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YOUR VIEW: STACEY VIOLANTE COTE

HOMELESS YOUTHS NEED SUPPORT

These are tough economic times for Connecticut but Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposal to gut funding from a planned support program for homeless youths is the wrong way to balance the state budget.

Many people may not realize the depth of the problem of homeless youths in our state. Connecticut schools reported a 34 percent increase in the number of homeless students, from 2,017 to 2,716, over the past two years. One program in New Haven is projected to serve 250 homeless youths this year, solely from the Greater New Haven area. Homeless youths are neglected and cast out from their homes with nowhere to turn.

The bipartisan appropriations committee of the General Assembly recognized the ongoing crisis and approved \$1 million to set up support programs that would offer outreach services, emergency beds and transitional programs — a lifeline to these most vulnerable kids. The full legislature approved the plan less

than five months ago, but now Gov. Rell has offered this lifeline up for sacrifice. Unfortunately, homeless children are a silent and often invisible population. Though we may not see them on street corners asking for money, they have the same desires and dreams as any other child: to be in school so they can become somebody, to be loved and safe.

As director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic at the Center for Children's Advocacy, I get calls from children who just want to get back into school, who have no place to go that night and who have moved three to four times during the last six months.

These kids may come into the care of the state Department of Children and Families but run away because of distrust or the many mental health issues that can result from a lifetime of neglect and abuse. These are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youths who have been kicked out of their homes after "coming out" or adolescent boys who are not allowed into family homeless shelters be-

cause of restrictive shelter rules. They are youths who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth found that parental abuse and neglect are primary reasons youths end up on their own and homeless. The National Network for Youth estimates that according to studies of a homeless youth sample, 33 percent had been in foster care, 51 percent had been physically abused and 60 percent of girls and 23 percent of boys had been sexually abused.

Their options without support are few. Homeless kids under age 18 will have to find their way into the care of DCF (an option legally unavailable to some), discover one of the few emergency beds (approximately three in Hartford County) or continue moving from house to house, staying on the couches of friends and relatives for a few weeks at a time.

They are more fortunate than their older counterparts. Young people who have turned 18, many of whom are still in

high school, are limited to friends' couches, staying in an adult homeless shelter or, too often, sleeping in the woods.

These are not the children from whom the government should be stripping support. Put plainly, without this funding, homeless youths will continue sleeping in the woods or moving from couch to couch while trying to finish high school. They will continue to be easy prey for predators who recruit them into prostitution in exchange for a warm place to sleep.

It can't be the plan to balance the state budget on the backs of homeless youths. That plan only exacerbates the already burgeoning population of homeless adults and does nothing good for our state.

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