



Get ‘Em Housed, Keep ‘Em Housed: Housing Models to Meet All Needs

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Needs included advocates from across Northern and Central California. Moderator Steven Shum of Corporation for Supportive Housing joined Toby Eastman, Chief of Programs of Larkin Street Services in San Francisco; Sparky Harlan, Executive Director and CEO of Bill Wilson Center in Santa Clara County; Susan Paradise, Program Manager of Transition Age Youth Programs at Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center; Michelle Tutunjian, Director of EOC Sanctuary and Youth Services of the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission; and Tom Bieri, Executive Director of Social Advocates for Youth. The lively discussion covered various housing models for youth populations, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, rental subsidies, and permanent supportive housing.

The panelists agreed that there is no one-size-fits-all formula for youth housing. Rather, a community that makes housing models ranging from emergency shelter to permanent supportive housing available to youth will have more success addressing the wide range of needs.

Effective Housing Models

Larkin Street Youth Services aims to provide a range of housing models within a single agency, which allows it to meet the needs of different youth subpopulations, like LGBT youth and youth with mental health diagnoses. Larkin Street Youth Services’ goal is to create a continuum of services that inspires youth to move beyond the streets,” said Chief of Programs Ms. Eastman. The continuum, she explained, “begins with youth living on the

street, moves through health services, housing, education, and employment to improve stability, and ideally ends with life beyond the street.” Bill Wilson Center also seeks to create a continuum of housing and services. They operate a number of housing programs to cover a wide range of youth in need. “We have programs to address the needs of youth as young as 11 and as old as 24 (including a project to serve adolescent girls who are chronic runaways from the foster care system), in addition to the more traditional transitional housing for homeless and former foster youth,” said Ms. Harlan. “It has been Bill Wilson Center’s experience that immediate placement in transitional housing is ineffective for youth aged 18-24; we need emergency shelters for that age group, in order to stabilize them and identify their needs,” she added.

The Transitional Living Center (TLC) program in Fresno County provides TAY housing and services for up to 24 months. So that TLC can provide housing and services to the maximum number of youth, TLC focuses on stretching meager housing dollars as far as possible. Though initially more expensive, “Fresno prefers to purchase its own buildings for the TLC program as leased buildings end up incurring more costs in the long run,” said Ms. Tutunjian.

Ms Eastman emphasized that housing is the foundation of successful participation in youth programs. “Housing is crucial for youth stabilization; without it, many youth are not adequately engaged in their supportive services,” she said. The process of moving youth out of crisis before housing them is essential to housing maintenance. “SAY has found that crisis intervention is the first step to stabilizing runaway and homeless youth,” said Mr. Bieri. “Our teen shelter is open around the clock to provide that intervention, and short-term

counseling is also available. It's important that we be as accessible as possible, so we offer our services in both English and Spanish.”

Once youth are in housing, providers use many different strategies to keep them there. “Harm reduction” is the practice of not requiring residents to stop risky behavior to maintain their housing. Though sometimes controversial, “harm reduction is an essential part of Larkin Street Youth Services’ philosophy. We focus on youth readiness in terms of desire to change risk behaviors,” Ms. Eastman said. To minimize the negative effects of risk behaviors until youth are ready to move beyond them, staff at Larkin Street Youth Services work closely with residents.

Since teens and young adults are often struggling to distance themselves from authority and establish an independent identity, Social Advocates for Youth has found that allowing youth a certain amount of freedom is a successful strategy for keeping them housed. “We think that privacy is essential in adolescents, so our transitional housing program is designed to accommodate that,” Mr. Bieri explained. SAY’s transitional housing program provides private bedrooms, but residents share communal kitchen, dining, recreational, and computer areas. Bill Wilson Center also provides built-in distance from adult authority where possible; as Ms. Harlan explained, “We’ve seen that peer-run programs are particularly effective for TAY.”

One of the limitations of youth-focused housing programs is that eventually, residents no longer qualify as youth. Preventing a lapse back into homelessness at this point is crucial to long-term success, but strategies for accomplishing this goal differ. Avoiding youth-specific housing during program design is one approach. “We’ve noticed a recent

trend toward scattering youth among general housing units, instead of housing youth separately,” observed Ms. Harlan. Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center offers services to get youth housed in general housing units as soon as they reach adulthood. As Ms. Paradise explained, “Since the waiting list for Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA) can be years long, the Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center helps youth above 16 years of age apply for and access TBRA’s waiting list, so that they are already receiving rental assistance by the time they turn 18.”

Housing for Parenting Youth

Bill Wilson Center’s transitional housing program is specifically designed to include parenting youth and their children. Since parenting youth have needs that sometimes differ from their peers without children, Bill Wilson Center offers services specifically designed to meet those needs. “We feel that it’s very important for parenting youth to avoid the additional complication of a second child,” said Ms. Harlan. “Since 85% of teen parents will have a second child before they turn 21, Bill Wilson Center provides financial incentive for teen parents to use birth control.” Additionally, to ensure that youth who are already parents are well-equipped to handle their responsibilities, Bill Wilson Center also provides parenting classes directed toward the unique challenges of teen parents, and offers doula training to encourage peer mentoring.

Though the youth population is diverse, panelists agree that it is possible to meet their needs through a broad-spectrum approach to housing. Respecting youth autonomy and maintaining awareness of changing needs can contribute to a youth’s successful transition from homelessness into stability.