

Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness

A Coordinated Community Response



In *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, we set a national goal to prevent and end youth homelessness in 2020. To get there, it will take all of us—government, non-profits, business, and philanthropy—to make sure every community has the capacity to achieve the goal.

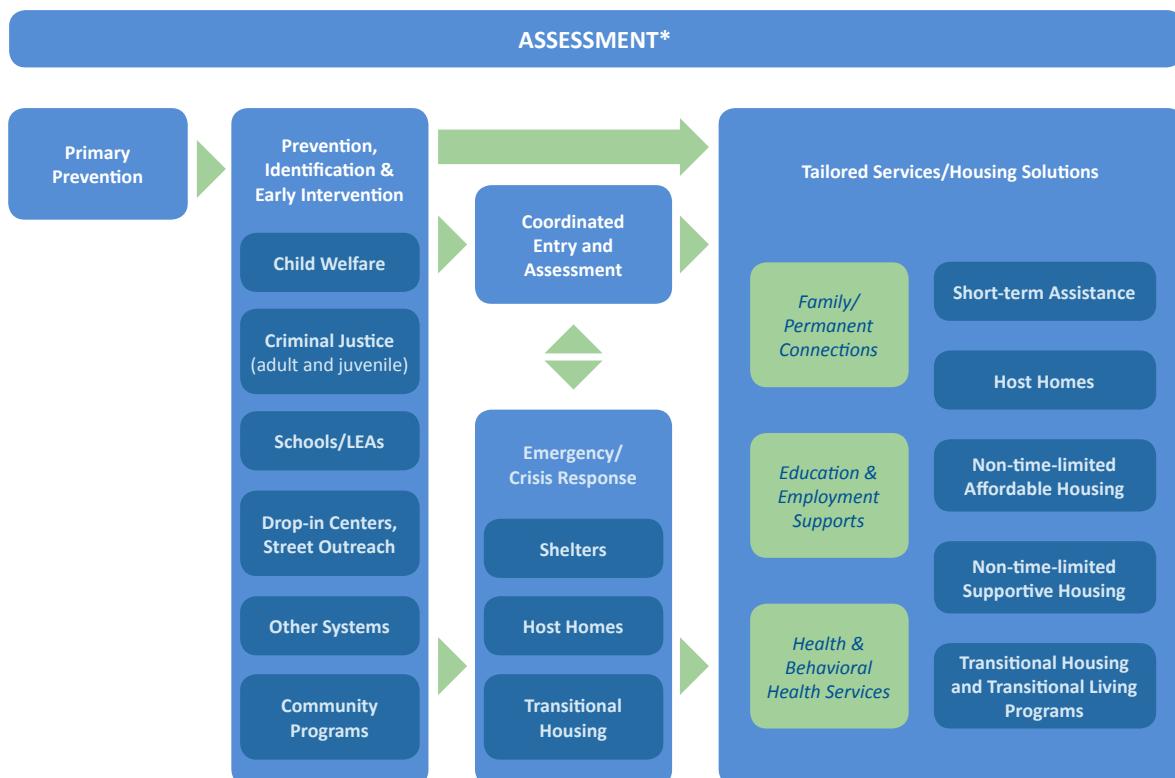
Our understanding of the scope and dynamics of youth homelessness is growing. While we continue to learn more every day, we must act now to build the comprehensive and coordinated response that young people need to end their homelessness forever.

This document provides a preliminary vision for such a response. It draws upon what we know works to end homelessness for other populations, along with strategies that support the unique needs of unaccompanied youth and young adults under 25.

We hope you'll use this document to advance discussions in your communities and build upon the work already underway. To receive additional tools and resources that will be developed to support the implementation of this response, [sign up for our newsletter](#).

Our Preliminary Vision for a Community Response

The Interagency Working Group on Ending Youth Homelessness has developed a shared vision for the community response that will be necessary to prevent and end youth homelessness, illustrated here and described in more detail below.



**Throughout the provision of services, assessment will be ongoing.*

Our Progress

The Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness calls on all of us to help youth achieve the outcomes most critical to their success: stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, and well-being. At the Federal level, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and our member agencies have been focusing on two simultaneous strategies: improving data on youth homelessness, and building the capacity of communities to deliver effective services.

We've made some notable progress. On the data side, there has been improvement in how youth experiencing homelessness are identified as part of Point-in-Time counts, and the integration of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS) and the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is proceeding as planned. Meanwhile, Federal, state and local partners have helped to initiate and guide community planning efforts, and Council member agencies have supported pilot projects to expand evidence of what works. As these and other activities continue, we have moved into the next phase, focused on developing and testing innovations in services and programs.

Core Outcomes for Youth

- ▶ **Stable housing** includes a safe and reliable place to call home.
- ▶ **Permanent connections** include ongoing attachments to families, communities, schools, and other positive social networks.
- ▶ **Education/employment** includes high performance in and completion of educational and training activities, especially for younger youth, and starting and maintaining adequate and stable employment, particularly for older youth.
- ▶ **Social-emotional well-being** includes the development of key competencies, attitudes, and behaviors that equip a young person to succeed across multiple domains of daily life, including school, work, relationships, and community.

What We Know About Youth Homelessness

Despite our progress, we still don't have a confident estimate of the national scale and scope of youth homelessness. We don't have a system in place to determine rates of homelessness among the broader youth population, so current methodologies are based on counts of youth experiencing homelessness.

Here's what the counts tell us:

- ▶ Approximately 45,000 children and youth without a parent or guardian (unaccompanied) under age 25 were living on the streets, in shelter, or in transitional housing on a given night in 2014, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Point-in-Time count. **The majority of youth captured in the HUD PIT count are over 18.**
- ▶ More than 90,000 youth without a parent or guardian (unaccompanied) enrolled in public school districts were identified as homeless at some point over the course of the 2013-2014 school year, according to Department of Education data. They include, among others, youth who are doubled-up or "couch surfing." **The majority of youth captured in the ED data are under 18.**

While we work to strengthen the nation's data capacity, we continue to use the information we do have to better understand the characteristics and experiences of youth under all Federal definitions of homelessness. The research tells us that youth experience homelessness differently than adults in some important ways. To respond effectively, we must adapt strategies designed for adults to:

- ▶ **Pay attention to factors that contribute to youth homelessness specifically.** Those include family problems, economic circumstances, racial disparities, and mental health and substance use disorders, as well as involvement with public systems like criminal justice and child welfare. In one study, 19 percent of youth who were in foster care at 17 years old reported two years later that they had been homeless at some point during those two years.¹

- ▶ **Focus on the unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness who are particularly vulnerable.** That includes youth who have been trafficked, Native American youth, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ). For instance, family conflict and rejection around sexual orientation and gender identity may need to be addressed in the 20 to 40 percent of youth experiencing homelessness who identify as LGBTQ.² Other vulnerable groups include youth with special needs or disabilities and pregnant and parenting youth. Around 1 in 4 youth served through Family and Youth Services Bureau-funded transitional living programs are pregnant or parenting, according to FY 2014 RHYMIS data.
- ▶ **Understand how age and developmental issues impact how youth experience homelessness and their pathways in and out of homelessness.** Strategies should focus on reunifying youth, particularly those under age 18, with family or other natural supports when safe and appropriate. Around 70 percent of youth under age 18 who entered a Family and Youth Services Bureau-funded emergency shelter left the shelter to go to a parent or guardian in FY 2014. In addition to family-focused efforts, ending homelessness for youth requires a broader set of interventions, ranging from short- to longer-term housing, with varying levels of support and services, including education and employment. Those services may be especially useful for youth over the age of 18.

How Our Communities Must Respond

Unlike other systems youth interact with, like child welfare or juvenile justice, efforts to serve youth experiencing homelessness are not provided through a single, coordinated system of supports funded by a state or Federal agency. Moreover, the varied and unique needs of youth experiencing homelessness require a range of interventions and solutions that no single funding stream can provide. Collaboration across Federal, state and local partners is needed to provide this full range of solutions.

To meet all the physical, developmental, and social needs of youth experiencing homelessness, we must design and implement a unified, collaborative response in every community (see Figure on Page 1). Building on local, state, and Federal efforts to support healthy families, this response must:

- ▶ **Prevent youth** from becoming homeless by identifying and working with families who are at risk of fracturing.
- ▶ Effectively **identify and engage** youth at risk for, or actually experiencing, homelessness and connect them with trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and developmentally and age-appropriate interventions.
- ▶ **Intervene early** when youth do become homeless and work toward family reunification, when safe and appropriate.
- ▶ Develop **coordinated entry systems** to identify youth for appropriate types of assistance and to prioritize resources for the most vulnerable youth.
- ▶ Ensure access to **safe shelter and emergency services** when needed.
- ▶ Ensure that assessments respond to the unique needs and circumstances of youth and emphasize **strong connections to and supported exits from mainstream systems** when needed.
- ▶ Create **individualized services** and housing options tailored to the needs of each youth, and include measurable outcomes across key indicators of performance, including education and employment.

¹Administration for Children and Families (2014). *National Youth in Transition Database Data Brief # 4*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/nytd-data-brief-4>

²Ray (2006). An epidemic of homelessness. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. National Coalition for the Homeless. Retrieved from <http://www.thetaskforce.org/lgbt-youth-an-epidemic-of-homelessness/>.

Federal Commitment to Action

To support communities in implementing this coordinated response, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and our member agencies have committed to:

1. Work at the Federal, state, and local levels to build the foundation for a coordinated and comprehensive community response. We will:

- Develop a shared understanding of what it means to end youth homelessness and establish the metrics to measure national progress.
- Project the full range of resources needed to end youth homelessness, identify resource gaps, and recommend new investments in order to help set budget and other policy priorities.
- Improve the collection, sharing, and use of data on youth experiencing homelessness to identify needs and plan for resource allocations.
- Build an evidence base for successful strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness that can be used to further refine the proposed community response.

2. Build the capacity of local communities to implement the components of a coordinated and comprehensive community response.

Prevention, Identification, and Early Intervention: We will advance strategies to support the capacity of communities to:

- Develop guidance and messaging targeted toward at-risk children, youth, and families to strengthen communities, increase protective factors, and reduce the prevalence of youth homelessness.
- Promote the use of evidence-based and promising practices in family interventions that can address and reduce family conflict and ensure youth remain connected to or reunify with their families, when safe and appropriate.
- Leverage drop-in centers, street outreach programs, and public systems, including child welfare, criminal justice, schools, community programs, and other youth-serving systems to quickly identify and engage at-risk children and intervene early to reduce the duration and impact of homelessness.

Coordinated Entry and Assessment: We will advance strategies to support the capacity of communities to implement screening and assessment tools at the client and community levels to ensure youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness have access to the most appropriate options to address their needs through specialized programs for homelessness assistance as well as mainstream programs.

Emergency and Crisis Response: We will advance strategies to strengthen community capacity to provide low-barrier emergency and crisis services that mitigate risk factors and strengthen protective factors for youth and work to connect youth to services and/or housing through the use of short- and long-term shelters, transitional housing, and host homes.

Tailored Services and Housing Solutions: We will advance strategies to support innovation and experimentation at the local level to increase the scale, performance, and range of trauma-informed, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and developmentally and age-appropriate services and housing options to positively impact the core outcomes.

Our Challenges Are Great, Our Determination is Greater

We recognize that achieving the goal of ending youth homelessness in 2020 is challenging. In order to reach the goal, the Federal government, states and communities must use all available resources effectively and efficiently, and new investments will be needed.

Through the implementation of *Opening Doors*, we as a nation have learned a lot about what works to end homelessness. The progress we've made demonstrates that ending homelessness for everyone is possible. When communities come together and mobilize around a goal, dramatic change can happen.

Join us – and the providers around the country who have been working for years to improve young people's lives – in being part of that change.