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**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Policy Analyst
At the Public Hearing Roundtable on the
End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act of 2014
District of Columbia Committee on Human Services
May 7, 2014**

Chairman Graham and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a policy analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on how policies impact low-and-moderate income families.

I am here today to testify in support of the End Youth Homelessness Amendment Act of 2014.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) reports that though much is unknown about youth homelessness, particularly the numbers of youth affected and the comparative effectiveness of different interventions, enough is known to set 5 targets that communities should work towards.¹ These are:

- Improve the crisis response.
- Prioritize family reunification or support as the initial intervention.
- Improve data collection and performance measurement.
- Collaborate with mainstream systems such as child welfare and juvenile justice.
- Expand the reach and effectiveness of transitional living programs.

DCFPI is thrilled that the legislation as introduced explicitly addresses the first three targets and includes activities that should address the last two targets. DCFPI encourages the Council to consider these targets as they contemplate changes to the legislation.

Improving the crisis response. NAEH reports that “youth are regularly turned away without a place to sleep.”² This has certainly been the case in the District, when providers reported that nearly 300 youth seeking emergency shelter were turned away in February 2013. The legislation requires the establishment of a coordinated entry system (CES) for homeless youth to facilitate entry into shelter or other programs. Additionally the legislation requires a system for tracking utilization rates and turn-aways across service providers. Both of these provisions should prevent turn-aways in the future. The CES will ensure youths are directed to programs they qualify for and have openings.

¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH). *Youth*. <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/youth>

² NAEH. *An Emerging Framework for Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness*. http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/1c46153d87d15eaaff_9zm6i2af5.pdf

Tracking utilization and turn-aways will help the District evaluate whether capacity is sufficient and whether resources need to be shifted among programs.

Additionally, the legislation mandates the creation of a street outreach program, tasked with identifying youth in need of shelter or other services. Street outreach serves an invaluable role — it allows service providers to build relationships with youth who may be hesitant to ask for help. These established relationships build trust and make it more likely that a youth will pursue services.

Finally, the legislation ensures that the District’s primary crisis response plan, the Winter Plan, will explicitly consider the needs of youth. During our testimony on the fiscal year (FY) 2014 Winter Plan, DCFPI expressed concern that the Winter Plan did not outline what would happen if the number of youth in need of emergency shelter outstripped the capacity on a hypothermic night. And that as a result, youth might end up outside during hypothermic weather, at-risk for cold weather injury and death. DCFPI strongly supports the clarification that the right to shelter guaranteed by the Homeless Services Reform Act (HSRA) applies to all District residents, regardless of age. With this clarification, the FY 2015 Winter Plan will have to outline procedures to be implemented if need outstrips capacity.

Prioritizing family reunification or support as the initial intervention. NAEH reports that interventions aimed at reuniting homeless youth with their families or with improving family relationships “improve a number of outcomes for youth aside from housing, including improvements in mental health and decreases in risky behaviors and suicidal thoughts.”³ Regardless of whether a youth is able to return to the family home, family connections are a vital support system for youth. This legislation supports this target by requiring the creation of a comprehensive Plan to End Youth Homelessness that includes recommendations for a grant-based family reunification program.

Improving data collection and performance measurement. NAEH reports that data on the number of homeless youth is weak and that performance data is preliminary or non-existent. This legislation requires an extended homeless youth count, a community-wide needs assessment, an analysis of strategies that have been successful in reducing youth homelessness, and an outcome tracking system. These activities will ensure that the District has the best possible estimates of the need and is implementing the most effective programs.

Collaborate with mainstream systems such as child welfare and juvenile justice. NAEH reports that “it is clear that the foster care system and other state-run institutions play a key role in youth homelessness. Young people aging out of the foster care system often do not have the resources to transition safely and productively into their communities”⁴ Homeless youth are also vulnerable to having contact with the juvenile justice system. This is because of a variety of reasons including:

- involvement in crime to meet basic needs, such as stealing food;
- involvement in illegal but noncriminal activities that other homeless individuals engage in, such as sleeping in public or loitering;

³ Ibid.

⁴ NAEH. *Youth Solutions*. http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/youth_solutions

- untreated mental health disorders; and
- sexual abuse and exploitation.⁵

Additionally, youth offenders, who were not homeless at the time of their offense may become homeless because their families will not house them upon their release or because youth cannot return home because of prohibitions regarding individuals convicted of certain crimes from living in public or Section 8 housing.

The legislation requires the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) to develop a Plan to End Youth Homelessness. As Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) is a member of the ICH, coordination with that agency will likely be part of the Plan. The Department of Youth Rehabilitations Services (DYRS) is not a member of the ICH so the Council should consider whether the agency should be specifically named in the legislation as a partner engaged in the creating the Plan to End Youth Homelessness.

Expanding the reach and effectiveness of transitional living programs. NAEH reports that many vulnerable youth who are not able to reunify with their families are also not able to access the services they need, such as transitional housing.⁶ They also report that high barriers to entry or strict program requirements may mean that the youth most in need. The legislation requires that the Interagency Council on Homelessness investigate strategies that have been most successful with youth and requires that the Coordinated Entry System place youth into transitional housing and track their outcomes. These activities should lead to an increase in the number of transitional housing slots if data confirms the need for these slots. Outcome data should lead to improvements in program design, if needed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

⁵ Fernandes Alcantara, Adrienne. NAEH. *Improving the Response to Youth In and Out of the Juvenile Justice System*. July 2011. <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/6.8-improving-the-response-to-youth-in-and-out-of-the-juvenile-justice-syst>

⁶ NAEH. *An Emerging Framework for Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness*. http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/1c46153d87d15eaaff_9zm6i2af5.pdf