

U.S. must do better for homeless, runaway gay teens

January 22, 2007

Deb Price

By the time Danny was 7 years old, he was already trapped in the tragic downward spiral that homeless gay teenagers so often describe when talking about how they found themselves living on the streets.

Danny was shoved from one foster home to another and repeatedly molested. He spent two years in a juvenile correctional facility. At 17, he tried living with his aunt, but she soon ordered him to get his "gay ass" out of her house.

Homeless, Danny got cash by reading people's tarot cards and a place to sleep by having "survival sex."

"I'd go to the library. I'd get on (Internet sites where men were seeking sex partners), just to find somewhere to sleep for the night, not for money. I slept with them so I could have a place to stay," he explained.

Danny's story is told in "An Epidemic of Homelessness," an alarming report by the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** and the National Coalition for the Homeless that collects the best research on homeless gay youth and combines it with accounts of the few projects that are successfully addressing the problem. (Read it at thetaskforce.org.)

An appalling number of young people -- as many as 1.6 million, the federal government estimates -- are homeless or runaways. And even though a small fraction of teens are gay, more than 40 percent of homeless youth are gay, the National Runaway Switchboard finds.

The new report is a wakeup call for lawmakers and social service agencies: So much hostility and violence are directed at gay teens in foster care, homeless shelters or correctional facilities that many conclude they're safer living on a sidewalk. Our nation is failing these kids.

The federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act needs to be renewed and better funded, as the report suggests, and Uncle Sam needs to focus on the reasons gay teens are at much higher risk for homelessness.

But this isn't just a government problem. Every American adult ought to hear the horrifying numbers in this report as a wakeup call to work harder to make our society more tolerant of diversity. One-quarter of homeless gay youth are throwaways -- teenagers thrown out of their homes because of their sexual orientation. As James, another teen profiled in the report, was told by his mother, "You're going to be straight or you're not going to live here anymore."

Plenty of kids living on the streets ran away from home to escape being beaten for being gay. Helping to create a society that teaches parents that every child deserves a loving home is up to every adult, not just those of us who're gay. (Any parent needing help in coming to terms with a gay child should contact P-FLAG at 866-627-9749.)

Some gay kids wandering the streets eventually find a drop-in center or shelter that is supportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth, such as the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, Waltham House near Boston and Urban Peak in Denver. James made it to Waltham House. And Danny finally has a place to call home, Urban Peak.

The way America treats gay children whose parents are unwilling or unable to care for them is a national disaster. We must do better.