

Human Services - Carl Siciliano <sup>2/8</sup>

February 9, 2017

RE: Written Testimony of Carl Siciliano, Executive Director of the Ali Forney Center, for the NYS Joint Budget Hearing on Human Services

This written testimony is in support of raising the maximum eligibility age for RHY from 21 to 24, and to increase the RHY budget by \$3.016 million.

The Ali Forney Center is the second largest organization in New York State dedicated to runaway and homeless youth. In 2016 we served over 1,400 individual young people experiencing homelessness. 52% of those young people were between the ages of 21 and 24, and thus not eligible for RHY residential services. As a consequence, most of those young people spent months sleeping on the streets of NYC, with many choosing to sleep in the subway system.

While in theory, young people in this age group are eligible to sleep in the adult shelter system, in practice the vast majority are too afraid of the violence and degradation they experience in that system, and are unwilling to do so.

It is very difficult to witness the suffering these young people endure, especially in the colder months. In the absence of being able to access safe shelter, many young people are forced into situations of sexual exploitation, or drug dealing in order to survive. Many consequently become involved in the criminal justice system. Many are also placed at significant risk of HIV infection. Furthermore, the trauma of struggling to survive for months on the streets has a debilitating impact on the mental health of many of these young people. Many of these young people will end up incarcerated, hospitalized, or doomed to chronic adult homelessness.

The model of support offered in RHY shelters and transitional housing programs, which unlike the enormous warehouse shelters offered in the adult homeless system, is required to be provided in homelike environments of 20 beds or less. The RHY model is significantly safer and more appropriate to the developmental needs of these young adults. Because young people are safer and better supported in such programs they are far more likely to become employed and re-enter educational programs. In a HUD-funded transitional housing program the Ali Forney Center operates for 21-24 year olds, in conformity to our RHY programs for our younger clients, 90% of our young people become employed, and 75% enroll in college. Consequently it is very clear to me that this model of housing young people is not only more humane, it is also far more cost effective because it offers young people an effective pathway of escaping homelessness and becoming independent (tax paying) adults, rather than incarcerated, hospitalized, and/or chronically homeless, and thus a long term drain on the State's resources.

So, for the safety and welfare of some of our State's most vulnerable young people, as well as in the interest of long-term financial prudence, I urge you to support raising the RHY age, and investing \$3.016 million, so as to begin to offer RHY services to young people in desperate need of them.

I would be more than willing to offer more information, or to respond to questions and concerns, in regards to this testimony.

Thank you,



Carl Siciliano  
Executive Director  
Ali Forney Center  
212-222-3427 x 302  
[carls@aliforneycenter.org](mailto:carls@aliforneycenter.org)

Ali Forney Center 224 West 35th Street • Suite 1500 • New York, NY 10001  
tel. 212-222-3427 • fax. 212-222-5861  
[www.aliforneycenter.org](http://www.aliforneycenter.org)

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