



HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

## Policy Brief

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# Towards a National Housing Strategy for Homeless Youth



### INTRODUCTION

With the increasing emphasis on ending chronic homelessness both at the federal level and in local communities, policy-makers and funding agencies have prioritized moving individuals into permanent supportive housing. We have seen encouraging results from this approach – communities have realized cost savings in their homeless service systems and chronically homeless individuals with severe mental or physical disabilities have transitioned off the streets and into safe living environments, accessed public benefits and outpatient treatment services, decreased their use of emergency rooms, and avoided arrest and incarceration.<sup>1</sup>

Permanent supportive housing has been largely successful for chronically homeless adults. However, unaccompanied transition age youth experiencing homelessness need access to a full continuum of housing resources. The importance of a housing continuum for youth is reflected in *Opening Doors*, the federal strategic plan for preventing and ending homelessness released by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH).<sup>2,3</sup> *Opening Doors* emphasizes the diversity of the homeless youth population and the importance of tailoring interventions and resources to match specific subgroups of youth.

This Policy Brief, *Towards a National Housing Strategy for Homeless Youth*, is part of a series developed by the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) to advance policy and practice recommendations focused on preventing and ending youth homelessness. This brief emerges from *No Way Home: Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Homeless Youth in Hollywood*, a report released by the HHYP in November 2010 presenting findings from a multi-method needs assessment conducted with 389 homeless youth ages 12 to 25 in the Hollywood community.

The purpose of this brief is to address the inadequacies of prioritizing permanent housing as the only solution for homeless youth, identify the major limitations of our existing housing programs, and advocate for developing a national housing strategy and funding a full housing continuum for homeless young people that is responsive to their unique needs and circumstances.

We are releasing this brief at a time of unprecedented interest in the issue of youth homelessness – we hope it will inform federal and local planning and decision-making and help advance our national agenda of preventing and ending youth homelessness.



## UNDERSTANDING HOMELESS YOUTH

### Magnitude of the Problem and the Diversity of the Population

It is difficult to know how many youth experience homelessness. Best available data suggest that between 1.3 and 2.1 million youth ages 12 to 24 experience homelessness each year in the United States.<sup>4</sup> However, there is no single reliable resource for data.<sup>5</sup> The numbers of youth and their profiles differ depending on the source of the data and the definitions of homelessness used, age ranges of youth surveyed, and sampling strategies and methods employed.<sup>6,7</sup> These methodological issues exacerbate the difficulties inherent in quantifying the homeless youth population and underscore the critical need to obtain reliable data on the prevalence and characteristics of homeless youth.

### Trauma and Unique Challenges Faced by Homeless Youth

Homeless youth face unique challenges that affect their stability and participation in services and point to the kinds of housing and resources they need. Homeless youth consistently identify conflict with their parents as the primary reason for their homelessness.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Many homeless youth have fled intolerable home situations, characterized by physical/sexual abuse, domestic violence,

homophobia/transphobia, or parental mental illness/substance abuse; or have been kicked out or abandoned by their parents/guardians.<sup>11,12</sup>

While prevalence varies depending on the data source, a significant proportion of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; have been pregnant or are already parents; and have prior involvement with the dependency and delinquency systems.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup> Many homeless youth report interrupted education, being held back in school, having received remedial or special education, and having dropped out of school or been suspended or expelled.<sup>17,18</sup> Homeless youth also report higher rates of mental health and substance abuse problems than their non-homeless peers.<sup>19,20,21</sup>

## NEED FOR A FULL HOUSING CONTINUUM FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

The ultimate goal for every homeless youth is safe, affordable, and stable housing. But in order to help all youth who are homeless achieve that level of security, stability and self-sufficiency, we need to ensure that they have access to a full continuum of housing resources, both short- and longer-term, along with supportive services, that are responsive to their developmental needs and diverse circumstances.

## Developmental Needs of Homeless Youth

All adolescents and young adults face specific developmental tasks – gaining independence, developing trust with peers, developing a sense of personal identity, and moving towards autonomy and self-sufficiency. Parents, schools, faith organizations, and other social institutions help most youth navigate through these stages, master skills and competencies, learn to cope with challenges, and help buffer the effects of poverty, adversity, and negative peer and social influences. Homeless youth, however, are often left to face these challenges alone. Their success in mastering these developmental tasks is affected by the trauma they've experienced, the degree of support they have from family, their connections with non-homeless peers and mainstream institutions, and the appropriateness and accessibility of resources in their communities.

Most transition age youth, homeless and non-homeless alike, are in flux, can move frequently as needs/circumstances change, and usually do not have incomes that support living independently. Homeless youth face distinct challenges – they often cannot live with parents or family; no one in their peer group has the resources to maintain an apartment; they aren't working or are only episodically or marginally employed; they may not have completed high school; and they are more likely to struggle with substance use or other mental health problems. As a result, it is critical that our housing models for homeless youth support their need for autonomy, while fostering their growth and self-sufficiency, addressing their trauma, and providing safety and acceptance as they navigate their transition to adulthood.

## Circumstances and Experiences Shape the Housing Needs of Homeless Youth

Age differences, length of time homeless, trauma histories, mental health status, system involvement, and relationships with family determine the types of housing that homeless youth need. Increasingly, policy makers, researchers, and providers are working to identify sub-groups of youth, characterized by risk and protective factors, to help

determine appropriate interventions and service needs. While more research is needed to characterize distinct populations and determine effective interventions for them, we can broadly identify three sub-groups of youth with discrete housing needs: 1) those with less risky behaviors and more positive connections, who are newly homeless or have only had brief episodes of homelessness, who are able to return home or find stable living in a relatively short period of time; 2) those who have been on the street for a longer time, are less connected to their families and mainstream institutions, are more involved in risky behaviors, are not able to return home and need more intensive housing and services to achieve stability; and 3) those with significant disabilities who will need on-going, permanent supportive housing.<sup>22,23</sup>

## KEY ELEMENTS IN THE HOUSING CONTINUUM FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

Housing options for homeless youth are typically identified as emergency shelters, transitional living programs, and permanent housing programs. There is often the assumption and expectation that youth progress in a linear fashion through the continuum, from transitional models to permanent ones, when in reality, youth may enter and exit housing programs multiple times before they can commit to a program or plan, or they may need one type of housing at one point and then find they need another when their circumstances change.

## Importance of Emergency Shelters for Youth

Emergency shelters, primarily funded through Health and Human Services' (HHS) Basic Center Program and Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Emergency Solutions Grant Program, are critical resources for youth who are newly homeless, are in crisis, or need a respite from the streets but are unwilling to enter a longer-term housing program. Emergency shelters are useful for engaging youth – they offer safe environments where basic needs can be met, service and housing needs can be assessed, and youth can receive assistance in applying for public benefits for which they are eligible. Emergency shelters are key for

achieving family reunification – they offer the opportunity to re-connect youth with their families when feasible, and families can receive services to address underlying conflicts and promote positive family interaction. When family reunification is not an option, providers can then help youth develop appropriate longer-term housing plans, either with a foster family or into group homes, transitional housing, or permanent housing programs; or by securing independent living, depending on their age, needs, resources, and readiness.

### **Contribution of Transitional Housing Programs for Youth**

Transitional housing, primarily funded through HHS's Transitional Living Program grants and HUD's Continuum of Care Program, offers a developmentally appropriate housing model for homeless young people who do not have families who can support them or resources to live independently, and who have significant needs for supportive services but do not qualify for permanent supportive housing programs. The two main types of transitional housing programs, clustered-site and scattered-site, offer differing degrees of independence and access to supportive services. Some youth are able to go directly into a scattered site program while others need the security, supervision, and services available through clustered site models; and some youth benefit from starting in a clustered site and progressing to a scattered site program as they prepare for independence.

Both types of transitional housing programs give youth time to begin to heal from the trauma they've experienced, obtain services and resources to address their educational/vocational needs, participate in mental health and/or substance abuse counseling, and build skills and competencies while they solidify their plans for the future. Two of the key benefits of transitional housing programs for youth are: 1) youth can be supported in making gradual, incremental changes consistent with developmental and maturational processes; and 2) providers have more time to fully assess youth's health and mental health status, life-skills, and competencies, and to determine their ability to live independently or their need for ongoing supportive housing.

### **Need for Permanent Housing Programs for Youth**

Permanent housing is community-based housing without a designated length of stay. While there are permanent housing models that don't require a qualifying disability, most federal funding for permanent housing is from HUD, and their Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program is restricted to individuals with qualifying mental health or physical disabilities that preclude them from accessing or maintaining employment and housing without continued support. These PSH programs offer a high level of supportive services and assist participants to secure mainstream public benefits (primarily SSI) in order to help cover their share of a lease and living expenses. PSH is a critical resource for homeless youth with disabilities, ensuring that they remain permanently housed and do not become the next generation of chronically homeless adults.



### **Limitations of the Current Housing Continuum for Youth**

These housing resources – emergency shelters, transitional living programs, and permanent housing programs – are essential components of the housing continuum, but as currently structured and funded, these models have limitations for homeless youth. Program regulations and requirements are not derived from any evidence of effectiveness nor are they necessarily aligned with the needs of youth. As a result, lengths of stay are often too limited to give youth sufficient time to stabilize and heal; age restrictions and eligibility criteria limit accessibility; and expectations of permanency are not necessarily realistic for a population of young people who are in transition.

Programs don't adequately consider the special needs of youth under age 18 who face specific barriers – they can't consent to most medical or mental health treatment without parental consent and they usually can't sign a lease agreement which limits many permanent housing options.

Emergency shelters are critical resources for stabilization, crisis intervention, and assessment and service planning, but funding which restricts services to youth under age 18 (such as the HHS Basic Center Program) removes this resource for older transition age youth. In addition, limitations in lengths of stay can undermine family reunification efforts and interfere with attachment and individual service planning.

The effectiveness of transitional living programs is constrained by program requirements that: 1) "cap" the length of stay, seriously undermining efforts to support youth's growth and skill development; 2) restrict the age at which youth can still be served, eliminating this resource for the youth population ages 22 to 25; 3) too narrowly define population eligibility, most commonly to former foster youth or pregnant or parenting teens, removing this resource as an option for a large proportion of homeless youth; and 4) require youth to contribute financially to the cost of their care, which may push them into low paying jobs that are usually the only ones they qualify for and disrupt their attempts to advance their education.

While PSH is a critical resource for homeless youth with disabilities, the majority of homeless youth do not have the physical or mental health disabilities that qualify them for this type of housing or the public benefits that provide income support for housing and living expenses. While there are permanent housing models that don't require a qualifying disability, including Rapid Re-Housing and Transition in Place, most programs have limitations for youth. Support services, if available, are often too time-limited to adequately address young people's trauma, build their skills and competencies, and ensure their access to education and preparation for employment. In addition, rental assistance that may be offered is usually insufficient to ensure that youth will be able to maintain an apartment lease, leaving them vulnerable to a return to homelessness. While the greatest degree of permanency is afforded to homeless individuals who

sign their own lease agreements, HUD's new interim CoC rules requiring individuals to sign year-long agreements is problematic both for youth and agencies.

Addressing these limitations would increase the suitability and effectiveness of our housing resources for homeless youth. However, to ensure that we have a housing continuum truly capable of ending youth homelessness, we may need to create new youth-specific models that provide permanency for youth while supporting them in their transition to independence.



## MOVING FORWARD

Fundamentally, what all youth need is a safe place to live until they have the resources and capacity to live on their own. Young people who are homeless need access to a full continuum of housing resources, with adequate funding allocated for short-term emergency shelters, longer-term transitional living programs, permanent supportive housing for youth with significant disabilities, and permanent housing for youth without qualifying disabilities. To be effective, all of these models must be based on a trauma-informed, positive youth development framework that supports youth in mastering the skills and achieving the competencies needed for stability, self-sufficiency, and independence.

Ultimately, our ability to develop an effective housing continuum for young people who are homeless is constrained by the lack of data. More research is needed to understand and characterize subgroups of youth, to know the numbers of youth in each of these categories, and to determine which types of housing models and services are most effective in achieving housing stability for different

subpopulations of youth. Without these data, it is difficult to determine the type and scale of the housing resources we need and to make strategic decisions about resource allocation.

To reach the goal of preventing and ending youth homelessness by 2020, we urgently need to develop a national housing strategy for homeless youth to guide policy, resource development, and funding allocations at the federal level and in local communities. We need to acknowledge that the needs of homeless youth are not the same as those of homeless adults, and that the housing continuum for young people must fulfill two essential goals – to end youth homelessness and to support young people as they navigate their transition to adulthood. A housing continuum that can advance these goals must ensure that youth can

stay in housing programs as long as they need to; that services and interventions will be there to support them through this process; and that sufficient assistance is provided for rent and living expenses so that youth can complete their education and effectively prepare for employment and self-sufficiency.



Our current system of housing and services for homeless individuals will not get us to our goals of ending youth homelessness and promoting positive youth development. Neither HUD's Homeless Assistance Programs nor HHS's Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs are currently structured or funded to ensure these positive outcomes for youth. We must be prepared to re-tool existing programs, create new models, and significantly expand funding for youth by developing new financing mechanisms, blending existing resources from HUD, RHY Programs, Medicaid, TANF, DOL, etc.; and identifying new funding sources. These are complex issues but addressing them is necessary if we are serious in our commitment to end youth homelessness.

There are some clear steps that must be taken at the federal level and within local communities to help us enact a national housing strategy and advance our agenda of ending youth homelessness.

#### We need to ensure that we:

- ▶ **Gather data on the size and characteristics of the homeless youth population derived from point-in-time surveys, integrated federal data systems, and other data collection strategies;**
- ▶ **Develop more precise, data-driven typologies of relevant subgroups of homeless youth to inform planning and development;**
- ▶ **Develop a structured and systematic way of assessing youth and directing them towards housing and services that are responsive to their circumstances and matched to their level of need.**
- ▶ **Fund research that examines the impact of different housing models on subpopulations of homeless youth, and the effectiveness of different interventions for reducing risk behaviors and promoting positive factors to support youth's resilience and success;**
- ▶ **Develop and implement new regulations and requirements in federally-funded homeless assistance and runaway and homeless youth programs based on the best available evidence to maximize accessibility and effectiveness with youth;**
- ▶ **Develop trauma-informed, youth-specific outcome measures to monitor the impact of housing on young people, and ensure accountability and efficiency in our homeless assistance and youth development programs.**

Never before has there been this degree of interest, commitment, and opportunity to tackle the problem of youth homelessness. We commend USICH for their unprecedented leadership at the federal level and for energizing local communities. Now is the time to mobilize and organize key stakeholders, policy-makers, and youth service providers to work in partnership to develop a national housing strategy for youth so that no young person in the United States is without a home.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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mental health and substance abuse treatment needs of youth; promote improved educational and employment outcomes; and advocate for policy and program changes to prevent and end homelessness for young people.

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This brief was written by key leaders of the HHYP and their consultants, with valuable input from community experts and external reviewers.

### HHYP Leadership and Consultants

Heather Carmichael, LCSW, *Executive Director, My Friend's Place*

Peggy Edwards, MPA, *Consultant*

Sylvia La Malfa, LCSW, *Associate Executive Director, Covenant House California*

Abbe Land, former Co-CEO, *The Saban Free Clinic*

Tod Lipka, MPA, *Executive Director, Step Up on Second*

Meera Manek, MBA, *Consultant*

Susan Rabinovitz, RN, MPH, *Consultant*

Christianne Ray, *The Saban Free Clinic*

Rachel Romanski, *former Executive Director, Hollywood Arts*

Arlene Schneir, MPH, *Associate Director, Division of Adolescent Medicine, Children's Hospital Los Angeles*

Curtis F. Shepard, PhD, *Director, Children Youth, and Family Services, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center*

Mark Supper, *Executive Director, Los Angeles Youth Network*

### Community Experts and External Reviewers

Sherilyn Adams, LCSW, *Executive Director, Larkin Street Youth Services*

Steve Berg, *Vice President for Programs and Policy, National Alliance to End Homelessness*

Shahera Hyatt, *Executive Director, Homeless Youth Project, California Research Bureau*

Angela Rosales, *Program Manager, Corporation for Supportive Housing*

We wish to also thank the young people whose experiences helped shape the content and recommendations of this policy brief. We hope that we have adequately captured their needs and offered strategies and solutions for safeguarding their futures.

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