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SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MATTHEW G. MARTINEZ

Hearing on the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice

and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

Tuesday, February 11, 1992 10:30 AM

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Good morning. I am really pleased to see the interest indicated by the attendance here today in what I consider to be one of the most important reauthorizations of this session of Congress. I had the pleasure of having breakfast with many of you already this morning. It is comforting to know that there are so many energetic and dedicated people looking out for the troubled youth of this great nation.

Today we'll be looking at the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act as part of a continuing series of hearings directed at reauthorizing the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency prevention Act of 1974. Many of us are all too aware of the dangers confronting youth who have nowhere to turn. I think everyone in this hearing room can vividly picture the brutality of a life on the streets. A life that has become increasing dangerous and violent.

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As policy makers we know that about 1 million kids run away from home each year, some of which are homes that force the kids to leave. In addition, there are over 300,000 homeless kids on any given day in this country. There is probably no population more vulnerable than these young people.

The pain and confusion of going through puberty is tough at best. Under the most supportive and comforting circumstances this initiation into adulthood is difficult. In circumstances less than ideal the trial is nothing less than nightmarish.

These teenagers are impressionable and easily taken advantage of. On the streets they often go unnoticed and uncared for. They are struggling with a world of constantly changing values, and a world that makes little accommodations for them.

Those who feel disenfranchised reach out for peer approval and find it where it is available—whether it is belonging to gangs or other peer groups. Many hide their pain through abusing drugs and many just succumb to exploitation for survival or because they just want to be accepted.

The Runaway and Homeless Act is the safety net with which we rescue those young people, who have been cast off into a sea of distrust and exploitation. The Act provides basic services through community-based local agencies to alleviate the problems of runaways through the provision of temporary shelter, supportive services and counseling, and whenever possible, reuniting them with their families. The Act also provides funding for transitional living programs that provide long term shelter and life skills training to homeless youth who are attempting to make that transition to adulthood.

Many of you have heard me talk about why I have taken the chairmanship of this subcommittee. You've heard me talk about the programs that we have jurisdiction over which serve society's most vulnerable people, the very young and the very old, and about how these programs are so near and dear to my heart. But I have another reason that strikes home and personalizes my commitment to the particular issues that we are addressing today. I would like to tell you a story about a kid who ran away from home when he was 12. This boy later grew up to be a Congressman because he had a brother that cared.

So you see that it can happen to any of us. Some of us have that support to help us survive but many others don't. What we are here to do today is to see that supportive services are available to every kid in need.

I have heard testimony in previous hearings about the need for a continuum of care for youth in need. All the way from prevention to detention. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, of which the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is a part, should provide that continuum.

We have with us today some very distinguished witnesses, ranging from a former youth in need who benefited from services provided by an agency that receives funding through this Act, to corporate officers who give of themselves for something that they believe in. Along the way we will hear from the people who actually provide those services for runaway and homeless youth.

Lastly, but certainly not least, we will hear from Ms. Carol Behrer, who is the Associate Commissioner of the Family and Youth Services Bureau at the Administration of Children and Families, at the Department of Health and Human Services. Ms.

Berher has the task of administering this vital program and seeing to it that as many kids as possible under the Act receive services. A monumental task to be sure.

Before we hear from our first panel, we have two items to take care of. We have a couple of young people here today to present a petition regarding the well-being of homeless youth from the youth of the American Catholic Church. I understand that they have collected over 5,000 signatures.

We also have John Peel, Director of the Los Angeles Youth Network, who asked me if he could read a letter from actor Chad Lowe. Mr. Lowe, who stars on the TV series, "Life Goes On", has been active in working with runaway and homeless youth for some time and has some insightful suggestions.

Again I would like to thank you all for coming and for your wonderful support this morning. With your energy and your insight I think we can accomplish a great deal.