



**The New York City Council**  
**Committees on Youth Services and General Welfare**

**Oversight: Safe and Accessible Shelters for Homeless Youth**

September 28, 2017

**Testimony of**  
**Jeremy Christopher Kohomban, PhD.**  
**President and CEO, The Children's Village; President Harlem Dowling**

I am Dr. Jeremy Kohomban, the President and CEO of The Children's Village and the President of Harlem Dowling. Founded in 1851, we work with some of New York City's most vulnerable children and families. We support children and teens in foster care, in the juvenile justice system, and teens who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We do so through a wide range of programs, including community prevention, residential interventions, health services, evidence based interventions, affordable housing, and one of the nation's only long-term, privately funded mentoring programs, the WAY Home which supports youth up to the age of 25. We are also a DYCD partner operating 27 in-school programs and two youth shelters.

I want to respond to the amendments being discussed today. Our recommendations are grounded in front-line experience, and also supported by relevant research.

Let me begin by stating the obvious, but it must be stated. Disproportionality by race and by place is the greatest impediment to success that we see in this population. A 2012 report<sup>1</sup> by the Social Science Research Council found that "the New York Metro area has the widest gap by neighborhood in terms of youth disconnection of America's largest cities." Basically, this means

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<sup>1</sup> "Youth Disconnection in New York City," Measure of America / Social Science Research Council (2012), retrieved from <http://www.measureofamerica.org/one-in-seven>.

that the children we serve come from poor, racially segregated community districts. They are overwhelmingly of color, and black children enter our systems faster, remain longer and far too many exit with the worst outcomes.

Int 1699-2017 By Council Members Gibson, Johnson, Dromm, Menchaca, Mendez, Torres, Vacca and Van Bramer

**Extend the periods of time youth may remain in runaway and homeless youth shelters.**

We agree that homeless youth should be permitted to remain in shelters for a longer period of time. We have seen an increase in the number of youth having sexual identity issues, struggling with substance abuse, who are pregnant or parenting, or who are exhibiting mental health issues. These youth need more time so that we can address their issues. However, to experience success, this group of children needs treatment and services that are responsive to their presenting issues. In the absence of targeted services, we will squander the opportunity to truly help.

Int 1705-2017 By Council Members Salamanca Jr., Johnson, Dromm, Menchaca, Mendez, Torres, Vacca and Van Bramer

**Create and maintain a process for conducting intake and assessments for any runaway or homeless youth who is seeking to enter a DHS shelter.**

We agree. In Westchester County, this is standard practice. All paperwork is done on site. Even in instances when we determine that the admission to the Youth Shelter is inappropriate (for example, if already in DSS custody) we let the child stay the night and coordinate movement in the morning.

**Permit shelters for runaway and homeless youth to serve youth ages 21-24.**

We agree. The 21-24 year old youth we serve, many of whom have no support system, are often functioning socially and emotionally at lower levels than other youth. Many exit government systems at age 21 and are soon homeless and disconnected despite their best efforts. In 2013, MDRC<sup>2</sup> noted that youth disconnection is a dynamic phenomenon – most do not simply give up, but rather make numerous attempts to re-engage with school or work, with varying degrees of success. A youth shelter can work with these youth before they give up. ACS recently predicted that 750 children will age out this year. Nationally we project 25,000 children ageing out of foster care this year. Youth from both these systems will find their way into NYC’s homeless population.

However, two cautions. First, while the intent here is applaudable, there is significant risk that without adequate services, this becomes yet another stop-gap measure that institutionalizes youth and creates a sense of entitlement that charity or government will have a solution for their lives. We know that this is not true. Our shelters cannot be a place where youth languish. Our shelters cannot be a place that simply prepares youth for adult shelters and prison, the other two government solutions readily available for the poor, black and brown children we serve. If we increase the age of youth able to use a shelter, we must add proven programs like Family Finding, to help them reconnect to family or someone that cares. Youth are only successful when they have at least one willing stable adult relationship. At least one person who commits to unconditional belonging<sup>3</sup>. In our experience, only when belonging is established do youth transition from dependence on government and charity to a life of independence and tax payer status.

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<sup>2</sup> “Building Better Programs for Disconnected Youth,” MDRC (February 2013), retrieved from <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/building-better-programs-disconnected-youth>

<sup>3</sup> “Survival is not enough; help children thrive, not just survive” Huffington Post (May, 2016) [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeremy-christopher-kohomban-phd/survival-is-not-enough-he\\_b\\_6496650.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeremy-christopher-kohomban-phd/survival-is-not-enough-he_b_6496650.html)

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**3 The Children’s Village.**

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Second, we should not mix 21 – 24 year olds with younger children. The children in our shelters are not siblings, they are often strangers. At 21, young people are adults, despite the disadvantages they have faced and despite the maturity that is still to come<sup>4</sup>.

Int 1700-2017 By Council Members Johnson, Torres, Dromm, Menchaca, Mendez, Vacca and Van Bramer

**Report annually on runaway and homeless youth.**

We support the data gathering and tracking. Data allows us to measure success, identify failure and improve intervention. But, please do not burden our staff with these good ideas. Our front line is very thin, our budgets strained! Every minute that we spend away from children is a minute that takes away from safety, relationships and helping them move out, into families. These are good ideas. But, like most good ideas, they often become unfunded mandates where we are asked to do more with less. In this case, that means, taking more staff away from children.

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<sup>4</sup> “You are an adult, but your brain might not be, experts say” CNN (December, 2016)  
<http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/21/health/adult-brain-development/index.html>