Ending Youth Homelessness: Examples and Emerging Practices

1. Introduction

Ending youth and young adult homelessness is both a national and a local priority. At both levels, progress is being driven by innovative program designs and implementations, with a primary focus on the long-term housing needs and well-being of young people. The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness has articulated what it means to have a coordinated response to ending youth homelessness, listing the core features of an effective and client-centered response: stable housing; education and employment; permanent community and social connections; and social-emotional well-being. Youth services organizations and programs have demonstrated that a youth-centered, trauma-informed approach to permanent housing and community opportunities are critical to fostering individual and program success.

The San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness requested a brief study of promising practices focused on youth-serving projects primarily funded by HUD's Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program. The goal of the brief is to highlight the ways in which communities employ crisis housing and rapid rehousing models to successfully meet the needs of young adults experiencing homelessness, including those with high service barriers or needs. TAC conducted interviews with four communities including Seattle, WA; New York, NY; Austin, TX; and Snohomish County, WA. TAC also researched and captured emerging practices from other sources and experts throughout the country.

Rapid Rehousing is Key

As Point Source Youth explained in introducing its comprehensive Rapid Rehousing for Youth Guidebook: *"Everyone deserves the right to secure, affordable, sustainable housing and young people are no different. Research shows that rapid rehousing (RRH) is cost-effective and that folks who receive RRH assistance experience homelessness for shorter periods of time than those assisted with shelter or transitional housing. Rapid rehousing is centered in independence, it's a client-centered and low-barrier intervention that focuses on housing folks in permanent housing as quickly as possible without preconditions that make attaining stable housing even less accessible. Rapid rehousing also helps to create "flow" throughout homelessness response systems and provides young people with the safe environments they deserve to grow and thrive in."*

2. Emerging Practices and Lessons Learned

TAC identified these emerging practices and lessons learned through direct community interviews and a review of national trends focused on ending youth and young adult homelessness. Most emerging practices for youth homelessness combine short-term crisis shelter or transitional housing (TH) with a direct pathway to permanent housing units via a rapid rehousing (RRH) flexible subsidy and an individualized service package. Traditionally, RRH has been focused on adults and families who only need short-term assistance and stabilization services to achieve housing sustainability. As HUD has invested in Youth Homeless Demonstration Projects (YHDP), new insights have emerged.

Rapid rehousing and permanent housing work.

Housing First is not a "program" confined to permanent supportive housing: rather, it is an *approach* based on recognizing that homelessness in any population is a lack of 1) permanent housing and 2) whatever supports are needed to stay in that housing. While younger adults may need or want other, more tailored services as well (for instance, linkages to social and educational opportunities), permanent housing remains the key driver of ending any type of homelessness. The *services* offered in transitional

and crisis settings remain critical, functioning to identify a young person's preferences and overall needs. But those same services can be offered in a rapid rehousing housing setting, allowing providers and the young people they are working with to pivot toward planning for longer-term housing sustainability. This model requires such activities as supporting lease requirements, matching roommates to leverage affordability, making linkages to educational opportunities that can result in gainful employment, and facilitating connections to services and social networks in the community where the youth/young adult lives and likely will continue to live for some time. YHDP Alternative Requirements allow up to three years of rental assistance and one year of follow-up services once the subsidy ends — a level of support that is far above traditional RRH opportunities, and that enhances the ability to serve high-need, high-acuity young adults in a rapid rehousing project. Emphasizing the RRH component of youth programs empowers young adults to build tenancy histories while still being supported financially, and to access the myriad of available and allowable RRH supportive services throughout and beyond the duration of their enrollment. *Permanent housing does not mean housing without support; to be successful, RRH relies on both robust, client-driven housing stability services and flexible financial assistance packages.*

Rely on young adults to be their own best experts and advocates.

Young adults will only want to be part of programs and services that respect their goals, needs, and desires. Focusing on new populations and program designs always demands innovative ways of approaching the work, and this is certainly true for young adults. Successful projects and communities are empowering individual clients to make their own, informed housing and service decisions — not only individually, but also collectively via local Youth Action Boards (YABs). To be successful, projects and systems must put decision-making power into hands of the young people they are serving, and adjust programs to reflect emerging needs. *Decision-making roles for youth and YABs should not be an afterthought; these groups must lead and influence all efforts to end individual and community-wide homelessness among young people.*

Make equity a priority.

The demographics of youth experiencing homelessness tend to be different than those of traditionally served homeless populations: Homeless youth and young adults are more likely to identify as LGBTQ, have higher rates of pregnancy and single parenthood, and have demographic trends that look different along race and ethnic lines. Successful youth programs must account for these factors, empower those with lived experience to inform services, and build both the staffing and partnerships needed to support highly individualized circumstances and past traumas. *Equity is not a separate issue, it is a principle to ensure that programs reach young people in ways that recognize their unique needs and strengths.*

Leverage what is known about rapid rehousing, and adapt it for youth.

Rapid rehousing is an intervention designed to provide time-limited financial and service supports to move people quickly toward permanent housing. Its core components are housing identification, housing case management, and financial assistance. While there are many promising practices for effective RRH interventions, the most important are flexibility and individualized supports. Rapid rehousing allows programs to adjust the level of services and financial support up or down ("progressive engagement") to meet the individual needs of each client. By and large, RRH has proven to a cost-effective and highly successful intervention for people experiencing homelessness. It is also far less costly than permanent supportive housing, which most young adults do not need. Practitioners must build from the wide body of RRH practice and program lessons learned, adapting and shaping them to meet the individual needs of young adults in their own programs. The wide array of trainings provided by the National Alliance to End Homelessness may be useful, and even other population-specific RRH

information sources such as the Department of Veterans Affairs' comprehensive SSVF University.
Existing RRH tools and practices don't need to be used "as is," or ignored either — instead, they can be adapted to work for young adults experiencing homelessness.

You don't have to be the best at everything.

In any strong community program, partnerships are key. To be successful, programs designed for young adults require both traditional and new partner structures. Many communities have built a centralized approach to coordinate housing navigation and landlord supports. Youth providers, who generally lack this historical expertise, can leverage their community and Continuum of Care (CoC) partners to help perform key functions of the work (such as landlord identification), meanwhile expanding in other directions to partner with educational institutions (including trade schools), employment providers, youth-serving and young-adult-led service organizations, and support networks. In this way, a program can access key expertise in discrete areas while applying its own strengths in case management and housing stabilization. Family and social networks are also valuable partners, and making the effort to reunify or promote safe connections between a young person and their family and friends may allow for enduring support networks to develop. *Successful projects cultivate real, enduring partnerships with others in the community whose expertise complements their own.*

Remember that programs are designed for people, not for providers.

To achieve the goal of linking young people to long-term housing opportunities with appropriate supports, programs must be designed (and then redesigned) to meet the needs of individual young adults who bring their own unique histories, traumas, assets, and opportunities. If your program isn't working and clients are "failing," it is time to take a close look at how your program may be failing them. Flexibility and ongoing quality improvement are required on the part of providers to ensure their work is effective. Furthermore, youth must be a leading voice at the table when designing, implementing and troubleshooting new or emerging program models. *Flexibility in program design and individual service focus are key to success.*

Be creative about units and housing arrangements.

Most people live with other people. Young people in particular may want to live with roommates to ensure housing affordability and to maintain new or renewed social and community networks. Youth should be offered informed choices about shared housing and roommate arrangements and how those arrangements may or may not support their longer-term goals. Further supporting this option is the fact that there simply may not be enough one-bedroom and studio units to end homelessness among youth or any other population. *Leveraging the stock of multi-bedroom units/houses in the rental market can open new opportunities for building landlord and housing partner relationships and lead to a flexible, choice-based pool of housing options for young people exiting homelessness.*

Don't make perfect the enemy of the good.

The primary mechanism for investing in ending youth homelessness comes in the form of demonstration projects. By definition, participation in such projects is a learning journey that is meant to test new ideas about how communities and projects can best support youth in exiting homelessness and moving forward with their lives. We know that the only way to end homelessness is by focusing our efforts on permanent housing, generally through RRH. We also know many youth need crisis and transitional support as a direct conduit to their permanent housing opportunities. Beyond these two principles, however, this work is emerging, flexing, and changing on an ongoing basis. Providers must be willing to take risks in order to identify the best approaches both for individuals and for programs. *Now is the*

time for the youth service community to face the challenges, try new tactics, learn from mistakes, and advance the field of knowledge in ending youth homelessness.

3. Case Studies

Seattle, WA: Housing First and Youth-Centered Engagement Work – If You Work Them!

Who They Are

The United Indians of All Tribes Foundation's Labateyah Bridge Housing Project received Round 1 YHDP funding as part of the Seattle-King County CoC's Coordinated Community Plan to End Youth Homelessness. The project combines temporary crisis housing with RRH support services to move young adults aged 18 to 24 as quickly as possible to permanent rental housing.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Case managers work with young adults to create a service plan and identify housing, all based on the young adult's goals. Rental assistance can contribute to a variety of housing options, including roommates, shared housing with family/friends, or an independent apartment. Rental assistance is provided using a step-down approach, and varies for every person in the program. Case managers help connect clients with other benefits and community resources that may help contribute to independence from the Labateyah program.

Once the implementation period began, YHDP lead staff noticed that the project was struggling to meet its planned milestones within the established timeline — so they moved quickly to create a performance improvement plan. Labateyah worked closely with project staff and the YAB to remove policies at the project level that deterred young adults and that were not in alignment with Housing First, trauma-informed, and empowerment approaches. For instance, Labateyah was employing the same case manager to work with clients in both the TH and RRH components of the project. This resulted in a large case load, preventing the case manager from focusing on move-ins to RRH because staff were struggling to manage crises in the transitional housing site. To find a solution, county staff and an additional hired consultant conducted weekly meetings with providers to reimagine their staffing and to train them in Housing First, trauma-informed care, and landlord recruitment/retention. The performance improvement plan included monthly goals, such as meeting permanent housing move-in targets and cleaning up existing data in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). To further inform the improvement process, the YAB conducted its own evaluation of the TH-RRH project with currently and previously enrolled youth and young adults.

The project significantly increased its permanent housing move-ins, and is achieving 108% of target enrollments into rapid rehousing. The project also reduced the average length of time from enrollment to move-in from 203 days in the first half of 2019 to 132 in the second half – meaning that, on average, participants moved into permanent housing more than two months faster. The program is one of the best performers in the community's young adult system, establishing new proof points that its Housing First, trauma-informed care, positive youth development, and racial equity approaches do work. Program staff also built a partnership with an apartment complex, which allowed for multiple young adults to move into one building, making case management visits more efficient and creating the potential for group work. All these adjustments led to improved young adults' perceptions of the Labateyah Bridge Housing Program, which has become a popular choice with consumers, especially

Black, Brown, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ young adults who had often felt culturally marginalized in other programs.

Lessons Learned

1. **Use data to inform decisions:** Data should be a key focus when making program design decisions and reviewing project and consumer outcomes, but data alone doesn't tell the whole story. Communities must work to understand the root causes of low performance, and focus improvement efforts specifically on those challenges.
2. **Housing First takes work:** We cannot expect traditional youth/young adult providers to embrace a new permanent housing model without the support and training needed to make that shift successful. Labateyah drew on training, technical assistance, and formal partnerships to learn new strategies for coordinating permanent housing resources; as a result, the program has seen growing success, both on paper and in feedback from the young adults it serves.
3. **Take chances:** The only way programs can improve is to take risks on new ideas, let those ideas either succeed or fail, and then regroup to make improvements. By the same token, projects must embrace new ways of thinking and approaching their work with young adults, if they are going to be successful with these new models. A trauma-informed, equity-led strategy that empowers consumers to help drive program and individual decisions, combined with training and partnerships at the local level, will help new practices to be adopted successfully.

Snohomish, WA: Get Youth and Other Partners Involved Early and Often!

Who They Are

Cocoon House was founded in 1994 as an emergency shelter for homeless teens. In years since, the agency has added programming and grown to serve more youth, ultimately adopting the mission of breaking the cycle of homelessness through engagement with youth, families, and the community. Cocoon House's most recent addition is the Snohomish Young Adult Housing (SYAH, pronounced "See ya!") program, funded by YHDP.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Using a scattered-site model, Cocoon House manages leased two apartments, with Cocoon House listed as the lessee. Program participants are given the option to reside in these units until they are able to find their own apartment through rapid rehousing. Clients who opt not to live in crisis housing are still eligible for the same range of other supportive services offered through the program. This flexible intervention has allowed Cocoon House, with varied services and housing settings based on young adult's choices and needs, to build trust and rapport with individuals who may be apprehensive to engage in more traditional housing or service programs. This approach also empowers young adults to help guide their own service and housing plans and gives them greater decision-making power in how they engage with staff and other service partners.

Cocoon House provides RRH to all participants and realized early on that it needed added expertise to facilitate permanent housing linkages. Now, Catholic Community Services (CCS) — a traditional RRH provider — conducts all of the housing searches, Housing Quality Standards inspections, and rent reasonableness certifications. Catholic Community Services brings its strong RRH experience to the partnership. Once housed, program participants continue working with Cocoon House staff to reach a point of stability such that they can sustain their housed status on their own. CCS contributes a half-time housing placement specialist, while Cocoon House contributes a program manager, a case manager, a

peer leader, and an education/employment case manager who helps program participants to identify and attain education and employment goals.

Cocoon House, along with Snohomish County generally, has developed a highly inclusive process to bring young voices to the table. Young adults involved in its Youth Advisory Council provide ongoing feedback on program design and overall strategic planning for the CoC. This collective system-level role, together with the program's emphasis on participant choice and empowerment, have in many ways flipped the traditional power structures and put more of the ownership directly in the hands of those who are being served by the program. This has created new partnerships and opportunities for youth involvement which are manifested in better outcomes at both the project and system levels.

Lessons Learned

1. **Young adults experiencing homelessness *are* "ready" to be housed:** One of the challenges Cocoon House worried about was whether the agency would be put at risk, or its young adult program participants set up for failure, by helping them to find their own housing. Instead, Cocoon House has found that with the proper guidance and support, young adults are ready to pursue housing, sign leases, and begin the next phase of their lives.
2. **Open partnerships are essential:** Cocoon House's partnership with CCS allowed it to focus on what it does well (connecting to and supporting youth), while giving youth the highest-quality RRH support that their community has to offer. Cocoon House and Snohomish County have built a strong, collaborative relationship by remaining transparent and communicating regularly with one another; as a consequence, when a challenge arises they are able to problem-solve as a team. Finding landlords willing to partner and be flexible with the program for their crisis housing units has also been essential to the success of the program.
3. **Youth involvement is critical**: From the outset, Snohomish County has included youth voice in program design. Through Snohomish County's YAC, youth meet regularly to provide feedback on program developments and offer suggestions, which has helped the agency to design a project that more precisely addresses the needs of program participants. Youth also participated in interviews as Cocoon House began hiring for the program, ultimately helping guide the agency to select staff who have truly done amazing work. Finally, the grant funds a Peer Leader position; this young person with lived experience of homelessness is essential to the program's ability to connect with and advocate for program participants.

Austin, TX: Partners and Program Design Run the Show

Who They Are

LifeWorks is a youth-dedicated direct service agency that, in partnership with the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), lead agency of the Austin/Travis County CoC, began planning its Action Plan to End Youth Homelessness in 2017. LifeWorks has a long history of advocating for and providing housing and employment services to youth and families in need. ECHO plays a lead support and technical assistance role, helping guide policy, program design, and training.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

LifeWorks has adapted its YHDP services and operations to reflect lessons learned along the way, and to ensure that interventions continue to meet the evolving needs of youth experiencing homelessness in Austin. One area in which program services have evolved is in creating safe spaces for youth through Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) resources, which supports certain housing protections and emergency transfer options for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. This led to building more robust crisis response

protocols and trainings that allowed staff to quickly respond and increase the safety of youth by helping them change housing units when domestic violence or other unsafe situations arose.

In order to prioritize individualized supports and choice, LifeWorks altered the transitional housing component of its Joint TH-RRH program. Based on feedback from youth program participants, LifeWorks included additional TH settings in which individual youth have their own rooms in a shared three- or four-bedroom apartment. Operating both congregate and scattered-site options for the TH component provides youth a choice on the type of temporary living space they live in while working toward their permanent housing goals. LifeWorks relies on its clients to make informed decisions about where they want to live, with whom they want to live, and how their preferences are balanced with neighborhood desirability, affordability, and feasibility.

LifeWorks has also worked closely with ECHO's housing department, taking advantage of this agency's large housing partner and landlord network. Instead of trying to "go it alone," LifeWorks relies on ECHO's housing navigation team to prepare and present unit options, inform landlords about program goals and parameters, conduct unit inspections, and facilitate lease-ups. Transitional housing case managers follow the young people into the RRH housing unit with a warm handoff to a housing case manager, and there is continued coordination around the young adult's needs. The three legs of the services stool are all in place: crisis and transitional housing, housing navigation, and housing stabilization. Program staff have built positive relationships with landlords by creating standardized templates for use during VAWA emergency transfers (ET), by adjusting program budgets to pay for eligible costs related to ET, and by quickly filling vacant units.

During the FY19 CoC funding competition, LifeWorks' two YHDP projects were renewed for funding under the Continuum of Care program. LifeWorks made amendments to ensure that all costs and services were eligible, and also requested – and received -- waivers and exemptions for some otherwise ineligible items unique to the YHDP vision. These include being able to serve youth in their RRH program for 36 months, allowing bail/bond fees as legal costs under supportive services, having operating and leasing costs in the same program for the TH component of the Joint TH-RRH project, and paying for training costs to build skills using best practices identified in program planning.

Lessons Learned

1. **Choice must drive the work:** Youth must be empowered and assisted in making informed decisions about their service needs, where and with whom they want to live, and how they plan to sustain their housing over the long run. This includes choices about housing, education, work and other life skills and service pathways.
2. **Get to the core of the intervention:** Recognizing the trauma and circumstances that lead to youth homelessness on an individual level, allows programs and systems to address those specific barriers and challenges. The programs must adapt to the young adult's needs, not the other way around.
3. **Figure out who should do what (and who pays them):** Programs should not work in isolation, but instead leverage existing strengths and funding in their community to deliver the best services possible for consumers.

New York, NY: Adapt with Purpose

Who They Are

Jericho Project is a nationally acclaimed non-profit ending homelessness at its roots by enabling homeless individuals and families to attain quality housing, employment, and mental and physical health services. Serving more than 2,500 individuals every year, the 36-year-old nonprofit has been a key

partner in New York City's initiative to end Veteran homelessness, and is leading bold, innovative strategies to do the same for families and young adults.

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Jericho Project has a long history of providing rapid rehousing services for Veterans via the VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, but learned quickly that providing similar interventions for young adults would require different approaches and services. By the end of the first year of operating its YHDP project, Jericho was clear that its service package for youth needed to be more intensive, and that some specific staff skills were more important than they had been before.

Acting on these findings, Jericho halved the case load expectations in its youth RRH program from 30:1 to 15:1 and added clinical services provided by a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), including short-term and group therapy, mediation services, and life skills training. Emphasis was also added on safety planning and responding to domestic violence situations. These more specialized services helped Jericho further stabilize the young adults participating in its programs, while also gaining more information as to whether some youth might need a longer-term subsidy or support to sustain housing (such as a voucher or permanent supportive housing). In addition to RRH case managers and the LCSW position, the Jericho staffing model also employs peer support specialists, career counselors, and housing specialists, all of whom receive training and supervision as they adapt their approaches to meet the needs of young adults. Ongoing supervision has focused on normalizing the RRH model for youth (and accepting that success may look different for some clients), Housing First, progressive engagement, and mediation.

Jericho has placed a lot of emphasis on supporting young adults with housing affordability. Shared housing, a key strategy for promoting affordability, has proven to be challenging but Jericho implemented a variety of tools and strategies to facilitate successful roommate situations. To foster a fair and accountable shared housing arrangement for all parties, Jericho administers formal roommate questionnaires to match clients who share interests and preferences; hosts "speed dating sessions" to informally introduce and organically match young adults; provides landlord and roommate mediation services; and develops roommate agreements, housing plans, and other tools. Jericho's defined rental assistance process follows a progressive engagement approach, titrating the rental subsidy over time so clients in the program can slowly take on the full rent over the course their enrollment. A 12-month initial housing plan is extended by 3-month increments as needed, allowing Jericho to work flexibly with the youth in its program while promoting accountability and longer-term sustainability from the beginning of the housing intervention.

Lessons Learned

1. **Expectations must be managed:** Young adults have different service needs than traditional adult RRH populations. Staff and programs must adapt their services and also work together with partners to ensure that outcome expectations are reasonable; Housing First practices may need to be adapted to ensure young adults longer-term options and sustainability as they progress through the programs.
2. **Shared housing is tough, but necessary:** Housing affordability, especially for young adults, is a long-term challenge in nearly every community. Employing formal strategies to support roommate arrangements allows for better affordability as well as social interaction and support. Success depends on thoughtful case planning, open communication with landlords, and clear expectation-setting with those who will be sharing housing.
3. **Program design must evolve.** A key to successful RRH for young adults is to avoid transposing the same services and planning that programs may have used for other populations. Young adults bring new opportunities and challenges to RRH, and being able to adjust case loads,

augment new services, and build unconventional partnerships may be necessary to successfully use RRH for young adults.