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Congressmen Reichert and Smith listen to youth discuss youth homelessness

Youth and service providers share their stories in a bipartisan congressional roundtable

Congressman Dave Reichert (R-08) and Congressman Adam Smith (D-09) heard from representatives of four local agencies working to end youth homelessness in the Puget Sound region at a bipartisan Congressional Roundtable on Youth Homelessness held today at the Renton Community Center. The event was hosted by the Puget Sound Runaway and Homeless Youth Collaboration (PSRHYC), composed of Auburn Youth Resources in South King County, Cocoon House in Snohomish County, Friends of Youth in south Snohomish and east and north King Counties, and YouthCare in Seattle.

"I know from my own past experiences just how hard and how dangerous life is on the streets," said Congressman Reichert. "We must work together to put an end to youth homelessness, helping them get back on their feet, providing education and training, and preparing them for success as adults. I am encouraged by all of those who participated in our roundtable today and know that with team-work and commitment we can solve this problem."

The goal of the roundtable was for legislators to better understand how federal investments in ending youth homelessness are making a difference and where challenges remain. Youth participants shared their stories of homelessness and the services that have helped them find housing, return to education, and find employment. Staff and leaders of the agencies helped illustrate how agencies leverage federal grants to support these life-saving programs and what success looks like for them.

"Youth homelessness is a critical problem in our community, but one that we can effectively combat," said Congressman Smith. "Throughout the roundtable it was clear that organizations in King County and Snohomish County are doing tremendous work providing comprehensive education, housing, and employment services to at-risk youth, but they need dependable

resources. In Congress, I will push for legislation to renew the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and provide the necessary funding to truly address and eliminate youth homelessness.”

In addition to the powerful stories shared by the youth participants, much of the dialogue of the roundtable focused on funding. Since 1974, these four agencies have relied on the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) for core funding for these critical services, but recent federal budget cuts have left organizations scrambling. Partially in response to budget cuts, these four organizations have intentionally collaborated on projects and programs to be able to continue to offer services across communities.

“Federal funding gives us the ability to create a system of support for youth throughout our nation, state and region. Together, our four agencies have leveraged federal funds to create a strong and collaborative network of services, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that network in the face of increased need,” said Friends of Youth President and CEO Terry Pottmeyer. “The youth that shared their stories today with such candor and courage eloquently described the challenges that our young people face. We must continue to prioritize the needs of youth, and continue to work together to solve youth homelessness.”

Youth homelessness is a significant issue in our region. During Count Us In 2014, an annual point-in-time count of homeless youth in King County, 779 youth and young adults were identified as homeless or unstably housed, with 124 young people literally unsheltered on a given night. Over the course of a year, over 5,000 youth and young adults seek help – such as shelter, housing, and case management – from homeless service providers in King County and Snohomish County. These numbers reflect only those youth willing to seek services, and they are likely a significant undercount of the scope of the problem.

“The story of each young person who is on the streets is different,” says Cassie Franklin, CEO of Cocoon House, “but we know that they all have one thing in common – they are not there by choice. Whether they’ve been kicked out of their home, or escaped an environment of abuse and neglect, or simply aged out of the foster care system without adequate support and preparation, adults in their lives and our community have failed them, and they need safety, stability and opportunity in order to succeed.”

Melinda Giovengo, Executive Director of YouthCare, notes that 40% of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer [LGBTQ] and may have experienced family rejection. Homeless youth are also disproportionately youth of color. Additionally, one-third of homeless youth have experienced the foster care system.

Despite the grim statistics, there is a great deal of hope. “We know what works,” Giovengo says. “A continuum of services that engages young people and earns their trust, with opportunities for shelter, stable housing, family reunification support, access to mental health counseling and education and employment opportunities; this coordinated set of services is the best way we know how to move young people off the streets and help them prepare for stable, healthy adulthood.”

Last year, for the first time since 1983, three of the PSRHYC members did not receive a federal grant to support their street outreach work. A bipartisan RHYA reauthorization was recently introduced in the U.S. Senate, and agencies are hopeful that a House version will be introduced after the recess.

“Youth homelessness is not a partisan issue,” says Jim Blanchard, Executive Director of Auburn Youth Resources. “We see every day that when young people are given the opportunity for education, for employment, they grab it and run with it. Solving this problem is an investment in our communities and in our future.”

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Roundtable Moderator Mark Putnam (Director of the Committee to End Homelessness of King County) begins the event.



Congressman Dave Reichert responds to a question from one of the youth participants.



About the Partner Agencies

Auburn Youth Resources was established in 1973 by a group of concerned parents, educators, and governmental leaders to address the growing problem of drug abuse among South King County youth. Since then, AYR has grown into a regional provider of mental health, homeless youth outreach, shelter, and housing, as well as substance abuse services, serving children, youth, and families of King and Pierce Counties. www.ayr4kids.org

Established in 1991, **Cocoon House** has been Snohomish County's only resource exclusively serving homeless and at-risk youth ages 13-17. We believe that every child deserves a home and the opportunity to achieve his or her fullest potential. Cocoon House provides youth housing and other critical community-based services to caregivers, families and the community. www.cocoonhouse.org

Founded in 1951, **Friends of Youth** delivers a comprehensive range of therapeutic services for youth and young adults at 25 program sites to provide safe places to live and emotional support for youth in challenging circumstances. Serving youth ages 12-24, Friends of Youth's Homeless Youth Services stretch from Snohomish County south to north and east King County. www.friendsofyouth.org

Since 1974, **YouthCare** has been a leader in providing effective services to homeless youth in Seattle/King County. From a three-bed shelter, our programs have expanded to include a continuum of services including outreach, basic needs, case management, emergency shelter, transitional housing, education, and employment training programs serving young people ages 12-24. www.youthcare.org