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Evaluation of the HOPE Act: New State Services for Street Youth Second Interim Report: First Two Program Years

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1999, the Washington State Legislature passed the HOPE Act, establishing two new service programs for older street youth who have no family support and for whom foster placements have not been successful. **HOPE Centers** are residential facilities where youth may stay for up to 30 days while being evaluated for appropriate placement, education, and treatment services, including family reconciliation if possible. **Responsible Living Skills Programs (RLSPs)** provide long-term residential placement and assistance in obtaining educational and health services along with training in independent living skills.

The Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to evaluate HOPE Act programs, focusing on characteristics of youth served, services provided, and outcomes of participation. This second interim report is based on entry, exit and services data from service providers and on interviews conducted with program staff and clients. The Institute's final report will be presented to the Legislature by December 1, 2002.

Key Findings

Implementation Issues

- Following a slow start, HOPE Centers are now in line with an adjusted implementation schedule and RLSPs are slightly behind schedule. By the end of 2001, nine HOPE Centers were providing a total of 31 beds, and five RLSPs were providing 21 beds.
- In the first two program years, HOPE Centers served 251 youth, and RLSPs served 52 youth.
- While occupancy of HOPE Centers increased slightly over the first two-year period, it remained low. The occupancy rate for the last six months of 2001 was 36 percent. State program managers and service agency staff have been working to clarify program definitions and to increase outreach.
- Occupancy of RLSPs has steadily increased to a rate of 70 percent for the last six months of 2001. More beds are being added in early and mid-2002. At the same time, funding issues influenced one provider to discontinue services in early 2002.

Characteristics of Youth Served

- Forty percent of youth served in HOPE Centers were under age 16. Many youth placed in HOPE Centers during the first two years were more similar to youth served in Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs) than to older street youth for whom HOPE programs are intended.

- Eighty percent of youth in RLSPs were between the ages of 16 and 18, and 20 percent were admitted under a HOPE Act provision allowing conditional placement of 14- and 15-year-olds. No youth under age 14 were admitted to RLSPs.

Services Provided

- The most common service needs assessed in HOPE Centers were physical health care, outpatient mental health care, and outpatient alcohol and drug treatment. The most common service needs in RLSPs were training in daily living skills and job training.
- An estimated three-fourths of all youth admitted to HOPE Centers received some level of needs assessment, and half received some level of services.
- HOPE Center staff often had to request extensions of stays, primarily because residential placements were not available at the end of 30 days. Program data show that about one-fifth of all HOPE Center stays lasted longer than 30 days. In addition, staff were often unable to complete assessments and provide linkage to services within one month.

Outcomes

- Following their stays, about 40 percent of HOPE Center youth went to homes of families, friends, or foster care providers; 11 percent (27 youth) transferred to RLSPs. However, 26 percent ran away, and another 23 percent went to temporary locations such as treatment facilities, juvenile justice facilities, CRCs, and shelters.
- Of 44 youth who exited from RLSPs, 19 (40 percent) ran away from the facility. Nearly one-fourth went to foster or group homes.
- Because of limited data obtained for this interim report and the short time elapsed since HOPE Act programs were created, long-term outcomes could not yet be evaluated. However, 40 HOPE Center youth and 25 RLSP youth provided feedback in interviews. Most youth interviewed reported the programs helped them in some way. However, many youth who stayed in HOPE Centers reported their stays were too short, and most indicated they did not have a plan when they left for how to manage afterward.

Next Steps

During 2002, the Institute will:

- Through June 2002, continue collecting and analyzing program data, as well as interviewing program staff and youth.
- After June, obtain data from state agencies to assess possible effects of the programs on youths' residential stability, alcohol and drug use, education, criminal behavior, and employment.
- Report study findings by December 1, 2002.