* <http://lmi2.detma.org/lmi/pdf/MAprojectionsREPORT%202016.pdf>.

¹⁰ See MASS. DEP'T OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUC., HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS 2009-2010: MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOLS 6 tbl.9 (2011), <http://www.doe.mass.edu/info-services/reports/dropout/0910/summary.pdf>.

¹¹ See ANDREW SUM ET AL., CTR. FOR LABOR MARKET STUDIES, NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY, THE CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL: JOBLESSNESS AND JAILING FOR HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE HIGH COST TO TAXPAYERS 13 Chart 10 (2009).

¹² See MASS. DEP'T OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUC., HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS 2009-2010: MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOLS, *supra* note 10, at 6 tbl.9.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See Stephen W. Baron & Timothy F. Hartnagel, *Street Youth and Criminal Violence*, 35 J. OF RES. IN CRIME AND DELINQ. 166, 179 (1998), available at <http://jrc.sagepub.com/content/35/2/166.full.pdf+html>.

¹⁵ See *id.* at 170.

¹⁶ See JOHN M. BRIDGELAND ET AL., CIVIC ENTERPRISES, SILENT EPIDEMIC: PERSPECTIVES OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS 2 (2006).

¹⁷ See NANCY MARTIN & SAMUEL HALPERIN, AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM, WHATEVER IT TAKES: HOW TWELVE COMMUNITIES ARE RECONNECTING OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH viii (2006), available at <http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WITfull.pdf>.

¹⁸ MASS. DEP'T OF CORRECTIONS, EXEC. OFFICE OF PUB. SAFETY & SEC., GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE DOC (2010), available at http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eopsmodulechunk&L=3&L0=Home&L1=Public+Safety+Agencies&L2=Massachusetts+Department+of+Correction&sid=Eeops&b=terminalcontent&f=doc_faq&csid=Eeops.

¹⁹ See *id.* at 4.

²⁰ See MOORE, *supra* note 2, at 10.

²¹ See NAT'L COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS, HOMELESS YOUTH: NCH FACT SHEET #13, at 2 (2007).

²² See MOORE, *supra* note 2, at 11.

²³ See MASS. DEP'T OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUC., MASS. DEP'T OF PUB. HEALTH, & THE CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, *supra* note 1.

²⁴ See Nicholas Freudenberg & Jessica Ruglis, *Reframing School Dropout as a Public Health Issue*, 4 PREVENTING CHRONIC DISEASE 1, 1 (2007), available at http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2007/oct/pdf/07_0063.pdf.

²⁵ See *id.* at 2.

²⁶ See ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION, HEALTHIER AND WEALTHIER: DECREASING HEALTH CARE COSTS BY INCREASING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 3 (2006), available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HandW.pdf>.

²⁷ See MARTIN & HALPERIN, *supra* note 14, at viii.

²⁸ See MASS. DEP'T OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUC., HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS 2009-2010: MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOLS, *supra* note 10.

²⁹ See MASS. GEN. LAWS ch. 119, § 51A (2010).

³⁰ See MASS. GEN. LAWS ch. 119, § 23(a)(7) (2010).

³¹ See NAT'L COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS, *supra* note 17, at 1.