ENDING HOMELESSNESS FOR UNACCOMPANIED MINOR YOUTH

An estimated 1.7 million children under the age of 18 run away or are forced to leave home each year in the United States[1]. Most return within a week, but close to 380,000 will be away from home a week or longer, putting them at significant risk. Unfortunately, the resources to help them are inadequate. Organizations that serve unaccompanied homeless minors report regularly having to turn them away from shelter due to a lack of capacity[2] and many communities have no crisis housing or shelter programs for them at all.

A comprehensive response to youth homelessness is critically needed, and the development of such a response should be informed by the practice experience of programs that serve the population. For this reason, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in partnership with Funders Together to End Homelessness and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and with the support of the Raikes Foundation and the Melville Charitable Trust, undertook the Practice Knowledge Project.

PRACTICE KNOWLEDGE PROJECT

The Practice Knowledge Project tapped the expertise of experienced and insightful practitioners with the goal of identifying those approaches most likely to succeed in reducing the number of homeless youth. The Project convened in-person meetings of practitioners from across the country to explore what works for unaccompanied homeless minors (the topic of this paper), and for unaccompanied youth aged 18 to 24. Based upon these discussions, specific interventions were also explored more deeply.

Research is certainly needed on the most effective interventions for unaccompanied minors who are homeless. Nevertheless, a great deal is known about what works; knowledge gained through years of practice. Following are some lessons about what ends homelessness for these vulnerable young people.

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[1] National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2012. An Emerging Framework for Ending Unaccompanied Youth Homelessness. Available online at http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/an-emerging-framework-for-ending-unaccompanied-youth-homelessness

[2] For example, over 2,400 youth were turned away from RHYA Basic Center emergency shelters in FY 2014. This and additional RHYA program data are available online at https://extranet.acf.hhs.gov/rhymis/custom_reports.jsp.

LESSONS LEARNED

Providers shared important lessons based on their many years of experience working with minor youth.

CORE SERVICE APPROACH:
HEALTHY, PRO-YOUTH AND PRO-FAMILY

While young people experiencing a family or housing crisis may have a wide variety of service needs, providers described a core set of practice strategies and service approaches that allow them to most effectively engage and intervene with youth.

Access to Caring Adults and Help Developing Permanent Connections

Teenagers are in the process of becoming adults. Until that process is complete, they require the on-going presence of a caring adult(s) to help them problem-solve and to look out for their best interests. The primary source of such adults is the family, and family intervention services can help youth strengthen or re-establish positive relationships with adult family members when it is safe and appropriate to do so. Providers noted that youth who cannot obtain such support from their immediate families may need more intensive help to develop positive connections to adults in their extended families, families of choice, or elsewhere.

Culturally Competent Staff and Programs

Providers stressed how important it is for programs to convey acceptance and understanding to youth in crisis. To accomplish this, programs and staff must be culturally competent. Because youth of color are overrepresented among homeless youth, providers reported the critical importance of staff understanding how stereotyping and racism impact their clients. Given the high vulnerability of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth, it is also important that programs and program staff welcome and affirm LGBT participants and have the skills to competently assist them. Culturally competent staff is also needed to engage the family members of the youth they serve, because many will return home and may require support to do so.

Low-Threshold and "Least Restrictive Environment" Placements

Providers noted that programs have to be accessible to youth with a wide variety of challenges. Program rules (e.g., curfews, substance use screening, mandatory meetings, etc.) provide valuable structure for some youth. However, youth who are unwilling or unable to comply may be unable to get the help they need. Providers pointed out that it is possible to offer less restrictive shelter and transitional housing options and still support a youth's success. They felt that programs should seek to provide the maximum level of autonomy that is manageable for a young person. They concluded that an effective community response to youth homelessness must include

sufficient crisis and longer-term housing options that offer a low threshold response, making it possible for *all* youth to have a safe place to stay.

Holistic, Strengths-Based, and Youth-Informed Responses

The needs of youth are varied, and providers reported that programs must be prepared to address developmental, educational, emotional, social, physical, and mental health issues. They recommended that programs employ a strengths-based approach that meets young people where they are. This perspective allows programs to enhance the assets and interests that youth bring to the table, and encourages them to set and pursue their own goals.

Trauma-Informed Services

Providers know that the process of becoming homeless, and homelessness itself, are traumatic. Programs should be prepared to address any existing trauma, and avoid re-traumatizing youth. Helping traumatized youth means respecting boundaries, honoring their need for privacy, and making appropriate referrals to more intensive therapy when needed. Providers recommended periodic staff training and review of program rules to ensure that frontline staff, especially those who play more of an enforcement role, are able to help youth in an appropriate, trauma-informed manner and apply rules consistently, safely, and respectfully.

Positive Youth Development Perspective

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an approach centered on a young person's strengths and potential, rather than his or her problems. When programs fully embrace this approach, they find that youth develop resilience, self-determination, self-efficacy, a positive self-identity, and belief in the future. PYD fosters a sense of leadership that launches young people out of crisis and into a sense of ownership of their future.

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

Ideally, no unaccompanied minor would ever experience homelessness. Providers identified key strategies that appear to be effective in preventing youth experiencing family conflict or a similar crisis from running away or being kicked out. These strategies can be especially impactful when targeted to specific subgroups of minor youth that may be at higher risk of homelessness, including those who are involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, frequently absent from school, or living in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Providers also stressed the importance of developing capacity within schools to intervene quickly with minor youth in crisis. Stabilizing services at that point could prevent both homelessness and a disrupted education. Schools can also be sites from which to educate all young people about how to avoid the risk of homelessness, including developing their own plans for what to do in a family crisis.

Providers identified the following key homeless prevention resources and strategies for minor youth.

Caring Adults to Serve as Resources

Providers reported that caring adults are a critical buffer to youth homelessness and that they can be found throughout the community, as well as in the family. After-school, sports, or other recreational programs and activities in which youth participate can be a source of contact with caring adults. Caring adults can also be found in schools, where most youth spend a large part of their day. Providers suggested that schools identify teachers, guidance counselors, or homeless school liaisons who can serve as a resource for students struggling with family conflict or housing issues.

Programs serving high-risk youth can similarly identify supportive and accessible adults who can assist those experiencing a crisis. Ideally, these individuals will be prepared to refer youth and families to support services including financial assistance, family counseling, individual counseling, and support groups.

Services for Families in Conflict

Providers noted that since family conflict is a primary cause of homelessness for youth, successfully addressing it early can help avoid homelessness altogether. Family intervention strategies may include:
- conflict mediation services,
- helping family members build communication and problem-solving skills,
- family counseling, and
- referring individual family members to more intensive therapeutic interventions (e.g. substance abuse treatment).

Family intervention specialists can help identify adults who might provide a supportive and healthy place for youth to stay, either temporarily or longer-term. And, family intervention professionals may also be able to judge when the level of conflict within a home places the safety and well-being of youth in jeopardy, necessitating a referral to child protective services.

Financial Assistance

Providers noted that poverty can contribute to youth homelessness in a variety of ways. It may force families to live with other family or friends, resulting in overcrowding and older youth being pushed out of the home. Insufficient income may cause stress, which in turn may cause family conflict. And families under severe financial strain may be less able to override that concern in order to engage in family intervention services to address conflicts. Finally, it is also possible that family difficulties do not involve conflict at all, but simply a lack of resources to pay for housing, which results in youth homelessness. Providers reported that building a program's, or the community's,

capacity to offer families financial assistance could lessen stress and conflict and potentially keep vulnerable families intact.

Respite Housing

Providers reported that there are times when young people and their parents may simply need a temporary break from one another. Respite housing (a safe place to go for a short time) can provide such a time out for youth. Some crisis housing programs for runaway and homeless youth may already function as respite housing. In these instances, youth may stay in a shelter program for 2-3 days as a "time out." Rather than being a sign of family disruption, crisis housing used for respite might be helping families remain together. Funders may want to consider different outcome metrics when emergency shelter is used as respite housing (i.e. returns to shelter may not represent failed reunification but rather a coping strategy that families have developed to deal with crises).

WHEN THEY FIRST LEAVE HOME: CRISIS AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Most nonprofit-run crisis programs for youth under 18 can only house them for a short period of time. It is therefore critical that the programs quickly and properly assess a young person's situation and identify the most appropriate next steps. Questions that need to be addressed include the following.

- Can and should a young person return home? At what point can this be done safely?
- What services and supports are needed to promote long-term safety and stability?
- Does a referral to the child welfare system need to be made?
- What is the appropriate long-term housing placement for youth who cannot immediately (or ever) return home?

Practitioners identified the following strategies to quickly stabilize and support youth when they first enter homelessness.

Alternatives to Shelter Entry

One of the first things that providers offer to youth seeking shelter is help to remain at home. Efforts to keep youth at home, or in the home of a safe and trusted extended family member or friend, are often considered to be an essential first step of an effective crisis response.

Providers may screen those seeking shelter to see if they have any alternative place to live.   Diversion is the effort to explore such alternatives, including services for youth and/or their families that would allow them to return to the home or to stay temporarily with someone they trust. These services might include individual counseling, family counseling, mediation, educational supports, or substance abuse counseling.

Diversion may allow providers to function as mediators and broker agreements or negotiate the terms under which the young person may return home or reside with extended family or others. Providers shared that in this context they often discuss the harsh realities of homelessness with the youth, and whether they can be avoided by remaining with family. Providers also assess whether referral to child welfare services (child protective services or child welfare-funded programs designed to support at-risk families) is appropriate.

Family Intervention

Family intervention is a key service that many crisis shelter providers offer to parents and youth facing a homelessness crisis. They find that many families are highly receptive to any assistance that will help them preserve or reunify their families. Others are skeptical, feeling that their family situations are too difficult to repair, or being too overwhelmed by material circumstances to focus on relationship-building. Providers agreed that in all instances, engaging parents and youth in family intervention requires a focus on strengths and building solutions, rather than on assigning blame or pointing fingers.

Crisis Shelter

Crisis shelter programs vary in structure but all are designed with one goal in mind: to provide short-term accommodation (typically under three weeks) while more permanent housing or a return to family is arranged.

Providers reported that crisis shelters should ideally be located near whatever location the youth considers to be home. This helps them maintain ties to existing social supports and avoid school disruption, and it provides greater opportunity to engage in family intervention. Unfortunately, the lack of shelter capacity, particularly in rural areas, often means that youth must leave their communities of origin to get help. Several providers described using host homes as a strategy to increase shelter capacity while helping minor youth stay close to home and connected to school. This housing model relies on community residents to provide space in their homes (which are pre-screened) to shelter youth. A youth service provider delivers support services, and works to develop a long-term housing plan for the youth, which may include family reunification.

Helping Youth Who Lack Shelter

Unfortunately it is not uncommon for youth to be unable to find shelter because there is an inadequate supply. This may result in them leaving their communities to find services, or spending time outdoors or in other unsafe situations. In such cases, providers still try to help. They might help youth reach out to alternative places they could stay (e.g., homes of extended family or friends). If all housing options are exhausted, they may still help youth with basics like blankets and advice on where and how to stay safe when spending the night outdoors. Some providers reported arranging back-up options for youth when shelters are full: for example, an agreement with a juvenile detention facility to use its empty beds.

Providers said that some youth avoid seeking shelter, or that they hide the fact that they need shelter, for fear of being reported to child welfare or "getting their family in trouble." Street outreach and learning how to identify youth who may be without shelter are, therefore, critical.

The dismal reality of having to regularly deny shelter to minor youth due to a lack of capacity lends urgency to providers' calls to create enough shelter to meet the needs of this very vulnerable group.

Providing Supportive Services, Planning, and Aftercare

According to providers, assessing immediate needs is a primary focus when young people enter crisis programs. This includes quickly developing a plan for where they will go upon exit (since minor youth can spend only three weeks in a shelter program). Options include returning home or to other extended family or friends who can provide a safe and appropriate home; referral to a long-term housing and service program (transitional housing); or a referral to child welfare.

While in shelter youth may need a wide variety of supportive services, and providers use a range of diagnostic assessment tools to develop service and treatment plans[3]. Services may include individual counseling, family counseling, mediation, educational supports, or substance abuse counseling. They may be offered in-house by program staff or through referrals to other agencies in the community that can help over the longer term.

Providers reported the importance of follow-up services after young people exit shelter. These are critical to the long-term well-being of youth and improved family functioning. Providers said they are concerned that, if not addressed, the issues that led youth to seek shelter may resurface when they return home. Therefore they seek to create sustainable family connections to ongoing financial, behavioral health care, and other supports. While they can make referrals, they rarely have the capacity to follow up to make sure youth and their families have the support they need. For this reason, youth providers expressed the desire to offer more aftercare services and follow-up support to youth and their families.

WHEN THEY CANNOT GO HOME: TRANSITIONAL HOUSING, SERVICES AND AFTERCARE

Minor youth who cannot immediately return either home or to extended family may be referred to longer-term transitional housing. For youth under 18, transitional housing typically lasts up to

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[3] Some of the assessment tools providers reported using are the Casey Life Skills assessment tool, the Adverse Childhood Experiences survey, the Pediatric Symptom Tool checklist, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and the Child and Adolescent Service Intensity Instrument.

two years. Supportive services are provided during this period, and may be extended to assist them even after they move into independent housing.

Transitional Housing

The physical structure of transitional housing can vary (see text box). Due to minor youth's dependent status, however, the most common models are single site or clustered units where supervision can be more readily provided. Providers felt that as youth mature they may want, and benefit from, greater autonomy and independence. This could mean a move from a single-site transitional housing model with on-site supervision to a shared housing unit with services delivered by the transitional housing provider. Conversely, youth may start out in a more independent setting but find they do not yet have the skills to succeed and move to a more structured environment.

Providers reported that having a variety of different transitional housing options allows them to make housing placements based on the individual needs and maturity levels of the youth. It is also helpful in facilitating moves as the needs of youth change over time. On the other hand, the vast majority of communities lack enough transitional housing units of any kind. The result is that youth are more commonly relegated to whatever program is available rather than to the model that best fits their needs.

Ultimately, providers noted that the goal is to help homeless minors develop the skills that enable them to transition to independence as quickly as possible without sacrificing positive outcomes. Regardless of the physical structure of a transitional housing program, the supportive services provided are critical for minor youth.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING MODELS

Single-site housing: This model includes settings which can house multiple youth in is single building in individual or shared rooms with 24-hour, onsite supervision.

Clustered: This transitional housing model houses youth in multiple units that are in close proximity (e.g. multiple apartments in one complex) with 24-hour support close by.

Scattered-site housing: This model relies on apartments or housing units located throughout the community. Youth may live alone or with roommates, in shared rooms or apartments, or in the homes of host families (host home model). Some offer 24-hour supervision (such as host home programs where the adult host is onsite overnight) and others employ an "on-call" system in case of an emergency.

Supportive Services, Planning and Aftercare

Providers reported that transitional housing programs for homeless minors have multiple responsibilities. They must keep youth safe and meet their basic needs, and also help them set goals for the future. Based on individualized assessments, they must provide, or connect youth to, supports in the following areas that will help them successfully transition to independence.

- **Education.** Transitional housing programs have a primary focus on making sure homeless youth continue their educations in order to boost their long-term economic prospects.

- **Employment.** Many programs help connect youth to in-house or community-based internships as well as summer job training programs. These can provide valuable employment experience. Providers may also help youth explore long-term career goals and plans, which may involve further education planning.

- **Family Intervention**. Many minor youth who enter transitional housing want to go home**,** and with planning they are able to do so in a safe way. Those who are unable to go home, however, may still want to maintain or strengthen their family relationships. Family intervention services, which can include mediation and counseling, can help them achieve this.

- **Independent living skills.** Unaccompanied homeless minors must become self-reliant very quickly. Transitional housing programs help by teaching them basic skills like meal preparation, household budgeting, and tenant responsibilities. Some providers continue to help with independent living skills when youth exit to the real-world environment of their own housing.

- **Mental and behavioral health assessment and services.** Providers reported using a variety of valid and reliable diagnostic tools like the Childhood and Adolescent Service Intensity Instrument to assess the mental and behavioral health needs of the minor youth they serve. To meet these needs, some programs offer clinical services on-site, such as counseling by a licensed clinical social worker. Alternatively, programs connect young people to agencies in the community.

- **Permanent connections.** Caring adults from a young person's extended family, "chosen family," or community can provide critical social support, offer practical advice, and be an ongoing resource during the transition to adulthood. Providers reported that helping youth develop healthy, permanent connections to caring adults requires a skill-set similar to that used in family intervention work.

- **Tailored services.** Providers noted that specific interventions for subsets of youth with specific needs (such as pregnant or parenting youth) and backgrounds (such as LGBT youth) are effective. Examples include educational programs with a two-generation approach for both young parents and their young children; and peer support groups for LGBT youth who are learning to celebrate their identities after being rejected by their families of origin.

- **Exit planning.** If young people are unable to return home safely, providers must help them plan for an eventual exit to independent housing. This may include helping them find and secure housing in the community, moving them into college dorms, or

referring them to specialized housing programs for older youth. It also involves helping them develop connections to services they may require after leaving transitional housing programs (e.g. counseling or employment).

- **Aftercare:** Whether minor youth return home or enter their own housing, aftercare services help youth deal with challenges that might result in another homeless episode. This could include help to navigate landlord-tenant issues, address family conflict, or cope with a mental health issue. Unfortunately, providers often lack the resources to provide adequate aftercare services.

In addition to this array of support services, providers noted that it is important that homeless minors have the same experiences as their housed peers: recreational activities, time with friends, and opportunities to explore their own interests and identities. Also important is that they must be allowed to make mistakes without fear of losing housing or the support of caring adults. One provider shared that the threshold for exiting homeless minors from programs should be high; as high as the bar someone would set would for kicking their own children out of their homes.

CONCLUSION: WAYS TO IMPROVE THE YOUTH HOMELESS SYSTEM

Each year, 380,000 unaccompanied minor youth experience a runaway or homeless episode lasting a week or more. Every night, thousands of unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18 have no shelter. These vulnerable young people have a broad range of needs, and their problems are exacerbated by the lack of a comprehensive system to prevent youth homelessness, provide supportive services, and ensure sufficient safe shelter and long-term housing options.

The nature of such a system can be informed by the knowledge of nonprofit providers who have extensive experience in helping homeless youth. Through the Practice Knowledge Project, they identified the following as the necessary elements of such a system.

- **Prevention.** The structures that support minor youth – families, schools, caring adults, and communities – can be strengthened and assisted to prevent their homelessness. Child welfare also has an important role to play.

- **Crisis and Early Intervention.** Communities need enough shelter beds and services to ensure that no unaccompanied minor youth ever spends a night on the streets. Further, crisis programs must have the capacity to connect youth and families to mainstream resources in the community to meet their long-term needs, including those resources that will enable youth to meet their long-term education and employment goals.

- **Longer Term Housing and Services.** For youth who cannot immediately return home, communities must have a variety of safe, supportive, and developmentally responsive transitional housing options available to ensure that youth under 18 can begin to develop independent living skills, healthy and affirming social connections, and emotional well-being. These housing options must have low barriers to entry, and low tolerance for involuntary exits.

Finally, all aspects of an effective system to respond to the needs of runaway and homeless unaccompanied minor youth should be informed by a holistic framework that: employs positive youth development and harm reduction approaches in the least restrictive environment; is trauma-informed, culturally competent, responsive, and affirming; and helps youth develop education and employment plans and skills and focuses on healthy relationships with family, other caring adults, social peers, and communities.