

SB 2258 – To provide for a legislative management study relating to shelter care programs for runaway youth
SUPPORT

Hearing of the House Human Services Committee, March 16, 2021
Testimony of Patricia Julianelle, SchoolHouse Connection

SchoolHouse Connection is a national non-profit organization dedicated to overcoming homelessness through education and responding to the needs of students experiencing homelessness on a federal, state, and local level. We are experts in the public policies necessary to help youth experiencing homelessness access safe and appropriate services, graduate from high school and college, and find stable housing to end their homelessness permanently. This year alone, we are active partners on legislation in 13 states. We do this work with the spirit of permanently interrupting homelessness and achieving stability for the generations of families it impacts.

SchoolHouse Connection strongly supports the enactment of SB 2258, which would allow the legislature to examine the barriers unaccompanied homeless youth face in accessing basic safety and support and to devise effective solutions. In the 2018-2019 school year, North Dakota’s schools served 285 unaccompanied homeless youth.¹ Almost all of these youth are under 18, which creates an insurmountable barrier to them accessing the services they need to stay safe. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey administered to high school students across North Dakota demonstrates the awful consequences of experiencing homelessness on your own:

- 10.9 times more likely to use methamphetamines than housed students
- 9.5 times more likely to engage in binge drinking
- 3.4 times more likely to abuse prescription medication
- 4.2 times more likely to be raped
- 3.6 times more likely to attempt suicide

Unaccompanied homeless youth lack stable housing and are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. They have no parental support to meet their most basic needs, including shelter, health care, food, and clothing. “In their efforts to meet their basic needs for safety, food, and shelter, many youth become involved in high risk behaviors resulting in criminal charges and victimization through sex trafficking and violence.”² When unaccompanied homeless youth under 18 years old cannot access safe shelter and housing services, they are extremely vulnerable to victimization.

When youth experiencing homelessness cannot receive services, we, as a community, lose the opportunity to keep them safe, help end their homelessness, and support their families. Homeless youth age 18 and over can access services on their own behalf,

¹ National Center for Homeless Education (2021). <http://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/StateProfile.aspx?StateID=34>.

² Utah Assistant Attorney General Nicole Lowe. “Advocating for Homeless Youth.” *Utah Bar Journal* (May/June 2018). <https://attorneygeneral.utah.gov/advocating-for-homeless-youth/>.

including shelter and housing services. However, unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18 cannot access safe emergency shelter and services without parental consent. Unfortunately, their parents are unable or unwilling to consent for various reasons - including their own mental health and/or substance abuse issues, incarceration, family dysfunction, or other reasons. This creates a barrier to safety and stability for youth and communities. Several states, including Montana, Wyoming, Indiana, Maryland, Missouri, Texas, and Utah, have enacted legislation to allow youth under 18 to obtain shelter and housing without parental consent. These laws have kept youth safe and connected to services and society while social workers and others work with them to find education, employment, housing, and stability-- often culminating in healthy reunification with their families.

SB 2258 creates an opportunity for the legislature to examine how these issues affect homeless youth in North Dakota and to develop solutions that will keep youth safe, support families, and improve communities. **For these reasons, SchoolHouse Connection strongly urges a Do Pass on SB 2258.** I am happy to respond to any questions or concerns.

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