

YOUTH AND HOMELESSNESS:

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.endhomelessness.org) cites research estimating that each year, approximately 1 million to 1.6 million youth experience homelessness.¹ Youth may become homeless for a wide variety of reasons, including running away from home or being locked out or abandoned by their parents or guardians - according to a January 2007 report to Congress, the most recent federal study of runaway and throwaway youth estimated that 1.7 million youth under age 18 left home or were asked to leave home in 1999.² There is often good reason for youth to stay away from home – 60-80% of adolescents staying in shelters or transitional living facilities have been physically or sexually abused by their parents or guardians. Homeless youth often report that their family relationships have also been strained by emotional abuse, neglect, alcoholism, addictions, or disapproval of their sexuality and/or sexual identity. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth are disproportionately represented among the homeless youth population.³

Some youth become homeless upon being emancipated from foster care, the juvenile corrections system or other institutional care, at or near age 18. For youth that have been emancipated from foster care, juvenile corrections or other institutional care settings, there may be few supportive family relationships still intact, to which the youth can return.⁴ Whether youth “age out” of the foster care or juvenile corrections system, they are at high risk for entering homelessness - a 1999 report by the GAO indicated that between 25% and 40% of foster care youth became homeless after emancipation, with a lack of a job and independent living skills cited as major causes of their homelessness.⁵

Once homeless and living on the streets or in shelters, homeless youth are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual assault or abuse – studies estimate that approximately 40-60% of homeless youth will experience physical abuse, and between 17-36% will experience sexual abuse while homeless. Due to their lack of financial resources and emotional vulnerability, they are more likely than adults to become involved in ‘survival sex’ and/or prostitution. Physical illnesses, such as asthma, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, diabetes, hepatitis and HIV/AIDS, are prevalent among homeless youth. Youth on the streets also have high rates of substance use and abuse, with somewhat lower rates reported for youth in shelters. Not surprisingly, homeless youth are at high risk for anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide.⁶

EFFECTIVE SERVICE AND HOUSING STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH:

For those homeless youth (ages 18 – 24) who face the most significant challenges, permanent supportive housing may be the intervention needed to end their homelessness. When provided with decent, safe and affordable rental housing, along with access to relevant, flexible, and responsive services, these young adults can begin to heal from past traumas, create community connections, and build the skills they will need to live stable, independent lives. Effective models of supportive housing for homeless and at-risk youth ensure that the following services and supports are available:

- A relationship with at least one responsible, trustworthy adult (ideally, a mentor), and consistent emotional support.
- Opportunities to learn and practice independent living skills including grooming, financial management, shopping, cooking, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills. Certain

- youth may also need medication management skills training or parenting skills training.
- Comprehensive employment services, which could include career counseling, job-readiness/job-seeking skills training, job placement services and job retention services.
 - Continuing education, which may include GED, ABLE or ESL programming, as well as opportunities for developing vocational skills or attending college.
 - Assistance and advocacy with accessing public benefits for which they are eligible.
 - Medical care, dental care, and preventative health services, which may include education about how to prevent STDs and contraception options.
 - Access to mental health and substance abuse recovery services, including counseling and psychiatric treatment.
 - Social and recreational activities.

Designing quality youth supportive housing requires sensitivity to the special needs of youth. The following are recommended practices for youth supportive housing programs:

- **Design flexible intake and admission processes:** Youth housing providers report that young adults may be initially critical of the housing options offered to them and may express reluctance to participate in services. However, it is common for youth to later change their minds about housing options, and to be easily engaged in services once housed. Intake and admission processes that allow youth to change their minds regarding whether to accept an apartment, and that do not emphasize statements of interest in services programming as a criteria for admission, will best serve young adults. In addition, many young adults may not have the skills necessary to navigate complex admission processes. Therefore, intake processes should be streamlined and require as few appointments and as little follow-up by the young adult, as possible.
- **Infuse an understanding of adolescent development into program design:** Services providers must be able to distinguish normal feelings and behaviors among adolescents (such as moodiness, being childish when stressed, testing limits and rules, and experimenting with drugs and sex), from feelings and behaviors which may signal that the youth has unmet mental health and/or substance abuse treatment needs. Service providers should use a positive youth development services model which assumes that young people will make good choices if they have the opportunity to develop social, moral, emotional, physical and cognitive competencies, and focuses on providing youth with opportunities to develop the skills they need.
- **Embrace youth culture:** For example, young adults keep late hours – shared facilities within the housing project, such as the laundry room or computer center, should be open late to accommodate the needs of young adults who work or go to school during the day. Evenings and weekends are critical times to schedule structured activities and recreation because these are the times when young adults might otherwise engage in less positive activities. Similarly, case management/services coordination staff should be available at non-traditional times, to help cover these critical times of day and to serve youth who work or go to school during the work week.
- **Acknowledge that youth are inherently in transition:** Young adults' service needs and goals will change over time and will require a flexible and responsive approach to service delivery. While supportive housing for youth is permanent housing, it should be expected that most young adults will eventually outgrow the program and move on to independent living in the

community or to other permanent supportive housing programs not focused on youth. Services which include teaching and assisting youth to find and maintain other positive permanent living arrangements, when they are ready to move on, are a crucial part of serving youth effectively.

- **Choose an appropriate housing model:** Youth supportive housing units may be mixed within a family supportive housing projects, may be in a separate and distinct area of a supportive housing building for single adults (scattered throughout such a building is not typically recommended), or may be within a stand-alone building designated for youth only. In any model, organizations considering creating supportive housing opportunities for youth should carefully evaluate their organizational capacity in making choices regarding housing models and the number of youth to be served.
- **Create venues for ongoing youth input:** Youth should be engaged as partners in program development and service delivery and there should be ongoing opportunities for youth input. It is important to create leadership opportunities for young adults such as taking turns leading weekly group sessions, mentoring other tenants, or serving on an advisory board.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES REGARDING SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR YOUTH:

The Corporation for Supportive Housing has a wide variety of resources available through our website at www.csh.org. Resources providing more detailed information regarding homeless youth and supportive housing for youth include:

- **[Youth Supportive Housing \(2003\)](#):** This document includes an assessment of the need for housing youth and overviews of current funding and legislative issues, existing models (especially transitional housing), and public policy recommendations, along with brief summaries of existing projects.
- **[Housing Youth: Key Issues in Supportive Housing \(2003\)](#):** Intended as a complement to the previous document, *Housing Youth* is primarily an exploration of issues specific to permanent housing with an emphasis on the nuts and bolts of designing and operating supportive housing targeted toward young people.

¹ M. Robertson and P. Toro, "Homeless Youth, Research, Intervention, and Policy, Practical Lessons," (presented at The National Symposium on Homelessness Research, Washington, DC, 1998).

² A.L. Fernandes, "Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics, Programs, and Emerging Issues," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (2007): 6.

³ N. Ray, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness," National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and National Coalition for the Homeless (2006), www.thetaskforce.org.

⁴ These youth, when between the ages of 16 and 24, are sometimes referred to as "transitional youth". This term describes youth with serious emotional disturbances, who are either transitioning from being served by the children's services and/or foster care services system, to the adult mental health care system or who are transitioning out of juvenile corrections system, into the general community.

⁵ C.M. Fagnoni, "Foster Care: Challenges in Helping Youths Live Independently," Testimony before the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, United States General Accounting Office, May 13, 1999.

⁶ National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Fundamental Issues to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness," www.endhomelessness.org.