



January 19, 2022

Chair Mohamud Noor
379 State Office Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Noor and members of the committee,

Avenues for Youth appreciates the opportunity to share written testimony regarding our strong support for HF444 which would both establish an emergency shelter facilities grant program and provide a much needed increase to the Homeless Youth Act.

Minnesota is facing an unsheltered homelessness crisis. Avenues and our partners work every day to address that crisis, but shelter capacity statewide is a not even close to enough to meet the need. Avenues partners with youth experiencing homelessness to achieve their dreams. We do this by providing emergency shelter, short-term housing and support for youth experiencing homelessness in a safe and nurturing environment. Through such support, Avenues seeks to help youth achieve their personal goals and to make a positive transition into young adulthood. Every year we support more than 300 youth experiencing housing instability or homelessness. However, youth homelessness continues to grow. In Minnesota, an estimated 13,300 youth will experience homelessness every year; 73% of them are Black, Indigenous & People of Color. 30% of youth experiencing homelessness report they stayed in an abusive situation because they had no other housing options.

Youth experiencing homelessness have distinct needs that are different from those of single adults or families. Youth need shelters that provide youth-specific mental health, physical health, education, employment and case management supports. When provided these supports, youth can successfully move into stable housing and to thrive as young adults. Shantasia is a perfect example. Shantasia came to Avenues after living in an abandoned house and couch hopping. She felt depressed, angry, and suicidal. Over time she opened up to staff about her dream to become a nurse and took full advantage of the education and employment resources Avenues offers. While living at Avenues, she became a Certified Nursing Assistant. She moved into her own apartment and is pursuing a career as a registered nurse. She says "I feel like I can accomplish everything now."

Youth like Shantasia need a home to call their own, and shelters can provide that home as they prepare for more permanent options. Since 2014, Avenues has operated a shelter and transitional housing program in Brooklyn Park, called Brooklyn Avenues. That shelter was built specifically to be a youth shelter and the design supports trauma-informed care and developmentally appropriate services. Every year 80% or more of the youth who live Brooklyn Avenues move into stable housing. Avenues also operates a shelter in North Minneapolis, known as Minneapolis Avenues. Minneapolis Avenues was built in 1934 and has served many purposes over the years, before being converted to a shelter in 1997. The

space does not adequately meet the needs of youth recovering from the trauma of experiencing homelessness and crowded conditions have forced us to reduce capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, a reduction that we can ill-afford when the need is so great.

Drawing on the lessons we have learned from Brooklyn Avenues, Avenues is planning to build a new building for our shelter and transitional housing program in Minneapolis. A new building will also allow us to grow our programming to fill the gap between the needs of youth experiencing homelessness and current shelter capacity. However, financing shelter capital projects is difficult. There are not enough funding options, requiring braiding many funding streams over the course of a multi-year campaign. Meanwhile, youth like Shantasia are couch-hopping, living on the streets, or staying in abusive situations.

The emergency shelter facilities grant program is an important step in providing funding for safe and accessible shelters for our homeless youth in Minnesota. The increase in funding for the Homeless Youth Act will support crucial on-going programming for shelters and other services for youth like Shantasia. Increased funding for HYA will reduce the risk of exploitation that many youth experiencing homelessness face, as well as prevent involvement in the criminal justice system, prevent adult homelessness, and improve employment and education success.

Thank you again for this opportunity to support this crucial investment. Please contact me at kmeerse@avenuesforyouth.org if I may provide further information on this deeply important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katherine Meerse', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Katherine Meerse
Executive Director