Runaway Prevention: Raising Awareness with NRPM

By: Jasleen Jaswal

November 1st marks the beginning of National Runaway Prevention Month (NRPM), and once again, agencies around the country will leap into action to support the effort. Throughout the month, National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) and the National Network for Youth (NN4Y) strive to educate the public about the issues facing the 1.6 million to 2.8 million youth who will run away this year, and the role the community has in runaway prevention. Last year, Connecticut-based H.O.P.E., a support group for parents who are seeking help for problems with their children, purchased 1,000 green light bulbs for the Green Light Project, and coordinated an awareness poster contest for local youth. Alabama-based Family Connection, Inc. distributed outreach materials via internet, news media, and partnerships with local businesses and schools of Shelby County, AL, including distributing materials to all 13 libraries in the county.

For those who want to help, whether in groups small or large, there are many ways to support NRPM.

In past years, NRS encouraged community members to participate in the Green Light Project during NRPM. Green light bulbs are placed in porch lights across the country to raise awareness and show support for runaway youth. The program is a proven success, and an easy way to support NRPM.

Youth and educators are encouraged to promote NRPM at their schools. The Community Action Kit (available at www.1800RUNAWAY.org) outlines how to plan and implement runaway prevention programs. Adopting NRPM and using the Community Action Kit are perfect ways for extracurricular groups to give back and speak directly to their peers about what’s really going on in their communities. In the greater community, business leaders and congregations can become a partner in distributing information about NRPM, as well as encourage media coverage of local efforts to educate the public.

Of course, runaway prevention isn’t a once-a-year event. Throughout the year, youth and educators can continue to educate themselves and each other about the risks of running away, as well as how to support a youth in a difficult situation. Let’s Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum, is an excellent way to start the conversation, and is easily implemented in 45-minute modules. This curriculum, as well as educational materials about runaway prevention, are available for download at www.1800RUNAWAY.org. Businesses can create opportunities for youth to grow and learn with mentoring or internship programs. As a whole, communities can lobby their local law enforcement agencies to include NRS’ name and the 1-800-RUNAWAY hotline number on Missing Children and Runaway Report forms.

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The National Runaway Switchboard’s (NRS) operations are based solely in a small office building in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago. Because NRS has compiled a database of over 16,000 local resources across the country, crisis callers may assume NRS is literally located where they are. To stretch our $2.3 million budget to handle over 176,000 calls, NRS continues to rely on many collaborative partners to link youth with the 1-800-RUNAWAY crisis line.

**National Runaway Prevention Month (NRPM):**
During November, 2008, NRS and twelve national organizations will partner to raise awareness of the issues facing runaway youth and to educate the public about solutions and the role it can play in preventing youth from running. NRS is proud to count the following organizations as partners in National Runaway Prevention Month: American School Health Association; National Association of School Nurses; Circle of Parents, Girls, Inc.; National Assembly on School-based Health Care; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children & Youth; National Association of School Psychologists; National Center for Homeless Education; National Network for Youth; National Safe Place; School Social Work Association of America; and YWCA USA. In addition, Financial Service Centers Cooperative, Inc. is a corporate partner promoting NRPM to its over 5500 credit union locations.

**National Safe Place:**
For the last several years, NRS has contracted National Safe Place (NSP) to connect youth to help and safety. This collaboration, National Safe Connections, provides a critical safety net for youth across the country. Together, NRS and NSP assist youth and keep them safe through promotion of 1-800-RUNAWAY, Let’s Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum, and Safe Place locations in communities across the country.

**America’s Promise Alliance:**
NRS recently became a member of America’s Promise Alliance, the nation’s largest multi-sector collaborative dedicated to the well-being of children and youth. The Alliance partners consist of businesses, youth-serving organizations, elected officials, educators, faith-based organizations, funders, and others who are dedicated to seeing that children and youth experience the fundamental resources they need to succeed. Along with these collaborative partners, the board of directors, donors, volunteers, and staff all lend their support in NRS’s quest to keep America’s runaway and at-risk youth safe and off the streets.

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**Street Team**

By: Lashawnda M. Carter

The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) recently implemented a new outreach program, Street Team. The purpose of the Street Team is to raise national awareness of NRS’ services, 1-800-RUNAWAY, and www.1800RUNAWAY.org.

Street Team is the answer for individuals who want to support America's runaway and at-risk youth safe and off the streets, but handling crisis calls at the Chicago call center isn’t an option. As a Street Team member, these individuals are supporting the mission.

**Becoming a Street Team member is easy!**
Visit www.1800RUNAWAY.org and complete an application. Registered members receive the Street Team starter kit of outreach materials and activities. Some of these activities include: adding NRS’s banner on a website, linking NRS to a MySpace and/or Facebook page, distributing materials at the local mall, promoting National Runaway Prevention Month, or presenting a module of the Let’s Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum.

But that’s not all! Besides helping to keep America’s runaway and at-risk youth safe and off the streets, team members earn points for each activity performed. Team members track their activity points to redeem prizes such as pens, flashlight key chains, NRS mugs, hats, T-shirts and more!

For more information on how to get involved with the Street Team, visit www.1800RUNAWAY.org or email streetteam@1800RUNAWAY.org.

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**Going once, going twice, helping youth in crisis...SOLD!**

The National Runaway Switchboard’s online auction is in full swing! Head over to www.1800RUNAWAY.org and click on the Spirit of Youth logo to bid on travel getaways, art pieces, sports memorabilia, and so much more!

For the first time ever – you can **Buy It Now!** All items in the online auction will be available for immediate purchase…for the right price!

**This year’s auction features:**
- TWO United Airline International Business Roundtrip Tickets
- Tickets to TWO Chicago Cubs Spring training games in Phoenix, Arizona (United Airline roundtrip tickets and hotel included)
- Tickets to a Boston Red Sox game at Fenway Park – seating in the exclusive EMC Club (United Airline Roundtrip Tickets and hotel included)

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg! Go to www.1800RUNAWAY.org to get your bid in NOW!

**NOTE:** Items that are not purchased using the “Buy It Now” button will move to the silent or live auction at the Spirit of Youth event on November 7, 2008. Live auction items will be open to proxy bidding at the event.
Maurice’s Story

By: Lashawnda M. Carter

“Our National Runaway Switchboard,” Stacey, an NRS frontline team member “liner,” announced as she answered a phone call to 1-800-RUNAWAY.

On the other end of the line was a quiet and hesitant young male’s voice. “Hello?”

“Yes, I’m listening. Take your time…”

— Stacey, NRS Frontline Team Member

After a few moments of silence, 17-year old Maurice began to open up to Stacey about why he called 1-800-RUNAWAY. He informed Stacey that a year ago he told his mother he was gay. “Things were so bad when I first came out to my mom that I ran away. She had a hard time accepting me,” he said.

For several months, Maurice had been going back and forth between his mother and his boyfriend. Although Maurice’s mom had become very supportive of his sexual orientation, she was not supportive of his relationship. Maurice’s boyfriend had been physically abusive.

“She doesn’t approve of me being with him at all. And to make matters worse, she’s moving away,” he explained.

“I’m not sure what I should do. I want to go with my mom, but I don’t want to leave him.”

Stacey actively listened to Maurice’s story. As a liner, Stacy had participated in forty hours of solution-focused intervention training and had been active in the call center for over six months. Stacy was there to help Maurice discuss the pros and cons for each potential choice.

Although Maurice realized it was his final decision, he appreciated Stacy guiding him through his options to ensure his decision was well informed.

As the call ended, Maurice decided that the best option was to continue discussing the situation with his mom, as well as distancing himself from his boyfriend. “Thanks for talking to me. I’m still unsure about everything, but at least I came to a decision that I think is best for me,” he said before he hung up.

The Gift that always fits!

This holiday season, make a gift to National Runaway Switchboard in honor of a special family member, friend, business associate, or youth at www.1800RUNAWAY.org.

By: Flor Bermudez, Lambda Legal Staff Attorney

In homeless service settings, LGBTQ youth regularly face harassment and abuse—physical, verbal and sexual. They are isolated from other youth, threatened or attacked by youth and service providers, blamed by service providers for their own mistreatment and even denied services outright because of their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. Transgender youth face particularly poor treatment. They are often targeted for harassment and assault, receive rooming assignments in accordance with their birth sex rather than the sex with which they identify, are called by their birth names and are forced to abide by dress codes with no room for their gender expression.

LGBTQ youth need: safe shelters where they are respected, referrals to LGBTQ-friendly physical and mental health services, affirming mentors and role models who can provide long-term sources of support in their lives and independent life skills and other transitional services that take into account the specific challenges that LGBTQ people face because of the pervasive discrimination that continues to affect our society.

In all homeless service settings, LGBTQ youth need protection from harassment and discrimination. All homeless youth serving agencies should be required to implement policies that prohibit discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression for youth, staff, volunteers and contract providers.

Such policies send a clear message that maltreatment is unacceptable.

For more information about Lambda Legal, visit www.lambdalegal.org.

Lambda Legal is one of the 16,000 database resources available for NRS callers.

In 1994, Lambda Legal Education &GLBTQ Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth


Transit and Non-Discrimination Policy for Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice Agencies

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth

www.1800RUNAWAY.org

By: Nicholas Ray, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness


See Out of the Margins at 34-43.

For a sample non-discrimination policy applying to child welfare and juvenile justice settings, see National Center for Lesbian Rights, CWLA Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care (2006) ("CWLA Model Policy").
New Horizons for Young Women: a first step to understanding

By: Joel Kessel

“I wish I would have had the National Runaway Switchboard number in my back pocket,” said Jacqueline Danforth, Executive Director of New Horizons for Young Women, reflecting upon her own challenging teenage days. “I may have called and gotten help before I put myself in such a risky situation.”

Offering alternative paths away from choices that put teens in those risky situations is a driving motivation for Danforth’s northern Maine-based New Horizons for Young Women. “Our mission is to support young women who work to better understand themselves and what motivates their choices, relationships and behaviors,” said Danforth.

Having experienced a tumultuous adolescence, including running away from her Malibu, California, home at age 15 to New Mexico for a few weeks, and spending three years at an alternative program in Idaho, Danforth understands and empathizes with the confusion, anger and depression that many at-risk teenage girls feel today. Danforth points out that many of these teenage girls are testing the waters but their actions may threaten their future success.

A family is often compelled to contact New Horizons for a variety of reasons, including their daughter’s loss of interest in school, running away or threatening to run away, high irritability, excessive sleeping, hostile behavior, isolation from friends and family and consistent feelings of sadness. Founding this safe haven in the woods resulted in part because of Danforth’s collegiate experiences, where she recalls young women naturally analyzed everything, [was the] daughter of a famous woman, and felt very exposed, said Danforth. “I was very tall, not competitive, a first step to understanding anger and depression that many at-risk teenage girls feel today. I didn’t just accept things as I was told or saw.” While she never adopted, and seemed to look at the world from an abstract view.

Danforth’s story may be more than 20 years back, but issues and challenges facing adolescents today are the same. That in mind she founded New Horizons in 2001, one of 16,000 resources in the NRS database.

New Horizons enrolls teenage girls between the ages of 13-18, who are engaged in behaviors that may be disrupting school or family life. Danforth points out that many of these teenage girls are testing the waters but their actions may threaten their future success.

Because our donors, partner and sponsors have been there for NRS, we have been there to handle over 175,000 calls in 2007!

NRS presented at a workshop at the Child Helpline International (CHI) Traffic Conference in Mexico City August 2008 for helpline service providers from North and South America (left to right) Jennifer Di Nicola, NRS Call Center Manager; Leen Decadt, CHI Head of Programmes; Gordon Vance, NRS Director of Programmes; and Magdalena Aguilar, CHI Programme Manager for Americas and Caribbean.

NRS received a visit from Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands (Left to Right) NRS Call Center Manager, Jacqueline Di Nicola; Director, St. Croix; Omar Vazquez; Eric Gastevich; and In Honor of Mary Smith’s 80th Birthday, Marvin and Kay Zakien
Friday, November 7th
The Drake Hotel; 6PM–11PM

Co-Chairs: Jim Criner and Michele Lehman
Honorary Chair: Rick Barkan

Every year it gets better and better – and this is truly our best year yet! On November 7, 2008, the National Runaway Switchboard will honor the Chicago Cubs for their support of our services and programs. The goal is to raise $150,000 to keep youth safe and off the streets.

To discuss sponsorship, please contact Katy Walsh, Director of Development and Communications, at 773.289.1727, or at kwalsh@1800RUNAWAY.org.

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3080 North Lincoln Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60657
Tel: 773.880.9860 • Fax: 773.929.5150 • TDD: 800.621.0394
Website: www.1800RUNAWAY.org
Maureen Blaha • Executive Director