



SUPPORT

SB 207 – Unaccompanied Minors in Need of Shelter and Supportive Services

**Hearing of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,
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Testimony of Patricia Julianelle, SchoolHouse Connection

SchoolHouse Connection is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to overcoming homelessness through education. Currently, we are working on legislation to help youth experiencing homelessness in over a dozen state legislatures around the country. 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.

SchoolHouse Connection strongly supports the enactment of SB 207, which establishes that unaccompanied minors who are experiencing homelessness have legal capacity to consent to admission to sheltering programs registered with the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development.

Unaccompanied homeless youth lack stable housing and are not in physical custody of a parent or guardian. The federal McKinney-Vento Act has required schools to identify, enroll, and serve these youth for decades. Unaccompanied homeless youth have no parental support to meet their most basic needs, including food, shelter, and clothing. They are homeless on their own for various reasons primarily related to poverty and family dysfunction, striving to survive in unsafe or unstable housing. They live in a variety of temporary and inadequate situations, including shelters, the homes of others, cars, campgrounds, public parks, abandoned buildings, motels, and bus or train stations.ⁱ

“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.”ⁱⁱ When unaccompanied homeless youth cannot access safe shelter and housing services, they are extremely vulnerable to victimization. Without these services:

- 70% of homeless youth report experiencing some form of violence, 32% of which includes sexual assault.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 40% of homeless youth are victims of sex trafficking at least once in a single year.^{iv}

- In a recent study, 50% of homeless youth reported prescription drug misuse.^v Homeless youth often turn to substances as a coping mechanism when they cannot access appropriate support services.
- Homeless youth are 7.2 times more likely to attempt suicide than their housed peers.^{vi}

Homeless youth age 18 and over can access services on their own behalf. They can seek medical and behavioral health treatment, as well as shelter and housing services. However, unaccompanied homeless youth under age 18 cannot access safe shelter and housing services without parental consent. Yet their parents are unable or unwilling to consent for various reasons, including their own mental health or substance abuse issues, incarceration, family dysfunction, having been deported, or other reasons. Parents do not object to their children receiving services, as much as they simply are not capable of supporting that access. And without the intervention of service providers, there is no opportunity to provide parents with support that might repair family relationships. Furthermore, community-based providers are well-positioned to intervene effectively, avoiding the threat of state child welfare services that alienate both parents and youth.

Unfortunately, due to current consent requirements, legitimate, law-abiding service providers find themselves unable to help some of most vulnerable young people. And when homeless minors cannot receive legitimate services, we lose the opportunity to keep them safe, help end their homelessness, and support their families. Youth are relegated to the streets and predators—individuals who abuse, hurt, and take advantage of youth without any consideration of legal consent requirements. Allowing minors to access shelter and services will help ensure they are connected to safe adults who can help them return home, when appropriate, and protect them from dangerous predators.

Introduced in response to requests from service providers who wish to provide homeless youth with shelter and services, SB 207 addresses the issue of minor consent in a simple, carefully limited fashion that is consistent with federal law and provisions already working well in other states. It gives unaccompanied minors in need of shelter the capacity to consent to shelter and supportive services, thereby incentivizing non-profit organizations to shelter this extremely vulnerable and underserved population.

Eliminating this barrier would allow homeless service providers the ability to intervene before homeless youth become victims of dangerous predators. Several states, including Indiana, Missouri, Wyoming, Texas, and Utah^{vii}, have enacted legislation to allow youth under 18 to obtain shelter and housing without parental consent. Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act regulations also allow youth to enter federally-funded shelter programs without parental notification or consent if the provider determines contacting a parent or guardian is not in the youth's best interest, the provider is unable to locate a parent or guardian, or the youth refuses to disclose a parent's or guardian's contact information.^{viii}

SB 207 strikes an optimal balance among protecting and respecting youth and parents; ensuring access to safe and appropriate services for vulnerable youth; and avoiding overly burdensome or structured approaches that unnecessarily limit the providers and youth who can benefit from the statute. In fact, in my own state policy work across the country, I have shared SB 207 as a model bill for other states to emulate.

Research has found that early intervention is essential to keep homeless youth safe and improve their long-term outcomes. The benefits of youth shelter, housing and related services include:

- Decreased victimization
- Increased school enrollment and completion
- Increased employment
- Increased family reunification
- Decreased likelihood of becoming chronically homeless adults

We must eliminate initial service barriers, so youth will seek help from legitimate service providers, who can take appropriate steps to reconnect them with their families, the state, and other positive interventions. **For these reasons, SchoolHouse Connection strongly urges the committee to issue a Favorable Report on SB 207.** I am happy to respond to any questions or concerns.

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ⁱ The legal rights of unaccompanied youth are recognized by several laws, including the McKinney-Vento Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Higher Education Act, and Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

ⁱⁱ <https://attorneygeneral.utah.gov/advocating-for-homeless-youth/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Kipke, et al. (1997). "Street youth, their peer group affiliation and differences according to residential status, subsistence patterns, and use of services." *Adolescence*, 32(127): 655-669.

^{iv} University of Louisville (2016). *Youth Experiences Survey*.

^v Harmony Rhoades (2014). *Prescription drug misuse among homeless youth*.

^{vi} SchoolHouse Connection (2018). *Risk and Resilience: Differences in Risk Factors and Health Outcomes Between Homeless and Non-Homeless Students in 2017 YRBS Data*. Available at <https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/risk-and-resilience-differences-in-risk-factors-and-health-outcomes-between-homeless-and-non-homeless-students-in-2017-yrbs-data/>.

^{vii} Indiana Code §31-36-3-2 and IC §34-30-25; Missouri [Rev Stat §431.056](#) (2000); Texas [Family Code §§32.202 and 203](#) (2003, 2013); Hawaii [Revised Statutes §346-17.6](#) (2012); Wyoming [HB 159](#) (2017); Utah [HB 371](#).

^{viii} 45 CFR §1351.24(e).