

Homeless Programs Hit Skid Row

Why more agencies are cutting back or shutting down.

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by *John Kelly*

Last month, Vicki Wagner took a call from the National Council on Accreditation, which was trying to find a particular nonprofit that had expressed interest in getting accredited. That nonprofit was a member of the National Network for Youth, which Wagner leads, and the council hoped Wagner could track down a phone number for the group.

Wagner called the number she had and was confronted with the chilling sound of an endlessly ringing telephone. Seemingly overnight, she said, a provider of runaway and homeless youth services had vanished.

It is not quite that dire for the majority of organizations serving runaway and homeless youth (RHY) populations, many of which would find it odd not to face financial extinction on an annual basis. But from top to bottom, the stability of the runaway and homeless youth services infrastructure appears shaky.

The federal agency that helps fund RHY programs, the Family Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), has been without permanent leadership for years. Wagner's National Network, which has long been the communicator between the field and FYSB, faces what she sees as serious but manageable financial problems. And all of it is happening while programs that work with youth on the streets say the number of clients is swelling while program budgets are shrinking.

A recent survey of 20 RHY programs in eight Southeastern states showed that 19 of 20 saw a noteworthy increase in clients. Meanwhile, 17 of the programs had to cut staff, 16 reported a loss or elimination of state funding, 12 reported a loss of city grants, and 13 reported a loss or elimination of foundation grants. None reported receiving even the same level of funding as last year.

Cuts Have Impact

The kids who are homeless in Ann Arbor, Mich., are usually from there. "They're running from a dangerous situation at home, aging out of foster care, they got kicked out of the house because they were gay or lesbian," said Ozone House Executive Director Katie Doyle, ticking off the usual circumstances that bring youths to her organization.



Vicki Wagner: Not going away

More are coming this year than before, she said, and they “tend to have needs that take us a lot longer to help with and are more complex.” Ozone struggles to help them with two basic needs – jobs and cheap housing – because students at the University of Michigan eat up a lot of both in Ann Arbor.

Doyle attributes the increase to the effect of the recession on families.

For service providers, she said, there couldn’t be a worse year for a spike in clients; at Ozone House, fundraising is down nearly 30 percent from 2008.

Foundation grants “we’ve counted on for 30 to 35 years, we’re struggling to re-up,” she said. Ozone’s federal grant from FYSB was half as much this year as it used to be, and the organization was skipped entirely last year.

There are similar stories all over: In Dallas, Promise House has rarely been in the red since Harriet Boorhem took over in 2001. She credits her development director, Judith Wright, who helped her take a program funded almost entirely by federal and state funds and buffer it with foundation and donor support, which now makes up 25 percent of the budget.

But the recession had Promise House staring at a possible \$500,000 deficit to end 2009, until several foundations pooled to provide close to \$200,000 in emergency funding. That, and staff members who took a 10 percent pay cut, kept the doors open, Boorhem said.

Those employees have to do more while they make less. Promise House has seen 1,000 more clients than it did last year, with a huge uptick in kids coming in right off the street. In the past, she said of youths on the street, “We almost always have to go find them.”

FYSB Struggles

With state funds for social programs expected to wither around the nation, money and training from the federal government will become proportionately more important. The current state of FYSB management leaves many in the field wondering if the agency is up to the challenge.

Curtis Porter is the civil servant in charge of FYSB’s youth services division, but he has had to fill in at higher positions since 2004. He was acting deputy associate commissioner for former FYSB Associate Commissioner Harry Wilson, then became acting associate commissioner in 2007 when Karen Morison, who was brought in by the Bush administration to replace Wilson, was jettisoned from the position 40 days after she accepted it.

But if you want to speak to the highest-ranking person at FYSB, you call Porter’s second-in-command, Debbie Powell. She (like Porter) is a civil servant and not a political appointee. And because Powell is the higher-ranking civil servant, she will become Porter’s boss once the president appoints someone to the FYSB post.

When will that happen? It's anyone's guess.

Carmen Nazario was confirmed only in late September to run the Administration for Children and Families, the parent agency for FYSB at the Department of Health and Human Services. The nominee to fill the post that lies at the level between Nazario and FYSB – Bryan Samuels, who would be commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) – has not yet been confirmed. President Barack Obama has yet to announce someone to head FYSB, so it could be months before someone takes permanent residence at the agency.

"I love Obama, but it's really disappointing" that he hasn't appointed someone to FYSB yet, Wagner said.

That has left pretty much everyone in the homeless/runaway services field unhappy. Wagner would like to see FYSB address the current thresholds on its RHY grants, which force providers to compete every year for funds. That process creates a lot of extra administrative work and leaves veteran programs vulnerable to less-proven organizations with what Wagner describes as a "hot grant writer."

A change to multi-year agreements would go a long way toward remedying that situation, but that change is unlikely to happen under interim leadership, Wagner said.

Runaway and homeless providers voiced their frustration with FYSB's communication with the field at a recent meeting in Washington, according to notes from the meeting obtained by Youth Today. Providers also noted that a "disconnect exists between federal RHY funding and other ... funding sources," such as state grants, which means "programs are pulled in different directions regarding standards [and] best practices."

Another major frustration with FYSB stems from the reorganization of its training and technical assistance services. The agency abandoned a regional approach – which entailed grants to regional providers to train and assist RHY sites – for a system that runs through one training center, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center (RHYTTAC).

RHYTTAC is operated by the National Resource Center for Youth Services (NRCYS) at the University of Oklahoma, Tulsa..

RHYTTAC, which is just entering its third year of operation, develops training curricula and dispatches its slate of trainers from around the country. But the feedback on that approach has been less than stellar, said Jim Bolas, who goes to programs around the country to provide training on street outreach for RHYTTAC.

Audiences are "voicing concern that the stuff is too generic," said Bolas, director of education at New York's Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services. The training sessions "don't meet the specific needs of the region or state."

Bolas preferred the regional approach, but said if the single contractor approach is what FYSB intends to keep, it needs have diversified curricula.

“Are they taking into account border issues?” Bolas mused. “Because I don’t know anything about that.”

RHYTTAC leaders say they have received feedback both ways in the first two years.

“Looking at the spectrum, you get some people saying ‘it’s too generic for me,’ and we get evaluations saying ‘it’s the best training I’ve ever been to,’ ” said NRCYS Associate Director Kristi Charles.

“You have a project that was going differently for 20 years,” said NRCYS Director Peter Correia. “It’s taking a while to right the ship.”

The existing curricula are set up so that “if you’re learning in California or Maine, you’re getting at least the core values,” he added.

RHYTTAC has had to adjust to the economic realities of the field. Fewer programs than ever can spare the expense of traveling for events, Correia said, and even if they could, with their depleted ranks, they can’t afford to lose staff for days at a time.

“The country looked different” when RHYTTAC proposed to manage training and technical assistance for FYSB, Correia said.

RHYTTAC has responded, he said, with more online learning opportunities and training of trainers, so that some programs can develop new staff immediately, rather than waiting for the next visit from a RHYTTAC trainer.

Network struggles

At the agencies in Ann Arbor and Dallas, Doyle and Boorhem say they are cutting any cost that is remotely frivolous this year, but neither would put long-term membership to the National Network for Youth in that category.

The network offers member organizations tangible benefits, including access to a national unemployment trust, discounts on accreditation and group purchasing. But Ozone House doesn’t take advantage of those, Doyle said; it’s the advocacy in Washington that she values.

“The knowledge of the advocacy role,” Doyle said. “We don’t do that.”

“I can’t be in D.C. all the time,” said Boorhem, who said the network’s efforts on that front have been stellar since it reorganized and created a policy council in 1995.

The largest feather in the network's cap will always be having prevented RHY money from becoming a block grant 25 years ago, according to Wagner. Asked for more recent accomplishments, she lists a few:

- Increasing the threshold for funding the three major RHY funding streams during reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act last year.
- Obtaining funds to help outreach and enrollment with homeless youth, to connect them with Medicaid or children's health insurance programs, written into a House version of the health care reform bill (H.R. 3200).
- Securing a Government Accountability Office study of FYSB, which many expect will air some of the concerns the field has had with the agency.

But the network is in the same funding gulch as its members, which include about 200 organizations and 300 individuals.

Organizational stability has never been the calling card of the network. Former Executive Director Della Hughes took the bulk of network projects that garnered foundation grants with her when she left for Brandeis University in 2000, and she remained on the payroll for months after her departure.

The network spent the next two years in leadership flux. Interim directors from the staff and the board gave way to Brenda Russell, the unanimous choice of the network's search committee in 2002, who was dumped by the board within a year.

Wagner signed on as permanent executive director in 2004, and has continued to travel between her office in Washington, D.C., and her home life in Washington state.

Since then, she said, the fiscal strategy has been to get the network back into foundation pipelines while picking up short-term debt to get long-term expenses off the books. Most of the financial problems were rooted in "physical locations," Wagner said, "ridiculous lease amounts and stuff."

Things were headed in the right direction when Wagner was blindsided by the news that the network would not be renewed for a \$400,000 annual grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service, of which the network kept \$200,000 and distributed \$200,000 to members.

Another federal grant – from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for \$320,000 a year – now represents 30 percent of the network's budget and is up for renewal in May.

The network will let go of most of its administrative staff to soften the blow to its budget, Wagner said, and she will take a pay cut. Her main force on Capitol Hill, Terry Modglin, will

work half-time for the network. Wagner has given up her Washington apartment and lives with the sad irony that she will be couch-surfing, like so many of the youths she has advocated for.

Despite those cuts, Wagner said she expects the network to provide the same federal advocacy presence it did last year.

“We’re having the same sorts of problems” as other providers and advocates, said Wagner, who played the survival game for years as director of a Seattle shelter, before she joined the network. “It doesn’t mean we’re going away, by any means.”