

StreetWorks Greater Minnesota Focus Group Summary: Youth Experts and Service Professionals

OVERVIEW

Research has shown that youth experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of sexual exploitation. To interrupt exploitation and ensure that youth experiencing homelessness in the Twin Cities have access to quality services, The StreetWorks Collaborative (StreetWorks), a Program of Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, currently provides training and technical assistance to StreetWorks Outreach Workers, community partners, and other youth-serving providers in the Twin Cities metro area and surrounding suburbs.

In an effort to determine the needs of youth and youth workers across Greater Minnesota, and to gauge whether the StreetWorks Outreach Worker Certification Training designed for use in the Twin Cities could be adapted for use throughout the state, StreetWorks conducted focus groups in five Greater Minnesota communities. During the focus group process, researchers compared StreetWorks knowledge of the needs and resources available for youth in the Twin Cities to the needs and resources available in Greater Minnesota. Results indicated key differences between the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota in the way this work should be approached and the challenges youth experiencing homelessness and/or exploitation face. StreetWorks has modified our curriculum to better serve Greater Minnesota based on these results.

Findings also indicated a significant need in Greater Minnesota for effective training resources for service providers and other professionals who encounter youth in their work.

5

focus group sites including Willmar, Duluth, Mankato, Brainerd, and Rochester, and took place between March and May of 2018.

49

youth attended the youth focus groups. These participants were ages 18-24 and were currently experiencing or had previously experienced homelessness.

45

professionals attended the professional focus groups, 47 completed the pre-focus group survey, and 36 completed the post-survey.



WALKING ALONGSIDE YOUNG PEOPLE
Acknowledging and Honoring their Individual Journeys



BACKGROUND

StreetWorks was established in 1994 as a collaborative of youth-serving nonprofits who provide street-based outreach to youth experiencing homelessness in the Twin Cities metro area. In 2015, StreetWorks was awarded a Safe Harbor grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services Office of Economic Opportunity (DHS O.E.O.) to develop a training curriculum and tools to ensure consistent and effective training for youth outreach workers. The focus of this grant was specifically to build capacity for working with youth at-risk of, or experiencing, sexual exploitation who are also experiencing homelessness or housing instability. The certification process trains youth workers in best practices to support this population and began with a focus in the Twin Cities metro area. StreetWorks is now adapting and expanding its work to Greater Minnesota service providers and professionals who encounter youth in their work.

Minnesota's Safe Harbor law went into effect in 2014 and has since increased awareness, understanding, and identification of the commercial sexual exploitation of youth across the state. In Minnesota, sexually exploited youth are no longer treated as criminals, but instead viewed as victims in need of services.



Throughout all five communities, participants shared concerns about the lack of available resources for youth experiencing homelessness. Both professional and youth focus group participants shared that youth who are experiencing homelessness

in their area are often couch hopping, doubling up, participating in survival sex, and/or sleeping in various outdoor places such as under bridges, in cars, at parks, etc.

SURVEYS AND FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

After analyzing data gathered in the focus groups and expert interviews, we identified themes that have informed our adapted training for youth workers and other professionals in Greater MN.

SHELTER AND HOUSING

The major complaint in all areas is the lack of shelter and transitional housing options—especially for young people under 18 and single males. Youth under age 18 cannot stay at a hotel or get their own apartment. In several cities, youth did not feel safe going to shelters that also served older adults. Drugs, dirty facilities, and people with severe mental health issues were mentioned as reasons why youth do not feel safe in some of the shelters.

“If you don’t have anywhere to go, you feel like a burden to everybody, it’s hard to make sure you don’t bother everyone.”
—YOUTH

TRANSPORTATION

Lack of transportation was a consistent issue for youth experiencing homelessness in all five communities. The following issues were discussed by both youth and professionals during the focus groups:

- Public transportation options often ended early in the day, so they could not use the bus after work if they had a night job.
- If a person lived in a smaller town because of affordable housing, but they had to work in the larger city, there was no public transportation traveling between the smaller towns and the bigger cities in the area.
- The cost was too high.
- Youth had to be accompanied by an adult (some drivers would not allow unaccompanied youth on the bus).

CONFIDENTIALITY

Youth in each of the communities (except Rochester) agreed that people in smaller communities know almost everyone in the area. As a result, they said homelessness is more noticeable, and the shame associated with it makes it less likely that youth would access public or community resources for help. For example, one youth explained that the food shelf in their area is on a main street and it is often busy. If they want to get food there, they must stand in line on the street where people they know will see them.

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING NEEDS

Professionals explained they would like to have a structured training for new staff but were unable to do so because there is no standard curriculum for them to use. They also said the main reason they are unable to provide structured training is because they do not have staff dedicated to training and do not have the time to train new staff themselves on such a deep level.

Participants relayed that due to the depth and breadth of the training needs, it would be most beneficial if the training were delivered in-person, with a cohort if possible, and with some pre/post work. Consistently, they stated that training from a StreetWorks trainer would be necessary, as their organizations did not have training staff, or other professionals in the area that would be available or able to deliver this content.



“People are selling their bodies all the time, so they have a place to sleep. It isn’t always laid out like a contract, it’s just understood. People don’t want to discuss the subject with a worker.”
—YOUTH



“Homelessness is pretty much invisible here, and it’s so cold. A lot of them [youth] are doubled up and just aren’t on the street. Officials say it’s not a problem.” —SERVICE PROVIDER



Youth experts reported the following additional barriers they faced due to homelessness:

- *No safe place to keep their belongings*
- *Inability to maintain hygiene*
- *Don’t want to be a burden on people they know, so they often do not ask for help*
- *Places that require appointments and don’t offer walk-in services can be extremely difficult to utilize, especially if the young person does not have reliable transportation*
- *Find it hard to trust anyone and often avoid law enforcement and county services*
- *In small towns, everything shuts down around 9:00 p.m.*
- *People who do drugs are treated poorly*
- *Finding resources can take all day*
- *Feeling like they are being judged*
- *There is nowhere to get water*
- *Sleep deprivation because they cannot sleep well anywhere*
- *Lack of childcare*

CONCLUSION

Conducting focus groups with youth and professionals in Willmar, Duluth, Mankato, Brainerd, and Rochester affirmed that the StreetWorks Certification Training Curriculum would be a useful tool for youth workers and other professionals in Greater Minnesota. The curriculum has been adapted to account for differences in shelter and housing, safe places for youth, transportation, and confidentiality.

Similarly, the way in which training is delivered has been adapted to meet the needs of agencies and organizations that do not have capacity for a train-the-trainer model or frequent travel to in-person training sessions in the Twin Cities metro. To meet this need, StreetWorks has engaged in a strategic planning process and is increasing our training team to implement this new certification curriculum training statewide.



NEXT STEPS

As part of the DHS O.E.O Safe Harbor Phase 2 Project, In the Spring of 2019, StreetWorks will coordinate and produce Regional Safe Harbor Trainings in three of the Safe Harbor regions, all of which will be open to the public and targeted towards youth workers and other youth-serving professionals in the region.

StreetWorks has partnered with MDH, DHS, the Safe Harbor Regional Navigator, and other providers in each region to host the trainings, develop content, and identify local training experts who are relevant to the region.

Training dates and locations are as follows:

- Rochester (SE Region), April 25, 2019
- Alexandria (West Central Region), May 8, 2019
Conference Center
- Mankato (SW Region), May 16, 2019

The purpose of the trainings will be to provide an opportunity for regional youth workers, advocates and systems professionals to participate in a skill-based learning through full day workshops focusing on best practices for serving youth who are at-risk of and/or have experienced sexual exploitation, and/or youth who may also be experiencing homelessness.

The trainings will also provide an opportunity to introduce the new StreetWorks Certification Curriculum and its adaptations for Greater MN, including a preview of traveling certification trainings that will be available in both the metro and Greater MN in 2019.

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This document is a condensed summary of a larger Focus Group report. To request a copy of the full report, contact Jen Fairbourne, LSS StreetWorks Collaborative, 1605 Eustis Street, St Paul, MN 55108. Electronic mail may be sent to Jen.Fairbourne@lssmn.org

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