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Testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor: Economic Opportunity Subcommittee; by Gregory J. Ahart, Director, Human Resources Div.

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The Runaway Youth Act provides for a Federal assistance program to deal with problems of runaway youth. It authorizes the funding of shelters and services through grants to State and local governments and nonprofit agencies. From a limited review of operation of the program, it was noted that: grantees provided at least a minimum level of services, most projects were in urban areas, the average annual grant is \$58,000, houses were in good condition, many of youth served were from the local community, and annual salaries ranged from \$8,000 to \$10,000 for counselors and up to \$14,000 for program directors. A program evaluation is being conducted for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) by a private contractor, and information generated will be used to strengthen the effectiveness of services. Although HEW's assessment of the program does not include studies of juvenile involvement in the court systems, there are indications that the projects reduce the number of runaways sent to juvenile courts. HEW has established reporting requirements for grantees on the disposition of sheltered youth after they leave projects. The current reporting system will include information on each client and correct some of the deficiencies in the former system. However, difficulties have been encountered in implementing the system. The program has suffered from a lack of management continuity which has caused shortcomings in funding, planning, and coordination with other agencies. Initiatives underway or planned have the potential to enhance program management. (HTW)

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Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives
on
The Management and Operation
of the Runaway Youth Program
Administered by
The Administration for Children, Youth, and Families
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to appear here today to discuss the Runaway Youth Program, authorized by title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended.

Last November, you requested us to conduct a limited review of the Runaway Youth Program in the following areas:

- Whether the program has been adequately evaluated by the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families to determine its strengths and weaknesses;
 - The extent to which the program has reduced the involvement of runaways in the formal juvenile court system;
 - The dispositions of children sheltered by the runaway houses supported in whole or in part by program funds;
- and

--The general management and administration of the program by the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families.

THE RUNAWAY YOUTH PROGRAM

The Runaway Youth Act, providing for a Federal assistance program to deal with the problems of runaway youth, was enacted in response to concern over the alarming number of youth leaving home without parental permission and who are exposed to dangers while living on the streets.

The act authorizes the funding of new and existing shelters and services for runaway youth through grants to State and local governments and nonprofit agencies. The first grants were awarded in 1975. The act also authorizes the provision of technical assistance and short-term training to staff of runaway facilities.

The act requires that HEW submit an annual report to Congress on the status and accomplishments of the program with particular attention to the following four areas which HEW has adopted as goals of the program:

- the effectiveness of using runaway houses in alleviating the problems of runaway youth;
- reuniting children with their families and encouraging the resolution of intra-family problems through counseling and other services;

- strengthening family relationships and encouraging stable living conditions for children; and
- helping youth decide upon future courses of action.

Public Law 95-115, the Juvenile Justice Amendments of 1977, approved October 3, 1977, extended the Runaway Youth Act through fiscal year 1980, and provided that priority be given to grants of less than \$100,000, compared to \$75,000 in the previous legislation. It also increased the annual authorization for appropriations to \$25 million for fiscal years 1978 through 1980. The Federal appropriations for the program for fiscal years 1977 and 1978 were \$8 and \$11 million, respectively.

The Runaway Youth Program is operated by the Youth Development Bureau which is part of the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, HEW. Implementation of the act is the responsibility of a single representative in each of HEW's 10 regional offices, whose activities are monitored by the Youth Development Bureau. The Youth Development Bureau has nine staff members assigned to the program at its headquarters office. Responsibility for review and approval of grant applications rested with HEW headquarters through fiscal year 1975. Since then, it has rested with the HEW regional offices.

During fiscal year 1977, 129 projects were funded nationwide--128 provide services to runaway youth and their families through community based facilities while one provides referral and communication services through a national

toll-free telephone service. The projects received a total of about \$7.7 million with about \$261,000 going to the grantee operating the national switchboard. During fiscal year 1977, 33,000 youth received services from the runaway facilities and 35,000 were served by the national switchboard.

SCOPE OF WORK

We conducted our work at the HEW headquarters in Washington, D.C., and at three of its regional offices-- Philadelphia (Region III), Chicago (Region V), and San Francisco (Region IX). These regions were selected because they had a large number of grantees and were geographically dispersed. We visited 9 of the 56 grantees--six runaway houses, a runaway house's administrative office, the national toll-free telephone service, and a grantee which purchases services for runaway youth through various community based service agencies--to observe their operation and to discuss the program.

We noted that:

- grantees operating runaway houses provide at least a minimum level of services which are temporary shelter, counseling for youth and families, 24 hour staff availability or a telephone hotline, aftercare, transportation, and community outreach;
- the majority of the projects are located in urban areas;

- the average annual grant under the program is \$58,000;
- the houses we visited appeared to be austere yet structurally sound, clean, and comfortable. They blended well with the surrounding area and according to the grantees are becoming well accepted in the community;
- many of the youth served by these houses were from the local community; and
- salaries of full-time staff counselors ranged from \$8,000 to \$10,000 annually at these projects, with program directors getting up to \$14,000.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

A program evaluation is being conducted for HEW by a private contractor. Recognizing the need to adequately respond to Congress' concern over program effectiveness, the Office of Youth Development (today the Youth Development Bureau), HEW, issued a request for proposals for a national evaluation of the runaway youth program in July 1976. Seven proposals were submitted. On October 1, 1976, the Department announced the request was being canceled because the proposals were technically unacceptable. Subsequently, HEW revised the request for proposals. The first request for proposals was designed to determine the effectiveness of project services in meeting program goals as viewed by HEW. Added to the second request for proposals

were tasks designed to identify and analyze factors affecting the provision of services.

The new request for proposals was issued on May 20, 1977, eliciting 18 responses. Three responses were initially rated technically acceptable. After submission of additional information by the acceptable respondents and further review and analysis by the Office of Youth Development, a cost-plus-fixed-fee contract estimated at \$364,000 was awarded on September 30, 1977, to Berkeley Planning Associates, Berkeley, California.

Work under the contract will be conducted over a 15-month period and is scheduled for completion by December 30, 1978. The contract provides for examination of the extent to which a sample of 20 HEW-funded runaway youth projects have implemented the program and are meeting the four goals of the program. Data are to be provided on the effectiveness of the services provided to youth and their families and the effect of specific organizational, community, and other local factors in achieving HEW's goals. The contract also calls for an assessment of the impact these factors have on the delivery of services to clients.

According to HEW, the information generated by the evaluation will be used by the projects to strengthen and increase the effectiveness of services provided. An official within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation who was responsible for reviewing

the evaluation proposal told us the contract as currently planned provides a good framework for evaluating the program. Runaway Youth program officials advised us that work under the contract is proceeding without difficulty.

EXTENT TO WHICH THE PROGRAM
REDUCES RUNAWAY INVOLVEMENT
IN THE JUVENILE COURT SYSTEM

The next area we examined concerns involvement of runaways in the juvenile court system. Reduction of such involvement is not included in HEW's assessment of program effectiveness because it is viewed as a secondary goal of the act and is difficult to measure. We approached this issue from the standpoint of how effective the projects have been in keeping runaways out of the juvenile justice system and from being processed as status offenders. A status offense is an act which, if committed by an adult, would not be considered an offense. We did not examine the effectiveness of the projects in keeping youth from committing subsequent criminal acts.

The grantees we visited generally agreed that reduced juvenile involvement in the court system is a positive by-product of their projects. However, we believe most of the grantees were not measuring this involvement because of (1) the difficulty of measurement and (2) a question of whether such involvement is a valid indicator of program effectiveness. In addition, attempts to measure reduced involvement would detract from providing direct services

to youth because staff time would be required to determine each youth's previous and subsequent involvement in the juvenile court system.

Related to this issue was an attempt by HEW in late 1976 to implement a followup reporting system which would have provided selected information on clients 30 days after leaving the project. The system was not implemented because of the burden the data collection effort would have placed on the grantees.

Also, some of the grantees we visited questioned the validity of using reduced involvement with the juvenile court system as an acceptable criterion for evaluating program success. An official at one project we visited told us that an increasing number of clients are either physically or sexually abused. In some of these cases, depending on the severity and frequency of abuse and the emotional impact on the runaway, it is better to protect the youth by advocating court custody. Because involvement in the juvenile justice system is sometimes desirable and other times unnecessary, it is not a good indicator for measuring program success. Also, other variables such as State laws and the attitudes of local juvenile courts and police impact on the extent of involvement. For example, some grantees advised us that some juvenile judges process runaways as status offenders while other judges send youths to runaway projects. Further, police enforcement of laws affecting runaways varies among jurisdictions.

There are some indications from the grantees we visited, however, that the projects do reduce the number of runaways sent to juvenile courts. For example, some runaways are taken directly to the runaway youth projects by the local police. If the projects did not exist, some of these youth would probably appear in court, especially if a warrant had been issued or a petition had been filed. Our interviews with the grantee officials support this. They stated that an increasing number of runaways are being referred by police to the runaway houses. It is also possible that runaways' involvement with the juvenile court system may decrease in the future. Consistent with the movement to not institutionalize runaway offenders, an HEW official told us that some States are considering decriminalizing running away from home as an offense. This would relieve the juvenile court system of its responsibility for handling runaways as status offenders.

More meaningful information on the impact projects are having on runaways is expected from the evaluation contract previously discussed. The contractor plans, subject to OMB approval, to follow up on 20 youths from each of the 20 projects being studied. The followup is planned at two 6-week intervals after the youth leaves the runaway house. As of February 1978, the contractor and HEW were working on the details of the data to be collected. A program

official anticipates that information will be gathered on the youth's subsequent involvement with the court system and their subsequent living situation.

REPORTING DISPOSITION OF SHELTERED YOUTH

The third area of concern relates to reporting the disposition of youth sheltered by the grantees, that is, where do youths go immediately after they leave the project. Recognizing the need to obtain data on the operation of the runaway houses and the need to annually report to Congress on the status and accomplishments of the projects, HEW has established reporting requirements for grantees.

Initial reporting system--January 1976 to June 1976

In January 1976, a reporting system was initiated which required information on each individual client. Statistics for the fiscal year 1976 report were compiled by HEW from the monthly reports received from the runaway houses.

In its fiscal year 1976 report to the Congress, HEW provided a breakdown of the case dispositions as of June 30, 1976. These dispositions were categorized as follows: returned home, returned to street, other/unknown, placed with relatives, placed in institution or other residential setting, placed in foster home, placed in group home, independent living, placed with friends, removed by police, and requested to leave by program.

Concern has been expressed that in the 1976 annual report 8.6 percent of the dispositions were reported in the "other/unknown" category. HEW did not attempt to identify the specific dispositions that constituted the category and the reporting forms have since been discarded.

Program officials were unable to explain to us why the "other" and "unknown" categories were combined. They agreed, however, that the categories could be reported separately in the fiscal year 1977 annual report expected to be issued this month. Discussions with grantees and program officials indicate that an "unknown" classification is valid for those youth who leave the runaway projects without indicating their destination. The "other" category includes any dispositions besides those previously mentioned.

Interim reporting system--July 1976 to June 1977

In July 1976, an interim reporting system was implemented because OMB clearance on the initial system had expired. Data compiled from this system will be presented in the fiscal year 1977 report.

The interim system collected only summarized data on the number of case dispositions in each category; clients were not reported on individually. As a result, cases reported in the "other" category were not fully identified and HEW will be unable to identify the disposition of youth reported in the "other" category in its 1977 annual report.

Current reporting system--July 1977 to present

In July 1977, HEW implemented a new reporting system similar to the initial system which will include information on each client. HEW plans to minimize use of the "other" category when another disposition category is more suitable, and to identify case dispositions reported in the "other" category. The system will allow HEW to report additional information concerning the reasons youth came to the projects and their previous involvement in the juvenile court system.

HEW has also developed an automated management information system to more effectively manage and analyze the reported data. Previously, the data were manually tabulated. Implementation of the system is planned for this month.

The system has the potential to serve as the basis for reassessing program policies and could provide Congress with more extensive analysis on the nature and extent of the runaway problem. Another intended benefit is the feedback it will provide to grantees, thus providing a better basis for assessing their own effectiveness. Program officials told us that in the past little feedback has been provided to the grantees.

It should be pointed out, however, that difficulty is being encountered in implementing the reporting system. Because many reporting forms submitted by the projects either contain errors, are incomplete, or both, information cannot be entered into the automated system without being manually

edited and corrected. As of February 1978, there were about 10,000 unedited forms at HEW's central office. If the errors and omissions on the forms submitted since June 1977 cannot be corrected, the 1978 report to Congress will not contain complete or accurate data.

MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

The last area I will discuss deals with the management and administration of the Runaway Youth Program. According to HEW and grantee officials, the program has suffered from a lack of management continuity which in turn has caused program shortcomings in areas such as project funding, long-term planning, and coordination with other Federal agencies.

We believe that these problems are at least partially the result of turnovers in two key positions: the Director, Youth Development Bureau, and the Director of the Bureau's Division of Runaway Youth Programs. The Bureau Director left in February 1977. Since that time, the position has been staffed successively by two civil service employees in an acting capacity and since January 1978, by a Bureau Director-Designate. More importantly, since December 1975, the Division Director's position has been filled by three different individuals, two in an acting capacity.

In addition, there have been several positions within the Bureau that have been lost due to a reorganization in the Department. According to program officials, this

situation has hampered the performance of routine administrative functions.

This disjointed leadership and staffing pattern has occurred at a critical time in the program's development. Now approaching its fourth project funding cycle, we believe the program has had sufficient time to be firmly established with policies and long-term program plans. However, our review indicates the program is experiencing difficulty in conducting routine operations as well as in developing long-term plans and policies.

Program direction

During hearings held before this Subcommittee in April 1977, HEW proposed a one-year extension of the Runaway Youth Act. The Assistant Secretary for Human Development Services stated that HEW wanted to see how the program "* * *" can be integrated with other HEW social services which provide the needed services for youth." During our review, we attempted to determine whether such planning efforts were underway. Federal and grantee officials were unable to identify any formal planning efforts. Near the end of our fieldwork in February, we were advised that a high-level Steering Committee was being established to study the youth-related issues, with a goal of submitting proposals for revised legislation to Congress for its consideration prior to expiration of the current act in fiscal year 1980.

Funding guidelines need to be examined

An area which we believe needs management attention involves project funding guidelines which are general in nature and do not contain definitive guidance. As a result, program officials are unsure whether an appropriate balance exists between the need for consistency in project funding from region to region and for flexibility to address unique regional problems.

For example, one regional representative stated that he preferred to fund as many projects as possible at a reduced level. Conversely, another representative indicated a preference for funding fewer projects at levels high enough to ensure that the grantees could establish themselves.

Two other funding issues which need to be examined include:

- whether projects should be funded to serve the maximum number of youths regionally and/or nationally, or to maximize geographical dispersion.
- whether there should be different funding criteria for well established versus newer projects.

Regional program administration

We noted two other factors, travel and administrative support, which impact on regional program administration. For the three regions we visited, regional travel funds

have either remained the same or decreased over the past two fiscal years (i.e., fiscal year 1977 and 1978). Regional officials told us that current travel budgets prevent them from visiting projects as often as they think is necessary. They also believe the anticipated increase in the number of grantees will adversely impact on their ability to properly monitor all projects.

Regional officials further stated that the availability of administrative support is limited, thus detracting from their ability to perform necessary duties. We noted that most of the 10 regional program officials share secretarial support with other programs. While this may not present a problem in all cases, regional officials with a larger number of projects, such as those in regions V and IX, are being hindered.

Coordination with other Federal agencies

Runaway projects including some funded by the Youth Development Bureau have other Federal funding sources. Our review indicates program coordination has been very limited. The Bureau's Director-Designate indicated that this is one of his principal concerns and that he plans to foster working relationships with other programs, including the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration's juvenile justice efforts and the Labor Department's youth

employment programs. We believe such coordination could improve Federal efforts to assist runaway youth.

Management initiatives

In contrast to the program's weaknesses, we observed initiatives, either underway or planned, which we believe have the potential to enhance program management. On July 28, 1977, the Secretary of HEW established a Major Initiatives Tracking System. The primary purpose of this system is to improve client services. Selected programs will be monitored by the Office of the Secretary for an 18-month period which started October 1, 1977. One result of the system should be increased program visibility.

The Runaway Youth Program is included in the tracking and has established specific program goals to be achieved by March 1979. The goals are:

- Funding about 150 projects (compared to the current 129 projects);
- Increasing the level of support provided by about \$8,000 per project; and
- Improving the quality of services and project administration through technical assistance.

Technical assistance to runaway projects is provided by a private contractor. The goal of technical assistance is to enhance project effectiveness through the use of such techniques as multi-regional, individual, and cluster workshops. Unlike previous technical assistance contracts, the current contract contains a requirement to develop a framework within which the technical assistance shall be evaluated, thus providing a basis to assess its effectiveness. It also requires the development of an operations manual which will provide a means to strengthen project administration and service delivery.

We also noted that there are plans to strengthen the requirements that grant applications must meet. Grant applications for previous funding cycles were to contain assurances that certain program requirements would be met. According to program officials, future grant proposals will have to contain detailed explanations concerning how such requirements will be fulfilled. This will provide more information for evaluating proposals and awarding grant funds.

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Mr. Chairman, that concludes our statement. We will be happy to answer any questions that you or the other Subcommittee members may have.