

## Riverbend City ® Activity

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# Task Force Decision Making

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## Introduction

You recently helped the Ruby Lake Teen Homelessness Task Force choose a leader. The task force members were unable to agree on any of the choices—so they've chosen you! You happily accept their offer. So, congratulations—you're the new leader of the Ruby Lake Teen Homelessness Task Force.

Today, the task force is addressing a specific case. Eva Wesley is a homeless 16-year-old who was hospitalized after an opioid overdose. She's transgender and does not want to return to her home. The task force has been asked to recommend a course of action for Eva. You will help guide their discussion.

As you think about how to help Eva, you should ask yourself this: What more does the task force need to know to better assist homeless teenagers like Eva?

# Scene 1

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## Email from Elizabeth Fine

**From:** Elizabeth Fine, Guidance Counselor

**Subject:** Action needed to help homeless teen

I'm so excited that you're going to be leading the Ruby Lake Teen Homelessness Task Force!

I know this is short notice, but can you stop by later today to help us with an issue that's come up? Here's what's going on: a 16-year-old homeless girl from Ruby Lake was hospitalized after overdosing on opioids. She's transgender. I know this girl; I was her guidance counselor when she attended Ruby Lake High School.

The county is unclear on how to respond to this situation. The girl adamantly does not want to go home. The task force has been asked to come up with a recommendation. My guess is that task force members will have different opinions on this, so we will very much need your guidance!

In addition to help with this particular case, I think this needs to be a stepping off point for discussing how to assist teenagers like this one. We may need to do some research, and also think about adding an additional task force member or two to help address this (and other) issues.

If possible, can you stop by the hospital and speak with the girl, if she's willing?

Thank you so much for your help!

— Elizabeth

# Scene 2

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# Ruby Lake Office

You stop by Riverbend City Medical Center and meet with Eva Wesley, the transgender girl who overdosed on opioids. She is willing to speak with you. You ask her what she wants to do. Does she want to go home?

## Eva Wesley

Age 16

I can't go home. I just can't. I mean, I really miss my mom. She accepts me for who I am. But my dad won't. He calls me Austin, no matter what I tell him. My mom calls me Eva and lets me dress the way I want when he's not around—like, when he was in rehab? But he's not drinking anymore, so he's around all the time now. I feel really guilty about that. I keep wanting my father to start drinking again so I can be myself. I guess that makes me a pretty terrible person. Especially because he almost died in a car accident because of his drinking, and I know he really wants to be sober.

But anyways, I can't pretend like I'm a boy anymore. I've known since I was five that I'm really a girl. I kept it to myself for a long time because I knew my dad would never be okay with it. I have two sisters and as far as he's concerned, I'm his only boy. But it got harder and harder to pretend. That's why I started taking pills. I did it the first time when I was twelve and it made me feel better. But then I finally decided I couldn't pretend anymore and I came out to my parents. My dad hit me in the face and told me he would kill me if I ever said that again. He didn't really mean that, and he said he was sorry when he calmed down. But he won't let me be Eva. When I wear girls' clothes he punishes me—he takes away my phone, doesn't let me talk to my friends, stuff like that. When he gets really mad he calls me stuff like faggot and freak.

If it were up to my mom, I could be Eva. But she's afraid to tell him that. I'm afraid that if she does tell him, he'll start hitting her again. He only hits her when he drinks—but I'm afraid that he'll be so mad about this that he'll hit her even if he's sober. I don't want my mom to get hurt because of me.

So anyways, that's why I left. So I can be Eva. And so my mom won't get hurt. It's been about three months now. And it's been rough on the streets. I'm not going to lie. I've had to... well, you know. Do some things to get money? Just a few times. But that made me really sad, so I took a lot of pills. And that's how I wound up in here. I'm probably better off dead, to tell you the truth.

## Scene 3

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### Task Force Recommendations

You meet with the Task Force in order to make a recommendation to the county for what to do about Eva Wesley. Three options are discussed: returning Eva to her home, placing her in foster care, or emancipating her.

#### Mark Tucker

Group Home Supervisor

**Option One: Should Eva be sent home?**

We can't send Eva home. She'll run away again. Trust me—I've worked with many kids in similar situations. She's already made her decision—being on the streets is better than being with a father who won't let her be herself. Besides, the dad's alcoholism is a huge red flag. Why would we send home a teen with drug problems to an alcoholic parent?

**Option Two: Should Eva be sent to foster care?**

Well, sure—if we could guarantee that the foster provider was LGBT-friendly. But foster care doesn't work like that. Kids are placed in foster care based on age, sex, and sometimes religion. But they won't consider gender identity. And it's hard enough to find foster care for older teens. So if we send Eva to foster care, we *might* luck out and send her to a welcoming home. Or, it could be an even bigger disaster than sending her home—and she'll run away again.

**Option Three: Should Eva be emancipated?**

Is there another family member who would be willing to take Eva in? Or a close friend? If that's the case, then I might recommend emancipation. Otherwise, I have serious reservations. It's very difficult for an emancipated minor to function successfully in society without someone over 18 to "sponsor" them, so to speak.

## Chelsea Jenkins

Crisis Intervention Counselor

**Option One: Should Eva be sent home?**

I think we need to consider the possibility of sending him home. *Her*, I mean... I'm sorry. It may not be a great option, but it's way better than being on the streets, where it sounds like she's already turned to prostitution. That's absolutely horrible. It sounds like her father isn't drinking right now—and that when he's not drinking, he's not hitting Eva or her mother. The state would need to work with the family and monitor things closely. It does sound like Eva won't be able to identify as a girl for the time being, but—I mean, quite bluntly, isn't that better than being on the streets and being a prostitute? At least I think so...I'll admit that I feel a little out of my element here. Maybe we need someone on this task force who can speak with more authority on situations like this.

**Option Two: Should Eva be sent to foster care?**

I still think home is the best option—as long as there's monitoring. But if that's not possible, foster care is probably the second best option. I know that there's a chance that she'd wind up with a family who doesn't accept her for being transgender. But again, that's got to be better than being on the street, isn't it? Foster families are trained to take care of kids who come from difficult situations. The system isn't perfect, but we do have a system in place to help kids like Eva.

**Option Three: Should Eva be emancipated?**

Emancipation is tough. Sixteen-year-olds are not ready to function in society as adults. If they were, then teen homelessness wouldn't be such a problem—because those teens would be able to take care of themselves!

# Jason De La Cruz

Foster Care Coordinator, Hennsey County

## **Option One: Should Eva be sent home?**

There are no ideal options here. What we really need are broader systemic changes so a kid like this doesn't have to choose between homelessness and the abusive environment she came from. Because, let me be clear—what was going on in her household was abuse. The physical abuse may have subsided with the drinking, but the emotional abuse was every day. Punishing a child for being transgender—and calling her names like faggot—that's abuse, plain and simple. And she responded to that abuse by taking opioids, which almost killed her. I don't know what the best solution is for Eva. I wish I were more of an expert about this issue. But I do know that we can't send her home.

## **Option Two: Should Eva be sent to foster care?**

As a foster care coordinator, I have serious reservations about sending Eva to foster care. She's 16 years old, which means that she'll be aging out of the system soon. And the system as a whole is not well-equipped to help kids who age out. The link between experience in foster care and homelessness is shocking—about 50 percent of the homeless population in the United States has spent time in foster care, and up to half of kids who age out of the foster system become homeless within 18 months. And this kid has already been homeless, so she would be at high risk.

## **Option Three: Should Eva be emancipated?**

Obviously there are problems with emancipation. However, this might be a case where this less-than-ideal option is appropriate. We have a situation here where Eva is being forced to live as a male, even though this is clearly a violation of her deeply held beliefs. The situation has led her to self-medicate with dangerous drugs, which almost killed her. If she goes home, she'll be forced to present as male until she becomes an adult. So maybe it's time we let her become an adult by law so that she can make her own decision. This is something I'd like to know more about, actually. Statistically, what happens to transgender teens when they're emancipated? That kind of knowledge would help us make more informed decisions in cases like this one.

# Elizabeth Fine

## Guidance Counselor

### **Option One: Should Eva be sent home?**

I worked with Eva when she was a student at Ruby Lake High School. I've spoken with her mother a number of times—both before and after Eva ran away. Her mother is absolutely devastated. It's clear to me that she loves her daughter very much and is willing to accept Eva for who she is. She's also trying to keep her family together. She told me a number of times that if she left Eva's father, she was afraid they would all wind up on the streets. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I *think* home might be the best option, but I'm torn. There's one loving, committed parent at home—and that's got to be better than being on the streets. But on the other hand, this is obviously not an ideal home for a transgender child, or for a child with a drug problem.

### **Option Two: Should Eva be sent to foster care?**

Based on my experiences with Eva's mother, I still think she belongs at home. She has a parent at home who loves her deeply. It's unlikely that she'll find that in a foster home. Although to tell you the truth, I don't know much at all about the experience of transgender teens in foster care. Maybe we need more information about this issue? Then we could make more informed decisions when cases like this arise.

### **Option Three: Should Eva be emancipated?**

A child can only be emancipated by a judge. I don't know if this would even be an option for Eva. I know the home she came from is far from ideal, but I don't think things are bad enough there for her to qualify for emancipation. Especially since there's a parent there who does love her very much. I know her father's treatment has been awful, but is it harsh enough to warrant emancipation in a judge's eyes?

## Conclusion

Now that you've heard the Task Force's opinions, what do you think the next step should be?

Are you ready to make a recommendation, or do you need more information first?

## Reflection Questions

Do you have enough information to make a recommendation on the Eva Wesley case? If so, what should be done? If not, what additional information do you need before you can make a recommendation?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

What knowledge gaps do you see in this task force that may impact their ability to help teens like Eva Wesley? How would you recommend they fill these knowledge gaps?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

Would you recommend an additional task force member (or members) to help address issues like this one? If so, what criteria might you use for selecting these prospective task force members?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.



If the task force were to conduct a literature review, what information should they research?

Your response:

This question has not been answered yet.

## Credits

Subject Matter Expert:

**Pamela Klem**

Interactive Design:

**Marty Elmer**

Interactive Developer:

**Dre Allen**

Instructional Design:

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Media Instructional Design:

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