

Testimony of Maria Estella Garza
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Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Insurance, Housing, and Community
Opportunity Subcommittee
Financial Services Committee

Hearing Entitled “The Homeless Children and
Youth Act of 2011: Proposals to Promote
Economic Independence for Homeless Children
and Youth”

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Good morning Representative Biggert, Representative Gutierrez, Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on this very important subject. My name is Estella Garza. I am the Homeless Liaison for the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) in San Antonio, Texas. I have been in this role in SAISD for 17 years. My duties as Homeless Liaison include identification of eligible children and youth, service provision, conducting training and awareness workshops, advocacy for enrollment, accessing resources in the community at large, coordinating with our local Continuum of Care, and overall program administration, including data management and budgeting.

Homeless Children and Youth in San Antonio

SAISD has an overall student population of approximately 55,000, with 93% economically disadvantaged. So far this school year, we have identified and enrolled 1,350 homeless students in school. We have identified roughly 700 additional homeless children and youth who are not enrolled in school, either because they are too young for preschool, are unable to enroll in preschool due to capacity issues, or are older youth we identified, and for whom we provided services in an effort to entice them to enroll, but who chose not to enroll. We are on pace to exceed the number of homeless students we identified last school year. In 2009-10 we identified and enrolled 2,033 homeless students. Last year we identified and enrolled 3,171 students (with over 4,000 children and youth identified as homeless in total). That's a 56% increase in one year.

Part of that increase is due to our training and presence in the schools, as well as our hiring of additional outreach staff with ARRA funds. SAISD school personnel are more cognizant than ever of homelessness, and are more apt to refer homeless students to my office. Of course, the economic recession overall in our community has had a serious impact on our homeless population. Our population tends to rely on low-paid, low-skill employment that has disappeared with the economic downturn. Many have lost rental apartments when the property was foreclosed because the landlord did not pay the mortgage. It was very evident a few years ago when the foreclosure crisis hit San Antonio, and we had an increase in mobility and homelessness among families. Even the increase in gas prices has created significant challenges for our families.

Unfortunately, homeless services have not increased along with the rate of homelessness. For years, most of our homeless families have lived in doubled-up situations. These families are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, so they qualify as homeless under the education definition of homelessness. However, as homelessness has increased, the doubled-up proportion also has increased. The shelters are full, and families and youth have nowhere to go. For example, in the 2010-11 school year, 79.5% of the homeless children and youth SAISD enrolled were living in doubled-up situations. That's 2,522 children. Only 15.9% (505 children and youth) were living in shelters. 44 students were living in motels at the time we identified them as homeless. However, we know that many more

children and youth actually lived in motels as a form of emergency housing during their time of homelessness. Finally 3.2% of our students (100 children) were unsheltered—living in parks, campgrounds, abandoned buildings, and public spaces.

The thousands of doubled-up children and youth I serve face severe challenges. They live in extremely overcrowded conditions, faced with the instability of not knowing whether they'll be allowed to stay from one day to the next. There is often a lot of tension between the host family and doubled-up family. For children in that kind of living situation, it's very difficult to concentrate or focus. There is no quiet place to study or do homework—sometimes there is no place at all to study. There is no calm place to sit down with your parents and talk about your day. The child himself or herself may see it in a more simplified manner: "I don't have my bedroom; I don't have my toys; I don't have any privacy." There are so many people in the home that the particular developmental needs of each child are not being addressed. In fact, they often are not even being considered. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains, the family is concentrating on the basic needs of shelter, food, and clothing, and everything else falls by the wayside, including school enrollment and attendance. The result is a negative impact on the child's education, behavior, physical and mental development, fine and gross motor skills—it affects every aspect of the child. Unfortunately, this situation is becoming the norm for many of our homeless families. It's the only norm many of our children have ever known, spending their childhoods bouncing from one place to another. So when we talk about ending homelessness in five or ten years, we must realize that we cannot do that without addressing the needs of our doubled-up children and youth. Because if they continue to experience the instability of doubling-up as their norm, they will become the chronic homeless adults of tomorrow.

In my work at SAISD, I see every day that many families cannot escape homelessness. Just as one example, we've had a family who has been homeless for the past four years. It's a family of six—four children and two parents. We've been working with them the entire time, as the family has bounced all over the city—from emergency shelters, to doubled-up situations, to motels, to wherever they could find a roof over their heads. In the emergency shelter, they can only stay for a short period of time, and then they have to leave. As a result, they have been in different doubled-up situations most of the time they've been homeless. They have lived doubled-up in houses where all six of them are in one room, and where some of them are sleeping on the floor. They've lived with other family members who have a family of four, so there are ten people in a 2-bedroom home. That kind of overcrowding is common among our families. Although they have bounced all over the city, we have been able to keep the children in the same school each year, particularly the three younger students. The older youth has faced greater instability, and right now he is in an alternative program, trying to get his high school diploma. It's to his great credit that he is still going to school, despite the chronic instability and upheaval in his family and his life. We have not been successful in connecting this family to any housing services. We provide them with transportation, school supplies, immediate enrollment, free meals—anything we can do from a school

or academic perspective, we're there to help them out. We also were able to get some additional services for them one Christmas, thanks to the generosity of a patron in our community. Early in the school year, the mother told me she'd finally received a letter from the housing authority informing her that if she could assemble certain documents and \$1400 in a short time frame, she could get into housing. We immediately sprung to action helping her get the documents together, and when she was \$40 short on the fee, we came up with that money for her. She was able to submit everything on time, but about a month later she called me to tell me it had all fallen through, because someone had stolen her husband's identity, resulting in problems in his credit report. They had an attorney assisting them with the credit issues, but regardless, they were denied housing. She ended up finding housing from a stranger she met on the bus, who had personal circumstances that resulted in her home being available, and she is essentially donating the home to this family.

We strive to keep serving our families and youth despite their constant mobility. We try to follow them, but since they have no way to access stable housing, ultimately, school districts are losing kids. We don't know how to find them. It's common for me to get calls from mothers in October or November, trying to enroll their children who have been out of school since the previous spring. They are so unstable that they don't know how or where to enroll. As a result, the children miss large chunks of the school year. I assisted a mother this October who had already been doubled-up in five different homes in two months, and she didn't know where to enroll her child. Once she called me, we got him in school immediately. However, I was not able to help her access HUD services, because she was not "homeless" according to HUD.

We also have many families who live in motels, where they are able to stay for a short period of time based on how much money they can piece together. One family in particular was a mother with a high-school aged boy. The mother was a Veteran of the Armed Forces. They were living in one room with no cooking facilities—not even a microwave oven or refrigerator. She asked us to help with food, which we did, but since they had no way to store perishable food or prepare any food, they ate their meals out of cans and boxes. Outside their single room, the motel opened up onto an unsafe and unsavory neighborhood. I remember her son's exact words were, "This kind of life is for the birds. This isn't meant for humans." I couldn't help this family access HUD homeless programs, either – the fact that the mother was paying for the motel room meant they did not meet HUD's definition of homelessness.

Collaboration Between SAISD and the HUD Continuum of Care

Over my 17 years in this position, I have worked closely with shelters in San Antonio and with our Continuum of Care (CoC). Our relationships have grown and matured. However, the differing definitions of "homeless" continue to be very problematic. I speak my language, they speak theirs. I speak out about the families and youth I serve, and my CoC and shelter colleagues know my population is larger than theirs due to the

definition. But because of the different definitions, as a community we constantly have to shift from one mindset to another. It's a challenge to identify common needs and pursue common goals. It's a challenge to help them understand my population. "They're not homeless," they say. Yes, they are. How do we include my families in the Point in Time Count? How do we include them in the services the CoC provides? They simply don't qualify for many services, period, sometimes because of where they live and sometimes just because they are a family or an under-age youth. And sometimes I have to push and prod and do whatever it takes to get a family into a shelter, just so they can access the other supportive services they need to get out of homelessness. I have a good relationship with my shelters, and I push them. It's a horrible situation to have to put another agency's back against the wall, but the only way I can get services for my kids is to get them inside the shelter. It's a nonsensical waste of my resources and those of the shelter. And sadly, more often than not, I am not successful getting them into shelter.

That's the trouble with the HUD definition. If you're doubled-up in the community, you're not "homeless", so you can't get services. But we don't have nearly the shelter capacity for all our families. So they can't get in the shelter, and therefore can't get any services. It's a cycle: doubled-up families can't get in the shelter, so they can't get services, so they remain doubled-up. As a result I'm forced to pressure my shelter colleagues to squeeze in desperate families, because it's the only way the families can access the supportive services they need. When you're 20 people living in a 3-bedroom apartment, children and youth and adults all on top of each other, literally rolling over onto each other in the night, suffering extreme hardship, sometimes without lights or running water—there is no kind of emergency assistance available for that kind of homelessness. There is no assistance for those children. They can apply for housing, and they can be placed on a two-year waitlist. They don't need the assistance in two years. They need it now. And they need supportive services now.

How can we begin to prioritize our families who are doubled-up for housing and support services without them having to pass through a shelter? How can they get from homelessness to housing without a shelter in between? I understand HUD categorizes those families and youth as "at-risk." But in San Antonio, the "at-risk" category doesn't help those families and youth. I know my community very well, and I am not aware of any services in my community for at-risk families, at all. From my understanding, the services that might be available for "at risk" families under the new HEARTH Act do not include most of the services my families need, such as transitional housing, permanent housing, and supportive services such as job training and mental health services. I also understand that only a tiny fraction of HEARTH funding is available for those families. In any case, calling these families and youth "at risk" doesn't do justice to the awful conditions they are living in, and it doesn't help the language barrier and the different mindsets in our CoC. It keeps my families and youth invisible – out of sight and out of mind.

The HEARTH Act's Definition of "Homeless" and HUD's Regulations

I had hoped the HEARTH Act's changes to the HUD definition of homeless would allow San Antonio to provide services to the children and youth I serve. However, upon reading the regulations, and particularly the documentation requirements, I realized that the new definition would not make any difference for the vast majority of my families and youth.

For example, it will be impossible for our doubled-up families to provide documentation, written or oral, from host families regarding how long the doubled-up family or youth can stay, or even confirming they actually are staying there at all. Hosting homeless families and youth often violates rental agreements and occupancy limits. Host families are extremely hesitant to admit to any authority or agency that they have ten people in a 2-bedroom apartment, when their lease and occupancy limits allow only four. In this context, even phone calls to the host family from case managers will be intrusive and likely to result in the host family asking the homeless family to leave immediately. In many instances the host family is in HUD subsidized housing. Will they be evicted? How will HUD treat these families?

If HUD's goal is to create a higher degree of anxiety and animosity among family members in our community, these documentation requirements are an excellent way to do that. The reality of family and youth homelessness in San Antonio is that due to lack of housing, families and youth bounce from relative to relative and friend to friend. When they go through all their support networks, they try to start the cycle all over again. They know they can't stay any one place for long. However, because they lack any other options, they stay longer than their hosts prefer—they wear out their welcome. This creates tension within the family, estranged relationships, anger and frustration, and ultimately the family having to leave and move on to another doubled-up situation. Expecting the host family to provide any documentation about how long the family can stay, or how often they've moved, will only add to that tension. In addition, the host family will now feel obligated to force the homeless family out within 14 days, for fear of charges of fraud or liability. They will be less likely to accept that family back in the future or to provide shelter for anyone. That will become a host home that our homeless family can never return to.

Ironically, this documentation requirement will actually help families meet another one of HUD's requirements: that the youth or family lacks the support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing. By systematically destroying families' support networks, it will make it easier for our families to assert that they have no support networks. Ultimately, it will plague our community with more instability for our families and children, higher mobility, more stress, and greater challenges.

Another example of documentation that will create insurmountable barriers for our families and youth is the acceptable evidence to prove that the family or youth can be

expected to continue in their current status for an extended period of time. It can be extremely difficult for the families and youth we serve to obtain written diagnoses of chronic physical health or mental health conditions. There are not a sufficient number of licensed professionals available to serve this community. By the time a youth or family is able to get through the process of getting this documentation and verification of a physical or mental health issue, the child is gone; we have lost them. We may not know where they are, and we won't be able to provide any services to the family. I also wonder what kind of impact this requirement will have on Medicaid services and providers, which, for most of our families, is the only access they would have to such professionals. This requirement could have a very severe, drastic impact on many different agencies and professionals in San Antonio.

Furthermore, it's simply not right to force an unaccompanied homeless youth to obtain a diagnosis of a chronic physical or mental health condition, a substance abuse problem or history of abuse as a condition to provide that youth with services he desperately needs. It forces him to establish and accept a written record that says he has little hope of breaking free of homelessness as a condition to having his basic needs met and being safe. It's not right, and it's not fair. Our kids shouldn't have to do this. For unaccompanied homeless youth to have to present this kind of evidence is creating a generation of kids with instability in their records. Why should they have to do that just to get services? It's horrendous.

In a sense, what HUD is trying to do is return to their old definition of homelessness, eliminating our doubled-up families and youth by requiring so much documentation. That's what the regulations say to me.

HR 32: A Better Way to Serve Our Nation's Families and Youth

I am familiar with HR 32, the Homeless Children and Youth Act proposed by Representative Biggert. In fact, I am used to the process of certifying homelessness for other federal programs, as I do with a streamlined system for free school meals for our students, and to allow unaccompanied homeless youth to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as independent students. I will gladly accept the responsibility to certify children and youth who are homeless under the U.S. Department of Education's definition. My families and youth need transitional housing, permanent housing, rapid rehousing and supportive services like case management, job training, and mental health support. Those kinds of services would make a huge difference for my families and youth, both those who need urgent, short-term help to get rehoused, and those who need ongoing support to undo what years of repeated homelessness has done to them.

One example of a family who could have been helped by HR 32 is a two-parent family I recently served. The family included six kids from middle to high school, and a father working low-wage jobs. They were at risk of homelessness for some time due to the

father's employment instability, and when the father ultimately lost his job, the family lost their apartment and moved into a doubled-up situation. If he had been able to access rapid rehousing or homelessness prevention services, he could have left the doubled-up situation immediately, or perhaps even avoided homelessness altogether. However, due to not meeting HUD's definition of "homeless," I was not able to obtain any such services for the family. In two or three months, they were displaced several times. With a great deal of logistical support and transportation costs, we were able to keep the kids stable in their schools over those months of upheaval. Eventually, the father found another job, and the family was able to get another apartment. However, if I could have accessed services for them, we could have rehoused them immediately and avoided the displacement and upheaval in the lives of these six youth. We were lucky none of them dropped out of school due to the instability, or in an effort to get a job and support the family.

Another family that could have benefited from HR 32 was a mother with a high-school-age daughter. They were doubled-up, and the mother needed a deposit and first-month's rent for an apartment. She was able to get some of the money, but was \$400 short. We couldn't get services for them, we couldn't get them connected to a rapid rehousing or other assistance program, and we couldn't find the \$400 for them. They are still homeless today. This was the perfect opportunity for a program to end this family's homelessness, to be able to celebrate getting a homeless family into permanent housing, but they weren't eligible for services. They've been homeless for a year and half now. They recently lost another doubled-up situation and had to move into a boarding house, where they are sharing one room. We are serving the youth and trying to keep her on track for high school graduation.

Conclusion

"HUD homeless", "ED homeless" – regardless of the legal definitions, in reality, these are all the same families. There is not a "doubled-up population" and a "shelter population." There is a homeless population. Families and youth can't find space in the shelter system, so they have to double up. Or the shelters don't serve families or unaccompanied minors, so they have to double up. Or the emergency shelter time limit runs out, so they double up. And then they are forced out of one doubled-up situation into another, or into a shelter if one is available, or into a motel if they happen to have the money. These are all the same families. They make the rounds. It's a means of survival. They're moving in and out of "HUD homelessness," with no consistency, no continuity, and almost no possibility of accessing HUD services.

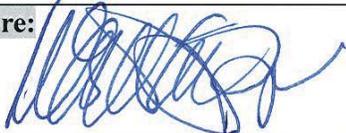
If HR 32 were enacted, we could begin to break this vicious cycle of homelessness. We could eliminate HUD's bureaucratic paper chase, we could be more creative and sensible in our use of existing federal programs, and we could put children and youth first, so they don't become tomorrow's homeless adults. Thank you for allowing me to

Speak on behalf of the thousands of homeless children, youth, and families in San Antonio, and across the nation.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Financial Services

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Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee on Financial Services require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony.

1. Name:	2. Organization or organizations you are representing:
Maria Estrella Garza	San Antonio Independent School District
3. Business Address and telephone number: [REDACTED]	
4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify?	5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify?
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
6. If you answered .yes. to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets.	
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