

What Kind of a Society Allows Its Youth to be Homeless? Ours

**By Hank Hughes, Executive Director
NM Coalition to End Homelessness**

When you see them walking around your town you wouldn't necessarily think they are homeless, and perhaps that is one reason homeless youth receive so little attention from decision makers. Homeless youth may dress in old clothes and have a lot of piercings but so do a lot of other young people. Homeless youth have not been on the streets long enough to have acquired that weather-beaten look that marks the older street person. And yet, youth homelessness is a huge problem in New Mexico, as it is generally in the United States. A recent one day count of the homeless in New Mexico found 90 homeless youth in five communities. Only the youth who were seeking help at a service provider were counted, so the actual number of homeless youth in New Mexico is many times higher. A federal study of the homeless found that 55% of adult homeless people first became homeless before they were 18, so solving the homeless problem in general means finding a solution to youth homelessness.

Unfortunately, funding for programs for homeless youth is tenuous at best. Southwestern Advocates 4 Kids, a transitional housing program for youth in Silver City closed its doors this year, and the First Contact Outreach Program for homeless youth in Santa Fe was forced to give up its space due to lack of funding and is now operating out of a used Volvo.

At Santa Fe's First Contact Street Outreach Program, one homeless girl told me that she likes the freedom of her current life and is escaping from structure. A young man told me he ran away from home to escape his abusive father. Another young man tells me he likes the no obligation part of the outreach program. Nearby a large young man sleeps on the couch cuddling a teddy bear, a reminder that these homeless youth are still children in some ways.

However, these same people who don't want structure also said they just got jobs and are looking for housing before the cold weather comes. So they are looking for places to fit in and make a life, albeit on their own terms. One young man said that sometimes he is overcome by fear that his life will never go anywhere.

Youth homelessness is hard to think about because it is a clear indictment of our society. It is hard to blame a teenager for their homelessness, and so the existence of a homeless youth problem says clearly that there is something wrong with our society. Child abuse is one big part of the problem. According to Tamar Spatz, the young woman who ran the outreach program when I visited, it is our housing style that separates one family from another that allows abuse to be more prevalent.

Government agencies are not adequately equipped to respond when abuse happens. Even when abused teenagers call for help, they get little attention from overworked social workers who are busy rescuing younger children from more dire situations. And so the teenagers often run away as a last resort.

It is unfortunate that in its current emphasis on ending chronic homelessness; the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is shifting money away from homeless youth and homeless families to programs that assist the single adults who have been homeless a long time. Not that the adults don't need and deserve help; however, if we never deal with the root causes of homelessness, causes that usually occur in youth, then we will never solve the problem.

New Mexico has some wonderful programs that help homeless youth, but they can only assist a small fraction of the total number who need help. Some of these programs provide transitional housing with supportive services, and they give homeless youth a place to live and a good deal of guidance in getting a positive start in life.

So what's the answer? Well certainly we need to invest more funding in the transitional housing programs that can help homeless youth get a start in life. We also may need to look at how our society is set up, and think about planning for neighborhoods where community spaces like churches and youth programs are within walking distance, and where neighbors are encouraged to interact with each other, so people in abusive families will not feel isolated.