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## Evaluation of the HOPE Act: Services for Street Youth

### 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 or 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 report is based on data collected between March 2000 and June 2002 in addition to interviews with program staff, regional administrators, youth, and parents. The evaluation is organized around three questions:

- What are the *characteristics* of youth served by HOPE Centers and RLSPs?
- What *services* are provided in these facilities?
- What are the *outcomes* for youth who reside in these facilities?

### HOPE Centers: How Often Were They Used?

Across the state, nine facilities provide 29 HOPE beds. During the study period, these HOPE Centers served 310 youth with an average length of stay of 22 days. The overall occupancy rate was 35 percent. Low occupancy rates were influenced by many factors, including youth choosing other living options, confusion and disagreements between providers and caseworkers about appropriate youth for these beds, and, in some areas, a potentially limited population of street youth.

### What Are The Characteristics of Youth Served by HOPE Centers?

- The majority (60 percent) of youth entering HOPE Centers were between 16 and 18. Slightly more than half the HOPE youth were female (56 percent).
- Most youth admitted to HOPE Centers could not be described as “street youth.” Over 60 percent had not spent any time “couch surfing” or on the street in the previous six months.

- A majority of youth entering the HOPE program were in the foster care program (60 percent). Over three-quarters had some prior involvement with the child welfare system, with 13 percent having 11 or more Child Protective Service (CPS) referrals.
- Many youth (28 percent) ran from the facility before resolution could be reached on their situation.

**What Services Are Provided by HOPE Centers?** HOPE Centers are intended to connect youth with appropriate services and treatment.

- 33 percent of HOPE youth received alcohol/drug assessment following their stay.
- 24 percent received outpatient mental health treatment during their stay.

**What Are the Outcomes for HOPE Youth?** The outcomes of HOPE youth were compared with outcomes for youth who spent time in a Crisis Residential Center (CRC). HOPE youth had more positive outcomes than CRC youth in four areas:

- Fewer school dropouts;
- Slightly higher wage gains for those employed;
- Lower crime involvement; and
- More likely to reach legal resolution of their living situations.

## **Responsible Living Skills Program (RLSP)**

Currently, facilities across the state provide 37 RLSP beds. The overall occupancy rate during the study period was 53 percent.

**What Are the Characteristics of Youth Served by RLSPs?**

- The average age at admission to an RLSP was 16.8 years; nearly 60 percent were male.
- Slightly more than half (54 percent) entered an RLSP from a HOPE Center.

**What Services Are Provided by RLSPs?** RLSPs reported the following as the most frequent services provided to youth:

- Daily living skills;
- Interpersonal skills; and
- Physical health exams/treatment.

**What Are the Outcomes for RLSP Youth?** RLSP youth showed the following positive outcomes following their stay:

- Youth were more likely to be employed (11 percent to 26 percent).
- When a youth exited an RLSP, a greater percentage (29 percent) were enrolled in community and technical colleges than at entry.

- 74 percent of youth established contact with a family member.

The eligibility requirements for RLSPs, in combination with expectations for motivational and behavioral restrictions, limited the number of youth suitable for the program. Approximately 80 percent of youth who entered an RLSP during the study period left the program because they either ran away, left after talking with staff, or were asked by staff to leave. However, for those youth who met the requirements and accepted the program expectations, RLSPs offered security and an opportunity to prepare for adulthood.

### **What Were the Costs for the State?**

Because of staffing requirements, HOPE and RLSP beds are more expensive than emergency shelter beds. Providers were paid \$3,364 per month for each HOPE bed; RLSP beds were reimbursed at \$3,109 per month. Because of the unpredictability of HOPE bed utilization, providers were paid for each bed regardless of occupancy. For RLSP beds, reimbursement occurred only for occupied beds. The biennium budget appropriation for the HOPE and RLSP beds and related services was \$2.7 million.

### **What Do the Findings Suggest for State Policy?**

State policy options for runaway and street youth must balance two conflicting goals: protecting vulnerable youth from potentially dangerous living environments and reinforcing the value and role of families in raising children. In striving to strike this balance, the Legislature set restrictive eligibility requirements for HOPE beds, aiming to assist youth who had already entered street life, were motivated to seek help, and were accepting of a living environment that restricted their freedoms. The low occupancy rates suggest that this particular population of street youth is limited.

RLSPs were aimed at a select group of street youth: state dependents with a history of unsuccessful placements who had a previous stay in a HOPE Center or secure CRC. Additionally, participants must be aged 16 to 18, be motivated, have no significant behavioral problems, and be capable of acquiring skills.

The high rate of voluntary exits from RLSPs, combined with the proportion of residents asked to leave the facility by staff, demonstrate the significant challenge of finding youth who meet the behavioral/motivational requirements. Providers and caseworkers report that for youth who meet these requirements, RLSPs are an excellent resource.

Since the majority of participants are still enrolled, it is too early to assess the influence of the program on long-term outcomes.