December 13, 2011

The Honorable Judy Biggert
Chair
Financial Services Subcommittee on
Insurance, Housing and
Community Opportunities
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chair Biggert and Ranking Member Gutierrez:

I write on behalf of the American Bar Association and its nearly 400,000 members nationwide to express our strong support for H.R. 32, The Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2011. This legislation amends the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of ‘homelessness’ to include children, youth, and their families who are verified as homeless by federal program personnel from four federal programs: school district homeless liaisons designated under the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act; Head Start programs; Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs; and Early Intervention programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C.

For many years, the ABA has supported federal legislation to better ensure that children, youth, and families considered homeless by these important HHS and Education programs are also defined as homeless by HUD, thereby enabling them to more quickly access permanent affordable housing. We were pleased to work with you on the HEARTH Act of 2009, which made significant but incomplete strides in this regard. We now believe that H.R. 32 is the appropriate next step.

Federal data from the 2009-10 school year indicates that 72% of the 939,903 identified and enrolled children and youth receiving assistance from school district homeless liaisons were living in doubled-up situations. Another 5% lived in motels. Without HR 32, many of these vulnerable American children and youth – and their families – will be able to access support from only a small portion of homelessness prevention dollars, leaving 97% of federal homeless assistance funds out of their reach.

The Homeless Children and Youth Act creates a streamlined, efficient referral process for homeless children and youth to access HUD homeless services. The simplicity of the Homeless Children and Youth Act is modeled on successfully implemented provisions of the Child Nutrition Act and the College Cost Reduction and Access Act.
The Homeless Children and Youth Act provides communities with the flexibility to serve and house families, children, and youth who are extremely vulnerable and in need of assistance. People in local communities are the best equipped to assess specific homeless situations to know which homeless families and youth are most in need of housing and services. Service providers make these determinations on a daily basis, and should be permitted to assess the full range of homeless situations.

Despite the success these programs represent, expanded eligibility and an unfortunate rise in the number of Americans falling into poverty will result in increased competition for available resources. We urge the Subcommittee therefore, to work to ensure that this invaluable federal commitment to getting Americans off the streets and back to their communities remains firm. We recognize that these are extraordinary economic times with difficult funding decisions to come. It is precisely for that reason that we are grateful for your historical support and urge your continued work toward ensuring that resources for HUD affordable housing and homeless assistance programs are commensurate with the need.

For these reasons, we strongly support H.R. 32. Thank you for your leadership on behalf of all homeless children, youth, and families.

Sincerely,

Thomas M. Susman