



HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

Issue Brief

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Exploring “Permanent Connections” for Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

In February 2013, the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released “*Framework to End Youth Homelessness: A Resource Text for Dialogue and Action.*” In this document, USICH identifies permanent *connections* as one of four key outcomes for youth (along with stable housing, education or employment, and social- emotional wellbeing) and defines permanent connections as follows: “Permanent *connections* include ongoing attachments to families, communities, schools, and other positive social networks. Connections support young people’s ability to access new ideas and opportunities that support thriving and they provide a social safety net when young people are at-risk of re-entering homelessness.” While programs serving runaways and homeless minors



have long histories of determining whether, when, and how to reconnect youth with parents, guardians, or other caring adults, programs serving transitional age youth experiencing homelessness often have assumed that

The Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) is a strategic alliance of youth serving agencies working together to prevent and end homelessness among youth and young adults in Hollywood. With support from The JIB Fund Community Building Initiative, the HHYP used a multi-agency learning collaborative approach to explore best practices for permanent connections and identify strategies for working with youth experiencing homelessness around permanent connections. This brief provides an overview of the lessons learned from focus groups and surveys with staff and youth and highlights some key challenges that need to be addressed by homeless youths serving agencies that are looking to improve their work around permanent connections.

parents and guardians were unavailable, unsafe, or even detrimental to the lives of these young people. In fact many of these young people retain significant ties to family members and friends from their pasts. Unfortunately, it is only after a tragedy or a death that an agency learns that there are parents, grandparents, or other relatives that are engaged in the lives of these young people. The release of the USICH youth framework has been a catalyst for the reexamination of how homeless youth serving agencies can help reconnect youth to caring adults from their past or help them build new supportive ties with adults in communities where they now live.



LITERATURE SUPPORTING THE EFFORTS AROUND PERMANENT CONNECTIONS

Several studies report that most homeless adolescents return home within two years of becoming homeless and nearly half return home within three months of becoming homeless and remain home over time.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, adolescents with more parental involvement, especially maternal social support, and more pro-social peers are more likely to return home and remain home over time.ⁱⁱ These connections to family and pro-social peers are not only influential in adolescents' ability to exit homelessness and remain stably housed over time, they were also associated with less HIV risk and anti-social behavior.^{iii,iv} These findings are particularly promising considering how easy it is for adolescents to stay connected with family and friends with the use of technology while homeless. Most homeless adolescents report using the internet at least

once a week at locations offering free internet access, enabling them to easily connect with family and peers via email, cell phone, and social networking sites.^{v,vi} It is worth noting that many of these studies were conducted with minors or youth under 20 years of age, with less data on older homeless youth. Furthermore, many homeless youth do not have strong family connections or pro-social peers to rely on for support in the stabilization process, and need help developing a community of support. To help facilitate this process, providers need to more effectively assess the connections that youth have to their families of origin. If the potential for healthy family connections do not exist, we need to connect youth to other caring adults in their communities.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand staff attitudes and current practices around Permanent Connections, we convened a learning collaborative of key staff from all HHYP agencies, conducted surveys and focus groups with direct service staff and held a focus group with clinical/program directors. A total of 20 staff participated in focus groups and 100 staff completed the survey. In addition, we conducted three focus groups with youth experiencing homelessness at three different agencies. A total of 37 youth ages 16-24 participated in the focus groups.



KEY CONCEPTS – LANGUAGE

The homeless field is rife with goals and objectives focused on permanency – including permanent housing, permanent placements, and permanent connections. While recognizing the importance of helping youth move into stability, the term “permanency” is problematic. Certainly, we believe that it is a good idea to connect youth with long term and stable individuals that support their positive growth and development. However, for many of the youth experiencing homelessness, this may not be possible in the short term. Furthermore, “permanency” can be a triggering word for youth who have been involved in the child welfare system. While this project was initially focused on permanent connections, we decided to elevate an important incremental step — helping youth and young adults improve the quality of their current relationships. Developmental literature suggests that relational skills are a key “soft skill” or building block to success in other domains.^{vii} Thus, by helping youth develop relationship skills and competencies, they can be more successful in other domains of their life, including school and work.

KEY CONCEPTS – THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

The experience of trauma, particularly complex trauma, is associated with diminished interpersonal skills.^{viii} Therefore, due to life experiences prior to becoming homeless, many youth and young adults accessing shelters and drop in centers require interventions to build their emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning. These types of interventions are required in order for them to develop more positive views about themselves, live a self-directed life, experience hope for their future, and build their resiliency in the face of ongoing adversity.

KEY FINDINGS – AGENCY PRACTICE AND CULTURE

We found significant differences between homeless youth serving agencies in their practices around permanent connections. Some agencies routinely ask youth questions about ties to family and some did not. There were also differences in when and how staff raised these questions. Many of these differences emerged from the type of service agency (drop-in vs. residential) and whether they



QUESTION: *How could an agency help you with finding and/or maintaining relationships with supportive family members or adults?*

“Don’t want that—help me deal with it on my own and maybe help me by providing a therapist to talk to.”

“Talk with me but don’t force me to connect.”

“You don’t know if it’s best for those people to connect and go back with their families—may be intrusive.”

were serving minors or young adults. Agency leadership, particularly from agencies serving young adults, often reported concerns about the unfunded staffing, time, and resources required to help facilitate reconnection with families. This includes assessing safety within the home environment, and working with youth and their family members in developing reasonable expectations for reunification. This also would include helping families to build the support network and resources they need in times of crisis.

Direct care staff reported that many of the families of the youth they serve are troubled but they also recognized the importance of family connections. They felt ill prepared to help youth connect to families but were very interested in learning more about how to help young people connect with caring adults and families. Direct care staff wanted more clear direction from their supervisors about their roles in this area.

KEY FINDINGS – TRANSITIONAL AGE YOUTH

The focus groups with young people demonstrated the multitude of pathways to homelessness and how their relationships with their families and caregivers differed sharply. Some differences were predictable based on the location of the focus groups. Youth recruited from drop-in centers were less likely to have regular contact with family or non-homeless peers. In general, youth that rely on drop-in centers are more firmly engaged in the street economy due, at least in part, to their lack of permanent connections. Youth recruited from residential programs were more likely to have contact with family and non-homeless peers. Residential programs include more youth that are homeless due to poverty or community violence, in addition to family dysfunction. Additionally, youth with stable housing may have the time, resources, and inclination to connect or reconnect with family or peers.

“Sensitivity training is needed [for staff]—they keep picking at you for an answer and won’t leave you alone.”



Some young people reported daily contact with family and friends whereas others reported no contact at all. Youth had widely differing views about the value of permanent connections in promoting their long term stability. Youth didn’t want to feel forced to connect with family and wanted staff to understand that questions about family connections can be trauma triggers. They didn’t want questions about family connections to be asked at intake or the first contact with an agency. They were only receptive to these questions during a private conversation from a trusted staff person.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Focus on Relational Competencies – In the initial application for funding, the HHYP had envisioned developing or adapting an individual or group intervention or developing protocols focused on permanent connections for youth. After reviewing the literature, consulting with agencies working on innovative projects, and considering the input of young people, we decided to focus on the importance of relational competencies for youth and the need to build the capacity of our staff to model these competencies in all of their interactions with youth.

Inherent Developmental Challenges with Transitional Youth – Individuation and separation from family is a normal developmental task for older adolescents. While sweeping economic changes in the U.S. have delayed many young adults from being able to fully support themselves,^{ix,x} homeless youth serving agencies

must consider the normative desire of young adults to be independent and their ambivalence about reconnecting with families. This ambivalence may be amplified for LGBT youth and young adults whose families don’t accept their sexual or gender identity.



Need for Staff Reflection – The intentional focus on the importance of permanent connections has forced this community of providers to re-examine our assumptions about the families of origin for the young people that access our services. It is clear that many young adults with whom we work come from highly stressed families. It is also clear that many of their parents/guardians have been abusive, rejecting, and/or consumed with their own substance use and mental health challenges. However, it is also clear that many of these young adults have a deep and sustained desire to connect in some way with their biological families. Most of the agencies in our community of providers have limited resources to help support youth as they navigate these relationships and/or identify family members who have the capacity and interest to engage in a positive way. Our challenge as providers is to identify new resources and strategies to help us partner with these young adults on this exploration.



Staff Training – Until we have the resources to designate staff in our agencies to assist youth and young adults in re-establishing relationships with their families of origin, we can invest in staff training that increases their capacity to build the relational competencies of the youth and young adults they serve. These relational competencies include, but are not limited to, empathy, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, insight, and resiliency. These relational competencies will not only build youth and young adult success in developing successful and productive relationships with their peers but will foster greater success as they apply these relational competencies to education and employment settings.

Need for Ongoing Support – Some youth and young adults reconnect with supportive family members and are able to secure stable housing through these relationships – both with or without our support. Due to the lack of adequate and affordable housing resources for youth and young adults and the association between homelessness and high risk behavior, these arrangements can provide promising opportunities for young people. However, there are two critical issues to consider. First, if a young person became homeless due to family conflict, it is likely that after a brief “honeymoon period” this conflict is likely to resurface. Second, attitudes and behaviors that were critical to survival for many of these youth and young adults, such as substance use, sexual risk behavior, and delinquency, may cause problems if they return to their family environment. Young adults and their family members need help identifying and anticipating potential areas of conflict and establishing agreements to help youth retain their housing while they are working these out.

Return to Chaos: At times, in spite of our best efforts, some youth decide to return to home environments that are chaotic, unsupportive of their positive growth, or even highly destructive. These youth are at high risk of returning to homelessness, incarceration, or worse. In these situations, youth will sometimes reach out to supportive agency staff members to help them navigate their current crisis and work towards newfound stability. We consider their reaching out for support a testimony to the importance of investing in healthy relationships between youth and staff. Rather than letting their situation get worse, these youth have learned the importance of asking for help from caring and trusted adults when needed.

Limitations: The collaborative exploration of permanent connections did not specifically investigate the unique needs of special populations of youth and young adults experience homelessness, such as LGBT, foster care, and commercially and sexually exploited youth and young adults.

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