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Homeless Youth Services
in Douglas County: From
Two Perspectives

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The following report describes the observations and opinions of Douglas County homeless youth and of the social service providers and advocates focused on assisting them. Initiated by the county's Commission on Children and Families, and conducted by Oregon State University researchers, this study provides data and analysis which may assist service providers and granting agencies in deciding what strategic service improvements might best assist homeless youth. After introducing the study, the report begins with a brief background section for the reader unacquainted with Douglas County, followed by an explanation of the research methods used. The next sections then present the results from the interviews. Subsequently, the report provides a short review of the most recent academic literature, showing how this research is both timely and state-of-the-art. The report ends with a conclusions section, followed by appendices, one of which addresses the challenges of establishing trustworthy estimates of the number of homeless youth, especially in rural places.

I. Background to This Study

Throughout the United States, it is estimated that up to 1.6 million youth between the ages of 16-24 experience homelessness in a given year (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006; Robertson and Toro, 1998). A broad range of research suggests that both the characteristics of these youth and the causes of their homelessness vary tremendously. However, many non-profit agencies, faith based organizations and local governments are working to develop broad-based, integrated models to meet the needs of homeless families and unaccompanied youth in their communities.

Within Oregon, two particular initiatives involve both community based and inter-agency solutions to Youth Homelessness. In 2005, the Oregon Legislature passed House Bill 2202. Acknowledging Oregon's lack of comprehensive policy and service provision for homeless and runaway youth, the Act emphasizes the need for statewide coordination and community level action. Shifting the responsibility to county-level commissions, HB 2202 encourages data collection and research that will improve the ability of local providers to address the needs of homeless youth and their families (Oregon Laws, 2005).

Further supporting the collaborative effort to create comprehensive homeless youth policy, Governor Ted Kulongoski issued an executive order forming the "Ending Homelessness Advisory Council" (April, 2006). This interagency council is to include local government representatives, state-level human service providers, faith-based organizations and non-profit agencies. Section 10 of the order explicitly encourages program development for homeless youth, primarily under the coordination of the Commission on Children and Families. With the fundamental goal of "developing a ten year plan to end homelessness," EHAC not only involves creating and implementing statewide objectives, but also includes collaboration with community providers who are already working with the homeless population in their local areas (Kulongoski, 2006).

Both of these initiatives are innovative in their emphasis—namely that homeless youth policies must acknowledge local level influences on homelessness, recognize unique regional barriers and embrace community strengths to be successful. Additionally, both House Bill 2022 and the Ending Homelessness Advisory Council strongly promote community-level research through collaboration of multiple "experts," including homeless youth themselves (Oregon Laws, 2005).

This report uses information from homeless youth, local leaders, service providers and community members to report on homeless youth and services for them in Douglas County, Oregon. Our objectives for this research were to 1) document individual, family or community-specific processes that enable (or hinder) service provision for homeless youth, 2) identify individual attributes and community characteristics which may shape the ability of homeless children and youth in Douglas County to succeed, and 3) provide information that Douglas County can use in its efforts to create effective policies and programs to aid

homeless youth and their families.

II. Douglas County, Oregon – An Overview

Geography: Covering 5037 square miles, Douglas County is one of the largest counties in Oregon. It is also geographically diverse. On the West side of the county is Reedsport, a small coastal community that boasts the Oregon Dunes National Recreational Area. To the East is Crater Lake, nestled within the 984,600 acres of Umpqua National Forest. While Douglas County's geography is one of its most profitable attributes, it also poses unique community development issues for the people who live there, particularly in terms of homelessness and the ability of Douglas County communities to cope with it.

Population and Demographics: The most current Census data indicates that Douglas County has a population of 103,152 persons with around one-fifth residing in the county seat of Roseburg. While Oregon saw a large rise in population during the nineties (~21%), Douglas County only saw an increase of 6%. This slow growth is accompanied by a disproportionate aging population -- 17.8% of Douglas County residents are 65 years or older, as compared to a state average of 12.8 percent (Census, 2000-04). According to the Oregon Employment Department, the growing 65+ population is not only representative of aging long-time community members, but is also the result of migration to Douglas County for quality health and retirement services (OLMIS, 2006).

Douglas County, like the rest of Oregon, is predominantly "white." Approximately 94% of persons in the county report themselves as white, compared to a statewide 87%. In almost all categories, Douglas County is less racially diverse than the rest of Oregon, with one exception: American Indian and Alaska Natives. Douglas County reports 1.5% of its population as American Indian/Alaska Native compared to a statewide 1.3% (Census, 2000). This is due to the large tribal presence of the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians centered in Roseburg.

While the percentage of high school graduates in Douglas County is comparable to the statewide average, the percentage of persons with a Bachelors degree is almost half the state average (Douglas county 13.3% as compared to Oregon's 25.1%). Lower education levels may partially explain lower than state average median income. Whereas the Oregon annual median household income is $41,000, Douglas County's median annual income is $33,000 (Census, 2000).

Lower than average median income, education levels and a disproportionate aging population have likely contributed to Douglas County's increasing poverty rate since 2000. While the state poverty rate stands at 11.6%, Douglas County's rate is 13.1% (Oregon State University, 2003). According to the Oregon Economic and Community Development Department, Douglas County is "severely distressed" partly due to per capita personal income, but also because of changes in employment, wages and unemployment rates (Oregon Community and Economic Development Department, 2006).

Industry and Employment: Economically, Douglas County has relied on timber both in terms of extraction and wood products manufacturing. Currently, 25% of the county population is employed in these sectors (Douglas County, 2006). In the nineties, timber related industries across the United States were squeezed as a result of both environmental protection and technological (less labor intensive) advances at wood mills. While employment in these sectors generally decreased during this time, timber based industry remained robust in Douglas County due to large amounts of privately owned timber land (OLMIS, 2004).

In terms of industry, Douglas County has diversified significantly over the past 10 years. As 50% of Douglas County land is federally owned, government continues to be a prominent employment sector. Additionally, services for the retirement population (e.g. assisted living, nursing) have increased as the result of the growing aging population. Retail and Service sectors have also increased with the expansion of the

Cow Creek Indian gaming facilities and growing technology support, including a call center for Dell and new Fiber Optic systems (OLMIS, 2005).

According to the Oregon Progress Board, Douglas County's unemployment rate is higher than Oregon's, and slightly higher than other rural counties in the state (2006). This unemployment is largely due to the decreases in timber extraction and manufacturing sectors.

Challenges in Community Development: Geography remains a significant barrier to Douglas County's efforts at community development. The county is "wide" so to speak, so the majority of cities within Douglas County are located away from the Interstate 5 corridor, and subsequently away from economic investment. As a result, communities near I-5 seem like booming metropolitan areas compared to their rurally isolated counterparts.

These discrepancies are reflected in local industry growth and subsequent employment opportunities. While Douglas County may be industrially diverse, many of the jobs are located in bigger towns such as Roseburg or Tri-City, with the rest scattered among smaller communities. Like other rural places across the U.S., many communities in Douglas County are reliant upon only a few industries (e.g. logging, wood manufacturing, tourism) to survive.

Data about unemployment, poverty, median income and budget share of housing illustrate these differences. Cities closest to I-5 (Roseburg and Tri City) tend to have higher per capita income, and lower rates of unemployment and family poverty. They also pay lower proportions of their incomes towards housing costs. One exception is the coastal community of Reedsport; while this city is not near I-5, it is located on Hwy 101, giving it unique exposure as well as an alternative industry base (e.g. coastal fishing).

	Unemployment	Per capita Income	Family Poverty	BSH[a]>30% Own	Rent
Reedsport	4.6%	$16,093	11.7%	26%	34.8%
Riddle	9%	$13,666	16.1%	18.2%	50.3%
Roseburg	4%	$17,062	11%	20.4%	30.8%
Sutherlin	4%	$13,439	12.4%	27.9%	40.2%
Tri-City	4.6%	$15,017	9.3%	20.9%	30.8%
Winston	5.1%	$13,299	13.7%	21.8%	33.6%

Data Source: Census, 2000.
a) Budget Share of Housing indicates percentage of housing budget devoted to housing costs

Exacerbating the problem of limited opportunity is lack of a transportation infrastructure. Cities like Riddle, although only 20 minutes from Roseburg, have no (or very limited) access to public transportation, making it difficult to get to I-5. Once a person reaches I-5 she or he can catch the bus that treks up and down the county—however, it only travels once a day. While many own their own vehicles, the rising price of fuel poses unique challenges to household budgets. Furthermore, the burden of undeveloped transportation is shouldered disproportionately among youth and their aging counterparts.

The lack of public transportation combined with the county's size presents unique challenges in social service delivery. Many of the service delivery centers are located at populated areas of the state (Roseburg, Tri-City, Reedsport) making it difficult for households in more remote areas to access services. This requires significant outreach on the part of more formal institutions (e.g. Department of Human Services) and/or utilization of more informal networks within these small communities.

III. Methodology

3

Interviews were conducted in two different phases. The initial participant population in this study consisted of key individuals in Douglas County who were most likely to come into regular contact with families and youth experiencing homelessness. These included personnel within the 14 school districts in Douglas County—primarily the district homeless liaisons, principals, counselors and teachers. Additionally, we spoke to community members who serve the homeless population including county officials, social service employees, religious leaders, shelter advocates, parents and previously homeless individuals. These interviews took place during the Summer of 2005.

Upon recommendation of the initial participant population, as well as displayed interest from the homeless youth community, the second participant population in our study consisted of youth within Douglas County *who identified themselves as homeless*.   Youth participants in this portion of the study were recruited through social service providers, community members and educators. Interviewed youth ranged in age from 12-18 years.   These interviews took place in the Spring of 2006

Both adult and youth respondents participated in individual interviews. Additionally, some youth participated in small (3-4 people) focus groups. Open-ended questions were similar for both populations; including topics about homeless definitions and community service provision (*see appendix*). All phases of this research were approved by the Oregon State University's Institutional Review Board to ensure the protection of human subjects.

IV. Findings Based on Interviews with Service Providers, Community Members and Educators

Every day social service agencies in Douglas County serve children and families with a multitude of problems. Because homeless and unaccompanied youth do not neatly fit into the categories of children or families, they can easily be overlooked and underserved (OHRY Work Group 2005, Hill 2003). While we identified a well established system of social service agencies in Douglas County, some service gaps became evident. The source of these gaps appear to be partly due to (a) the characteristics of homeless youth, (b) coordination of and communication between services and (c) the rural nature of Douglas County.

a. Challenges Due to Characteristics of Homeless Youth

"It takes more than one person to address youth homelessness - - because there's usually more than one issue that got them there." (Douglas County social service provider)

This observation resonates with current research which finds that homeless youth are often dealing with many issues beyond the lack of adequate, safe housing. Many are dealing with histories of child abuse or domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental illness. They are also unaccompanied, without the support of families or caring adults, making them vulnerable to more abuse (Moore 2005). Once youth enter homelessness, they must navigate a network of social services alone, often for the first time. They do not have the economic, social or emotional resources to care for their own needs, making important life decisions at a time of rapid psychological and physiological changes (Moore 2005). As a result, in addition to receiving services, youth also need help in accessing those services.

A major obstacle to providing services to homeless youth is identification. Homeless youth often are secretive and not willing to seek out the services that are available to them (Nord and Luloff 1995). In many cases, youth simply would not identify themselves as homeless, especially as worded in federal legislation such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act. If they have a bed and roof to sleep under, they will not always identify themselves as homeless, nor do they recognize their eligibility for the services offered. *"These youth are not always easy to work with because they do not necessarily want the assistance. They try*

very hard to stay invisible." (Douglas County school employee)

b. Challenges of Coordination and Communication among Services

A common theme in our talks with social service providers was the difficulty youth experienced in finding and accessing services.

"It's the transition times where kids fall through the cracks—the time spent between leaving home (becoming homeless) and waiting for help and/or services." (Douglas County social service provider)

Among social service agencies and personnel in Douglas County, there is a common lack of knowledge about what services are available for homeless youth and where those services can be accessed. The County has a toll-free information and referral line (*Warmline*) for youth and adults in Douglas County, but over half of the individuals we spoke to, including social workers, do not know it exists. Youth receive referrals at some agencies in Douglas County, but receiving referrals often depends on the individual they first encounter. Although there are a variety of services available, social service personnel are not all equipped to make those referrals. Some individuals are more knowledgeable than others, just as some agencies provide more assistance than others.   Respondents indicated that they had repeatedly asked for a full, updated, and easily accessible list of the services available for both youth and social service agencies throughout the county to aid in agency- and self-referrals.

In some cases youth become visible to the social service network only after they have gotten into trouble with the authorities. One social service provider spoke pointedly about this issue,

"Sometimes these kids need to be in dire straights and will first break the law to get noticed. Without that we can't take them, our hands are tied."

This same observation was made regarding homeless youth throughout the state of Oregon. A recent report from the Oregon Homeless and Runaway Youth Work Group (OHRYWG) found that:

> "Runaways are viewed as inappropriate for child protective services, and lack of
> funding as well as rules of access leave the majority outside of the mental health and
> child abuse protection systems. Juvenile probation concentrates on law violators, and it
> is not against the law for a teenager to be without a home. Except for falling under
> truancy laws or invocation of a little-used parental responsibility law requiring
> supervision of a minor, runaway and homeless youth don't fit neatly within any specific
> jurisdiction. As a result, most "official" doors are closed."
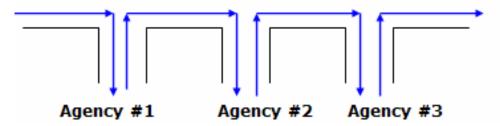> Oregon Homeless and Runaway Youth Work Group, 2005.

In Douglas County, we also found the current system for provision of social services to be disconnected. For first time users to the social service system (characteristic of many homeless youth), the disconnection proves intimidating. They usually know little of what or where services are available. Having to travel from agency to agency to access individual services proves to be a major obstacle for many youth.

Not only are they required to find transportation to or around Roseburg, but many youth are also met with questions by staff that they cannot answer. Unaccompanied and homeless youth are often missing important identification and documentation such as picture id and social security numbers. Others face obstacles accessing services because of parental notification requirements or simply because they are still considered dependents of parents they do not live with. When unaccompanied youth cannot produce the required identification, documentation, or parent signature, they do not always receive assistance in obtaining the required information. Social service providers indicated that youth eventually become tired and frustrated of

5

running from door-to-door and being turned away, and finally give up. Social workers report that youth become lost in the maze from one place to another. Workers can lose track of their clients, who then move on to find other alternatives for meeting their basic needs.

We provide a diagram that describes the model of the current social service network in Douglas County (Figure 1). It illustrates the path to services that youth must follow in order to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, health care, etc. Most social services within the County are located in Roseburg; however, they are not located within one central area. Therefore, youth must travel from one location to another in order to find services. For example, as in Figure 1, youth travel to Agency 1 for food stamps. Once they finish at the first agency, they must move on to Agency 2, which probably requires some method of transportation, to find help accessing health care. Then they move on to a shelter or the next agency. There is no guarantee that this process moves smoothly for youth, and after going from place to place, especially when some attempts prove futile, they become frustrated and lost, leading them to turn elsewhere for help.

Figure 1: Model of the social service network in Douglas County (2005)

School districts play a large role in the identification of unaccompanied and homeless youth. As a result, they also play a significant role in helping youth access services. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 requires all school districts to appoint a Homeless Liaison who has the responsibility of ensuring that the school district follows the requirements put forth in the McKinney-Vento Act. The Homeless Liaison is the district's point-of-contact for families, youth, teachers, and social service agencies in relation to homeless children. They ensure that homeless children and youth receive access to educational opportunities and social services. In some cases, the Liaison serves as an advocate for youth. However, they often face large caseloads in larger districts (such as Roseburg) and work part-time (resource officers/special ed job shares) in smaller districts. This means they spend much of their time taking care of school needs (identification, registration, supplies, teacher training and transportation) with little time left for community collaboration/advocacy.

In Douglas County, school districts approach unaccompanied and homeless youth differently. All districts have a policy in place that allows unaccompanied and homeless youth to register for school fairly easily. Some homeless liaisons are more involved and active than others. They work with teachers to identify unaccompanied and homeless youth. They also connect youth and their families to social service agencies. Homeless Liaisons develop local trainings for school personnel on how to identify and serve this vulnerable population. In some cases, they coordinate local events that collect and distribute school supplies, clothing, shoes, and personal hygiene items for youth and their families. However, even though there is a network of school district personnel within Douglas County working on the same issues facing unaccompanied and homeless youth, there is no consistent meeting at which they can share their experiences, their resources, or their challenges.

Despite some recent efforts to train teachers and school personnel around the county, there appears to still be a significant number of school employees who are not familiar with the definition or the signs of homelessness. This is much more prevalent in the smaller school districts who have fewer resources to offer training. There have been some successful efforts to coordinate such training opportunities within the County, but those trainings are primarily for teachers. Other school personnel, such as bus drivers and school

receptionists, are in a position to see some of the first signs of homelessness among children and youth. Yet the major training for identifying the signs of homelessness are for teachers and professional staff.

c. Challenges of Providing Services in Rural Areas

Homelessness in rural areas is harder to define and harder to find. Most people have a residence, but it can be inadequate, insecure, or intermittent. Research shows that rural individuals are more likely to seek help through informal social networks rather than seek out formal agencies (Fitchen 1992). Therefore, they sleep with friends, often called couch surfing, or rely on the faith-based community for basic needs. One of the things we found in Douglas County was that needs were not often met by the faith based community, and that the services that were offered were not coordinated, forcing youth into the same place-to-place conundrum found in the community at large.

As a result, the rural homeless in general are harder to find and harder to serve.

"When the kids here need something like food, clothes or shelter, they either beg for a ride to Roseburg or just go without." (Rural community member)

Transportation is the biggest obstacle to youth and rural residents in accessing the services Douglas County. Even the satellite offices in the smaller cities are too far for some residents without transportation to reach. Several respondents spoke of the bus service that travels the I-5 corridor between Winston and Sutherlin. They indicated that the bus schedule, primarily designed for commuters, discourages regular use of the service to access services in Roseburg. It is also only available to a limited number of places within Douglas County and remains inaccessible to people off the main corridor in smaller, isolated places.

IV. Findings Based on Interviews with Homeless Youth in Douglas County

Homeless youth identify a wide variety of issues when asked about the causes and their experiences of homelessness. However, particular themes emerged as prominent among youth and their families within Douglas County. Some of these concepts, such as inadequate housing, school issues, local service provision and substance abuse were similar to those mentioned by providers and educators—although many of the details varied from the interviews in Phase One. Other themes predominant among youth, such as concern over a growing sex industry, differed from the concerns mentioned by service providers and educators.

a. The Pivotal Role of "Home"

Multiple research studies indicate the effects of adequate, stable housing for children and youth—including safety, physical health, emotional well-being and school performance (Bratt, 2002; Haurin et. al, 2001). Interviews across Douglas County indicated that housing is foremost on the mind homeless individuals, regardless of age.

Youth and their families described to us the various housing conditions of homeless youth in both Roseburg and outlying areas of the county. Living in motels, cars, trailers by the river, shelters, the homes of others and "flophouses" seems to affect many aspects of these students' lives. Students in these conditions indicate they are often tired, cold, lack privacy, have no place to do homework, cannot have friends or relatives visit, do not catch the school bus (due to geography or embarrassment) and perceive themselves as sick more often.

One middle school student describes his experience living in a small car with his mother, her boyfriend, a younger brother and a newborn baby for 9 months in a Wal-Mart parking lot:

> *"It's tough to sleep in a car sitting up, with all the noise. It was hard not having a home to go to after school. [I was] too tired for school, and it is really hard to do homework."*

One young woman, a self-proclaimed future veterinarian, lives in a motel room with her siblings, mother and several pets:

> *"It is crowded enough, but then our dog just has to sleep in the bed with us too. [laughing] At least they get to be with us in the motel. We couldn't have brought them to a shelter."*

Other students describe the unfamiliarity and instability associated with living in foster care:

> *"My newest foster care family is nice, but before that…they'd [foster families] expect me to change right away, or be something I'm not. They wouldn't let me see my friends, or my family, or the people I was close to. So I would runaway, or tell my foster parents I had Herpes or AIDS so they'd ask to get rid of me."*

> *"Foster care can screw up a child, families. Most people are only willing to give a week or two of time. They need to find foster families that actually care about kids."*

While most readily acknowledge the disadvantages associated with sub-standard housing conditions, youth (and their families) were most vocal about the transition times consisting of the three months leading up to homelessness, as well as the 3 months after finding new housing. This "zone" of transition is reflected among youth as a time of fear and instability. Many families indicate that in addition to financial uncertainty, their dignity and rights (e.g. housing, parenting) are also compromised during these periods.

One of the threats associated with the transition zone is eviction. Most families lose any kind of housing rights as they struggle to make rent or mortgage payments in-full, and many express that assistance is only for those who have all ready "hit bottom." Some of the youth recall parents begging with landlords to make exceptions. When asked what could be done to help homeless youth, one 12 year old boy responded, *"Landlords need to give people a little extra time, and second chances."*

As standard tenant-landlord laws do not apply, housing rights are further diminished for those living in mobile homes—a growing alternative housing source for many families in poverty. One grandmother and daughter raising four children in a local mobile home park expressed:

> *"This park ain't too bad. The last place we was at took my daughter's trailer from us 'cause they said we didn't pay our fees. We went to UCAN [a local Community Action Agency] to try and get it back, but no one could help us 'cause it's a mobile home."*

Another challenge during the transition zone is parenting. Parental rights were frequently brought up when discussing housing stability—both from youth concerned about being "taken" from their parents, and adults worried about children being "taken away." Strategies are frequently employed to be sure no one knows about impending homelessness, including avoiding discussion with school or social service personnel. Youth voiced that keeping homelessness a secret posed unique challenges in the school setting.

b. Youth Homelessness and School

Whereas adults obtain necessary homeless services through local agencies and organizations, children rely largely on educators and school personnel to meet these needs. Within Douglas County, there are 14 school districts, each with resource staff or homeless liaisons to identify, assess and serve the needs of homeless students. During preliminary interviews, educators, service providers and community members indicated

that more homeless youth services were necessary within the schools. Many of the youth we talked with agree. However, homeless students also strongly suggested that current services may simply need improvement.

When discussing school, homeless youth are quick to point out day to day struggles. Getting to school on time is a challenge--particularly for students living in cars in hidden or remote areas, or for families who do not own alarm clocks. When students get to school they are often tired, and sometimes hungry, making it difficult for them to concentrate. The biggest challenge, however, is homework. For some students, homework becomes a low-level priority when stacked up against basic needs like food, housing and care of siblings. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is often no space, supplies or quiet to get homework done:

> *"It's tough to get homework done with all my brothers and sisters in one motel room. There is hardly anywhere to sit and it's really noisy. I sometimes give up and try to do it during school, but usually I just don't turn it in."*

Many students indicated that moving around has left them behind their classmates in terms of reading and math skills. Youth conclude that while some teachers are flexible in terms of late assignments and tardiness, most have too many students to help them "catch up" academically. As a result, many students get sent to the Learning Resource Centers or special education classrooms: *"They treat us like we're retarded because we're homeless. Then we still don't get any help with school."*

One homeless liaison said that due to a combination of funding issues, under-staffing and an increasing homeless population, "homelessness is treated like a disability" within the districts. This division is aggravated when students believe their homelessness is isolated. Upon arriving for an interview with us, one 12 year old student exclaimed happily *"I didn't know there were other homeless kids here. I thought I was the only one!"*

Both students and staff assert that segregating homeless youth during school years can have long-term negative effects on students. Many youth decide the effort "isn't worth it" and drop out before completing high school. Some lose their interest in learning altogether. Among the middle school females we spoke with, only two were contemplating education or skilled jobs after high school. Over half of the girls boasted of their child-rearing skills instead, exclaiming they couldn't wait to have families. Many could not yet make the connection between children, housing and money:

> *"I'm not too worried about finding work or going to school. As soon as I'm old enough, I'm going to marry my boyfriend and have 20 kids. I want to pop them out all at the same time, and have a big house."*

Youth have a variety of suggestions for bridging the academic gaps caused by homelessness, including homework help, tutoring and even just a "quiet, peaceful place to study." While some schools offer homework help or tutoring after school, many students have secondary barriers keeping them from obtaining assistance. Some are required to provide daycare for younger siblings until a parent returns from work. For others, transportation "home" may be limited to the district school buses, which leave directly after last classes of the day.

Similar to the responses in Phase One, homeless students suggested offering more curriculum based "life skills" classes, specifically pointed toward job training and mentoring opportunities. These types of programs, generally relegated to social organizations and agencies, may be more accessible to students within the schools--as many have difficulty obtaining these services in the community-at-large.

c. Challenges and Limits in Service Provision

Similar to many of the responses in the interviews with service providers and educators, youth identified several barriers to accessing services in the community. The primary obstacle for all youth is lack of transportation. Only one of the kids we talked to had access to a car, and could drive legally. The others are dependent upon friends, family or public transportation for mobility. This challenge is made worse for those youth who are rurally isolated. Many of the available services for homeless youth are centered in Roseburg or Reedsport—making it difficult for some youth to apply for or obtain the help they need:

> *"In order to get help from the state, we have to go to the next town over. Since it is a small office, we can only apply there, and then the paperwork has to be sent to Salem. So we have to wait a couple of weeks to get any help. It is a pain to take off school and get a ride, only to find out we have to wait."*

Unaccompanied youth face unique challenges in obtaining aid. Many are leaving home situations that are abusive or unsafe, yet they have difficulty accessing services without parental consent. Additionally, the unaccompanied teens we spoke with said that their requests for help are often met with judgment and/or conditions:

> *"We hid being homeless for a long time, because we were afraid of being judged. When we did go get help, it usually came with conditions. At one church, the help stopped when we didn't get more religious. I don't want to believe in God just because they are helping us."*

This sentiment was echoed among youth who had stayed in area shelters:

> *"They [shelter programs] make you cut off your ties to family and friends. They make you try to be someone you're not. I wouldn't stay there. I'd rather be on the streets."*

In formal institutions, such as state or county agencies, homeless youth repeatedly indicated the need for an advocate—someone that knows the system, "treats them like adults" and understands that youth can't always obtain necessary documents or parental permission without putting themselves in danger.

While the majority of service providers we interviewed indicate that service *coordination* is a challenge in Douglas County, youth unanimously felt that the lack of *consistency* within the social service network is more disturbing. The discretion that many social workers consider necessary to provide meaningful services to homeless families is considered "unfair" for many youth, who insist that certain families are favored over others:

> *"It isn't fair that not everyone gets help, and that some people waste the help they get. Everybody deserves a chance, so why do some people get a shot and others don't?"*

Furthermore, many of the youth (as well as homeless adults) feel that those whom agencies favor are usually the people who need help the least. The consensus among families on the street is that in an effort to "look good," many agencies and organizations choose to help those closest to overcoming homelessness in order to, as one youth said, *"brag about their success."*

Whereas community providers and homeless youth may have different ideas about how services are delivered, many agree that there are gaps in the kinds of assistance available to homeless youth. Most feel that while basic needs such as food, blankets and clothing are well covered, there is need for more emergency, transitional and permanent housing assistance. Most also agreed that more aggressive substance abuse prevention and treatment programs should be put in place due to the growing methamphetamine epidemic—however, justification for these services diverged among various groups in the community.

d. Methamphetamine and the Sex Industry

Substance abuse, particularly methamphetamine use, was a key issue brought up in all of our interviews, although the context varied between different groups within the community. While many of the law-enforcement or state agency providers felt that better treatment and prevention programs were necessary for *youth*, homeless youth and youth advocates supported substance abuse treatment for *parents* in the community. Among all of our interviews, youth agreed unanimously that, homelessness was usually the result or cause of drug abuse among parents, not youth:

> *"Most people blame the kids for being homeless. They think we run away because we're using drugs or getting in trouble. But most the times we're just trying to leave our houses because it isn't safe, or because our parents are screwed up."*

While youth homelessness may not be caused by substance abuse, a homeless liaison asserts that once a child leaves the home, the chances of them getting "caught up in Meth" are high. She states that many dealers in the community offer unaccompanied youth a place to sleep, showers and a sense of safety in hopes of accessing more underage users. Even more frightening is the connection between methamphetamine use and sexual abuse. Interviewed youth speak of friends who exchange sex for food and shelter after getting "hooked on Meth." One service provider supported these claims, explaining the link between methamphetamines and sexual abuse:

> *"Methamphetamines cause a loss of sexual inhibition. Teens are less likely to resist, and adult meth users are more likely to take advantage. This is particularly true with homeless youth who are exploited because they are desperate to meet basic needs."*

Sexual crimes are not limited to substance abuse. One district homeless liaison asserts that she has seen an increase of prostitution over the past couple years—particularly among younger middle-school girls. This includes young girls getting "primed for prostitution" through pornography and sexual abuse before getting pimped out to people beyond the abuser. One 13 year old girl we spoke with had already been prostituting for three years, along with her mother:

> *"My mom hustled just to get money and keep us warm. She didn't have an ordinary life, and she used drugs. But we know lots of people who protected us, stayed at a lot of flop houses."*

While there are substance abuse programs in place, no one was aware of a program specifically designed to offer prostitution alternatives, sexual abuse counseling or sexual assault services. While our sample was not large enough to make sweeping conclusions about the nature of sexual abuse among homeless youth in Douglas County, the prominence of the issue among interviewees may warrant consideration in community conversations about solutions to homelessness.

e. Ending Youth Homelessness: In the Words of Youth

Everywhere we went, from flophouses to campgrounds, from schools to the street, we found a fierce, unconditional loyalty among homeless youth and their families. Many families say they learn from and help each other out. They applaud each others' efforts, even in the face of numerous setbacks:

> *"We help out, learn from each other. At the shelter, we help with other people's kids. Some people don't always do the right things, or have bad luck. But we can still help them out."*

A resident at a local flophouse echoed this sentiment:

> *"We all get drunk and high, but one of our guys, he's trying real hard to get sober. We all congratulate him, help him out when we can. We don't all have the same ideas, but we gotta help each other out…cause there ain't no one else who will help us."*

When asked what the community could do to help and support homeless families, the responses reflected common sentiments:

> *"I don't think that it is an issue of whether or not people don't know what homeless is. They just don't care."*

> *"I've been spit on walking home, looked at funny. Some of the kids are bad, but I've never done that kind of stuff. Homeless people need respect like everyone else."*

> *"A lot of the help we got was a result of curiosity. People just wanted to see what a homeless kid was like, or be able to tell their friends they helped a homeless family. They always help to a point, until they get to know you."*

Many of the families and youth we interviewed appreciate the advances made in the community to help homeless youth and their families, but feel that mainstream efforts lack a key component: respect. One 18 year old told her story of escaping a violent home, traveling across the United States, living on the river for a year, going to school and graduating near the top of her class. She asserts:

> *"People need to let us tell our stories. I'm still homeless, but I'm living. Look at all I've done with the help of other people! We need to be allowed to put ourselves out there."*

All of the youth we spoke with not only acknowledged they have something to offer to the community discussion about youth homelessness, but wanted to be engaged in finding a solution.

V.   How Does This Study Fit Within What We Already Knew? A Brief Review of Recent Research

Recent research about services to homeless youth provides context for and insights into the research we completed in Douglas County. In this report we do not provide a detailed account of each individual study, nor a summary of the full body of social science literature pertaining to homelessness, but rather we synthesize the existing recent literature about rural youth homelessness going back to 1999. In general, we observe that there is little quality research available on <u>rural</u> homeless youth services and only minimal resources that describe 'best practices. But the mostly urban-based research provides some assistance in interpreting the results of our Douglas County interviews. Our results from interviews with Douglas County homeless youth and service providers yield data that is often consistent with the claims made in the existing literature, but which raise important additional concerns.

The most informative research comes from a wide variety of English-language social science journals, many with an international scope reporting on youth homelessness not only in the U.S., but also in Canada, England and Australia. Many of these studies focus on why homeless youth leave home. For example, earlier this year Australian researchers (Rosenthal, et.al. 2006) published a report documenting 18 different reasons that young people become homeless. "Conflict with parents" was the most common reason provided by homeless youth who were interviewed, but the remainder of the reasons documented ranged from abuse and neglect at home to tastes for adventure and independence. The previous year, a Los Angeles, California study examined transitions into homelessness, interviewing 50 homeless youth (Hyde 2005). The author points out that homeless youth do not only point to circumstances that push them from the home, but also emphasize their own 'agency,' or sense that they made independent decisions to leave their families. *The*

observations in these two recent studies resonate with findings in our report, where students often speak of choosing to leave their homes (agency) because of problems with parents (often related to parental drug use).

Other recent researchers have lamented the lack of studies about youth homeless service utilization (Milburn et.al. 2005), claiming that "most research has focused on the individual characteristics of homeless young people, yet contextual factors such as service delivery are crucial to understanding this population's pathways in and out of home or stable accommodations." They would appear to have anticipated our project in Douglas County, claiming that "to understand the pathways that enable young people to exit homelessness and become safely housed, we ... need better *descriptive and evaluation information that accurately reflects the perspectives of service providers and clients.*" (*emphasis added*) Other research suggests that there is inconsistency between what services youth perceive as important and what agencies serving those youth see as important (Moore 2005). These issues are in fact the substance of our report about Douglas County.

Earlier projects (De Rosa, et.al. 1999) reported that in urban areas, drop-in centers and shelters "were the most commonly used services" of homeless youth, finding that substance abuse and mental health services were not highly utilized. Very recent research confirms this pattern (Carlson et.al. 2006). The earlier De Rosa study included interviews with homeless youth, reporting that young people had "generally positive reactions to services," but the youth described "barriers ... including rules perceived to be restrictive, and concerns ... about confidentiality and mandated reporting." The authors went on to say, "Youth suggested improvements including more targeted services, more long-term services, revised age restrictions, and more and/or better job training and transitional services to get them off the streets." *We note that these are not the primary issues addressed by Douglas County youth. However, the observation of 'generally positive reactions to services' is not inconsistent with the opinions expressed by the homeless youth we interviewed.*

Not surprisingly, the social work literature targeting social work professionals has provided many calls for improved coordination between services and for more analysis of how different services, programs, agencies, and policies interact. For example, the observed overlap between homelessness and involvement in the child welfare system in urban areas suggests the need for coordination between the child welfare system and services to those who are homeless or are in danger of homelessness (Park et.al. 2004) Other literature emphasizes this issue of providing successful, efficient services through a "connected" and coordinated network. This connected system better serves youth, but also assists agencies in obtaining a more accurate count of the homeless population (Moore 2005, Goodfellow and Parish 2000). There is little reason to assume these claims, usually made for urban situations, are any less relevant to rural areas. Douglas County is likely not alone among other rural counties in the challenges it faces to better coordinate services.

Evaluation research regarding best practices and evidence-based assessment of programs is not readily available for understanding rural homeless youth, especially in academic journals. Excellent work has been compiled by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, especially in their materials about rural homelessness (NAEH 2006). A recent study provides an assessment of how strategic partnerships between a non-profit shelter and the Department of Human Services led to inexpensive services yielding positive outcomes (Van Leeuwen 2004). This emphasis on strategic partnerships is very consistent with the Douglas County situation and with the state-level goals of public/private partnerships to eliminate homelessness. Another recent study (Cloke et.al. 2000) describes "the importance of 'partnership' and 'policy networks' in the new contemporary governance of rural areas." They describe a setting in England where "partnership networks have been brokered by the local authority which bring together a wide range of business, voluntary and community interests with a stake in the homelessness issue." However, they warn that *such efforts will fail if efforts are primarily decorative and rhetorical, lacking mobilization of new resources to provide effective services.* These same authors provide additional insights into the unique nature of homelessness in rural places in a subsequent article (Cloke et al. 2001) pointing out that rural homelessness is often not considered to be a problem by rural civic leaders because of its physical invisibility and because of an idyllic

view of small town life where such things just "don't happen". We did not interview the general public in Douglas County to determine what people in general think about this topic, but it appears, based on the interest in this commissioned study, that many stakeholders in the county do wish to collaborate to address what is increasingly understood to be a real issue in this rural county.

Finally, do services to homeless youth actually have the positive effect we would hope for? We found no recent evaluation research on long-term effects of shelters, health services, and other programs, especially for youth. However, a fairly recent study demonstrated that short-stay shelters seem to improve short term outcomes for youth (Thompson et.al. 2002). They found that 6 weeks after the end of a short term shelter stay, youth were more likely to be enrolled in school and/or employed, and less likely to be in school detention or sexually active. These outcomes were essentially the same improvements that were observed for long-term treatment programs, suggesting at the very least, the efficiency of temporary shelters. Their study focused on urban shelters in the Midwestern U.S., but there is little reason to suspect that shelters in rural communities like Douglas County would be less effective.

VI. Conclusions Based on Our Interviews and Other Recent Research Literature

Our interviews with social service providers and homeless youth, along with available current research literature, lead us to the following set of conclusions.

Issues over which homeless youth and social service providers generally agreed

a) *They agreed that they often do not see 'eye to eye'.* That is, there is a disconnect between service providers and the homeless youth they serve regarding the challenges of helping homeless youth. This means that there remains a need for greater inclusion of youth in discussing how to help homeless youth, a suggestion emphasized in research literature.
b) *There are serious limitations to the current services which are aimed at complex needs.* Because agencies need to spend limited funds efficiently, they serve those who are closest to overcoming homelessness. However, such provision overlooks the people who need long-term, holistic services that require careful collaboration and likely more resources (money, time, personnel). Youth and social service providers both see the issue and are both frustrated by it.
c) *Douglas County faces barriers related to the county's geography and infrastructure*, most obviously seen in the problems related to transportation and available resources in the more remote parts of the county. This challenge emphasizes the need for outreach in these more distant rural communities.
d) *Many services are working, but just need to be bolstered.* Service providers and youth agree that homeless liaisons in the schools do important work, but liaisons are unable to devote as much time as may be needed to advocate for homeless youth. There is an agreed upon need for greater availability of shelters with more space and staff, and with less restrictive eligibility requirements.
e) *Drug use by parents is a common source of youth homelessness in Douglas County*. Hence, while drug use among youth is a source of concern, it is important for service providers to think strategically about where to target help and recognize how youth are sometimes making reasonable but difficult choices to avoid their parents' homes. Current research literature emphasizes the 'agency' of homeless youth meaning that they are not just thrust into homelessness, but they may choose it over an even worse alternative in the parental home.

Issues over which homeless youth and social service providers generally disagreed

a) *Homeless youth emphasize consistency of services while service providers emphasize coordination.* While both groups acknowledge both of these issues, youth see problems with services being issues of consistent, fair treatment of all homeless youth, particularly in terms of the discretion granted to service providers. But providers tend to focus on issues of county-wide coordination.
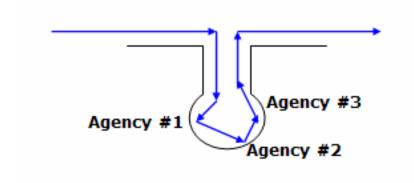
b) *Service providers emphasize* <u>program</u> *coordination and extension while youth view the issues as* <u>people</u> *issues, where they ask for respect, understanding, and community involvement.* Of course, these go hand in hand, but the focus in terms of our interviews was very distinct.

c) *Youth, more than service providers, are concerned about lack of youth services related to sexual assault, sexual abuse, and prostitution.* Generally service providers were not attending to this issue while youth spoke of it often.

Some initial implications

We observe that some of these conclusions describe service provision that could be fairly readily improved. Some require little money, others require new financial commitments. We highlight three, not to claim that these are the most urgent or strategic solutions, but to illustrate that the observations from this report may lead to useful changes.

First, the consistent concern about information sharing appears to be an organizational problem that could be solved with more regular, consistent meetings of service providers and a relatively small investment of time by only a few people to make sure information is widely distributed to anyone who may be in contact with homeless youth. Second, youth who do make first contact with social services need a more coordinated and efficient way to quickly access all, or at least more of, the services available to them. Available resources will dictate possible solutions, ranging from development of a one-stop location that has all this information (see Figure 2) to improving mobile delivery of needed information through outreach of fully informed service providers.

Figure 2: A coordinated model for the social service network in Douglas County

Third, in the process of developing community based (and not just professional, agency-delivered) services to homeless youth, it remains important to include in the planning process a broad cross section of the community, including youth, whether they be homeless or at risk of homelessness. The lack of common understanding of the problem, and of the solutions, between homeless youth and those who wish to assist them demonstrates that well-intentioned help from active community members can be misguided or can be misunderstood by the people they seek to help. Having youth regularly involved in the discussions of what to do would help solve this problem.

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Appendices

Appendix A: On the Challenges of Estimating the Number of Rural Homeless Youth in Douglas County

Appendix B: Questionnaires Used in Douglas County Interviews

Appendix A: On the Challenges of Estimating the Number of Rural Homeless Youth in Douglas County

Counting homeless people is notoriously difficult. It is even more difficult in rural areas. As recently as October 2006, federal officials admitted that rural homelessness has "been difficult to assess because rural communities by and large have not chronicled their problems with the data-heavy planning documents..." required by federal agencies (New York Times; October 11). We need not expand at length on all the reasons for why it is difficult to accurately count homeless people, and especially rural residents, but it is important to understand how estimates, guesses, counts, and predictions are likely to miscount homeless youth. In this appendix we do not offer an estimate of the number of Douglas County homeless youth, but articulate how available data may misrepresent the scope of the problem.

In the absence of clear definitions of what constitutes homelessness, it is impossible to count. All may agree that a teenager living under a freeway overpass is homeless, but many may disagree over whether a teenager temporarily sleeping on his uncle's couch is homeless. In the federal McKinney-Vento Act, good progress was made in institutionalizing a definition of homelessness. According to the Act, "homeless children and youths"--

> (A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1) [of the Act]); and (B) includes--(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement; (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C)); (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and (iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

Homeless liaisons, using this definition, assist schools in identifying the number of youth in these categories. For various reasons it is likely that official numbers reported by schools will under-count homeless youth in rural counties. First, homeless liaisons will not always be alerted when students' housing situations change, especially when they remain informal such as doubling up at the homes of extended family or with friends. Second, youth often do not wish to be identified as homeless because of embarrassment about their family situation or about being in what seems like an abnormal, 'deviant' situation. Third, as we indicate in our report, homeless liaisons often have multiple job tasks beyond trying to identify homeless youth, and hence do not have the time to locate the less-obvious cases. This may especially be the case in more remote rural school districts where resources are even more constrained. Fourth, in more remote rural places where schools are smaller, youth may be even more reluctant to be identified as out-of-the-ordinary and hence go to even greater lengths to hide their situation. It is important to recognize that these observations about what leads to under-counting do not provide a basis for criticism of youth or homeless liaisons, but rather they emphasize how mundane things like 'looking normal among your friends' and doing all the things in one's job description can conspire to hide a problem like youth homelessness.

Hence, while the McKinney Vento definitions and methods for counting are better than other approaches that are often used (shelter counts, service utilization rates), and are more easily obtained than expensive

processes (e.g., "street sweep" counts, advance sampling techniques, etc.), it should be recognized that the official numbers are likely to be under-estimates of the extent of the problem.

Appendix B: Questionnaires Used in Douglas County Interviews

Questions for Educators, Social Service Providers and Community-Members

You have been referred to us as someone who is familiar Homeless Youth in this community. What is your specific position/role with this population? (e.g. educator, parent, service provider, etc).

What direct services do you offer to homeless youth in Douglas County?

How would you define homelessness as it pertains to youth? What "criteria" need to be fulfilled in order for a youth to be considered "homeless."

Based on the definition you gave us, how often do you come into contact with homeless youth on a weekly/monthly/yearly basis?

The State of Oregon identifies homeless youth as those minors who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. It includes children and youth who:

are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement; have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and migrant children and youth (as defined under NCLB Title IC – Migrant Education) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described above.

(If above definition differs from Answer to Question #3) Based on the State's definition, how often do you come into contact with homeless youth on a weekly/monthly/yearly basis?

Do you feel that this definition is widely accepted among educators? Social Service providers? Parents? Community at large?

What percentage of the homeless youth you serve meet the following criteria:
___In a motel
___In a shelter
___With more than one family in a house or apartment
___Moving from place to place
___In a place not designed for ordinary sleeping accomdations such as a car, park, or campsite

Which of the above groups is the most difficult to identify and why?

Once identified, which of the above groups is most difficult to serve? Why?

What are some of the common characteristics you see amongst Homeless Youth in Douglas County? Are there any characteristics that you believe are county specific? Why?

How do you learn about the homeless youth whom you (teach/assist/provide services)?

How do homeless youth learn about you?

How well do communities and schools work together to identify and serve homeless youth in the community?

How would you characterize the relationship between parents of homeless youth and educators/school administration in the community? Between social service providers and parents?

What tools would enhance your ability to provide services to the homeless youth population within Douglas County?

What current services/organizations within the community do you feel are most effective for identifying and serving homeless youth?

What services (within the following areas) do you feel could be improved upon to better serve homeless or at-risk youth in this community:
schools/education:
social services:
community at large:

Is there anything else you think would help us in assessing youth homelessness in Douglas County?

Is there anyone in the community you would recommend we talk to regarding homeless youth? (educators, officials, formerly homeless students, parents, etc)

As part of our study, we are employing an anonymous "needs assessment" that asks participants to gauge the level of school/community services available to homeless youth and their families. It takes about five minutes to complete, and we have provided a stamped return envelope. Would you be willing to take a few minutes to complete this assessment at your earliest convenience?

Can we call you if we have any further questions or need further clarification?

Are you interested in receiving a copy of our completed report?

Questions for Homeless Youth

1. What do you think being homeless means?

2. What do adults in Douglas County think "homeless" means?

3. In your opinion, what types of services do homeless youth in Douglas County need the most?

4. Who have you received services from in Douglas County? What did you like about these people/agencies/organizations?

5. Who have you *not* received services from in Douglas County? Why haven't you received help from these people/agencies/organizations?

6. Have you sought any faith-based programs while homeless in Douglas County? Were you satisfied with your experience? Why or why not?

7. What one thing could Douglas County do to make it easier for you to transition back home or into permanent housing?

8. If you could tell everyone in this county anything about homeless youth, what would it be?

9. If you could tell leaders in this county how to help homeless youth, what would you tell them?

10. Is there anything else you think we should know?