

# ENDING HOMELESSNESS FOR UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

## RAPID RE-HOUSING

Rapid re-housing is an intervention that helps people who are homeless quickly return to permanent housing. The intervention has been widely used to end homelessness for adults, including both individuals and families. It was also identified as a promising practice by participants in the Practice Knowledge Project of the National Alliance to End Homelessness (Alliance). This brief is based on information obtained by the Alliance from practitioners who provide rapid re-housing for youth.

## PRACTICE KNOWLEDGE PROJECT

The Practice Knowledge Project is an initiative of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, and national partners, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and Funders Together to End Homelessness, to capture information from diverse homeless youth practitioners about the strategies they are finding work to prevent and end homelessness among youth.

With generous support from the Raikes Foundation and Melville Charitable Trust, the Alliance and national partners convened practitioners to examine effective responses to youth homelessness. The first in-person meeting was held in October 2014 and explored what providers have learned from their many years of experience addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors. A second in-person meeting was held in April 2015 and explored strategies to help youth over the age of 18 avoid and escape homelessness. Findings from these two convenings have been published.

Following up on these in-person sessions, conference calls were held with practitioners to examine in greater depth some of the strategies identified as holding particular promise to end youth homelessness. This report examines lessons learned from providers implementing rapid re-housing to help youth escape homelessness.

## WHAT IS RAPID RE-HOUSING?

Rapid re-housing is an intervention designed to help individuals and families quickly exit homelessness and return to permanent housing. To accomplish this, it helps people find rental housing, provides short-term financial assistance to help them pay for housing, and delivers housing-focused case management and services. Rapid re-housing assistance is offered without preconditions (such as employment, income, absence of criminal record, or sobriety) and the resources and services provided are typically tailored to the unique needs of the household. Rapid re-housing consists of three core components<sup>1</sup> all of which are essential to the success of the model.

- **HOUSING IDENTIFICATION:** Rapid re-housing providers recruit and/or help people identify landlords. They help address potential barriers to landlord participation such as concern about the short-term nature of rental assistance or tenant qualifications. They assist households to find and secure appropriate rental housing.
- **FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE (RENT AND MOVE-IN):** Rapid re-housing programs offer financial assistance to cover move-in costs, deposits, and the rental and/or utility assistance necessary to allow people to move quickly out of homelessness and to stabilize in permanent housing.
- **RAPID RE-HOUSING CASE MANAGEMENT AND SERVICES:** Rapid re-housing case management and services are primarily focused on helping people secure and sustain housing. This may include helping them identify and select among various permanent housing options based on their unique needs, preferences, and financial resources. It helps them address issues that may impede their access to housing (such as credit history, arrears, and legal issues) and negotiate manageable and appropriate lease agreements with landlords. It provides services and supports to help people stabilize in their new housing and manage any crises. Finally, it connects them to services and resources in the community to address their needs, including employment.

An important core feature of rapid re-housing is that the services are client-directed, respectful of individuals' rights to self-determination, and voluntary. Unless basic, program-related case management is required by statute or regulation, participation in services is not to be required to receive rapid re-housing assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> The Core Components of Rapid Re-Housing was developed in collaboration with, and endorsed by, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The document can be accessed online at: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/rapid-re-housing2>

## LESSONS LEARNED

The following important practice knowledge emerged from an in-depth discussion with providers who are implementing a rapid re-housing model for youth.

### **Purposefully Embracing a Client-Driven, Housing First Philosophy**

Youth rapid re-housing providers reported the common experience of having gone through an organizational shift to adopt a Housing First approach. Adopting a Housing First orientation requires providers to move from judging whether or not a youth is “ready” to be housed on their own, to focusing on how to help youth, including those with very significant challenges, succeed in housing. It also requires providers to embrace a voluntary services approach that allows youth to lead the way in developing their own service plans rather than mandating that they comply with a services plan developed by the provider.

Making a shift from an orientation that requires compliance with services to a voluntary services approach is often a difficult process for organizational leaders and frontline staff. However, providers reported that adopting a voluntary services approach gives youth the developmentally appropriate space to make mistakes from which they can learn, and to do so in a protected environment. To ensure consumer participation, providers tailor services to the needs and goals of young people. This results in youth more enthusiastically participating in services, which improves outcomes and eliminates the fear that voluntary services will not work.

Providers pointed out that the wider community, including political leaders, funders, landlords, program providers, and youth who may be in need of rapid re-housing services also have to be educated about how rapid re-housing based on Housing First principles can work. This includes providing information about how individually tailored case management services (which in the case of youth are often very intensive) make housing young people in independent housing far less risky than they might think. It also includes helping youth understand the responsibilities they have to assume, such as complying with lease requirements and assuming rental payments independently within a relatively short period of time.

Ultimately, providers found that when they stay focused on delivering supports to help youth sustain housing in a manner consistent with Housing First principles, rapid re-housing works well for even highly vulnerable youth and should be more broadly available as a tool to combat youth homelessness.

## Landlord Engagement Is Crucial

Rapid re-housing providers serving youth reported that building and sustaining relationships with landlords is essential. Cultivating new landlords is a necessary component of providing rapid re-housing, and some providers have gotten very savvy at engaging new landlords through techniques such as cold calling developers of new properties to let them know about the program.

Many providers who have served adults with rapid re-housing have existing relationships with landlords. When preparing to house youth, these providers find it is important to educate landlords about youth development, age-appropriate behaviors that could be addressed by the program rather than through an eviction, and rental criteria that may not be appropriate for young people. With respect to the latter, for example, youth may not have rental or credit histories, or they may have negative credit histories because their families have taken out loans in their names without their knowledge.

Through developing relationships and a history of working with different landlords, providers often learn which landlords have sensitivities to different barriers youth might have. For example, some landlords might be more concerned about criminal histories than credit histories, and vice versa. This can help youth providers identify housing options and landlords that will likely be more accepting of youth with certain barriers.

Providers also found that it is very important to clarify to both the landlord and the youth the nature of the lease, the youth's responsibility as a leaseholder, and the role of the program in supporting a successful tenancy. Ultimately, educating landlords about the unique developmental needs of youth and about how the program's often intensive case management services allay the risk of renting to youth helps these programs develop more housing options.

## Services Are Key

Services delivered to youth in rapid re-housing programs are critical and may begin during the initial outreach on the streets or in shelter. When youth enter the program, they may still be in survival mode and have histories of trauma. As such, it is important that services be relationship-based and trauma-informed. Many young people have never lived on their own and need support to learn the basics like managing a budget, preparing meals, and understanding tenant rights and responsibilities. They need links to benefits and employment services because they will have to relatively quickly assume responsibility for the rent. The range of needed services can be extensive.

Importantly, case managers should facilitate the development of supportive relationships with caring adults outside of the homeless youth service system. These connections can provide longer-term support for youth after they exit the rapid re-housing program. They are particularly important for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth who

may have to create a new family and support system after being rejected by their families of origin. One rapid re-housing program facilitates new connections for youth by linking them to mentors or life coaches who are not attached to the organization. These adults help youth develop social skills and community connections.

Case managers may also need to help youth navigate existing relationships with family and friends. Once housed, youth often want to help friends and family with housing problems by giving them a place to stay. However, this can result in a lease violation or other issues that undermine the young person's own housing stability. Case managers can respect that youth are trying to maintain or rebuild relationships. At the same time they can use such incidents as an opportunity to educate youth about lease requirements, and brainstorm or role play other ways to honor their relationships while employing healthy boundaries that allow them to maintain housing. Youth requiring more intensive or specialized help to rebuild relationships with family members may be referred to appropriate community-based agencies delivering those services.

Ultimately, case management in rapid re-housing programs for youth needs to be flexible and service-rich. Services should allow youth to experiment, make mistakes, and learn and grow in developmentally appropriate ways, without the threat of housing loss.

## **Rapid Re-Housing for Youth Different than for Adults**

Rapid re-housing programs serving youth reported relying on a small client caseload ratio (10:1). This enables case managers to provide the level of developmentally appropriate support youth need to successfully sustain their housing, develop the necessary independent living skills, and connect to the community-based supports and services that will help them achieve their long-term goals. Further, as mentioned above, because youth often come into programs with both trauma histories and no experience living on their own, services are usually more intensive than in adult rapid re-housing programs, especially early on. Case management meetings happen more often and providers report trying to meet with youth face-to-face at least once a week.

Initially, youth may require mentoring on independent living skills and the rights and responsibilities of tenancy since most have never run their own households. They may also require emotional support if they are recovering from traumatic experiences of family abuse or rejection and life on the streets. Youth are often farther behind on their education and employment journeys than adult clients, so they may require more support and time in order to achieve the education they need and the financial resources that enable them to assume rental payment on their own. Young parents may need access to child care and assistance with parenting skills. Youth with disabilities may require linkages to treatment or other services.

As youth become more stable in their new homes, in-person meetings may drop to twice a month. With this population, however, case managers have to be flexible and mobile.

They may have more opportunities to engage with youth in the community, during transportation to job interviews, or via social media, rather than in-office. When crises come up, case managers may need to see youth more often, and low caseloads allow them the flexibility to respond appropriately.

Providers find that issues often emerge six to eight months after youth enter rapid re-housing programs. These include unresolved legal issues or emerging mental health issues, which require reassessment and adjustment of a young person's case plan. It is critical that the program sticks with the youth as they work through all of these issues. Willingness to provide more help when needed lets youth know that they cannot fail within the program.

Youth providers said that it is beneficial to extend services to youth for a period of time after they appear to have stabilized in housing (or, minimally, to continue to monitor their progress). The providers view this as a strategy to help youth avoid losing housing if issues arise and to alleviate the necessity of having to set youth up in another housing situation later.

This is also true for financial assistance. While some programs require youth to pay 30 percent of their income for rent, others choose to pay the full rent until the young person's income increases more substantially. These providers see it as helpful to provide full rental assistance for a longer period of time so that youth can accumulate some savings and be protected should a circumstance suddenly change (e.g., lost hours at a job). This may also mean the provider can serve fewer youth.

It is important that funders and community leaders are aware that the average cost of rapid re-housing for youth may be higher than it is for adults. Providers note that this is due to the need for smaller caseloads and longer term financial and case management assistance in the case of youth.

## Flexibility Is Essential

**Case management.** Providing rapid re-housing case management services to youth requires flexibility. Case managers must be prepared to be mobile and spend a lot of time out of the office, engaging with youth in their apartments, in the community, and via texts or social media. Case managers may also require training on landlord engagement and real estate marketing skills if landlord recruitment is part of their job duties.

Case managers new to rapid re-housing and working within a Housing First approach must become comfortable engaging youth in a voluntary services model. Since youth choose how and when to engage in services, case managers must make services attractive. They must be prepared for youth to sometimes pull back from case management in order to try things on their own, which is a developmentally appropriate

response. Case managers have to remain ready to reach out to youth and respond when they are needed.

**Funding.** Homeless service system leaders often develop blanket guidelines for the rapid re-housing programs they fund. When supporting programs serving youth, however, they may need to be more flexible as to how funds can be used and the outcomes they expect. For example, homeless service system leaders in one community required rapid re-housing clients whose incomes exceeded a certain amount to receive assistance for only a few months. Youth providers argued that young people's employment is less stable and their hours more variable than is typically the case for adults. The providers advocated for a change to the policy; youth with higher incomes are now eligible to receive financial assistance for a longer period of time. This may also help keep them engaged in services.

Because the service needs of youth are so varied, youth programs may require flexible funds to cover costs that are not typical (or appropriate) for adult programs. For example, youth may require financial assistance to pay for other living expenses beyond rental payments, including food, transportation, and phone plans. While providers often solicit private donations to cover such costs, core funding is sometimes required.

Youth rapid re-housing providers also report difficulty meeting funders' match requirements. This may be due, in part, to their having to use their unrestricted funds to meet the wider range of youth needs noted above. Since youth-serving organizations often have very limited margins in their budget, they may at times turn down rapid re-housing funds if they feel they will be unable to raise matching and flexible funds to meet the more varied needs of youth.

**Measure of success.** Outcome measures for programs serving youth may be different than those serving adults. Housing outcomes may be different for youth, for whom more frequent moves, returns to family, or shifting roommate situations are age-appropriate choices. Since youth may require more intensive and longer lasting support than adults, youth programs will also cost more, making them appear less cost-effective.

## CONCLUSION

Providers are exploring innovative ways to rapidly move homeless youth into permanent housing, regardless of their barriers. When serving youth, financial assistance and rapid re-housing case management and services will probably need to last a little longer, and funding to support youth in housing should be more flexible than what is typically allowed in adult programs. Additionally, landlord engagement is even more important for youth rapid re-housing, and implementing the model requires an organizational commitment to embracing the Housing First philosophy. All of these efforts can be very hard work, but providers around the country are demonstrating that rapid re-housing tailored to the needs of youth can quickly and successfully end their homelessness.