

Ending Youth Homelessness in 2017: Knitting Federal Resources Together to Ensure Housing Stability for Youth

Many years ago, at the beginning of the Obama Administration, our organization was invited by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness to offer a set of recommendations to end homelessness for youth and young adults in the U.S. At that time, we deferred on all issues of homeless unaccompanied youth to providers who serve that population; and instead focused our comments on foster youth aging out of care. Our thinking at that time was that there was a separate system of care for homeless youth and others were more qualified to discuss improvements to that system.

Since that time, NCHCW has changed our position. We believe that all homeless youth who are unable (and those who are unwilling) to return home are eligible for funding under Title IV-E. As such, this year, as we offer these recommendations for drawing down federal funds (primarily under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act) to provide an array of flexible housing resources applies equally to young people who are currently in foster care and youth who are homeless and unaccompanied.

Instead of simply acting as a feeder system to the adult and family homeless system, we argue that foster care funding can be used to appropriately prepare foster youth and unaccompanied youth for independence and housing stability as adults. Furthermore, programs serving youth must build formal, robust partnerships to with competent housing entities to ensure that young people who are in need of subsidies and support as adults are seamlessly transitioned into the resources controlled by those partners. It is in this spirit that we offer these recommendations to Community Access Unlimited and all of our allies.

The National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (NCHCW) links housing resources and child welfare services through training, technical assistance, and advocacy in order to improve family functioning, prevent family homelessness, safely reduce the need for out-of-home placement, and ensure that each young person who ages out foster care is able to access safe, decent, permanent housing. NCHCW is committed to ending homelessness for all Americans.

Strategies to end youth homelessness must address the multi-systemic and complex nature of the issue – and the fact that foster care feeds this problem.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2004) estimates that 1.6 million children between the ages of 16-17 run away from home and experience homelessness each year. Perhaps as many as half of

these children are encouraged to leave by their families – others make the dangerous but courageous choice to leave in order to flee sexual, emotional, and physical abuse (Greene, Ringwalt, Kelly, Iachan, & Cohen, 1995). These young people turn to the streets living in abandoned buildings, tents, or temporarily share space with friends, strangers, and all too often, dangerous predators (sometimes referred to as “couch-surfing”). According to Burt et al (2001) many homeless youth have experienced foster care placements and a third of homeless adults report a history of foster care. Recent AFCARS data shows that 9,766 children ran away from foster care in 2008 (HHS, 2009).

A recent study by Fowler (2010) found that while 57% of foster youth are able to gain stability upon exit from care, the increasing number of young people aging out of foster care without adequate housing supports is feeding the adult shelter system. According to HHS, the number of youth aging out of care is increasing at an alarming pace. In 2000, the number of youth that emancipated from foster care was 20,172 – by 2008, that number had grown to 29,516 (HHS, 2009). **In 2014, the U.S. Children’s Bureau reported that five percent of all 415,129 children in foster care had a goal of aging out into independence. During 2014, nine percent of the 238,230 children who exited the foster care system aged out – or a total of 21,440 young people. It is important to acknowledge that double the amount of youth that we think are going to age-out are actually aging-out.**

Though it is impossible to track the outcomes of each of these young people, several studies indicate that perhaps as many as a quarter of these young people will experience homelessness within a year of emancipation from foster care (Courtney & Hughes-Huering, 2005; Dworsky, 2005; Festinger, 1983; Pecora, Kessler et al., 2005). **What is particularly troubling is that their risk of homelessness is entirely predictable yet foster care fails to use available resources appropriately to prepare youth for independence.**

In fact, the top concern of former foster youth is their nearly universal inability to afford safe, decent, housing – is a bi-product of the fact that ***the foster care system does not prepare them to be economically self-sufficient adults.*** Former foster youth express a complete disappointment with the lack of attention by child welfare agencies to economic self-sufficiency. Their stories document instead, a last-minute, frantic, crisis-driven aging out process that relies heavily on emergency services such as homeless shelters and loose connections of friends they might stay with temporarily. While a law student at American University, former foster youth, Farrah Champagne, Esq. published a 2014 law review article entitled *Providing Proper Preparation: Achieving Economic Self-Sufficiency for Foster Youth*. She shares some of these unimaginable stories and asserts that public systems of care fail so miserably to prepare youth that state actors can and should be held liable in court.

Additionally, just three months ago, (July 2016) at the National Alliance to End Homelessness Youth Summit, all members of their advisory committee, which is composed of homeless young adults prioritized self-sufficiency services as the best way to help young people avoid and escape homelessness.

We must acknowledge that the economic struggles faced by former foster youth are entirely predictable and work across systems to close the obvious gaps through which so many youth are destined to fall into homelessness.

The Good News: HHS funding is flexible and easily braided with housing funds or contracted to housing providers

HHS funding is flexible. Title IV-E can follow the young person to the most appropriate and least restrictive setting. The HHS Administration for Children and Families provides guidance that encourages a range of housing options from family reunification, to traditional family foster care, to an independent apartment with supportive services provided by a licensed agency, or any other appropriate setting in between. All of the

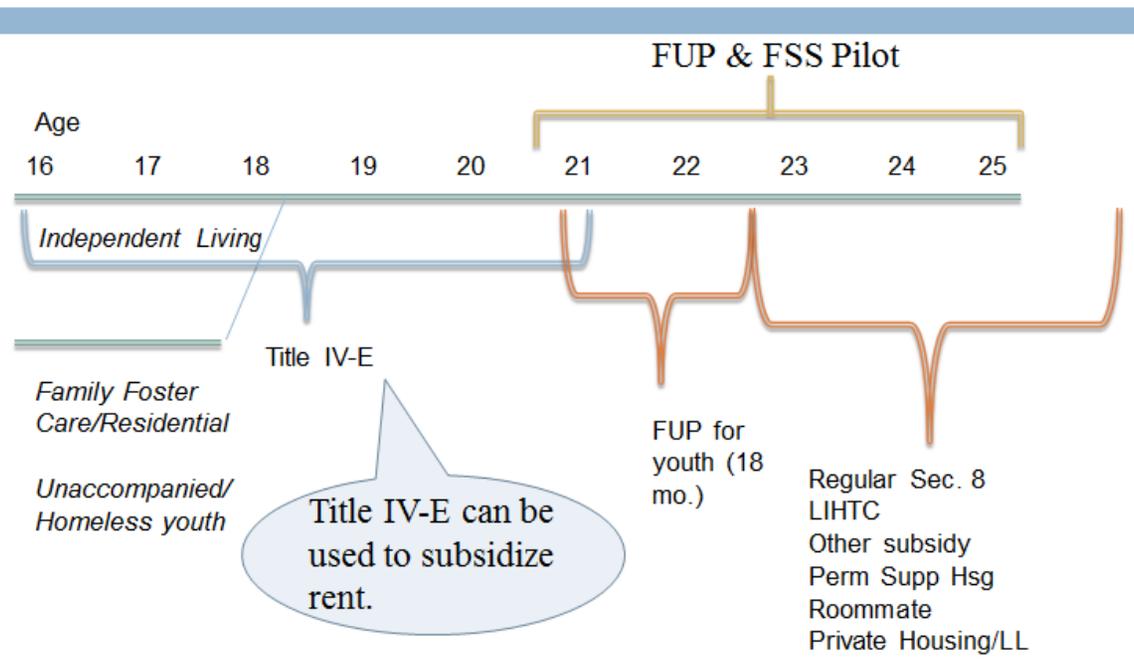
The placement must be selected with the young person's input. It turns out that youth tend to vote with their feet anyway. If a placement is a poor match or worse, they are being exploited at home or while in care, they run away. A small minority might be lucky enough to encounter outreach workers for programs like Sasha Bruce, Covenant House, Ali Forney and Youth Care. But these programs rely on an unpredictable mix of the paltry RHYA funding, increasingly restrictive HUD funds and private dollars. Consequently, shelters and basic center programs turn away nearly 60 percent of the homeless youth who seek help.

HHS funding is not only flexible, it is elastic — meaning that it expands and contracts to meet the need. As such, no child, no teen, no one under the age of 21 should ever be homeless in the U.S.

Child welfare agencies must partner with these providers and reimburse them for serving youth.

The following chart illustrates, to some extent, how HHS funding can be used to support housing options for youth, and allow for preparation for stable housing upon emancipation.

Recommended sequencing of housing resources for at-risk youth



Summary of best practices and barriers to best practices

In order to prepare young people aging out of foster care for a successful transition to adulthood, communities must offer a wide range of independent living options. Though empirical research is just now beginning to catch up with the many innovations in the independent living movement over the past two decades, NCHCW has identified several best practices in the field. Some of these programs are listed below:

- Perhaps the best example of a seamless and bi-directional continuum of housing options can be found in Hamilton County, OH at the Lighthouse Independent Living Program. Through a mix of federal, state, local, and to some extent, rent paid by the youth themselves, Lighthouse Independent Living Program matches youth with developmentally appropriate placements ranging from family foster care to independent apartments. In the event that a placement fails, young people are not expelled from the program, but rather helped to move into a more supported placement (such as a host home) while they prepare for returning to independence. Youth are never put out on the street. A recent study found that at discharge, 60% of clients had completed high school or obtained their GED, 31% were employed or had completed a vocational training program, and one-third (33%) were living independently, either by themselves or with a friend, in their own apartment, room, or house (Kroner & Maris, 2008).
- The Illinois Department of Children and Families (DCFS) uses Chafee dollars to support its Youth Housing Assistance Program. The project provides housing advocacy and cash assistance services for youth at risk of becoming homeless who have already transitioned or are preparing to exit the foster care system and have not yet reached 21.
- Sites in Florida and California (including the noteworthy First Place for Youth Program and the John Burton Foundation) use a mix of child welfare and other state funding subsidize scattered site housing for youth aging out of foster care including the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, HOME, CDBG, private development dollars, and rent paid by the youth participants.
- The Housing Authority of the City of Las Vegas (HACLV) signed an MOU with the local department of child welfare and created a local waitlist preference to ensure that when the Housing Choice Voucher Wait list opens 50 eligible foster youth through will be referred and provided with services matched with vouchers. New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the Administration for Children's Services have had a similar arrangement since 1999.

- The Colorado Family Unification Program (FUP) serves former foster care youth experiencing homelessness. In 2001, the Colorado Department of Human Services received 100 FUP vouchers. These Section 8 vouchers last for 36 months and are targeted specifically for youth ages 18–21 that leave foster care at age 16 or older with inadequate housing. The Department recently partnered with Mile High United Way to expand the case management component. Van Leeuwen (2004) found that this approach to permanent supportive housing for homeless youth cost a tenth of a placement in youth corrections or residential treatment. Supportive housing averaged \$5,378 annually compared to \$53,655 for corrections and \$53,527 for residential treatment.

The majority of these partnerships formed as a result of HUD’s Family Unification Program, but a number including NYCHA and HACLV (mentioned above) while based on the FUP model – are independent of FUP. NCHCW also worked with HUD and CSH to establish a pilot program that couples FUP with HUD’s FSS program to allow young people to keep their vouchers for up to five years if they participate in the Family Self Sufficiency Program.

Given that much of the innovation suggested in our review of best practices is possible under current federal policy, communities should direct existing child welfare funds toward housing interventions to prevent homelessness. That being said, however, no amount of creative thinking, training, or budget slight-of-hand eliminates the desperate need for more affordable housing resources nationwide.

The nation requires significant federal investments in affordable housing to restore a nearly thirty-year gap in adequate funding for affordable housing at the federal level. The FSP must give priority to expanding a range of affordable housing opportunities to end homelessness for all Americans through significant investments in affordable housing. The Plan must call for the creation of at least 90,000 additional units of permanent supportive housing; an initial capitalization of \$1 billion for the National Housing Trust Fund; and funding for 19,000 in new Family Unification Program vouchers from HUD’s Tenant Protection Fund.

Effective federal government efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness

HUD’s Family Unification Program (FUP) provides an excellent formula for local level partnerships between public agencies and social service providers. HUD and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are encouraged to use FUP as a model for the creation of Memoranda of Understanding that

facilitate resource sharing and relationship development between agencies at the local level.

All young people who age out of foster care at 18 are entitled to services through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. This program provides a number of important supports to youth leaving foster care up the age of 21 including limited room and board assistance, educational and training vouchers, independent living programs, counseling and employment assistance.

While federal foster care eligibility ends at age 18, some states extend foster care eligibility to age 21. This practice goes a long way in preventing homelessness among youth leaving care. In October 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351) was signed into law. This landmark child welfare language now allows states that opt to extend foster care beyond age 18 to draw down federal dollars to help cover the costs of assisting these young people.

The Fostering Connections Act also made a number of other changes to existing child welfare law that may begin to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care including educational rights, medical care, and improved family and sibling connections for children in foster care. Additionally, the law requires child welfare agencies to create a youth-directed plan for stable housing 90 days prior to discharge.

Suggestions for improvements in federal efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness

- Improve efforts to reunify homeless young people with their families when appropriate. Title IV-E child welfare funding must be made more flexible to allow for prevention and reunification services. The Families First Prevention Act as currently written only allows for three months of concrete services (rent, income support, etc.). This is insufficient. Consequently, even if the Families First Act passes, increased funding is needed for the Safe and Stable Families Program, TANF, Social Services Block Grant and other family support programs.
- Extend Chafee eligibility to all disconnected youth. Young people who have fled abusive foster care placements or have not been admitted to the child welfare system should not have to forfeit eligibility for this vital federal entitlement program – this will require more funding for the Chafee program.
- The Administration for Children and Families, perhaps with assistance and funding from the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness must add to its National Resource Center structure, a national center that spans the boundary between HUD and HHS’s Children’s Bureau. Such a resource

center would identify and share best practices for preventing and ending homelessness among families and youth in the child welfare system. Among other things, this center would provide cross-training and educational materials to arm front-line child welfare workers and independent living coordinators with the tools necessary to assist youth transition successfully to adulthood through housing interventions.

- HUD must change the regulations governing the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance to prohibit the involuntary separation of youth (of any age) from their families.
- The Secretary of Health and Human Services in issuing guidance on implementation of Section 201(d) of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P. L. 110-351) must clarify that placements for youth aged 18-21 may include living arrangements that do not require 24 hour on-site supervision.
- Child welfare agencies nationwide must insure that housing a central feature of independent living curricula. In the words of Mark Kroner, the nation's leading expert on housing options for transition age youth, one of the nation's leading experts on transition age foster youth, "independent living without housing is like driver's training without a car."

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