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Testimony of Jamie Powlovich

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RE: Runaway and Homeless Youth in the FY2017-18 Executive Budget Proposal

New York State Senate

Committees on Finance and Ways and Means

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Introduction

Thank you Senators Young and Farrell, and members of the Committees, for the opportunity to testify in regards to Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal for FY2017-2018. I am the Executive Director of the Coalition for Homeless Youth, formerly known as the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services. The Coalition for Homeless Youth has advocated for the needs of homeless youth for nearly 40 years. Our coalition includes 67 providers of services to homeless youth across New York State, including providers of shelter, housing, drop-in and outreach programs.

Background

For years runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programming in New York State has been woefully under resourced. In some counties, there are currently no functioning RHY programs, while in New York City the need for RHY resources far exceeds the supply. Data from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services has shown that thousands of young people have been unable to access shelter.

State-funded RHY programming currently only assists young people through 20 years of age. The federal definition of homeless youth includes youth through age 24. Our providers, many of whom serve young people through age 24 in drop-in and outreach settings, often find that at the end of age 20 the lives of the young people they come face-to-face with each day undergoes a rapid change. Because shelter and other state-funded services end at the end of age 20, many homeless young people are left to adult shelters that are not sensitive to the particular needs of young people and often function more as a diversion mechanism than a truly accessible safety net from which young people can build their lives.

In New York City this situation is particularly pronounced. Youth in New York City's RHY shelters routinely exist shelter with no place to go. For example, data provided by City's youth department found that in FY16 nearly 30% of discharges from RHY crisis shelter were to another RHY crisis shelter. Nearly 23.5% disappeared to the four winds, while less than 1% went into their own apartment. For RHY in longer-term transitional programs, which many young people are not able to get into due to access criteria, less than 10% moved into their own apartment. Others moved in with friends or relatives – situations that are often precarious and

land a given young person right back into homelessness. And a smaller number, about 11.6% of transitional-placement discharges, transitioned from youth homelessness into the experience of homelessness in the city's adult shelter system. We also know from discussions with providers that some young people don't access transitional beds and instead go from crisis shelter into adult shelter, largely because there has been virtually no investment in permanent housing options for young people using homeless youth resources. More often, our providers will tell us, young people try the adult shelters, have a negative and at points traumatizing experience, and simply will not return to them.

Drop-in providers routinely discuss the difficulties that young people age 21-24 have absent a youth-specific safety net. Everyday providers work with young people who are engaged in high-risk exchanges of sex for shelter because their only alternative option is an adult shelter that they won't go back into. Some young people become increasingly involved in the street-economy in one way or another, and eventually end up cycling between jails, hospitals and the streets. We know that young people lacking a youth-specific safety net often become increasingly involved in high-risk drug usage that can result in infections with Hepatitis C or HIV. The lack of options that often lead to the aforementioned scenarios are avoidable.

The Executive Budget Proposal

Given the circumstances that homeless youth face as they enter age 20 and face the life-altering cliff of hitting age 21 without a relevant safety-net, we were deeply appreciative to see that the Governor is proposing game changing shifts to RHY regulations. In particular, the Governor proposes to allow counties the option to increase the age of access for youth services to include young people ages 21 through 24. Passing this would be nothing short of historic in terms of homeless youth programming in New York.

Unfortunately, the Governor's proposal does not offer a single cent of funding for the counties to use in increasing the age of access to RHY programs. The current budget proposal stays flat at \$4.484 million. From our perspective, at minimum, RHY providers should be brought back to a pre-recession level, which was a more appropriate response to the overall need. Surely, the need has not decreased in recent years and, like the homeless crisis in general, it is

most likely to have increased. We strongly encourage the legislature to increase funding by \$3.016 million, bringing us to the total of \$7.5 million, where we were at in years past.

In addition, we urge the passing of an additional \$15 million over the next three years, through FY20, in capital funding so that new RHY facilities can open. Currently, providers struggle statewide to provide the facilities needed to shelter young people. This is a particularly dire situation in New York City.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Coalition for Homeless Youth is very appreciative of Governor's proposal to expand RHY shelter through age 24. However, absent funding to support this increased access, we fear that many young people will continue to unnecessarily remain in dire, high-risk unsheltered situations. Thank you.