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## Sasha Bruce Youthwork Copes With Funding Cuts Amid Growing Youth Homelessness

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WASHINGTON -- A longtime provider of runaway and homeless youth services for D.C. teens is calling out the District for falling short of its commitment to help homeless youth, alleging that the mayor's office is recklessly gutting funding at a time when youth homelessness is on the rise.

[Sasha Bruce Youthwork](#), which provides overnight shelter, counseling services and prevention programs to runaway and homeless youth, has been hit with more than \$1.1 million in District-funding cuts within the past year, despite [youth a recent increase in youth homelessness](#), said its executive director.

According to Deborah Shore, the drastic funding cuts are forcing the organization to limit its services and, in some cases, turn away youth in need of overnight shelter.

"The cuts ... were a serious a blow to our core mission," [Shore said in a testimony](#) before the D.C. Council Human Services committee last Wednesday. "We have provided services for 35 years at the Sasha Bruce House in partnership with the city ... we [now] are turning young people away in numbers we have never seen before."

Founded in 1974 as the Washington Streetwork Project, Sasha Bruce Youthwork has grown into one of the District's largest providers of youth services, serving nearly 15,000 at-risk youth since its creation. However, due to a series of recent funding cuts, Shore said the organization is now turning away roughly three youth daily.

"We desperately need more help as do the youth we serve," Shore added.

In her testimony, Shore urged members of the committee to consider increasing the group's funds in the [2014 budget](#), which will be available to the public no later than March 28.

In an interview with The Huffington Post, Shore expressed concern that the past year's funding cuts are "allowing so many more young people to be unprotected."

"There is a significant problem not just in the narrative of our story about losing this funding but really that, in all of the interest that there has been in developing plans to end homelessness, there has been a kind of lack of recognition [of] young adults," Shore explained.

Shore also said that the cuts signal the District's failure to recognize the need to prevent runaway and homeless youth from succumbing to risks.

A spokesperson for Mayor Vincent Gray's administration, however, said that it is committed to serving homeless youth and that, in some areas, "expenditures on these services are growing, not being cut."

"The mayor and agency leaders all recognize that youth homelessness is an issue that requires attention and we are working to address increasing needs in this area on numerous fronts," Doxie McCoy told The Huffington Post.

According to McCoy, the Department of Human Services provides about \$3.1 million each year to youth homeless services, as well as the \$1 million spent by the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency on its Rapid Housing Program for youth aging out of the foster care system.

Other agencies -- such as the Department of Human Services and the Department of Mental Health -- offer supportive services to youth and families and, McCoy said, programs within these agencies will be expanded through a \$500,000 funding increase.

Still, Shore argues that the District doesn't recognize the importance of prevention services -- like those provided by Sasha Bruce Youthwork.

In her March 13 testimony, Shore explained that "youth who [run away] and/or are homeless without their families are much more likely to drop out of school, become engaged in illegal activity as a way to survive, do drugs, get pregnant, become victimized including being trafficked ... [and] develop serious health problems."

According to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), homeless and runaway youth disproportionately suffer from those consequences, and "are more likely to remain homeless and be more resistant to change."

Although the immediate impact of funding cuts concerns Shore, it's the long-term effects that alarm her most.

"It's kids who get disconnected from school, don't finish school, don't have work [and] are not in trouble yet," Shore said. "Unless there's some real, creative intervention ... of course they're going to get into trouble."

This, too, is a legitimate concern – not just for the estimated [1,880 homeless youth in D.C.](#), but also for District residents. The recidivism of youth incarceration carried a hefty price tag for D.C. taxpayers; according to the National Juvenile Justice Network, [\\$125 million was spent on the D.C. Juvenile Justice System](#) in 2011.

But community-based programs, such as Sasha Bruce Youthwork, provide greater cost savings than juvenile incarceration, research indicates.

According to a [Justice Policy Institute report](#), “some programs ... have been shown to yield up to \$13 in benefits to public safety for every dollar spent. These programs are more cost effective and produce more public safety benefits than detaining and incarcerating youth.”

Fiscal benefits and funding disputes aside, there is [growing consensus](#) that the District could [do more to protect at-risk runaway and homeless youth](#) – including focusing more on prevention programs.

Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children’s Law Center, told The Huffington Post that while the District is taking great strides to advance services for at-risk youth – including those involved in the foster care system – there is room to improve.

“We certainly have way too many youth who are homeless, both with their families and on their own, and we don’t serve them very well,” said Sandalow. “We need to do more to [prevent] trauma upfront by making children’s lives safer and healthier, and that will both help raise more productive adults and save the city money in the long run.”