

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0908

May 18, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
U.S Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Chairman Shelby and Vice Chairman Leahy:

We write to respectfully request that you include provisions to support children, youth, and families experiencing crisis and homelessness in the anticipated fourth supplemental package of legislation to address the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). We appreciate that the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act* included some funding related to homelessness. However, dedicated funding is needed to meet the unique and complex needs of homeless youth and families through the programs and systems that are best positioned to help them immediately, and ensure their long-term stability.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, public schools reported a record 1.5 million children and youth experiencing homelessness, preK-12, for the most recent year reported (2017-2018)¹. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education estimates that 1.4 million children under age six -- infants, toddlers, and preschoolers -- are experiencing homelessness. As disturbing as these numbers are, they significantly undercount the actual number of children and youth experiencing homelessness. Analysis of the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates that public schools are identifying only slightly more than half of high school students experiencing homelessness. In addition, many youth and young adults also experience homelessness on their own, without a parent or guardian. National research from the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall found that approximately 4.2 million youth ages 13-25 experienced homelessness on their own during a 12-month period. The current economic crisis and family stress related to shelter-in-place orders are expected to create new waves of youth and family homelessness.

Homelessness harms the health, development, safety, and education of children and youth. It leaves families in a state of crisis. Children who are born to mothers who are homeless are more likely to need hospitalization during childhood, and are in fair or poor health as compared to peers whose mothers had never been homeless. The longer a young child experiences homelessness, the more that negative health outcomes are magnified, causing lifelong effects on the child, and in turn, the family and community. Indeed, many adults experiencing chronic homelessness also experienced homelessness as children.

Homelessness also has a damaging impact on academic outcomes for students in addition to impacts from other socio-economic indicators such as poverty. Based on data from 49 states, the 2017-2018

¹ <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Federal-Data-Summary-SY-15.16-to-17.18-Published-1.30.2020.pdf>

national average graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness was 67.8 percent; more than 10 percent below other low-income students (79.5 percent)². The low graduation rate of these students is of particular concern because lack of a high school degree or GED is the single greatest risk factor for homelessness as a young adult³. Finally, youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are at great risk of victimization and assault⁴. Recent data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline shows that being experiencing homelessness during youth and living in unstable housing are two of the top risk factors for human trafficking⁵.

Nevertheless, despite their great vulnerability, most children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness are not eligible for homelessness assistance provided through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), including for most of services provided by the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program, through which coronavirus-related homeless funding is provided. While the ESG program provides critical outreach, shelter, and prevention activities for homeless individuals, it is not geared toward (or does not address) the complex needs of families with children or youth who are homeless on their own.

Many families and youth experiencing homelessness are not eligible for many of the services provided by the ESG program. Shelters and transitional housing are often full, unable to serve families as a unit, do not accept unaccompanied minor youth, or simply do not exist in too many communities. In rural communities, where there are less shelters and resources, homelessness remains a prevalent issue and is seen in many forms, including precarious overcrowding and invisible ‘couchsurfing’. Homeless families also are less likely than single adults to stay on the streets and other outdoor locations, often because they are afraid that their children will be removed from their custody. Homeless youth fear interactions with authorities and exploitation from older adults. Instead, most homeless youth stay temporarily with other people in situations that are crowded, unstable, and often dangerous -- situations that make it impossible to self-isolate, shelter-in-place, or maintain social distancing. Schools and service providers report seeing these “doubled up” situations disrupt more readily, as tensions and fear about the virus lead youth and families to be asked to leave. In addition, some families stay in motels for which they pay nightly or weekly, depending on their sporadic income. And now, in the wake of job losses related to the economic crisis, these families and youth can no longer afford motel costs. Local or state eviction moratoria do not protect children and families experiencing homelessness who are staying with others, or in motels. These families and youth move often, and are at high risk of COVID-19 transmission, infection, and illness -- as well as predation and trafficking.

Now, more than ever, is an opportunity to close a gap in our federal system, which has disadvantaged our families and youth in crisis who need specific services along with housing assistance. The needs of this critical population that have gone under resourced for years, are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have a responsibility to provide assistance to our families in crisis.

Fortunately, a number of federal programs serve youth and families who experience homelessness, no matter where they happen to be staying. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) program, the

² https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2017-18.asp

³ <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/missed-opportunities-education-among-youth-experiencing-homelessness-in-america>

⁴ <https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/ht/murphy-labor-sex-trafficking-homeless-youth.pdf>

⁵ <https://polarisproject.org/2018-us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics/>

Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, and a variety of programs administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) have expertise in serving children, youth, and families. None of these other programs, however, is funded sufficiently to meet the tremendous increase in need caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. For this reason, we request supplemental funding to bolster the efforts of these programs to reach and meet the unique needs of children and families experiencing homelessness. This will help to stabilize and protect some of our most vulnerable children and youth during the outbreak and recovery, and also help to prevent entrenched chronic adult homelessness in the future.

Support for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) Program

- The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) program, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), has 45 years of expertise in holistically preventing and serving young people experiencing homelessness by building relationships with youth, meeting their immediate needs, providing short and long-term residential services, and conducting prevention and outreach efforts to move youth out of homelessness. RHYA providers are embedded in communities and serve as the first line of defense in helping young people connect with caring adults and access basic services and health care. These basic services can help prevent the spread of COVID-19. RHYA providers face increased demand for services and sharply increasing costs, including for personnel, housing-related expenses, and basic needs expenses. At the same time, RHYA providers have seen a decrease in charitable contributions and volunteers. For these reasons we respectfully request that the anticipated fourth supplemental package of COVID-19 legislation include –
 - At least \$25 million for existing RHYA grantees to allow 336 American communities to maintain and expand housing and services for youth and young adults at-risk of and experiencing homelessness.
 - At least \$75 million to fund new RHYA grants to expand services, so that more youth and young adults experiencing homelessness may access the housing and services that they need. Only 25 percent of applicants receive a RHYA grant, with many applicants scoring high and not receiving a grant due to the lack of funding.

Support for the Education and Homeless Youth Act (EHCY) Program

- The McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education and reauthorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act, helps remove barriers to school enrollment, attendance, and success caused by homelessness. Under the law, every local educational agency must designate a local liaison to ensure the identification of children and youth experiencing homelessness, as well as school access, stability, and coordination of services. School closures have been devastating for these children; they have lost one of the safest and most stable places in their lives. In addition, children and youth experiencing homelessness face tremendous barriers to distance learning, putting them even greater risk of educational failure. In the wake of the outbreak, homeless liaisons continue to identify and maintain contact with families and youth, helping them access food, hygiene products, and shelter, and assisting them as they work to continue their education. However, there has been a huge increase in the volume and complexity of needs, and typical community partners are closed, or overwhelmed with demand. At current funding levels, less than one in four local educational agencies currently receives a McKinney-Vento subgrant. For these reasons, we respectfully request that the anticipated fourth supplemental package of

COVID-19 legislation include –

- At least \$150 million in supplemental funding to provide targeted support to children and youth experiencing homelessness through the EHCY infrastructure and service delivery system.
- In considering this request, it is noteworthy that Congress has provided supplemental support through the EHCY program in the past, both in response to the Great Recession in 2008, as well as three different disaster-related spending bills (2005, 2008, 2018).

Support for Youth who are at high-risk for Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation:

- Alaska and many other states have the unfortunate reality of becoming national hubs for sex trafficking and exploitation. COVID19 has created an untold number of opportunities for pimps to exploit children through online platforms. Millions of children (and educators/parents) are unaware of the warning signs of exploitation and/or trafficking. This pandemic has exposed a very serious problem - and it will continue to worsen unless we act to train our students and educators. As COVID-19's spread has intensified, schools have been compelled to close their doors and implement distance learning as a way to continue to provide educational services. Physically isolated from their classmates, millions of children are connecting with each other on a range of social media platforms as a way to seek companionship and support during a time of great anxiety. This increased time online, often with little or no supervision, has made America's youth vulnerable to virtual sexual predators. Often adopting a fake persona of another child, these predators seek to befriend youth with the goal of obtaining sexually explicit images to be shared with other pedophiles. The damage caused to children by this practice of "catfishing" is lifelong, as once published on the internet, a sexually explicit image is nearly impossible to erase. For these reasons, we respectfully request that the anticipated fourth supplemental package of COVID-19 legislation include –
 - At least \$2 million for an online program that will train parents, educators, and students how to recognize the indicators of trafficking. This is needed now when students are spending more time online with their peers. Administered through ACF's Office of Trafficking in Persons in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education this program will use the \$2 million appropriation to create an expansive curriculum online. Nine regional support team members should work with state education departments to make this online curriculum available to schools nationwide. Based on data provided by the National Human Trafficking Hotline, each geographical hub would be chosen as a result of having a high volume of reported calls. We recommend this program be largely based off the program described in S.3333, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Training Act of 2020, which was introduced by Senator Murkowski and Senator Smith on February 25, 2020.
 - At least \$15 million in supplemental funding for existing HHS trafficking grantees to provide direct survivor support and operate the National Human Trafficking Hotline, including but not limited to financial assistance for needs related to legal services, emergency shelter, food, medical and behavioral health treatment and medication, personal care items and clothing, transportation, education, workforce development and employment training.
 - \$2 million for HHS to collect data on how increased unemployment rates and economic and social instabilities related to COVID-19 impact human trafficking, including among immigrant populations, both documented and undocumented.

Support for a Family Stabilization Fund in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF)

- The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. the Department of Health and Human Services administers programs that are uniquely positioned to strengthen and support children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness. Several of ACF's programs already have specific mandates to serve children, youth, and families who are homeless. For example, Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund programs are required to prioritize children experiencing homelessness for enrollment, proactively identify and provide outreach, and remove barriers to enrollment and participation. Other ACF programs and offices, such as the Family Violence Prevention & Services Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Office of Trafficking in Persons, engage in primary prevention strategies to reduce the risk of becoming homeless, and alleviate conditions associated with homelessness. In particular, ACF programs are well suited to two-generational approaches that help mitigate the impact of homelessness on the early development of children, and build skills for self-sufficiency for parents.
- Even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of children experiencing homelessness served by Head Start more than doubled over the past ten years, while rates of housing placement by Head Start programs decreased. Now, in the wake of COVID-19, ACF grantees and other community-based organizations face tremendous challenges in meeting the service and housing-related needs of increasing numbers of youth and families who are homeless. For these reasons, we respectfully request that the anticipated fourth supplemental package of COVID-19 legislation include –
 - At least \$800 million for a Family Stabilization Fund to provide flexible funding for community organizations to meet the unique needs of children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness. This funding would allow child -, youth-, and family-serving agencies to provide immediate support to these families and individuals. Providing housing-related and other services to children, youth and families experiencing homelessness as early as possible will reduce transmission of COVID-19, and mitigate compounding trauma and negative lifelong impacts of homelessness.
 - Eligible uses of funds would include expenditures to address shelter and housing-related needs, such as eviction prevention, utility payments, motel stays, and housing placement assistance; health and safety needs, including food, hygiene supplies, and physical and mental health services; transportation, educational, employment, and other needs; the particular needs of pregnant women and children birth to age five; the particular needs of unaccompanied homeless youth; the particular needs of survivors of domestic violence, and assistance in accessing Economic Impact Payments, unemployment compensation, and other benefits provided by federal, state and local governments.
 - To ensure equitable access to services, 30 percent of the funds would be designated for urban areas, 30 percent for suburban areas, and 40 percent for rural communities. Rural communities struggle to provide services for families, youth, and children experiencing homelessness as they are consistently underfunded and under resourced.
 - A 10 percent set-aside of funds for Indian Tribes and Tribal Organizations. Research has found the highest prevalence rates of homelessness and runaway experiences among AIAN youth and young adults, compared to other racial/ethnic subpopulations⁶. However, homelessness in AI/AN communities is less visible than in other areas because homelessness primarily takes the form of staying in crowded, temporary locations, rather

⁶ https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10935-019-00571-2?wt_mc=Internal.Event.1.SEM.ArticleAuthorOnlineFirst

than sleeping on the street. As homelessness looks different in tribal communities, these communities often do not receive equitable federal funds to address homelessness among their families and communities.

In combination, this request will bolster and expand the vital work of key federal programs to help move children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness from crisis to stabilization, healing, and, ultimately, self-sufficiency. These interventions will help ensure that prolonged homelessness does not result from the coronavirus outbreak, and that we protect the futures of some of our most vulnerable children, youth, and families. We urge you to prioritize their needs in the next supplemental package.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



Joe Manchin III
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator