

Can Pro Bono Legal Services help to End Youth Homelessness?

By Cathy Krebs and Shannon Prown

Every Year, More Than 2 Million children and youth in America Will Face a Period of Homelessness (<https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-teen-issues/statistics>).

Almost 40% of the homeless in the United States are under 18 (<https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-teen-issues/statistics>). Many more are between the ages of 18-26.

50% of adolescents aging out of foster care and juvenile justice systems will be homeless within six months because the state has not prepared them to live independently nor have they ensured that the youth have the supports they need to be successful (<https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-teen-issues/statistics>).

According to a [study](#) of youth in shelters, nearly 50% reported intense conflict or physical harm by a family member as a major contributing factor to their homelessness.

Multiple [studies](#) have found that approximately 40% of the youth homeless population are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), a far higher percentage than the general population.

One [study](#) found that 32% of homeless youth are black, more than double their representation in the general population.

Once on the streets, homeless youth are at serious risk of violence. In the United States, as many as 20,000 kids are forced into prostitution by human trafficking networks every year.

These are hard truths to confront. Yet, while these numbers are overwhelming, there is real opportunity for the legal community to make a difference. Providing legal services can make a dramatic impact on the life trajectory of a homeless youth and can literally make the difference between life on the streets and a life of stability and success. The American Bar Association (ABA) has launched a project to make it easy for any lawyer and law firm to get involved.

How Can Legal Services Help?

Homeless youth include children or minors under the age of 18 as well as young adults who are 18-26 who lack permanent reliable shelter, including those who couch surf, stay with friends, try to secure beds in a homelessness program or otherwise have unstable shelter. Youth become homeless in a variety of ways. Those who are “unaccompanied”, meaning they are not with their family, come to homelessness due to a variety of factors including family violence and rejection and/or aging out of the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Youth experiencing homelessness may have a variety of factors that make it challenging to remedy their situation.

- If a youth does not have identification they may not be able to enroll in school, apply for benefits or even enter certain buildings.
- In the U.S., life-sustaining activities like sleeping and eating are often criminalized for the homeless meaning that homeless youth often have arrests, tickets or convictions on their record that can seriously impact a youth's ability to secure housing or employment.

Legal services that address the above and other issues can literally change the direction in a youth's life by giving them access to things like health care, education, housing, benefits and employment. Whether in the short-term or long-term, legal services can literally make the difference between a youth living on the street and securing safety, stability and a path forward for the future.

But I Don't Know Anything about Representing Homeless Youth!

Like any broad demographic, the legal needs of homeless youth can be diverse depending upon what brought them to that state. They have often experienced (or are still experiencing) trauma that can make forming a trusting lawyer-client relationship challenging. Many youth may have no access to telephones or other reliable means of communication and they can likely not afford to get to your office. Given these many challenges, how can a lawyer who does not work with homeless youth full-time provide legal representation for this population? The ABA's [Homeless Youth Legal Network Pro Bono](#) (HYLN Pro Bono) project has an answer to that question.

The ABA through its [Commission on Homelessness & Poverty](#), [Commission on Youth at Risk](#), and [Section of Litigation Children's Rights Litigation Committee](#) has created the [Homeless Youth Legal Network](#) (HYLN) as the result of an ABA Enterprise Fund Grant. HYLN is focused on increasing legal services for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness and it provides information and fosters collaboration in order to help lawyers and other advocates address existing gaps in legal services. So far the Network has launched a website, surveyed more than 300 individuals and groups regarding the legal needs of youth in their community, identified 12 model programs across the country to highlight promising practices, and launched a list serve for attorneys and other advocates for homeless youth with more than 250 members. HYLN is also equipped to provide training and technical assistance to legal service providers and homelessness programs.

ABA President Hilarie Bass has built on that network to launch [HYLN Pro Bono](#), a project through which lawyers, law firms, bar associations and in-house counsel will be matched with homeless youth shelters and drop-in centers around the country. Once connected, volunteer lawyers will work with shelter staff to determine the best approach to providing legal assistance. Some of the options include: direct representation of individual youth; Live legal clinics to represent groups of youth who all have similar legal needs, for example obtaining identification documents; or Live legal education or "Know Your Rights" presentations to teach youth about important issues such as employees and job applicants.

You do not have to do this work alone! The ABA stands ready to support your work:

- You will have access to a [primer](#) for volunteers with more information about the legal issues that you might encounter as well as good information on communicating with youth who might have experienced a great deal of trauma; and

- Through HYLN, the ABA will be able to provide support to volunteer lawyers as they take on this critical work.

A lawyer can make a huge impact on the trajectory of a young person's life and help address the tragedy of homelessness in the U.S. To learn more about volunteering, e-mail HYLNprobono@americanbar.org or visit the [HYLN Pro Bono](#) website.

This article is part of a year-long celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the [Children's Rights Litigation Committee](#).

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